

Adventist Culture in Africa

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ABSTRACT

The Adventist church emerged from a wide-spread revival which was prevalent in the 19th century. This was characterized by a frenzy of the eminence of Christ's second coming. Notable advent preachers of the time included William miller, a Baptist minister in the US, whom using biblical prophecy as a guide, had postulated that Christ was due to return to earth in 1844, precisely October 22nd. The failure of the anticipated return, or rather, the misinterpretation of the events that took place, shattered peoples' faith, homes and even their very existence. In an attempt to re-evaluate the failure of the prophesy, led spirited men of God to further probe into Daniel 8:14 prophecy, which formed the basis of the initial prophesy. In the wake of the re-interpretation and cross-referencing with events in the book of revelation, they stumbled upon the discovery of the seventh day as the correct day of worship and discovered there was no biblical backing for Sunday as a day of worship. This altered their initial task as they took upon themselves, the holy responsibility to preach to the world, the truth of Gods holy day. In 1863, they formed themselves into a formal church organization and adopted the name '**Seventh-day Adventists**'. This paper examined the Adventist culture in Africa and elucidates cogent historical antecedents that places the discourse in perspective.

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1. A HISTORY OF THE SEVENTH DAY ADVENTIST CHURCH IN AFRICA.

In an attempt to re-evaluate the failure of the prophesy, led spirited men of God to further probe into Daniel 8:14 prophecy, which formed the basis of the initial prophesy. In the wake of the re-interpretation and cross-referencing with events in the book of revelation, they stumbled upon the discovery of the seventh day as the correct day of worship and discovered there was no biblical backing for Sunday as a day of worship. This altered their initial task as they took upon themselves, the holy responsibility to preach to the world, the truth of Gods holy day. Following this development, they embarked on a vigorous evangelistic and missionary campaign that led them as far into non protestant countries like Russia in 1886, and by 1894, the Adventist message had gotten to the shores of Africa through the gold coast (Ghana) in west Africa and Matabeleland, in South Africa. Karl G. Rudolph and E. L. Sanford were the first Adventist American missionaries to set foot in west Africa.

However, some studies claim that some indigenes by name William Kweku Attah and Francis I.U Dolphin had anonymously come across the message in 1888. The Adventist message gradually spread to other parts of Africa like sierra-leone, Liberia, Nigeria amongst other northern, central and southern African countries. Like other explorers and missionaries from other denominations and affiliations, the Adventist missionaries and evangelists encountered several difficulties ranging from cultural, religious and socio-political ramifications which will be adequately discussed later in this work. These challenges, although may have been managed and controlled to a considerable extent, still reflect and affect the nature and practice of Adventism in Africa, and more particularly, Nigeria

1.1 Culture Conceptualized

Culture is perceived as multi-faceted and multi-dimensional in nature. That is why scholars and philosophers view it as a complex phenomenon. Culture is central to human existence. It is essential for societal development and continuity. Culture shapes attitudes and molds behaviors. Culture embodies characteristics a people evolve in trying to cope with the challenges of life in an environment. Culture is transient in nature, moving from generation to generation. Culture offers meaning to the cultural, social political, economic, religious, linguistic ethics of our society.

According to Ade Obafemi, culture is divided into two major parts which are the material/tangible and non-material/intangible culture. Simply put, a man's language, dressing, personality and philosophies are largely influenced by his societal culture.

2. METHODS USED TO PROPAGATE ADVENTISM IN AFRICA.

Adventism faced a lot of challenges when it got to Africa, because other denominational churches were already present propagating their religious belief and convictions, some of which were not at par with what the Adventist believed. Furthermore, most of the evangelical techniques known by the missionaries were already being adopted by other churches missionaries as they were converts from some of those churches. Also. It was quite difficult to explain to the Africans, the peculiarity in their 'kind' of Christianity, for they believed all Christians were the same, with differing names. However, below are stated some of the peculiar ways the Adventists propagated their message of salvation and hope which formed a cultural basis for the church body in Africa.

1. Open Air Preaching/Public Evangelism Culture

This is characterized by teaching the truths of the bible to a crowd in open air at a given time. This was a system of evangelism that was widely practiced by various Christian denominations like Methodists and Baptists. This system was very instrumental because it assisted the message to get to people who wouldn't ordinarily go to the church or its premises to listen to the word. Passersby, market women, transporters and other artisans were opportune to hear the message. This was also actively supported by annual camps where peoples' basic needs would be attended to, while they listened to the word over a short period of time, which varied across Africa.

2. Door to Door Evangelism Culture

This method of evangelism entails moving from door step to door step, face to face, one on one. This method of evangelism has been seen to work better in heterogeneous societies, unfortunately, most African live in a homogenous society where everyone's business is every other persons business. This made it quite difficult to convert people on individual basis. However, evangelically speaking, it is considered the most effective method of evangelism because it ensures the spread of the message to the farthest corners.

3. Literature Evangelism Culture

Literature evangelism is seen as one of the strongest tools used by the Adventist church to propagate the gospel. This method of evangelism was adopted in 1963. It involves the publication of gospel messages in their various perspectives to meet the cognitive, health, family and spiritual needs of people. It also provided a new line of employment for youths who were recruited to distribute and market these publications. It even opened up opportunities for some of them to travel beyond Africa.

4. Lifestyle Evangelism Culture

This method of evangelism is characterized by the ability of the missionary to live out his/her faith, hoping that people around them will be influenced by their lifestyle and be attracted to becoming a Christian or accepting their faith. This was a veritable tool the missionaries used in propagating the gospel. They had nature tutoring, where they educated the local youth on certain things in their environment that could enhance their livelihoods. They also practiced vegetarianism, emphasizing the benefits of leading such a lifestyle, which eventually assisted some of the aged ones in the environment and added longevity to their lives. This attracted others to aspire to live such lives and on the long run, accept the Adventist faith. They also organized periodic love feasts and community guest days where members and non-members were invited to participate and they used the medium to spread the gospel.

5. Medical, Educational and Prisons Evangelisms Culture

Adventist missionaries in Africa embarked on health or medical ministries by establishing hospitals, clinics, sanitariums, dispensaries, where the local community people could access expert medical services at next to nothing costs. They also introduced medical missions where they provided certain medical treatment and surgical services absolutely free of charge. The establishment of educational institutions is also a strong point where Adventist gained popularity and acceptance. Primary, secondary as well as tertiary institutions were established to train the indigenes in these communities. They provided international standard education at subsidized rates, especially for church members, and this has become a strong pillar in Adventist evangelism and mission work. Incarcerated individuals were also given a hope as the Adventist missionaries were one of the foremost to introduce prison ministries, where frequent visits were made to people in prison to give them a hope beyond their present condition or situation and to preach the grace and salvation of Christ Jesus to those who were willing to accept him. Relief and humanitarian works were also methods the Adventist used to gain recognition and acceptance in Africa. This was done through the establishment of missions such as the Adventist Frontier Mission (AFM), Maranatha International, ADRA - Adventist Development Relief Agency etc.

6. Auxiliary groups evangelism

Various auxiliary groups were formed within the church hierarchy that assisted in organizing church member and programs as well as ensuring the welfare of members and outsiders alike. Some of these groups include; youth ministries, hospital ministries, prison ministries, women ministries, men's organization, family life ministries, Dorcas women, amongst so many others. This formed a sort of surrogate family, especially to members that had been rejected by their families for accepting the faith. There are many other isolated methods the Adventists employed to propagate their message in Africa, however, these were the most widely known, efficient and acceptable methods, which eventually gave recognition to the Adventist fold and formed a distinct Christian culture for the church, amongst its other denominational peers.

3. CHALLENGES OF PROPAGATING ADVENTISM IN AFRICA

The Adventist message did not have a smooth sailing ride and wide spread acceptance, when it was introduced in Africa, as sequel to other Christian churches. However, the Adventist church had both remote and immediate challenges that made its establishment quite difficult. Some of these challenges were common to all other foreign religions while other were quite peculiar to the Adventist church. Firstly, language was an endemic problem the missionaries faced in Africa. The multi ethnic nature of Africa made it extremely difficult for the missionaries to communicate their intentions and messages to the local people. The level of literacy was almost non-existent at this period which made the work very slow. Language, being one of the main fabrics of any culture had to be re-orientated to get the message across to the people.

Secondly, there was a ‘culture shock’, between the two races, that is, the European race and the African race, and this greatly affected the propagation as well as the acceptability of the Adventist gospel. The Adventist work was going to transform their village setting to urban life, from communism to capitalism, as salvation was individual, from illiteracy to literacy, from superstition to medicine, from polygamy to monogamy and from African traditions to Adventism. In fact, Africans perceived that the missionaries wanted to save them from being themselves, as being Africans by virtue of customs, traditions, arts, ethic play, history, skills and beliefs seemed to all be in stark contradiction of the message they were presented with. This birthed violent opposition from the people.

Thirdly, doctrinal confusion was another challenge that the Adventist missionaries encountered in Africa. The late realization of the Sabbath truth by William miller, led to a rather late crusade of the seventh day truth. By the time the first Adventist missionaries arrived in Africa, other denominations like the Methodists, the Anglicans, Catholics, Baptists were already in Africa, claiming territories for themselves and converting the locals in their large numbers. The ignorant Africans had only just encountered the truth about a supernatural, all loving God who did not judge with instant retribution and was worshipped on Sunday. Furthermore, there were no lifestyle peculiarities especially in areas of diet and the use of certain African instruments affiliated to the other denominations, while they all also conducted their worship on the same day. However, the Adventist message came with more stringent doctrines on lifestyle and a belief in a totally different day of worship. This made them automatically labeled as fanatic and people converted into the church were persecuted both by unbelieving locals and Christians form other denominational churches. For fear of being labeled, a lot of people rejected the Seventh-day truth when it was first introduced and thus its acceptability suffered condemnation from all sides, a phenomenon the church still suffers till date.

Fourthly, the geographical terrain of some of the hinterland communities where Christianity had not reached for obvious reasons, posed a very big challenge to Adventist missionaries. Due to the fact that most of the urban areas and coastal towns had been overrun by other denominational missionaries, when the Adventist missionaries came to Africa, to fulfil their mission, they had to extend hinterland to break ground where other churches had not reached. Some of these communities had no road networks, and even the topography of the areas were not favourable to the European missionaries and their families. Some of these areas even lacked some basic social amenities which the Adventist church was eventually able to provide through their relief and development agency.

Finally, although some of these challenges were surmounted while others were managed, it is still quite evident that they still live with us in present day Adventism in Africa.

4. IMPACTS OF ADVENTIST CULTURE IN AFRICA

The impacts Adventist message and culture has had on the African people cannot be overemphasized. Their presence in Africa, birthed a revolution in healthcare and education. The Adventist health philosophy is one that is unparalleled around the world, having one of the six best health facilities around the globe. Africa was not isolated from this milestone, as hospitals and healthcare facilities were also established in different African countries, which compete favorably with national and international healthcare facilities. It also provides an opportunity for Africans to specialize in the medical science as most of these facilities also concurrently run nursing schools where the locals can attend and specialize. These facilities also have foreign medical evangelists which visit from time to time to share their expert knowledge as well as attend to serious cases that need expert attention. Another milestone in the Adventist health mission is the alternative therapy or what may be better termed as ‘foods that heal’. This is a sensitization on natural remedies as an alternative to medical options. This has helped to re-educate the African people on herbs, fruits and roots that are readily available, that can help them to live a healthy lifestyle as well as manage conditions that some of them may already have.

Educationally, the Adventist philosophy of education is one of holistic education, which is the education of the physical, spiritual, mental, psychological, emotional, and intellectual being of a person.¹¹ It is an education of the head, the mind and the hands.¹² This is the educational foundations, the Adventist culture introduced in Africa, where the locals were trained to use their heads as well as their hands. This assisted a lot of youths acquire technical skills which has helped them to sustain themselves financially and otherwise within and outside the college premises. It has also given a lot of Africans who wouldn’t have been able to afford education with international standards an opportunity, with the work and study program.

However, there were some fallouts with the introduction of the Adventist culture, as was with some other Christian denominations. Some African churches, claim a total rejection of the African culture while others feel otherwise. The Adventist church doctrine, as stated in the church manual, claims a total rejection of the culture. However, this is only on perspectives that are contrary to the bible, and are inimical to ‘thus says the lord’. However, concerns have been raised as to the treatment of some fabrics of the African culture which are not clearly stated in the bible, yet uphold biblical standards. As afore mentioned, there are African cultures that have been evolved as a means of meeting up with the challenges of living in an environment, especially in northern and eastern African nations, for instance dressing and language, which are not necessarily inimical to the bible, but because they seem to represent certain cultural or religious affiliations, have been automatically debunked and are out rightly rejected by African Adventist churches. Other examples and instances abound, but this worldview evolved by indigenous African Adventists is as a result of the cultural shock that the traditional African culture experienced when the Adventist missionaries came into their communities. They assumed that the European culture and religion was to be mirrored rather than adapted, and this has affected the adoption of Adventist culture in Africa.

5. THE WAY FORWARD

Adventist culture in Africa is one that should be encouraged and propagated rigorously, especially its unparalleled healthcare with natural remedies and its holistic educational approach that educates the body, the mind and the spirit, in order to turn out positive minded people into the society. However, certain assumptions and conclusions that have contradicted traditional African cultures and its acceptance need to be revisited and reinterpreted. In instances where these cultures do not directly contradict the word of God in principle and practice, these practices should be encouraged, even introduced into our worship. This is what distinguishes us as Africans, that which we should be proud of.

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