

## BOOK REVIEW

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***Religion and Social Change: A Sociological Study of Seventh-day Adventism in Kenya*, by Nehemiah M. Nyaundi. Lund, Sweden: Lund University Press, 1993, 278 pp.**

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Seventh-day Adventist missionaries entered Kenya in 1906. Because they were relatively late on the scene, and the British colonial government policy discouraged direct competition between missions, they concentrated their efforts for the first several decades on the region of western Kenya near Lake Victoria. Their efforts met with considerable success, so that by 1991 Adventists reported 301,023 members. The growth rate increased sharply after independence (membership stood at 36,469 in 1963), and especially after 1981, when world leaders made rapid growth their first priority. Membership in Kenya stood at 130,081 in 1981, so that the growth rate there during the following decade was 131.4%; this contrasts with an increase of 110.0% in the world membership, which climbed from 3.4 million to 7.1 million. There were 2.2 million Adventists in Africa south of the Sahara in 1991.

Little research has been published on Adventism in Africa or other parts of the Developing World. In this pioneering study based on his Ph.D. dissertation in sociology at the University of Lund in Sweden, Nyaundi, a Kenyan Adventist and one-time licensed minister, asks what factors facilitated Adventist growth in his homeland in recent years. He employs resource mobilization social movement theory and church growth theory to address this question.

In the process he considers the evolution of Adventist outreach strategies there. The central strategy was the provision of elementary education, especially while government authorities chose to leave that task to the missions and provided them with "grants in aid" to subsidize their costs. Although schools were primarily evangelistic centers, Adventist schools earned a superior reputation for teaching literacy. Until the 1940s Adventists insisted that their converts leave their villages and live in new Adventist communities where they were subjected to total socialization. Meanwhile, Adventism became a "full-service" church, providing medical care through a hospital and series of clinics, welfare and disaster relief programs, training in agriculture, trades, and diet and hygiene, and considerable employment opportunities for members. In the 1950s the Adventist education system was thrown into disarray when church leaders chose to reject government aid rather than accept restricting educational reforms. This caused a financial crisis, which greatly reduced the size and quality of the Adventist education system. In 1968 the government took direct responsibility for providing much of the education, and the number of mission schools was restricted. Although the Adventist education system

remained significant, and was capped by a university in 1979, recruitment strategies in the past 15 years have increasingly emphasized public evangelism.

Nyaundi also considers the impact of Adventism on Kenya, of its own rapid growth on itself, and the issues facing Adventism today in Kenya. Indigenous leaders have taken over since independence – but there are struggles among potential leaders, and men are elected because of their tribal ties rather than competence. He estimates that more than 80% of the members – and new converts – are peasants, without regular income; the number of urban slum dwellers is increasing. This concentration of poverty among the membership impacts the finances of the church, which have not kept up with numerical growth. This has been felt acutely as the flow of funds from the General Conference has diminished. Consequently, pastors are poorly paid and there are too few of them to nurture the rapidly growing membership.

A small but growing educated elite is emerging within Kenyan Adventism, a mix of new converts and inherited Adventists concentrated in urban areas, some of whom hold high government positions. However, the ties of many of these to the church are loosening. One reason he gives is that there are no pastors with sufficient education to minister to them appropriately. Another is that the image of the church as a vehicle for upward social mobility is eroding: "...at the beginning, missions provided the best form of education, which was often tied to Christian membership. At the time, it was made to look like that once a Kenyan was converted to Christianity, then one had embarked on a bandwagon destined to improved personal status [even though the education offered was rudimentary]. This is long past. In modern Kenya, the state offers better education and employment in secular jobs bestow higher social status than mission employment." [241-2]

Nyaundi makes references to the close relationship between Adventism and the political regime, and to compromises made by the Advent movement "in order to obtain legitimacy" [p. 48]. Because of the national spirit of Harambee ('Let us pull together'), Adventism, like other Christian churches, "conducts public fund-raising campaigns organized by politicians to finance its projects" [174], such as building a church, school, or dispensary, or for a scholarship fund for Adventist students in Adventist schools [201]. This practice contrasts sharply with the earlier decision of missionary leaders to reject grants-in-aid for Adventist schools.

Close ties to the colonial British government earlier proved a problem when the independence movement blossomed; it seems to me that similar ties to an increasingly unpopular and autocratic government place the church similarly at risk. A speech by then General Conference president Neal Wilson when the Annual Council of the General Conference was held in Nairobi in 1988, the year which marked the 25th anniversary of independence, which was reported in the local press under the headline "SDA head lauds Kenya for upholding freedom" [Daily Nation, Oct 6, quoted p.209], seems naive given the caliber of the regime.

Nyaundi praises the National Council of Churches of Kenya and other churches for playing a strong and important opposition role in politics, for example concerning government attempts

to introduce three constitutional amendments in the late 1980s. He is regretful that Adventists have refused to join these churches in this role [78, 81-3, 209].

Although Nyaundi gives an enlightening overview of the history of Adventism in Kenya, the value of his study is compromised by severe weaknesses in his data, especially those needed to address his stated purpose of accounting for the pace of recent Adventist growth there. He found that Adventist documents had not been kept at all consistently, and that the existing "archives" were in disarray. He was forced to abandon an attempt to gather questionnaire data because of an unacceptably low return rate. He uses the official membership data and other archival materials which have been maintained in the U.S., discusses official church manuals and church propaganda originating in America as if they describe practices in Kenya accurately, and extrapolates from the limited secondary sources that are available, most of which focus on other denominations. He draws extensively on his own experience with Kenyan Adventism, but without attempting to check it and expand on it through the use of interviews. Some of his statements conflict with my own data, which are based on extensive interviews within Kenyan Adventism. For example, while he assumes that all members are active because of provisions in the Church Manual to disfellowship all inactive members, I found widespread nominalism because of the practice of rapid baptisms at the end of short evangelistic campaigns (which replaced a policy of two years in a baptismal class before baptism in the mid-1970s), poor nurture of converts, and widespread public identification with Adventism in Western Kenya, where over a million identified themselves as Adventists in a government census. The study is especially weak at its core, in the attempt to account for the rapid growth of Adventism in Kenya: Nyaundi gives a good summary of the church growth literature, but does not have the data to apply it effectively to Kenyan Adventism, and often tries to fill in with data from studies of Adventism in the U.S. He also lacks the most basic comparative data, such as growth data for other denominations in Kenya, which must surely be available.

I was also frustrated by the many errors in spelling, grammar, and punctuation; by a very repetitious style; and the absence of an index.