Book Reviews


Stefan Höschele has done a brilliant work in writing a historical account of the development of the Seventh-Day Adventist (SDA) Church in Tanzania. He has approached it like a historian and paid great attention to those details others would have deemed less significant. In his work he has identified two aspects to explore in his investigation into the development of the SDA Church: the SDA church as a remnant and as a folk church. His investigation provides us with a historical narrative that looks into the development and challenges of the SDA before and after World Wars I and II.

The phenomenon of the development of Adventism in Africa has been one that needs closer observation. There is a steady growth in their numbers on the continent with major challenges that need attention from different perspectives. Höschele has succeeded in looking at the Tanzanian story for the period covering about 80 years. He has highlighted several challenges and factors that have been operational in the success of Adventism in Tanzania. Some of these are similar to problems from other places on the African continent.

In the first chapter he asks what a “Folk Church” is. Höschele provides the reader with different ways of qualifying or defining a folk church: (1) A theological idea of a church that claims religious authority over an entire people. (2) Empirically it is seen as a religious majority based on the overwhelming number of its followers in a given area. (3) Sociologically a folk church constitutes a religion that relates positively to a people’s cultural identity. All these aspects add up to a holistic image of what is a folk church. In his analysis, Höschele looks at the different ways in which the SDA church has managed to replace, to an extent, the festivities and cultural identities that were observed by the Pare and other groups in Tanzania. He detects that the Sabbath observance, song and baptism have become iconic ideas that have defined Adventism.

The idea of a remnant has taken a strong meaning in Africa. In later chapters, Stefan Höschele rightly observes that Adventists in Tanzania employed the idea of a remnant when they made choices to interact with a society in ways that were not political. Much of their interaction was designed to influence the society in a way that reflected that the return of Jesus was imminent and even nearer than many people thought. Added to the idea of a folk church, Adventism became quite successful and turned into a great phenomenon in Tanzania and other places in East Africa.

As a Kenyan who became a Seventh-Day Adventist at a very early age, I have identified with many of the ideas and facts reflected in this study. I have experienced many of these stories and met some of the people mentioned in this book. I have also met children and grandchildren of some of these people who have been credited with several ideas in the advancement of the Adventist course in Tanzania. I have listened to and met some of the church choirs that used theological ideas that presented the remnant message in a very bold way. I have lived and developed my life around the remnant church for a big chunk of my life until I left Kenya. The ideas
that Höschele has extrapolated in his studies are not far-fetched; they are real and apply in Kenya and Tanzania besides other places in Africa.

In chapters two to five, from North American revival to the establishment of a church in Tanzania, Stefan Höschele looks into the early beginnings of the SDA church in Europe that developed into a fully-fledged exportation to European colonies in Africa. In German East Africa, Tanzania took on a nationalistic idea that expanded the remnant idea. At a crucial stage when the church in Europe was gaining membership, Tanzania and East Africa in general came into the picture. But the challenges of working with colonial governments were ever so present. The church's endeavours to work with the colonial government, like all the other churches, were of an expedient as well as nationalistic nature.

The birth-place of Tanzanian Adventism owes much of its origin to the idea of allocation by the colonial administration as well as to the choice of a healthy highland devoid of the many ills that plagued the low-lying areas. It is also worth noting that the idea of working with other churches in terms of a loose idea of ecumenism established an unprecedented idea of cooperation with other churches at the time. Adventists pulled the card of cooperation when it suited them. For the rest they went alone in a hard-headed manner! In a way not unbeknown to them, Adventists were eager to work the system to their advantage as long as it did not hamper their goal of achieving the task of spreading the message "to every nation, kindred and tongue".

Missionary strategies were not always successful in the Adventists' approach. High-handedness and zeal from missionaries who took it upon themselves to apply corporal punishment left an indelible mark in the minds of the locals. There were many occasions when the pursuit of pietistic ideology was at odds with the community ideology held by the local people.

Despite the lack of any productive work in Pare, Adventists decided to explore a second mission elsewhere, in tandem with their mission of spreading the message to every nation, kindred and tongue. The first baptisms were to come later. Subsequently, despite the presence of other churches in the vicinity, Adventists set their sight on the densely populated areas around the lake with good mobility. With Kenya and Uganda in close proximity, the odds favoured their choice. Several reasons made their eventual success possible; Höschele has observed one of them. With Adventists providing a different idea on the state of the dead and a strict idea of being a Christian as opposed to that which was offered by other churches, there were good reasons to feel that the offer of a remnant church was ideal. The idea of a remnant church coupled with a general comity principle and other mitigating aspects gave them a chance for success.

Like many African countries where Adventism has succeeded, the Tanzanian version of Adventism has not been spared the complexities of inculturation. For example, the imposition of European values led to a conflict between issues that were community-oriented and the personal and pietistic approach from missionaries. There were different approaches to cultural issues like dress codes, marriage ceremonies, exchange of dowry or bridal price, initiation rites both for girls and boys, hair grooming, polygamy (Europeans had serial polygamy where one could marry more than one wife at different times while most African traditions allow for parallel polygamy where a man has more than one wife at the same time) and other culturally valued practices.

Many factors led to the development of the church in Tanzania, such as people who were subjects and/or agents of missionary work; theological policies that were sometimes ecumenical and accommodative on the ground; and a presence or absence of other competing religions. Nationalists who followed a German agenda most of the time hurt the course of the Adventist work. This became very noticeable after the First World War when Great Britain took over the German Territory in Tanzania. Because the structure of government was mirrored in the church, there were upheavals that made recovery hard for those churches or mission stations that were established by and still depended on German missionaries, expertise or finance.