

# Adventists and African Traditional Practices in Tanzania

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ZETTI BATISTA NDOLA

Zetti Batista Ndola, M.A.P.Th. (Adventist University of Africa, Nairobi) serves as the Ministerial secretary and evangelism coordinator for South-East Tanzania Conference. He is married to Leticia and the two are blessed with three children.

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Wherever the Adventist message has been preached in Tanzania, it has collided with African traditional practices. For Adventists, the Bible is the standard that guides their life practices of life, while traditional practices are the foundation of African life.

## Overview

Tanzania is populated by people from more than 120 different ethnicities. “Each of these groups differs to varying degrees from other groups in culture, social organization and language. Only the smallest groups are homogenous. Most of groups are characterized by some internal variation in language and culture.”<sup>1</sup> These ethnic groups are further divided into two major groups—namely the Bantu and the Nilotics. Each group lives by a set of traditional practices.

The term tradition is defined as a: “Belief or behavior passed down within a group or society with symbolic meaning or special significance with origins in the past. Common examples include holidays, clothes, greetings etc. ‘Tradition’ itself is derived from the Latin *tradere* or *traderer* literally meaning to transmit, to hand over, to give for safekeeping. While it is commonly assumed that traditions have ancient history, many traditions have been invented on purpose, whether that is political or cultural, over short periods of time.”<sup>2</sup> Generally, traditions are a set of practices conducted by the community as principles of the society by which members are expected to abide. In an African setting, any member who does not conform to society norms is rebuffed. This means Tanzanians, like other Africans, are restricted in their religious beliefs by their culture. Any interference that causes disruption of the society’s norms and values is not welcome.

Traditional beliefs control every activity of an African’s life. Nothing can be done without considering veneration of the spiritual realm, whether economic, social, lifestyle, or political. To disengage with African traditions is to disconnect with the entire African society. Thus, the complexity of African traditions has hindered the success of Adventism in Tanzania.

## The Beginning of Adventism in Tanzania

The Seventh-day Adventist Church was introduced in Tanzania around in 1903 near the Pare Mountains, Mamba Miamba. The work of the great commission was established by two missionaries from Germany, John Ehlers and A. C. Enns. These missionaries spread the message between 1903 and 1920. By 1920 time, they had baptized members in various areas including the Pare Mountains, Lake Victoria, the Mara region, and Sukuma Land.<sup>3</sup> In presenting the message, Adventist missionaries experienced difficulties because Africans were not ready to recant their traditional religions and practices, and accept the gospel preached by missionaries. Since Tanzania is peopled by diverse ethnicities and dissimilar traditions, the author presents only the practices that are shared among ethnicities such as polygamous marriage, initiation practices, ancestral veneration, and eating foods termed unclean by the Bible teachings.

### Polygamy

Many ethnicities within Tanzania practice polygamous marriages. This is especially common among the Luo, Kurya, Sukuma, Maasai, Jita, Nyamwezi, Gogo, Hehe, and others. Although the Bible advocates monogamy (Matt. 19:3-9), indigenous polygamous men wanted to be baptized with their wives. In a certain period, missionaries accommodated them by baptizing them. "Before WWI the issue of polygamy was brought by the old chief of Mamba, Mauya who desired to be a church member but did not want to leave his wives .... Enns the missionary accepted polygamous husbands for baptism."<sup>4</sup> The syncretism on the matter of polygamy for the time opened the door for many people to join the church with their wives.

The issue of baptizing polygamous men was extensively discussed in Tanzania, especially among the Pare, Maasai, Kuria, and other parts of the country. Various church leaders came up with different positions. In spite of the 1939 action to allow probationary membership which was more or less imposed upon Tanzania, German Church leaders likewise objected to the practice and the Pare Committee Action in 1948 called polygamy "an adulterous condition."<sup>5</sup> The issue of polygamy in the church remains a challenge due to its traditional and cultural prevalence among indigenous people. Currently in some areas, there are churches that experience difficulties during the election of the local church officers because many of the baptized men went into polygamy. The experience shows that when they fail to get qualified men for elder's positions, women are chosen to be church leaders.<sup>6</sup> Most affected churches with this challenge are found in Rorya, Mara Conference of Northern Tanzania Union Conference.

### Initiation Rituals

Another challenge to the Adventist Church in Tanzania is the issue of initiation practices. Initiation rites are practiced by the majority of ethnic groups in the country. They have also affected the mission of the Church

negatively. The common names for initiation rites in Tanzania are *unyago* and *jando*. *Unyago* denotes initiation of women, while *jando* is the initiation rite for men. Initiation in itself is not bad; however, it is pervasive with spiritism, veneration, and negative teaching especially on family matters. Since these rituals are cherished, every member of the family, regardless of faith, must participate. Mary Bendera reported attending a “*unyago* where [she] found unexpected circumstances. All people in the room were naked; teaching girls aged seven to twelve years. Topics were based on family matters using wicked words, songs and spiritism stories to the youngsters.” Those who denounce initiation are labeled with insulting names. In the Makonde culture, a person who does not undergo *unyago* or *jando* is not respected. They are outcasts.

Unyago is a momentous ceremony to the Makonde society that even if a family member is in a foreign land say America, he or she must be informed and endeavor to attend or send a representative. Also, if a woman did not undergo *unyago* she regarded as *nahaku* for girls and *mnemba* for boys meaning they are childish, unclean, and uncivilized. They cannot share with those who conceded *unyago* and *jando*, neither can they participate in social events. Also, they cannot marry among the people of that society.<sup>8</sup>

In spite of the fact that church members are aware that the Bible condemns spiritism, they participate in these evil practices due to societal pressure.

## Death and Burial Rituals

Traditional Tanzanian belief about death is in direct opposition to Adventism’s biblical understanding. According to Tanzanian tradition, “after death, an individual lives in a spirit world, receiving a new body which is identical to the earthly body, but with the capacity to move about as an ancestor.”<sup>9</sup> African traditionalists in Tanzania believe that when a person dies he or she enters an unseen world which is better than the one we see. The dead are believed to have supernatural power to communicate, bless, curse, and give or take life. The way the dead treat the living depends on how the dead are treated during and after the burial. This belief encourages many among Tanzanians to worship the dead with the expectation of receiving a blessing. Those who do not can expect a curse from the ancestral spirits. “One of the most common cultural practices in Tanzania is the offering of sacrifices to ancestors and spirits in order to guarantee protection and safety, with up to 60% of local people believing that making a sacrifice will guard them against harm from evil doers.”<sup>10</sup> The practice of worshiping ancestor is condemned by the Adventist Church as evil and unchristian. For this reason, many Tanzanians fail to join the church, fearing to separate with ancestors. Many who do join the church, silently continue to practice this African traditional belief.

## Foods

Diet is another obstacle to reaching people with the gospel in Tanzania. This problem centers on the definition of clean and unclean meat. Most people in African settings eat the kinds of meat that the Bible in Leviticus 11 names unclean. When these people want to join the church, they are instructed to abstain from their traditional foods, which they find difficult to do. Instead, they discontinue the faith. There are people who eat anything in the name of meat, including rats, snails, tortoise, pork, and all kinds of rodents, as their main delicacies because they are readily available and inexpensive.<sup>11</sup> A common saying, “Chiumbile Nnungu chakumemena,” means whatever was created by God is to be taken as food.

The Maasai society in particular presents due to their traditional food that includes animal blood, a practice forbidden according to the Levitical law. “Blood is obtained by nicking the jugular artery of a cow, allowing for blood-letting that doesn’t kill the animal. Mixed blood and milk is used as a ritual drink in special celebrations, or given to the sick.”<sup>12</sup> The Maasai and other ethnicities who eat these unclean foods do not often join the church. If they do join, they do not stay long.

Alcohol is an important part of celebrations in most of Tanzania’s cultural groups. It is used in any ritual gathering such as initiations, weddings, family meetings, and even place of work. Nothing can be done without the presence of local alcohol. Those from these cultural groups who join the Adventist church find it difficult to avoid drinking alcohol and are prone to violating this standard of the Adventist faith.

## Spiritism

Before the beginning of recorded history, Tanzanian traditional practices were based on ancestral worship, the land, and various ritual objects.<sup>13</sup> Adoring ancestors, mountains, big trees, stones, tombs, and others objects has made it difficult for the church to penetrate certain communities. Some church members practice double standards: they worship ancestors on the one hand and God on the other hand. Members may be found in church, but the same people may be found at ceremonies venerating ancestors. When Sherina Nassoro married she “was ordered by the family elders to go to [her] deceased parents’ tombs to tell them about [her] marriage. [She] refused because of [her] faith. Consequently, no one among [her] relatives attended [her] wedding ceremony just because [she] didn’t accept their order.”<sup>14</sup>

## Lesson

In spite of the fact that Africans have entrenched their beliefs in traditional religions, they also possess a strength that will potentially enhance mission. African religions and culture teach people to have faith and assurance in unseen things. Using this belief as an entry point, the Adventist Church could follow the Apostle Paul’s example in Athens as recording in Acts 17:23: “For while I was passing through and examining the objects of your worship, I also found an altar with this inscription, ‘To an Unknown God.’ Therefore, what you worship in ignorance, this I proclaim to you.” The issue of African tradition in relation to the Church needs special attention.

"It is not the gospel that has been rejected, instead it is the way the message is proclaimed or the culture in which the message is wrapped that prompts resistance. Effective practitioners keep looking for new ways to present the timeless gospel, so that by all means they might save some."<sup>5</sup> The Adventist Church in Tanzania seems to be evangelizing using methods that do not influence traditionalists to accept the message.

This presents Adventist scholars with an opportunity to conduct research and missiological symposiums in order to discover methodologies that will influence African traditionalists to receive the message of the gospel and exist comfortably in the Church. Jesus and the apostles are the blue print of gospel contextualization.

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