

Colonialism and the Seventh-day Adventists in Kenya

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Overview of Kenya

The formal colonial period in Kenya started in 1888 with the granting of a Royal Charter to the Imperial British East Africa Company (IBEAC) by the British Crown, to exploit the British sphere of influence between Zanzibar and Uganda.¹ However, it was not until July 1, 1895, that Arthur H. Hardinge, Her Majesty's Representative and Consul General at Zanzibar, proclaimed East Africa a British protectorate.²

Between 1896 and 1900, the British established their presence among the Luo and Gusii peoples (part of Uganda protectorate).³ The relations between various communities and the British were characterized by suspicion and mistrust. The Gusii community, for instance, had been forewarned by the prophet Sakawa about the coming of strangers who would interfere with their way of life. The British, on the other hand, regarded this community as troublesome, resulting in the use of military expeditions against the community at the onset of colonial rule. Colonial rule, by definition, takes into account the dominance of one nation by another. This is usually achieved through aggressive, often military, actions and territory acquired in this manner.⁴

Colonial rule in British East Africa was characterized by the use of force to pacify recalcitrant African tribes fearing the loss of their freedom and way of life. Many Africans resented the restrictions and loss of land at the start of colonial rule leading to violent confrontation. The British responded by sending military expeditions against resisting communities, and this meant that Christian missionaries could not enter these areas until law and order was firmly established. In April 1904, during a confrontation between the Nandi and the British, an American missionary at Kaimosi named William Wendt was speared to death by Nandi warriors thinking him part of the enemy.⁵

Military expeditions also had the effect of moving huge African population to designated reserves, which freed up much needed land for European settlement. The British had also constructed a 500-mile railway line from

Mombasa to Kisumu, and to pay for it, it had become necessary to encourage settlers to come over and take up land to farm.⁶

The colonial period in Kenya ran between 1895 until 1963, when Kenya became independent. This article will examine the establishment and growth of the Adventist Church in Kenya within this period.

The Seventh-day Adventist mission in British East Africa (Kenya) first made contact with the Luo people at Gendia in 1906 and thereafter the Gusii people at Nyanchwa Hill in 1912. The establishment of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Kenya, therefore, had its origin in this region known initially as South Kavirondo and later Nyanza Province.

The initial attempt to establish the Adventist Church among the Gusii had little success. First, the Adventist missionaries were entering into the community shortly after a hostile encounter between the Gusii and the colonial administration. In the years 1905, 1907, and 1908, the British had sent military expeditions against the community leading to devastating loss of life and property which, in turn, left a general mood of mistrust and hostility against Europeans in general. The community, and indeed many others, became suspicious and apprehensive of all Europeans regardless of whether they were missionaries or administrators. This hindered the acceptance of Adventism.

Adventism during Colonial Rule

The introduction of Adventism in British East Africa came early in the colonial period, just 11 years from the date of proclamation of protectorate over the area. By the time Adventism came to British East Africa, it had already been planted in South Africa in 1887, in Rhodesia (Zimbabwe) in 1894, and in German East Africa (later Tanganyika and now Tanzania) in 1903.⁷ In many ways, colonial rule paved way for the establishment of the Adventist Church in Africa.

Other than South Africa, the advance of Adventism in Africa largely followed the establishment of colonial rule, taking advantage of the security provided by the civil authorities. In 1894, for instance, Adventist missionaries led by Asa T. Robinson sought permission from Cecil Rhodes, who was prime minister of Cape Colony in South Africa, to establish a mission at the newly founded country of Rhodesia.⁸ The General Conference encouraged European Adventists to establish missions in Africa according to the ruling colonial power.⁹ For instance, German Adventists were encouraged to send missionaries to German colonies while British Adventists were encouraged to send missionaries to British colonies in Africa. The Adventist missions in British East Africa (Kenya) and German East Africa (Tanzania) were under the Northern European Division with headquarters in Germany.

The Onset of World War I

Missionary activities were interrupted by the outbreak of World War I in Europe. Tanganyika was a battleground between the Germans and the British. The Seventh-day Adventist Mission suffered two major setbacks at the onset of the war. First, the church headquarters was based in Hamburg, Germany, which caused the Adventists to be viewed with suspicion. The Canadian-born Carscallen had to prove he was not a German spy, and his internment in Kaimosi effectively slowed the development of the Adventist work in Kenya. The missionaries suspended their activities until 1919 when they were resumed. The war also resulted in looting and vandalism of missions, especially at Nyanchwa Hill.

Impact of Adventist Missionary Work in Colonial Kenya

The Adventist Church in Colonial Kenya made notable contributions in five major areas—Evangelism, Bible Translation, Education, Publishing, and Medical Work. Arthur Carscallen translated the Gospel According to Matthew to Dholuo, a language he had mastered with the help of his assistants. He became the first Bible translator of an indigenous Kenyan language to have his work accepted and published at the British and Foreign Bible Society in 1913.¹⁰ Other denominations working among the Luo who were also doing the Bible translation work amalgamated his work to produce the first full Dholuo Bible.

Carscallen, together with another missionary Lea Lane, established the first printing press in western Kenya. Carscallen published the first magazine 'Jaote Luo' (the Luo Messenger) and a Luo Primer that was used in Adventist and non-Adventist schools as a teaching aid. He also produced a book on Luo grammar. In later years, Grace Clarke, a missionary administrator, did important translation work among the Luo, producing the first 'Luo/English' dictionary and numerous other publications. Paul Mboya, first a teacher at Gendia then a pastor and later chief and colonial administrator, became one of the first published Kenyans when he produced a book about his travels in England.

From the humble beginnings in 1913 with a tiny platen press, the publishing ministry in the Adventist Church grew to what is today the giant Africa Herald Publishing House at Gendia.

Adventists and the Civil Authorities

Adventism in British East Africa began among the Luo people, a community that had not violently resisted colonial rule. This helped enhance the advance of Adventism among the Luo people of South Nyanza. Traditionally, Adventists avoided any form of confrontation with civil authorities, instead encouraging their members to be law-abiding citizens. The colonial authorities were quite impressed with this attitude, and this opened doors for members of the Church to work with civil authorities. Some of the first Adventists who had gained sufficient proficiency in reading and writing (thanks to the Adventist emphasis on Education) were quickly appointed to the civil administration, becoming clerks, teachers, enumerators, tax agents, and even chiefs. It soon created a class of high-ranking Adventists in the civil administration, and some of their policy decisions and

influence quickly supported the development of the young Church. Their considerable income, too, was ploughed back to support the development of the nascent Adventist Church.

A notable example of Adventists in the civil administration was Paul Mboya. After completing his elementary education at the mission school in Gendia, he became a teacher and taught for a number of years (1916-1919), then went into the administration and was eventually elected to join the inaugural South Kavirondo African District Council in 1925. While there, he trained in ministry and, in 1931, became the first ordained African pastor of the Adventist Church in Kenya. His exemplary service attracted the attention of local authorities who made him chief in 1935 and, a decade later, made him the first African secretary of the South Nyanza African District Council – a senior and powerful position in colonial Kenya. He was greatly admired for his exemplary service and granted the OBE and the BEM awards.¹¹ He was also rewarded with several trips to the United Kingdom, even having an audience with King George VI and later with his daughter Queen Elizabeth II, who hosted him at Buckingham Palace. He also attended her coronation. Mboya also used the trips to England to connect with some of the pioneer missionaries who had returned to England and published a book about his travels to England. As secretary, he influenced the establishment of Adventist schools in Nyanza and, by the mid-1950s, Adventist schools far outnumbered those of other denominations.

The British installed a number of chiefs who ruled the people on their behalf. They were also meant to collect the taxes imposed on the Africans – the most notable of them being the Hut and Poll taxes. Taxation had the (intended) effect of forcing Africans to leave their reserves to find paid work to pay the taxes. The social disruption of the taxes meant that many of them moved away from their traditional homelands to the settled areas in search of paid work and more to the urban areas. The result of the high mobility of Africans in the colonial period had the advantage of pushing new denominational converts to move into unentered areas. For instance, when the tea industry in Kericho began, many early Adventist converts among the Luo and Kisii moved to Kericho District as migrant workers in that industry, carrying with them the faith they shared with their fellow workers.¹²

It is well known, for instance, that some of the early Adventists in Nairobi, who would eventually form a congregation at the Pumwani social hall, had been early converts of the denomination from Gendia or Nyanchwa. Many had travelled to Nairobi to find paid work as early as 1912 when the denominational work in Gendia was still at its infancy.

The taxes collected, often through coercion and threat of incarceration, were used to defray the costs of administration, and pay for social services and development. It soon became apparent that the colonial government could scarcely meet the development needs of the new colony. It then encouraged missionaries to provide some of the essential services, particularly Education and Healthcare. This was firmly in line with Adventist philosophy which provided for the wholistic development of the person – physically, mentally, and spiritually.

Adventist Educational Work in Colonial Kenya

On November 27, 1906, Arthur Carscallen and Peter Nyambo opened the first Seventh-day Adventist mission station at Gendia near the shores of Lake Victoria among the Luo people.¹³ In 1909, Carscallen reported in *The Adventist Review and Sabbath Herald* that he had set up a carpentry and blacksmith shop and that some of his first converts were already “handy with the tools.”¹⁴ The School at Gendia soon opened the way for many others that would be established mainly by the churches in the South Nyanza region. The Kamagambo school became an important educational center, offering training to teachers from the 1920s. It went on to establish one of the first high schools in the region and supplied teachers to many Adventist and government schools.

By 1952, the Adventist Church in the South Nyanza region had a total of 54 primary schools, 11 intermediate schools, and one teacher training institute – Kamagambo.¹⁵ Most of these schools were recipients of grants-in-aid from the government with only a handful not receiving this aid. By 1954, Adventists operated 37.93 percent of all the institutions in South Nyanza, a figure that would rise to 45.28 percent by 1955 (See chart 1 below). The Adventists ran the largest number of schools of any denomination. The Catholics, on the other hand, operated 31.03 percent of all schools in 1952, but by 1958, that figure had risen to 33.88 percent while that of the Adventists had declined to 20.45 percent. This meant fewer schools for the Adventists while the membership of the Church was growing tremendously.

During the colonial government period, the Adventist schools in the South Nyanza District received aid from the government for their maintenance. For example, in 1925, Kamagambo alone received a total grant-in-aid of 2,859 pounds (K£) from the government to purchase equipment. In 1926, the sum of 2,403 pounds was secured by W. T. Bartlett (who had replaced Carscallen) for the improvement of supplies at the Adventist schools and also to pay teachers. The funds came from the annual tax that was levied on every male. Since the colonial government operated no schools in the district, they found it more economical to give cash gifts to missions that provided education for the indigenous inhabitants.¹⁶

Since the grants-in-aid came from the taxes and to some Adventists, this was akin to accepting state support when in fact God should have been the Provider.¹⁷ Traditionally, Adventists have avoided close relations with secular government¹⁸ and for offering the grants-in-aid, the Adventists were not able to independently determine their curriculum. For instance, it was common practice in Adventist schools not to have lessons on Friday in preparation for the Sabbath and that classes would take place on Sunday. They also viewed the government money as a serious threat to religious liberty. In 1955, denominational leaders voted to preclude Adventist schools from receiving government appropriations and grants-in-aid during that year’s Winter Council. The decision affected Adventist schools in East Africa, Nyasaland, and Northern Rhodesia.¹⁹ The impact was immediate, and there was an immediate decline in the number of Adventist schools in South Nyanza, and the same was true across the country in Kenya. What the Adventists rejected was diverted to other denominations,

and indeed their schools began to thrive both in quality and quantity.

Medical Work

On January 21, 1921, Dr. Alex George Madgwick and his wife Vera sailed for Kenya to begin medical work. They settled at Kanyadoto Mission, and with £75 for medical supplies, he began the first Adventist medical work in Kenya. Prior to coming to Kenya, Madgwick was the medical director at the Stanborough Park Sanitarium. He worked in difficult conditions at Kanyadoto, performing surgeries on a kitchen table in a mud hut and sterilizing his instruments in open fires using kerosene tins. In 1924, he moved his hospital to a site two miles from the Gendia Mission.²⁰ Here, an impressive new hospital would eventually be constructed that would eventually become integral in providing healthcare to tens of thousands of people in South Nyanza. Dr. Madgwick remained there for 15 years.²¹ During the colonial period, Kendu Mission Hospital also began training nurses and other hospital staff, becoming a premier institution in that area.

Conclusion

Attitudes towards Christian mission during the times of colonialism has been the subject of much debate. Indeed, colonial rule brought with it untold injustices, and in the process of pacifying African tribes, many people died, women were raped, and the country's social and economic fabric was seriously disrupted. Christian missionaries have been variously blamed for being silent in the face of these atrocities, and if they were not, they certainly did little to stop them. Jan H. Boer of the Sudan United Mission is famously quoted as saying, "Colonialism is a form of imperialism based on a divine mandate and designed to bring liberation – spiritual, cultural, economic, and political – by sharing the blessings of the Christ-inspired civilization of the West with a people suffering under satanic oppression, ignorance and disease, effected by a combination of political, economic and religious forces that cooperate under a regime seeking the benefit of both ruler and ruled."²² Scholars such as Toyin Falola criticize this view as saying that Christian missionaries were indeed an extension of Imperialism and were an integral part of that hegemonistic dominance that birthed an exploitative relationship with Africans.²³

The Adventist Church in Colonial Kenya made its mark in Education, Healthcare, and Publishing, and all of them created jobs for many Africans. The Church was criticized by early nationalists, notably Tom Mboya, for not adequately educating its members and actively dissuading them from the clamor for independence.²⁴ The teaching of the Church at that time was that its members must focus on being a part of the coming kingdom, and through its traditional emphasis on prophetic teaching, everything that was happening was a part of biblical prophecy and prophetic timelines that pointed to an imminent end of the world. They emphasized that members were to spread the Gospel to reach the ends of the world for the end to come.

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