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Adventists and Jita Culture

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Jita is a tribe located around Mount Masita in the eastern side of Lake Victoria in Tanzania. The name Jita was adopted based on the location of Mount Masita. The colonial governors from Germany could not pronounce Masita; instead, they called it Majita. They put in writing the word *Majita*, and therefore it became the name for these people. Since then the whole area is called Majita.¹

Mount Masita is the highest mountain in the area with a height of 4,916.9 ft above sea level. At its peak there are some notable features such as flat land and wells. Traditionally, the Jita used to climb the mountain and worship around it. People settled at the foot of the mountain and engaged in activities such as farming and fishing²

Origin of the Jita People

The Jita people originated in Ethiopia.³ They came down through Sudan via Uganda to Lake Victoria and sailed by canoe to Tanganyika (current Tanzania).

The Jita society had neither government nor a king or a chief. Each sect had an adviser who was wise and sometimes he would be regarded as a prophet. There was no federal governance in Jita society. Under this system of life, Jita people had no strong unity in terms of culture. Each sect had its taboos that governed its ways of life. These taboos were quite different from one sect to another. However, Jita people had some things which they shared in common. These include the language (Kijita), religion. They all worshiped gods. They believed in one senior god called Nymuwanga accompanied by other junior gods who are his representatives. Those junior gods are like Mugasa, the god of the sea and everything there in. He helped fishers when they were in activities of fishing. The other small god was Karungu, the god of the wild. He helped hunters when they were in activities of hunting. And finally, they were generous to whoever came to them. They were not hostiles to strangers. They were easily receptive to something new from outsiders.⁴

Introduction of Adventism in Jita Land

In 1909 Adventist missionaries from Germany reached Jita land. Once missionaries arrived they started to erect a church building which was finished in 1911. On February 12, 1911, two converts from Jita land, named Yohana Mtarimbo and Filip Kayanda, were baptized. Missionaries who were involved in this outreach included Abraham C. Enns, Raaesler, Carscallen, Stain, Otto Wallath, and their colleagues⁵

Although the Jita community is receptive to outsiders, there were other factors that favored the penetration of Adventism into the Jita community. One was worship. Because Jita people were accustomed to worshipping various gods, it was simple for them to worship the true God who was introduced by the Adventist missionaries. Along with other texts in the Bible, Acts 17:22-31 and Hebrews 1:1 were powerfully used by missionaries to introduce the Adventist message to the Jita community. Another factor that made Adventism welcome was generosity. Because Jita people are generous, it was conducive for Adventist missionaries to mingle with them and invite them into the Seventh-day Adventist Church. Generosity is biblical (Hebrews 13:2). The generosity of the Jita people contributed to influencing Adventist missionaries to persist in staying with them until Adventism was implanted. A third factor is flexibility. Jita people are flexible and willing to make new insights a part of their culture if this new information brings improvement. The fourth factor was their ability to analyze quality. The Jita chief, Kusaga, and his people were able to analyze qualities of the Adventist Church compared to other denominations, and the Adventist Church rated higher. The fifth and final factor was their love of education. The Jita people loved education more than other tribes in Mara region.⁶

Growth and Development of Adventism in Jita Society

By 1913 there were three churches, but after the war, in 1921, only ten members could be found out of the former 78 members.⁷

Due to the efforts of missionaries and African workers, the work subsequently prospered. In 1960 the Majita area was organized into the Majita-Ukerewe Field under African leadership. Simon Dea Otieno was the president and N. Elias the secretary-treasurer. In 1967 the name of the field was changed to Central Nyanza Field. Until 1974, the president of this field was Z. Bina and G. Makondo was secretary-treasurer. The Seventh-day Adventist Church has grown vigorously in Jita land. The land contains 13 districts, 96 organized local churches, and 53 companies, with a membership of 28,736 as of December 31, 2019. Ukerewe Irelands area alone is home to seven districts that comprise 79 organized local churches and 21 companies containing 17,340 church members.⁸ The number of church members in the Ukerewe area is dominated by the Jita which make up almost 97 percent.

Jita people were the first to accept the message of Seventh-day Adventists in the Mara region. They became pillars of the gospel to other communities. In Jita land, nearly all families refrain from work on Saturday (Sabbath), because they feel that God would not be pleased by anyone who works on Sabbath. Even now people from Majita are regarded as Adventists by those around them, even if they come from a different denomination. Most of the Jita were converted from worshiping false gods to worshiping the true God. The Jita community has produced many pastors who serve nationally and internationally. Some examples are Fares Masokomya Muganda, a famous evangelist in East Africa; his son, Baraka Muganda, who served as General Conference youth director for two terms; Misperes Rutolyo, a field president (1975-1977); Elizafan Bwire Wanjara, a field president (1966-1991); and Elias Makaki Kasika, the first head master of the first Adventist secondary school in Bwasi within the Jita community. He also was the first executive secretary to the first conference in Tanzania called the Mara-Kagera Conference, and in the East Tanzania Conference he served as union education director. Presently he is serving as the union youth director. In the area of education, the Seventh-day Adventists established nine primary schools. Most of the important scholars

from Majita attended those schools. Later on, after the independence of Tanganyika, the government confiscated those schools. However, two of them were reclaimed by the church, and those two schools are Bwasi and Kameya. Currently, they are at the level of secondary schools.⁹

The Jita used to believe in Nyamuwanga, the senior god whom they had never seen; so it was easy to learn about the true God who was being spoken of by Adventist missionaries, and they chose to believe in Him. They were receptive to outsiders and they were generous, a character expected in Christian practice. Yohana Mtarimbo and Filipo Kayanda were the first converts to be baptized in December 1911.¹⁰

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NOTES

1. Stephen D. Manyama, *Wajita Zamani Mpaka Sasa* (Dar es Salaam, Tanzania: Matokeo Publisher and Printers, 2013), 1, 2, 8-11.?
2. Stephen D. Manyama, retired insurance official and native of Majita, interview by the author, May 21, 2017.?
3. Wikipedia.?
4. Stephen D. Manyama, retired insurance official and native of Majita, interview by the author, May 21, 2017.?
5. *Seventh-day Adventist Encyclopedia*, second revised edition (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1996), 74.?
6. Kangalu B. Elineema, *Historia ya Waadventista Wasabato Nchini Tanzania 1903-2014* (Dar es Salaam, NEEC General Traders, 2015), 109.?
7. *Seventh-day Adventist Encyclopedia* (1996), 74.?
8. Mara Conference secretarial report, Fourth quarter, December 31, 2019, Mara Conference archives, Musoma, Tanzania.?
9. Elias M. Kasika, interview by the author in Arusha on March 10, 2020.?
10. Stefan Hoschele, *Centennial Album of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Tanzania* (Morogoro, Tanzania: Tanzania Adventist Press, 2003), 13.?

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