



The Sparrow family. Left to right: David Sparrow, daughter Alvinah, wife Sallie [or Sally], and son Herbert. (Photo courtesy of Gapman Publications)

Early Adventist Evangelism in Western Kenya

The Life of Ezekiel Kimenjo

BY GODFREY K. SANG

The edge of the vast Uasin Gishu Plateau in Western Kenya opens into the sprawling lowlands of the Lake Victoria basin on the north-eastern side of the lake. It is on the northern fringes of the lake, Africa's largest, that the Luhya people of Western Kenya live. Adventism was not known here until 1933, when a young Nandi colporteur named Caleb Kipkessio araap Busienei made his sojourn there to sell his book *Vita Kuu*, the Kiswahili version of *The Great Controversy* that had just rolled off

the Adventist Press at Kendu Bay.¹ Literature evangelists at that time had to overcome great odds, the greatest in this part of British East Africa being widespread illiteracy. Sales were low and they had to walk far to make a sale. At Shandike, Caleb met a young Luhya man named Petero Chetambe and interested him in his book.

Caleb had become an Adventist through the effort of David Sparrow and his wife Sallie, who were early European settler-farmers on the Uasin Gishu plateau of

western Kenya. The Sparrows arrived from South Africa in 1911 and settled among the Nandi people. They immediately set about to reach them with the Adventist message.² Bringing the Adventist message to the Nandi was no mean feat. The Sparrows were fluent in southern African languages, including Zulu and Xhosa, but Nandi, a Nilo-Hamitic language, proved to be a challenge. With the help of Caleb, they managed to learn the language enough to conduct Bible studies and hold Sabbath services. Soon, the reputation of the Sparrows' Ndege farm spread far. People began to refer to it as "that farm where no work is done on Saturday."

David Sparrow became an Adventist at Rokeby Park in the Eastern Cape of South Africa through the efforts of Ira J. Hankins, who moved to the area in 1890.³ After his baptism in 1892, and his marriage the following year to Sallie (née Pittaway), the Sparrows worked for the church as missionaries in many parts of South Africa and Rhodesia. In 1910, he met a Cape Town dentist, Dr. Bridgeman, who asked if he could manage his farm on the Uasin Gishu Plateau in British East Africa.⁴ He accepted and, with his wife and son Bert, settled among the Nandi people and began to share their faith with them. It was not easy. Early efforts to enter this country by missionaries of various denominations had come to nothing; one mission, which was established in 1909, packed up and left after several years without a single convert.

Caleb became the first Nandi to accept the Adventist message and David Sparrow sent him to school in Nairobi, some 200 miles eastward, so he could return and run a school on the farm. Going to Nairobi then was no easy thing. The railway station at Londiani was some seventy miles away by oxcart, requiring several days' travel each way. Caleb gained a good measure of literacy in Nairobi: enough to return and teach the other workers on the farm and to run the Sabbath program.

Just after the First World War, a dapper young Nandi ex-soldier joined the Africa Inland Mission at Kapsabet. This was one of the first missions to be established among the Nandi, taking over in 1914 from another mission that had closed without a convert. They, too, had to wait another five years before the Nandi gave them some attention. Kimenjo was one of the first. Here, he learnt to read and write and studied the Bible with the plan to go into full-time ministry. In 1926, the missionary in charge at the

Kapsabet mission heard that the Adventists were drawing away large numbers of members from his mission's branch in South Nyanza. He bade Kimenjo to venture into the area to counter the teachings of the Adventists. When Kimenjo arrived, he began earnestly teaching against the Adventists in various gatherings. In one of those, an Adventist evangelist took his hand and asked him how he could logically explain the Sabbath question using the Bible alone. Kimenjo was momentarily lost for words and asked for more time. Even then, he could offer no logical explanation. It was not long before he believed.

The first Adventist missionaries, Arthur Carscallen and Peter Nyambo, had entered this area in 1906 and started the work at Gendia, on the eastern shores of Lake Victoria. By 1920, when Carscallen left, the Adventists had already created six more stations: Wire Hill, Karungu, Rusinga Island, Nyanchwa (Kisii), Kanyadoto, and Kamagambo.⁵ Little work took place in western Kenya among the Nandi, other than the work by the Sparrows. W. T. Bartlett took over from Carscallen and he came with a fresh team of missionaries from England, one of whom was Spencer Maxwell.

The Place of Education in Evangelism

To the early missionaries, Western education was regarded as important in attaining the level of enquiry necessary to appreciate biblical teachings and to counter traditional African religion and thought. Simply put, you could not be a Christian without an education. The demand for education was so high at Gendia that Carscallen simply could not cope. Almost as soon as B. L. Morse arrived in March 1909, Carscallen dispatched him to help at the school at Gendia. The enrollment continued to climb, and they had to turn away hundreds of young people eager to learn.⁶

In August 1913, several young Luo men (known then as the Kavirondo) walked the 106 miles (172 km)⁷ from Gendia to the Sparrows' farm near Eldoret to enquire from him if he was going to start a school. Sparrow was taken aback by the need that was before him. Writing in the *South African Missionary*, Sparrow said,

About two weeks ago some Kavirondo boys came and asked if we were the people who kept the Sabbath of (*Mungu*)⁸ God, and inquired when we shall

start a mission with books to learn from. The Nandi have also asked the same questions, stating their willingness to work for an education.⁹

The Luo walking so far, and bypassing numerous other missions along the way, is testament to the spiritual capital that the Adventists had built so early in their mission work in British East Africa. David Sparrow was merely a farmer, and not even a missionary, but the reputation of his faith had gone ahead of him. Realizing the enormity of the need, Sparrow decided to send for help from South Africa. Writing in the *South African Missionary* in February 1916, he expressed his desire to have a South African come over to help him with his evangelism work and on the school. He wrote:

We need a young, strong, reliable native or coloured¹⁰ man with his wife, both converted Seventh-day Adventists. He must know Zulu or Xhosa and be able to read one of these languages. Must have education to help him study this (the Nandi) language. He should develop into a teacher and evangelist for these natives, but must be able to drive oxen, run a single and double plow, care for stock and do general farming.

This part of the country is very healthy, the climate is good and soil fertile. My mind it is a splendid place for a native school. A good home will be provided for the man and his wife and we will do all we can for them both spiritually and temporally. Full particulars as to conditions, salary and passage can be obtained by writing to me.¹¹

As far as we know, nobody fitting the description responded to the call and so he was left to depend on what he had on hand. Caleb Kipkessio was then sent to Nairobi

for further training in order to return to the farm to help out. Caleb worked until the arrival of this very able brother in the faith—Ezekiel Kimenjo.

Early Life of Kimenjo

Ezekiel Kimenjo araap Maswai was born about the year 1897, at Kapeywa, in Tinderet in Southern Nandi. In 1906, after the Nandi war of resistance against British rule had ended, Kimenjo was one of those that were relocated to northern Nandi by the British. As a little boy, he witnessed some of the great difficulties suffered by the Nandi people at that time, which partly explained why they wanted nothing to do with the Christian faith. When the First World War began, he enlisted with the

King's Africa Rifles (KAR) and fought with the British in the East Africa Campaign, which took him, among other places, to Tabora in Tanganyika. Like many soldiers, the war changed him. He could now speak Kiswahili, the new *lingua franca* of East Africa, and having travelled far and met many people, had gained new perspectives about life. After the war, he became one of the first people to join the Africa Inland Mission founded by American missionaries. He learnt to read and write and was baptized and given the name Ezekiel. In 1922, he married Esther, who had also

been a member of the same mission, and together they had a daughter.

Upon conversion to Adventism, Kimenjo returned to Kapsabet and tried to reconnect with his old mission but was immediately expelled when they found he had switched sides. About this time, his wife Esther became seriously ill. He took her to the Kaimosi Hospital, run by Quaker missionaries, but she died there, leaving behind their only child. Leaving the child in the care of relatives, he returned to Gendia where he had developed a good friendship with Paul Mboya (who would later become

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Kenya's first African Adventist pastor). Mboya took him further into biblical study. He was baptized in 1928 at Gendia and while there he was trained to conduct literature evangelism and other aspects of personal evangelism. A man of a quiet but resolute demeanor, tall and lanky, Kimenjo did not come from the usual mold of evangelists. He was not outgoing or argumentative, but the depth of his faith was quite apparent in his mastery of biblical knowledge. Kimenjo avidly studied the Bible, which at this point was only in the Kiswahili language,¹² which he had mastered in his army days.

In 1929, Pastor Spencer G. Maxwell took over from Bartlett as superintendent of the East Africa Union Mission. He quickly realized that Kimenjo could help expand the work among the Nandi people and sent him to Eldoret to connect with David Sparrow's work. By this time, the Sparrows had already brought to the faith about two dozen Nandis and were holding regular Sabbath services on the farm.¹³ Kimenjo took over the young congregation.

After about a year of working with Kimenjo, David Sparrow felt it was time to reach into the Nandi Reserve. In 1930, he charged Kimenjo with finding a suitable place on the Nandi Reserve to establish a church. Kimenjo first went to Kimolwet, some twelve miles (19 km) south of the Sparrow farm, where an old friend named Chebotok araap Terer lived.¹⁴ It was Terer who informed him that he would have a better chance of introducing his faith to the Nandi people in the Kaigat area to the north.

The following day he arrived at Kaigat, which turned out to be just what he was looking for. He was embraced by the local people there and Kimenjo returned to Sparrow with the good news. The following year, Kimenjo relocated to Kaigat and held the first Sabbath service, under a tree. David Sparrow happily used his trusty old oxcart to ferry building materials to Kaigat, nine miles (14 km) from his farm. During the week, the church building served as school. Maxwell sent a Luo teacher to Kaigat named Silvano Achia, who had completed his education at the Kamagambo Training School under E. R. Warland. Even then, the authorities frustrated the Adventist work, persistently denying them a license despite them meeting all the obligatory requirements.

It was not until the end of 1933 that the District Commissioner, K. L. Hunter, who was due to leave Nandi shortly, consented to give the Adventists their license as a parting favor. A former Adventist missionary, Pastor

William Cuthbert, who had left the ministry in 1931 to become a farmer at Lemook, constantly ministered at the young church at Kaigat, which was not far from his farm.

In August 1933, Maxwell travelled to Kaigat and presided over the dedication of the church. Kaigat became the first church under the newly organized North-West Kenya Mission (NWKM). By this time Kimenjo was a credentialed missionary and was placed in charge of the congregation at Kaigat and also the unentered areas of the Kabras in North Nyanza.¹⁵ He appears in the 1934 *Adventist Yearbook* as a Missionary Licentiate of the North-West Kenya Mission.¹⁶ He was put on a wage of 12 shillings a month (about £0.6 or \$3 in 1933 rates).¹⁷ This improved to 16 shillings (about £0.8 or \$4) from July 1, 1933.¹⁸ He was assisted by Caleb Kipkessio who had since joined full-time literature evangelism.

That year, Kipkessio led Kimenjo to Petero Chetambe at Shandike. Chetambe had organized a group of about twenty members and had requested that an evangelist be sent to tell them more about the Adventist message. Kimenjo brought Chetambe, and several others in the congregation, to the faith and soon a baptism was organized by Pastor Maxwell. This marked the entry of Adventism into the vast and populous Luhya country and Chetambe would now lead the charge. The first church in Luhya country was organized at Shandike in 1935. Chetambe had purchased a piece of land at Chebwai which he offered the church; after considering the intense resistance to Adventism in Nandi, it was felt that Chebwai, rather than Kaigat, was most ideal to be the headquarters of the North-West Kenya Mission.

In 1935, Kimenjo married Rebecca Jteptekeny at Kaigat and started a family. Applications were already underway to establish at Chebwai and, with the help of the local Chief Mulupi Shitanda, the Adventists were offered land. Chief Mulupi, despite being a practicing Muslim, enthusiastically assisted the Adventists establish at Chebwai. In 1936, Maxwell sent H. A. Matthews and Mariko Otieno to assist Kimenjo's work in the area. In July 1937, Otieno left, leaving Kimenjo and Chetambe as the principal workers there of the NWKM. In 1936, Matthew C. Murdoch became the first resident missionary in charge of the NWKM, now based at Chebwai.

In 1941, the members at Kaigat decided that they would have to disperse to other parts of Nandi to hasten the



Ron Carey (front row middle), the press manager at the Kavirondo Press at Gendia, with early Adventist colporteurs in 1931. Ezekiel Kimenjo is seated second left, while Caleb Kipkessio is standing on extreme left. (Photo courtesy of the British Union Conference)

spread of Adventism. Kimenjo left for Samitui, the southern-most tip of Nandi, close to the border with Kisumu, some 53 miles (85km) away from Kaigat. He was offered the land that was once owned by the famous diviner *Orgoiyot*, or Laibon Kimnyolei araap Turugat, whose son, Koital-el araap Samoei, had led the bloody resistance against the British from 1895 until 1905.¹⁹ The *Orgoiyot* was so feared that even after his death, which occurred there in 1887, nobody dared to live on his former lands, and the ruins of his old homestead could still be seen in 1941 when Kimenjo arrived. It was on this same spot that Kimnyolei had famously cursed the Nandi and Kipsigis people for plotting to kill him and had predicted the coming of the Europeans and their “Iron Snake” (the railway) and the defeat and subjugation of the Nandi by the British as their punishment. The end of the disastrous Nandi Resistance in 1906 was seen as a fulfilment of that prophecy.

The people there, distrusting the Adventists, offered Kimenjo the land in the belief that he would soon die and

leave them in peace. Undeterred, Kimenjo constructed a home and church right on top of the ruins of Kimnyolei’s homestead and curious villagers were surprised that nothing happened to him. Despite the great odds, the faith was established, albeit slowly. But not everyone was happy. Kimenjo encountered serious resistance from the local administration, who denied him a license for the church and school. Despite repeated applications, they would not budge.

Matters got worse in October 1948, when two young men kidnapped his adopted daughter Chesum and had her forcefully circumcised. When the word reached him, he angrily stormed the place of seclusion and rescued the poor girl but in so doing he seriously violated the customary law that strictly forbade men from entering the place. He was charged with the offense in a local tribunal which found him guilty and ordered him to pay a bull. He refused to pay and invoked his right of appeal. The matter went to the district officer, P. D. Abrams, who found him guilty and worsened the fine. Undeterred, Kimenjo refused to

pay and appealed to the district commissioner, J. K. Thorp, who again found him guilty and ordered him to pay the two fines imposed earlier and also to leave Samitui. Kimenjo further appealed yet again to the provincial commissioner in Nakuru, D. L. Morgan, who, together with the chief native commissioner, P. Wyn Harris, in Nairobi, declared him not guilty and harangued the lower officers for tolerating the barbaric custom.²⁰

During the entire affair, Kimenjo received tremendous support from the church. His immediate boss, Pastor K. J. Berry, then in charge of Chebwai, together with the Kenya Mission Field president, Pastor E. W. Pedersen, rallied the churches across Kenya to pray for Kimenjo. There was jubilation at his acquittal across all the churches of western Kenya. However, after the politically charged Chesum affair, the church felt that it would be better to move him from Samitui. In 1950, he was posted to Kebeneti in Kericho to pastor the pioneer church among the Kipsigis people, another sub-tribe of the Kalenjin people similar to the Nandi. He remained there for five years, planting a number of churches.

When he returned to Nandi, he settled again in his old homestead at Samitui (even in his absence nobody took over the land) and continued his work. The coming of Kenya's Independence in 1963 removed all religious restrictions. He organized the church at Samitui and the school he founded in 1942 was finally registered and has since expanded to include a boarding secondary school. Kimenjo conducted his final camp meeting in August 1969 at Kapcheplanget, in Ziwa in Uasin Gishu, north of Nandi, bidding his farewell to the people among whom he had laboured tirelessly. He passed away on the morning of July 5, 1972 and was laid to rest at his Samitui home two days later. He was survived by Rebecca and their five children. Petero Chetambe died in February 1990, while Caleb Kipkessio died in December 1998.

From the old North-West Kenya Mission, pioneered by Kimenjo in 1931, today stand three conferences—the Greater Rift Valley Conference, the North-West Kenya Conference, and the Central Rift Valley Conference, which have between them over 4,000 congregational establishments, including about 1,500 organized churches with over 160,000 members worshipping there.²¹ They are all served under the West Kenya Union Conference. In sending Kimenjo to Samitui, it appears God wanted to overturn the curse of the old *Orgoiyot* over the Kalenjin people.

Endnotes

1. It was known at this time as the Kavirondo Press, based at Gendia, the traditional birthplace of Adventism in Kenya.
2. Godfrey K. Sang and Hosea K. Kili, *On the Wings of a Sparrow: How the Seventh-day Adventist Church Came to Western Kenya* (Gapman Publications Ltd.: Nairobi, 2017).
3. Virgil E. Robinson, *Third Angel over Africa*, unpublished manuscript held at the Pieter Wessels Library, Helderberg College, Somerset West, South Africa.
4. *The South African Missionary*, vol. 11, no. 9, (March 4, 1912): 4.
5. Ibid.
6. “The Story of Our Missions for 1909,” in *The Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, vol. 87 no. 24 (June 16, 1910): 41.
7. The distance measured by Google Maps uses the main roads for motor transport today from Gendia to Ndege farm in Kipkenyo, near Eldoret. The same journey may have been slightly shorter made on foot but passed through dense forests and the territory of hostile tribes. The journey was definitely not a simple one.
8. The Kiswahili name for God.
9. *The South African Missionary*, vol. 12, no. 30 (August 18, 1913): 2.
10. Term used to refer to a bi-racial person in South Africa.
11. *The South African Missionary*, vol. 15, no. 7 (February 14, 1916): 2.
12. The translation of the Bible into the Kiswahili language was completed in 1890. It was not until 1939 that the Nandi Bible was completed by his former mission.
13. Ibid.
14. Sang and Kili, *On the Wings of a Sparrow*.
15. *The Advent Survey*, vol. 5, no. 11 (November 1933): 4.
16. *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook 1934* (Takoma Park, Washington DC: Review & Herald Publishing), 148.
17. <http://www.miketodd.net/encyc/dollhist.htm>, accessed in July 2019. Back in 1920, the East Africa shilling was introduced, and the exchange rate pegged at £1 to 20 shillings.
18. Minutes of the East Africa Union Committee held at Kamagambo, Session no. 139, May 28–31, 1933 (Archived at the East Kenya Union offices in Nairobi).
19. He was shot dead in October 1905 by the British forces. Some Nandi continued to resist despite his death but that did not last long. In February 1906, the Resistance was brought to an end.
20. Sang and Kili, *On the Wings of a Sparrow*.
21. *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook 2018*.



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