

The Impact of Adventism on Bakonzo Culture

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The Bakonzo are part of the Bantu people who are found in east, central and southern Africa. They predominantly live around and on the slopes of Mount Rwenzori in western Uganda; and they are the same people as the Banande of eastern Democratic Republic of Congo in North Kivu Province. They are one in culture: language, food, customs, and social behavior. They are referred to differently in Uganda and the Democratic Republic of Congo due to the colonialists who ruled Uganda and the Democratic Republic of Congo in the second half of the 19th century and in the first half of the 20th century. Uganda was colonized by the British while the Democratic Republic of Congo was colonized by the Belgians. The collective name for both the Bakonzo and Banande is Abayira and their language is Oluyira. Therefore, Bakonzo, Banande, and Abayira refer to the same people.¹

The international border between Uganda and the Democratic Republic of Congo passes through the Bayira. In Uganda, the highest population of the Bayira is on Mount Rwenzori and its adjacent lower parts. However, they also have a fairly large diaspora in other parts of Uganda like Kagadi, Kibaale, Hoima, Mubende, Mityana, Kiboga, etc. They number about one million people in Uganda², while in the Democratic Republic of Congo the number is close to five million people. This brings the number of Bayira to about six million people.

Culturally and economically, the Bayira are cultivators. They produce foods like bananas, cassava, millet, yams, beans, potatoes, etc. They also keep animals, especially goats and chickens. Because they live in the border regions, they are also involved in cross-border trade. The Bakonzo have practiced male circumcision since times immemorial. Historically, circumcision was done in the community every seven years. It was practiced in cohorts, and all the members of a cohort were meant to live as associates the rest of their lives. Social bonds are therefore generally very strong among them.³

The Bakonzo have a rich religious cultural background. They culturally worshiped a supreme being called Kitasamba. The name *Kitasamba* literally means "one who does not need to climb." The implication was that this supreme being was already above everything else and already exalted. So the Bayira believed in the most exalted being in their belief system. They believed that Kitasamba was the creator. On mount Rwenzori, where

the Bakonzo live, the top of the mountain is covered with permanent snow. They believed that the upper most parts of the mountain and the areas next to the snowline including the snow parts exclusively belonged to Kitasamba. According to them, no person was allowed to go to these areas because they belonged to Kitasamba. They believed that it is Kitasamba who made these places very cold to stop people from accessing them. This instilled a sense of reverence among the Bakonzo. Furthermore, the name *Kitasamba* suggests that this supreme being is the highest being. He did not need to climb like human beings because he was already above everything else. The Bayira knew that God was the creator and was the most exalted being. Like the Hebrews feared to mention the name of God, the Bayira also feared to mention the name *Kitasamba*.⁴

Another high cultural religious practice among the Bayira was the periodic cleansing ritual that was conducted by the head of every clan. This ritual was done every 3 to 5 years. In this ritual, the head of the clan invited all the clan members for a worship fellowship, bringing with them a sacrifice of either a sheep, goat, or a chicken as one was able. In addition to these individual sacrifices, the head of the clan was supposed to have two sheep or two goats especially put aside for cleansing the clan. When the clan came together for fellowship and cleansing on a designated day, every member of the clan would repent of all their sins and then sacrifice their animals. The blood from these sacrifices was collected and mixed with the blood of one of two goats or sheep prepared by the head of the clan. Every member of the clan was supposed to step in the combined blood of all the sacrifices for atonement and cleansing. Then, just like the biblical scapegoat (Leviticus 16), the second animal prepared by the head of the clan was not killed. Instead, they assigned one male person of the clan to carry it deep in the mountains. It was intended to carry away all the sins and misfortunes of the clan. It was left in the wilderness to die of itself or to be devoured by animals.⁵

This high ceremony involved clan fellowship meals, and the ceremony ended by asking all males to sweep the courtyard where the ceremony was conducted and all the paths of the village as a symbol of sweeping away all sin, evil, and misfortunes in the area. These two religious practices symbolized the best religious practices of the Bayira. Of course, they also believed in other smaller gods to whom they assigned various duties, such as; Musangania, a god of peace and reconciliation; Kalisya, the god for hunting; and Nyabibuya, the god of fertility and all good things.

The Bakonzo strictly prohibited premarital sex because young people were told if Nyabibuya, the god of fertility, found out that people were engaged in premarital sex, this god could spit on them for being contemptuous, and thus they would never have children. Culturally, the Bayira believe in high morality. These beliefs provided fertile ground for biblical gospel message.

Adventism among the Bakonzo

This article explores the impact of Adventism on the Bakonzo (Abayira) culture in Uganda and the Democratic Republic of Congo. From the observations that have been made, the history of Christianity is to a great extent

interwoven with colonialism. In the case of Uganda, Christian missionaries and colonialists came at the same time even though chronologically the missionaries came first and somehow encouraged the colonialists to come. The colonial leaders in Uganda adopted a policy of allotting specific areas to particular faiths. It is also a historical fact in Uganda that Christian missionaries found themselves being part and parcel of the new colonial enterprise.⁶ Due to the prevailing social and political conditions, colonial and missionary leaders found themselves working together to spread colonial administration and Christianity to different parts of Uganda. This arrangement benefited Buganda kingdom and its people because they collaborated with the British. As collaborators, they benefited earliest and the most from colonial education. They were used as teachers, chiefs and local missionaries to the new areas in Uganda where Christianity and colonial administration was being introduced. This arrangement, that was adopted by both colonial leaders and Christian missionaries because of the shortage of missionary and colonial staff, resulted into a situation of sub-imperialism as described by Herbert Ithran Galimaka in his thesis: *Conflicts in Church and Society in Uganda with Special Reference to Politics and Education*.⁷ The policy of sub-imperialism in Uganda gave some kingdoms in Uganda the privileges of education and land as well as positions in both civil and church service over others. In turn, such areas provided the needed manpower to extend colonial rule and Christianity to other areas that were still living as purely native African societies.

The Bakonzo in Uganda have been among the Ugandan native societies that were brought under British colonial administration using the sub-imperialism policy administered by their neighbors the Batoro under the Toro Kingdom. Unfortunately for the Bakonzo, the sub-imperialism policy proved too oppressive because no school, church, or hospital was built in their territory; yet they were supposed to pay taxes to both the colonial government and the local kingdom that was acting as agents for the colonial administration. This arrangement was not good for the areas that suffered this fate.

Adventist missionaries went to the king of Toro, George David Rukidi Kamurasi, in 1945/6; as was common during the colonial times in Uganda, Toro kingdom had been allotted to already existing religions. Adventist missionaries were sent to Rwenzori Mountains among the Bakonzo because this territory was still in the dark, and its people were looked upon as less-than-human. From 1894, when Uganda became a British protectorate, to 1946, a period of 52 years, the greater area of Rwenzori Mountains was kept from missionary work and colonial administration benefits like education and health services because of the policies of sub-imperialism that were applied to this area.

Under these conditions, the hand of God was working behind the scenes, waiting for just the right time. This fullness of time came in the year 1946 when a delegation of Adventist missionaries approached the king of Toro seeking permission to preach the Adventist message in his territory and requesting land to open a mission station. Because the Rwenzori Mountains were never allotted to any faith, these Adventist missionaries were given this territory for their evangelistic work. The members of this pioneer team of Adventist missionaries came from Nchwanga and the first official Adventist mission station in Uganda was established in 1927. This team of

missionaries included a Norwegian missionary, Pastor M. E Lind, and his wife, Yofesi Kihangire, a native Munyoro, as well as native Mutoros Denis Bazarra, Kezironi Kahwa, Yosamu Katarwa, Yowasi Bamaturaki, and John Mbugosa.⁸

According to those who saw this team of pioneer Adventist missionaries come, the very first public evangelistic meeting was opened on October 10, 1946. The preacher was Pastor Lind, a white missionary who was assisted by Denis Bazarra as his translator. As a result of this evangelistic meeting, the very first Bakonzo converts were realized. These included: Rusi Nzanzu, Bulasio Mukirania, Johnson Masereka, Samwiri Bukombi, Isalari Ndyoka and Sibitsomwa. There were Batoro converts from this first evangelistic meeting as well, including: Mary Kahinju and her son Absolom Ndyanabo, Isaaka Kihika, Nuha Majamba, and Kwamya. Apparently, Pastor Lind used to sleep in Mitandi where he got a suitable house because no housing was available in Kazingo.⁹ Officially, Kazingo was the very first church where Adventism reached the Bakonzo people near the end of 1946. At Kazingo, Adventist missionaries, under the leadership of Pastor Lind, built the first Adventist church and a school for teaching the natives how to read the Bible. Between 1946 and 1947 plans were made to purchase Mitandi estate about 8 kilometers way from Kazingo. This estate belonged to a white settler by the name of Daniel Fredrick West. Pastor Lind chose Mitandi for the pioneer Adventist mission station in Rwenzori among the Bakonzo people because it had enough land—one square mile—and had a good spacious permanent house that could meet the housing needs of the missionaries. Mitandi mission station was officially opened in 1948, and this station served as the launching pad of Adventism among the Bakonzo of Rwenzori Mountains. The very first Bakonzo converts at Mitandi in 1948 were: Ibrahim Balihabuka, Erika Nzanzu, Yosiya Mugamba, and Asa Kule.¹⁰

A Chronology of Pioneer Adventist Churches Among the Bakonzo People

The following were the pioneer Adventist churches in the Rwenzori Mountains among the Bakonzo of Uganda: Kazingo (1946); Mitandi (1948); Karangura, Kaghughu, and Mabeere (1948); Bunyangabu, Burongwe, and Kikyo (1950); Bumate (1952); Bwera/ Mpondwe (1953); and Ndongo (1954).¹¹

In 1948, a school was opened at Mitandi to help the natives learn how to read. After seven years, permission was granted by the Toro Kingdom administration to open a primary school both at Kazingo and Mitandi.¹² It is important to note that the opening of two primary schools at Kazingo and Mitandi helped quickly spread Adventism among the Bakonzo. The students from these schools became important parts of opening more Adventist churches in their communities.

The Impact of the Seventh day Adventist Church on Bakonzo

From the establishment of Mitandi mission station among the Bakonzo in 1948, together with the opening of formal primary education in 1953, Adventism has steadily grown in the Rwenzori Mountains. When permission was granted in 1972 to open a secondary school at Mitandi, the resulting educational opportunities by the Seventh-day Adventist Church among the Bakonzo unlocked this territory to an unprecedented spread of Adventism in the Rwenzoris. Many more churches were established, and more primary schools founded between 1970 and 1985. The Adventist Church has greatly impacted the Bakonzo by providing education and the teaching of the gospel. Due to the policies that denied the greater territory of Rwenzori Mountain formal education, the opening of Mitandi Adventist Secondary School in 1972 further spread the Adventist faith among the Bakonzo. Today, the Church operates more than 60 primary schools and five secondary schools in Rwenzori. The many schools the Adventist Church opened in this territory met this felt need in the communities because there were very few public schools in this territory. Rwenzori Mountains now has one of the highest concentrations of Adventists in Uganda. The second area in Uganda with another high Adventist membership is in central Uganda. By the turn of the 21st century, the Adventist faith had taken root among the Bakonzo.

From this humble beginning, the seeds of Adventism have continued to grow into more memberships, resulting in several local churches across the mountains. Adventism among the Bakonzo has not only been about spreading the truth; it has also been a means of bringing positive social transformation through education. In this community, the Adventist lifestyle has replaced many formerly traditional practices like funeral rites and healing practices performed by witch doctors and some marital practices in those communities. For example, the Bakonzo previously practiced male circumcision accompanied with a lot of traditional cultural rituals. Due to the influence of Adventism, today the same procedure is with sound medical practices. Also, pagan death rituals no longer take place even among the Adventists because of the church's influence. Rituals that followed the birth of twins are also no longer performed.

Among the Bakonzo, Adventism has positively engaged the everyday lives of many and has also made a powerful impact on several communities in the Rwenzori through an ongoing process.

Conclusion

The story of Adventism among the Bakonzo/Bayira of Uganda continues to unfold as a successful mission story. Out of an unfriendly historical setting and an unlikely fruitful territory, the seeds of the gospel sown 72 years ago continue to bear fruit for the kingdom of God. The Church in this territory was organized into a Mission Field in 1989. This region is one of the major areas in Uganda, contributing to the workforce of the Adventist Church in the country and the region.

From a social and spiritual perspective, the coming of the Seventh-day Adventist faith into the Rwenzori region was timely as well as providential. The Adventist faith has greatly contributed to the transformation of the communities of the region. The Adventist message and the resulting lifestyle is not only found among church

members, but to a great extent is also reflected in the surrounding communities. Many of the African traditional practices have been impacted by an Adventist lifestyle. The Church in this area is growing in service to the community, in membership and self-sufficiency.

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NOTES

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4. 4. Yowasi Bukombi, interview by Daniel Matte, FortPortal, June 2019.
5. Ibid.
6. Herbert Itrhan Galimaka, "Conflicts in Church and Society in Uganda with Special Reference to Politics and Education" (M.A. Thesis, University of Durham, Department of Theology, June 1997), 1, 25.
7. Ibid., 21.
8. Johnson Masereka, interview by Daniel Matte, Kireka, November 2019.
9. Ibid.
10. Paul Kibwana, interview by Daniel Matte, Kasese, March 15, 2020. Paul Kibwana was a long-term educator at Mitandi from 1955 to 1993.
11. Ibid.

12. Ibid.

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