

Masai, Kiliopa Kipkuchuriit (1909–2016)

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Kiliopa (Cleophas) Masai was a pioneer evangelist and the first Nandi person to enter fulltime ministry as a pastor. He spread the gospel message to the Nandi and Kipsigis people of Western Kenya. He was a member of the Adventist Church continuously for 78 years.

Early Life

Kiliopa Kipkuchuriit araap Masai was born at Chebirirbei near Chebut in Kapsabet in 1909, the last child of Agui Chepng'or Masai. When he was a young boy, his parents moved to the settler farms in Eldoret where they became squatter folk. He underwent the mandatory rite of passage of circumcision at Sugoi near Eldoret in 1925 at the age of 16. For five years he herded cattle in the settled areas for European farmers. He then felt the desire to go to school. The main school for the Nandi was at Kapsabet, and so in 1930 he decided that he would go there to get an education. When he arrived at Kapsabet the European principal Mr. C. E. Bungey (1927-1932) turned him away for being too old (he was 21).

Even after being turned away, he refused to leave the school and even slept on the roadside hoping to be admitted. One of the African teachers in the school took him into the dormitory and hid him there. He was soon discovered by the administration and, seeing his determination, Mr. Bungey gave him new uniforms which included a fez (hat) and khaki shorts and a shirt. He then discarded his traditional clothing and became a pupil in Sub A, the first class, proceeding to Sub B the following year.¹ Francis Biama, then a tailoring instructor at the school, enrolled him in the Catholic catechumenate which was run by a young German priest, Father Joseph Kuhn. Father Kuhn baptized him in 1935. He went through Standards 1 through to 4, which was the top class, completing his education in 1935. He obtained a school leaving certificate.

The Lost Certificate

The following year, now literate and able to converse fluently in both Kiswahili and English, he got a job as a court clerk in Kapsabet. He worked there for a while and then sought leave to visit his parents at Sugoi in neighboring Uasin Gishu district. He took with him his school certificate to show his parents as a proud mark of his achievement. On the day he was to return to Kapsabet (a 50-mile journey undertaken on foot), he discovered

that his school certificate was missing. He frantically searched for it but could not find it. He was running late for Kapsabet and thought of postponing his journey but chose to go anyway.

It was getting late when he stopped at Kaigat and he decided to sleep there and wake up early to proceed to Kapsabet. Here he saw a building that looked like a church. In his curiosity, he enquired about the building from a young lady standing there. His intention was to find out if he could be accommodated for the night and before continuing his journey.

The young lady, Joan, had been the best friend of Rebecca Jeptepkeny and both had been brought to the faith by Caleb Kipkessio araap Busienei while at the Sparrow farm in Eldoret. The previous year, in 1935, Rebecca had married Ezekiel Kimenjo Maswai. Joan explained to Masai about the church. She told him how the church and school had started. She told him that they had been looking for a teacher for the school. Masai stayed there for the night, but before he left the following morning Joan interested him in a Bible study. This was made much easier since he could fluently read the Bible which at this time was only in the Kiswahili language.² He became deeply attracted to the new faith and learned everything he could. It was at this point that he realized why his certificate had disappeared, making him late to return to work at Kapsabet. In 1937 he was baptized into the Adventist Church and so began a journey that would only end in 2015, 78 years later.

Marriage and Career

Joan, who had become an evangelist in her own right, won Masai to the faith. She was most certainly the first independent Adventist woman evangelist in Nandi. Joan married Masai in 1938 in a ceremony officiated by Pastor Matthew Murdoch of Chebwai Mission.³ Masai then joined Sylvano Achia as a teacher at the new Kaigat Adventist School. Following the closure of the Kaigat School in 1939, Masai began to preach in various places, notably Kungurweet, Chepkoiyo, Sigot, Kimolweet, Kapkeringon, and Kaplemur where he made a firm association with Silvano Chepsiror araap Ruto. A powerful and persuasive preacher, he moved from place to place and helped organize the first camp meeting at Kaigat in 1949.

Masai's Work Among the Nandi

Masai's ability to read and write became an important asset to the early Adventist church in Nandi. If there was a petition to be made to the chiefs or the district commissioner, Kiliopa as he was better known, was the man to do it. When there was correspondence received, Kiliopa would be the man to read it. He mastered the English and Swahili languages early and contributed greatly to the Adventist educational work, which had since gone underground following the closure of the school. During preaching sessions by visiting preachers, particularly the European missionaries, Masai was always called upon to translate into Nandi.

In June 1939 Masai was approached by the elders of the Kamoywa area who asked him to write to Chief Willie araap Boit to petition him for a school in the area. Masai was clearly well ahead of his contemporaries and his mastery of the Swahili language and writing was commendable. The chief was, however, strongly against the Adventists and so the application did not go far. He wrote similar letters for the elders at Kaplemur requesting permission to start a school, but a baraza (council meeting) attended by the district commissioner saw a unanimous shoot-down of the Adventist bid. Masai wrote similar application letters for the elders at Kapsoen where again, at a baraza in Sangalo, the bid was declined.⁴

Moving to Sironoi

At the point of the Kaigat Dispersal of 1941, Kiliopa moved to Sironoi so as to be close to the Talai people, a clan of the Nandi living in nearby Kapsisiywa. The Talai were much feared by the British and the Nandi people and had been concentrated at Kapsisiywa not far from Sironoi. He had been turned away at a place named Kokwet where he had constructed a church. At Sironoi, on a site where stood an ancient shrine, he built a church in 1942.

It was from Sironoi that the Adventist message reached the nearby Talai community which was deemed to have supernatural powers and which the general Nandi people feared to associate themselves with. Masai preached to these people, bringing many of them to the faith.

Obtaining a plot for the church at Sironoi was nothing short of a miracle. It was the result of deep, earnest, and answered prayer. The school at Sironoi, which Masai and his wife Joan had planned to establish, met serious opposition and was closed down by the authorities. The Masais resorted to holding a home school for the community and attracted a good number of pupils who studied at their home. They continued to prayerfully petition the Nandi local native council which eventually voted to grant them a license. He went on to establish more schools at Tendwo and Emdin in central Nandi. Soon after the establishment of the school at Sironoi, Masai organized new churches at Kipsamoo, some 19 miles due south in the Tinderet area, and at Lelaibe, some 12 miles due north from Sironoi.

Joan and Kiliopa became the foremost missionary couple working jointly. They purchased 13 hectares of land and on it established the Sironoi Church, and after receiving a license Kiliopa built a school and a dispensary on that property. Some of the pioneer members at Sironoi included Miriam Kamabei, Julia Tamining, Araap Chebarbei, Kipsoimo, and Ezekiel Lamai.⁵

Further Work

In 1952, Cleophas attended Bugema College in Uganda for a six-month training in ministry. He returned and immediately pastored new congregations in various places in Nandi. After several years in Nandi, he received a

call to work in Kericho among the Kipsigis. Knowing that the congregation at Sironoi still needed them, Joan chose to remain behind to continue the work they had begun. When Cleophas returned, he worked in his home church until 1959. In 1960 he moved to Kakamega and worked as a pastor in Bukwala and Siyongo. He returned in 1961, but only for a while. In 1964 he returned to work among the Kipsigis people and pastored the churches at Kabokyek, Sigor, Mulot, Chemaner, Bomet, Sotik, Ngariat, Matarmat, and others.⁶

He remained among the Kipsigis for 12 years until 1976 when he was transferred to West Pokot where he worked in Kapenguria for a year. He retired in 1977 and returned to Sironoi. Cleophas and Joan Masai were blessed with a number of children. Joan passed away on February 4, 1989, while Cleophas survived her for 26 years and passed away on August 31, 2015, after a short illness.

SOURCES

File No. DC/KAPT/1/4/11, Kenya National Archives, Nairobi, Kenya.

Sang, Godfrey K., Kili, and K. Hosea, *On the Wings of a Sparrow: How the Seventh-day Adventist Church Came to Western Kenya* (Nairobi: Gapman Publications Ltd., 2017).

NOTES

1. From school records at Kapsabet High School.
2. The Bible was not available in the Nandi language until 1939. The effort to translate the Bible into that language began in 1927 at the Africa Inland Mission in Kapsabet under the leadership of Australian missionary Stewart M. Bryson with the assistance of Samuel Gimnyigei and others. Outside the Kiswahili language, the Nandi Bible was one of the first of an indigenous language in Kenya. The early Adventists in Nandi used the Kiswahili Bible which had been translated much earlier.
3. From records at the Chebwai Adventist Mission.
4. File No. DC/KAPT/1/4/11, Kenya National Archives, Nairobi, Kenya.
5. Godfrey K. Sang, Kili, and K. Hosea, *On the Wings of a Sparrow: How the Seventh-day Adventist Church Came to Western Kenya* (Nairobi: Gapman Publications Ltd., 2017).
6. Ibid.

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