CHAPTER SIX

DIMENSIONS OF AN AFRICAN ADVENTIST CHURCH LIFE

The first decades of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Tanzania coincided with a period of several interesting transitions in the Adventist denomination and its environment: (1) The formative period of Adventism was over. A new era began in which a new generation of leaders took over; they did not know the founders of their church personally any more but mainly through their books. (2) Events and developments such as World War I, industrialization, urbanization, and new forms of communication and travel changed the lives of whole nations and made previously unexplored regions much more well-known than in the previous century. (3) Adventism expanded from a rather regional movement to a worldwide church. (4) Therefore, Adventist identity had to be translated into distinctive contexts as it took root in new soil.

The first transition mainly affected Adventism in Tanzania in an indirect way. The post-World War I generation represented a period of orthodoxy; it attempted to define what Seventh-day Adventism was to be after its founders had died. Despite the earlier official rejection of a creed\(^1\) and an authoritative church manual,\(^2\) leaders of the growing organization felt the need for guidelines which would provide identity and unite the whole denomination. This led to a whole series of documents that largely codified what had already become commonly

\(^1\) A creed was rejected because leading Adventists emphasized that “the Bible is our only creed.” Instances of Adventists who had been disfellowshipped from their former denominations because of their millennial views (which had been interpreted as contrary to established creeds) added another reason to reject specific statements of faith. See Schwarz, *Light Bearers*, 166–167.

\(^2\) Already by 1883, some articles on church policy had appeared in the leading denominational magazine, *Review and Herald*. A committee had been commissioned by the General Conference to prepare a church manual, but then the manual-to-be was not adopted because of fears that it would lead the denomination to a formalism that would leave no room for development. In 1907, J.N. Loughborough published *The Church, Its Organization, Order and Discipline* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald, 1907), which was much used but, as a personal undertaking, did not carry the authority of official guidelines. See “Church Manual,” SDAE, 264.
accepted standards: (1) a *Manual for Ministers*, which appeared in 1925,\(^3\) (2) a first official statement of beliefs, which was formulated in 1931, (3) the first *Church Manual*, published in 1932,\(^4\) (4) a uniform baptismal vow, adopted in 1941, and (5) a statement on “Standards of Christian Living,” which was agreed upon in 1946.\(^5\) That these documents came into existence rather late implies that the denomination often operated with unwritten or semi-official traditions before these respective years. These traditions had not yet become immovable guidelines but were in the process of becoming crucial elements of Adventist Christianity. This situation allowed for some degree of flexibility, which would ultimately contribute to distinct features in African Adventist church life.

While the second and third transitions mainly concerned the denomination as a whole, the fourth transition, the translation of Adventism into new contexts, was the major issue in Tanzania. This task was particularly challenging because it emerged at the very time when Adventist leaders were seeking to create worldwide uniformity through the documents referred to. In spite of all these attempts, the very environment in which the denomination grew and the people who constituted the Tanzanian Adventist church created a peculiar identity in four realms: (1) church life, (2) the church’s interaction with its cultural environment, (3) its relationship with the public realm, and (4) theology. These four aspects will be dealt with individually in this chapter and the next three; this chapter draws a sketch of Tanzanian Adventist identity as reflected in the life of this church.\(^6\)

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\(^5\) This statement covered topics such as Sabbath keeping, entertainment, recreation and amusement, music, dress, health, courtship, marriage, and divorce. See “Standards of Christian Living,” RH (16 June 1946): 216–220.
\(^6\) Church life has been chosen as the beginning of the four thematic chapters because it was the primary dimension of faith for the majority of believers, the aspect of religious existence that was most tangible and local, i.e., it could be experienced immediately and permanently. Chapters 6 to 9 attempt to portray a “widening” picture of Tanzanian Adventism in that the most concrete phenomena are discussed first and each consecutive chapter presents an aspect that is somewhat more removed from religious every day life. Chapter 9, however, with its focus on popular theology and religious movements, in a way closes the circle by taking up issues that also appear in this chapter.