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Sabbath Roots -- The African Connection

by Richard Nickels

Black Africans have a unique proclivity toward accepting the seventh-day Sabbath. Historically, Ethiopia, and many other parts of black Africa have been bastions of Sabbatarianism. Their isolation, for centuries, from the corrupting influence of Rome has allowed Africans to maintain much spiritual independence. Today, Christianity in general, and Sabbath-keeping in particular, is exploding in sub-Saharan Africa.

Charles E. Bradford, author of **Sabbath Roots: The African Connection**, brings to light many surprising historical facts. Those of us who have been schooled in European civilization may be shocked to realize the existence and widespread nature of unvarnished Christianity in black Africa, for centuries. About 340 million Africans profess Christianity. According to reliable estimates, Africa has the world's largest concentration of Sabbath-keepers, some 20 million people, of which only about three million are Seventh Day Adventists. The Sabbath is natural to black Africans. God is doing a work in Africa!

Ethiopia Equals Sabbath-Keeping

Ethiopia (Abyssinia) is a nation defined throughout its existence by its fidelity to the seventh-day Sabbath. Today, the numbers of Sabbath-keepers are exploding in Nigeria, Ghana, Kenya, Gabon, Congo, and elsewhere. Why? Because of the work of missionaries in the 1800s? No! The Sabbath is thriving in Africa because the Sabbath roots of Africa run deep, both in Scripture, and historical practice.

Psalm 68, the Pentecost Psalm, we read, "Princes shall come out of Egypt; Ethiopia shall soon stretch out her hands unto God," verse 31. And, she has, and is, responding to the Almighty. "When Israel was a child, then I loved him, and called My son out of Egypt," Hosea 11:1. "From beyond the rivers of Ethiopia My suppliants, even the daughter of my dispersed, shall bring Mine offering, Zephaniah 3:10. (Zephaniah may have been of African descent, because he was the son of Cush, a code name for a descendant of Cush, son of Ham.) "Also the sons of the stranger . . . every one that keepeth the Sabbath from polluting it, and taketh hold of My covenant; Even them will I bring to My holy mountain, and make them joyful in My house of prayer," Isaiah 56:6-7.

African-American preachers have long emphasized the importance of Ethiopia in the plan and purpose of God. For them, the Abyssinian Church is the Church in the Wilderness through which God had maintained for Himself a witness down through the centuries. Egypt is mentioned in Scripture 611 times; Ethiopia 20 times. Egypt figures prominently in the plan and purpose of God, Isaiah 19:24-25. Ethiopia and Egypt are representative of the entire African continent. For the Ashanti (Akan) of Ghana. Saturday has been the

traditional holy day, a day of worship of God. Among the Yorubas of Nigeria, the seventh day of the week has been a day when no work, no marriage, no festivities, should be performed. There is no record at any time in the history of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church that they have officially given up the Sabbath. Another group of Ethiopians, the Falasha, or "Black Jews," hold to a form of Old Testament religion that was dominant in Solomon's days.

There is a natural God-consciousness among Africans, both in Africa and in the "diaspora," or dispersed. With its theme of deliverance from slavery, justice, and righteousness, the Old Testament looms large in African thinking. Modern white, liberal, theology is foreign to the black mind, which usually take the Bible literally, and religious beliefs seriously. One does not go to Africa only to preach the Gospel; he goes to learn about the Almighty.

Racial Origins: One Source, One Place

What is the origin of the races? While some aspects may be shrouded in mystery, Bradford argues for a monogenetic (single source, single place) origin of mankind and the races, in Africa. Assyria in Mesopotamia, understood to be a northeast extension of Africa, is called in the Bible, "the Land of Nimrod [son of Cush]". In the "Table of Nations" of Genesis 10, Ham's progeny are given more space than any of the other sons of Noah. Of Ham's four sons, Mizraim went to Egypt, Cush to Ethiopia, Phut to Libya, and Canaan to Palestine. Whatever the origin of the racial differences of mankind, Bradford argues for their common origin, and common access to Yahweh's covenant, Genesis 9:8-19. The Sabbath is the great common denominator of that covenant. No one is excluded.

The so-called "curse of Ham" of Genesis 9:20-27 was not on Ham, but Canaan. The startling occurrence of Hebrew words in West African languages, especially in Yoruba, is evidence that covenant people descended from Ham have long permeated the African continent. Far from being pariahs from God, the Eternal has a heart for the African people: "Blessed be **Egypt My people**, and Assyria the work of My hands, and Israel Mine inheritance," Isaiah 19:25.

Church of Ethiopia

Sabbath Roots gives much fascinating information about the history of the Church of Ethiopia. The Queen of Sheba was from Ethiopia, and bore a son from King Solomon. Falashas continued the Old Testament religion. In Acts 8:26-40, we are given the account of the introduction of Christianity to Ethiopia, with the conversion of the Ethiopian treasurer (eunuch) by Philip. The treasurer returned to Candace's court, and as a result, Ethiopia became the first Christian nation. The influence of Ethiopia on the rest of Africa was enormous. Ethiopia has been the model nation of Africa for 2,000 or more years. The Bible uses the name, Ethiopia, to mean all of sub-Sahara Africa.

While Europeans (and especially Romans) have continually been uncomfortable with Jewish things, Africans are typically pro-Jewish. That is why we see the Europeans abandoning the Sabbath for Sunday, while many Africans continued to revere the Sabbath. Europeans adopted pagan Greece as their cultural model, while Africans leaned toward Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Although European history is steeped in portraying Africa as the deep black hole of humanity, Africa actually became a model for the rest of the world, albeit not always known to be so.

Conflict With Islam

Islam arose 600 years after Christ due to the failure of western European Christendom to live up to, and spread, the true Gospel message. Muhammad and his cohorts sought to reclaim the faith of Abraham, which Europeans had abandoned. Islam nearly defeated Europe, and severely endangered Ethiopia. Yet when Islam swept North Africa and the Middle East, Moslems created a shield for Africa from the corrupting influence of the Roman Church. The Ethiopian Church continued independent for centuries, until at last the

Jesuits encroached under the guise of helping Ethiopia resist Moslem invaders. More of this story is given in Michael Geddes' book, **The Church History of Ethiopia**, available as a 148-page reprint for \$12.50 from the BSA. The battle between Islam and Sabbath-keepers continues today in Nigeria, where the northern part of the country and the central government are dominated by Moslems, and the eastern and southern portions are predominately Christian.

Black African Openness to God

Charles Bradford takes us on a fascinating tour of Africa, visiting Sabbath-keepers from coast to coast, and sharing tidbits of their remarkable history. Today, Sabbath-keeping is so prevalent in Africa, that in some places, like the Kisii District of Kenya, the government cannot hold elections on Saturdays. **Sabbath Roots** is truly a remarkable and inspiring history.

It has often been said that Africans twist and distort Christianity, so that when western missionaries leave, the jungle grows back quickly. Sometimes, this has been the case. However, people are generally the same, regardless of the color of their skin. At least Africans did not change the Sabbath to Sunday, and create the Inquisition and Albigensian Crusades against those who believed the Bible. Catholic Europeans did this and more to distort the Gospel. There has long been an openness to God in black Africa. In their honest zeal, Africans often put western civilization to shame.

A King with Ten Sons

An illustration of the African mind's skill to put the Bible text into a format uniquely African is given by this story told by a young African lad. The purpose is to illustrate how the original Sabbath was changed by the European ecclesiastical establishment. It is a story Africans, and anybody, can relate to.

"Once upon a time, there was a great king who had ten sons. Then one day, the king decided to go on a journey. He called his ten sons before him. He also called for the Prime Minister. He embraced each of his sons, one by one, saying 'Oh, my son.' The king then turned to the Prime Minister and said, 'While I am away, take care of my sons.'

"Soon after the king was gone, the Prime Minister called the sons and lined them up before him for inspection. When he came to son number four, the Prime Minister said, 'You do not look like a royal son.' He took him out of the lineup and sent the boy into the fields to work with the slaves. Then the Prime Minister took his own son and put him in the place of the king's son.

"But the king came back one day, and called the Prime Minister to give an account of how he had taken care of his sons. The Prime Minister said, 'O king live forever. I have done as you have commanded.' He told the king that his sons were well.

"Then the king said, 'Bring in my sons.' As he had done at the first, he embraced them all until he came to the fourth son. Then he said, 'You are not my son. You must be an imposter.' The king turned to the Prime Minister and said, 'Who is this?'

"The Prime Minister replied, 'Your Majesty, your son did not look like a royal son, and so I removed him from the lineup and put my son in his place.'

"'Who gave you permission to do that?' the king demanded. The Prime Minister was speechless. 'But where is my son?'

"The Prime Minister responded, 'He is in the fields, Your Majesty, working with the slaves.' This made the king very angry. He banished the Prime Minister and his son from the realm and restored his own son to his proper place in the lineup."

When the story is over, the usual response from the African audience is, "Tell us, what is the meaning of the

story?" The lad would answer: "The king is God, and the ten sons are the Ten Commandments. The fourth commandment is the commandment that says 'Remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy.' The Prime Minister is the church, the one He left in charge of the commandments. But the church changed God's day of rest and put another day in its place, a day it chose. But the King is coming back!"

My African Friends

My first exposure to African Sabbath-keepers came shortly after I began Giving & Sharing in 1978. Through my book, *History of the Seventh Day Church of God*, I became acquainted with Sabbath-keepers in Nigeria and Kenya. Over the years, we have sent them many Bibles, concordances, books, and articles. One African elder, John I. Ajalli, began to contribute Bible Study articles, which we reprinted and sent to our mailing list. See two of John's excellent articles, Study No. 100, "**I Believe in Jesus Christ, What's it all about?**" and 102, "**Worship Not the Beast With 666**," on the www.giveshare.org BibleStudy website.

Although I never met him, John and I became spiritual brothers through frequent correspondence. His untimely death around the late 1980s temporarily halted our relationship, which I hope to renew in the Kingdom of God.

I will never forget the episode in which the Ajalli family endangered their freedom to worship God on the Sabbath day. As related by Mrs. Ajalli, she was in her garden hoeing weeds one day, when a group of snake worshippers were passing by. They were shouting and worshipping a snake (which was their "god"). The snake was allowed to go where it willed, and the worshippers followed chanting and singing. The serpent strayed from the road into the Ajalli garden, and Mrs. Ajalli warned the pagans that if they didn't get their snake out of her garden, they would be sorry. They refused to listen to her, so she killed the snake with her hoe. Well, this "sacrilegious" act caused a great uproar in the community, because she had killed their god. The local chieftan made it rough on the Ajalli family, and it was thereafter difficult to conduct Sabbath services in their compound.

John Ajalli and his wife had courage and faith. While many Nigerians begged for money, and we suspected that some sold the free Bibles we sent them, John was different. He once wrote that he appreciated the Bibles and literature we sent him, but if we couldn't or wouldn't do so, he and other Africans would still continue the work of God. John was a trustworthy servant of the Almighty.

Two Nigerians have visited our home. The first, James Obj, is a short, effervescent man, with a sparkling personality. He worked for Shell Oil Company in Nigeria, a leading oil producer. He visited us once for the

Feast of Unleavened Bread, and delivered interesting Bible Studies. James introduced me to Nigerian Christian music, which I like very much. When I was helping James unload his luggage, I noticed a fishy smell. He had brought some dried fish on a stick. He coaxed me into eating some of it with him. First, he made a kind of paste with some dried greens he called "bitter leaves." Then, we dipped the fish in the bitter leaf paste. It tasted, well, unique! We assured him that we did not eat pork, but he persisted in asking us, meal after meal, if there was any pork in the food, as he did not eat it either. We thoroughly enjoyed James' brief visit.

Another Nigerian, Christian Nwakafor, stayed at our home for a while, when we lived in Washington State. He had a different personality than James, was shy and reserved. Christian came from Ibo country, the "bush" portion of eastern Nigeria. The Ibos are most receptive to Christianity, and elders have told me that anyone who is a polygamist is not allowed in their Church. As he was not accustomed to indoor plumbing, I had to literally get into the shower with Christian to show him how to use it. Christian was a fine young man.

Nigerians Proclaim Sabbaths

Africans may be low on funds, but they tend to be high with fervent energy. My friends, the Nigerian Sabbath-keepers, are my kind of people. I have been amazed at how zealous many of them are for God's Truth. Sure, there are impostors and charlatans there, as in other parts of the world. But, there are also zealous, dedicated workers who faithfully persevere, in spite of the financial difficulties and hardships of living

zealous, dedicated workers who faithfully persevere, in spite of the financial difficulties and hardships of living in a Moslem-dominated country that is hostile to Christianity.

How the Nigerian Church of God keeps the festivals puts many American Sabbath-keepers to shame. Even during the spring festivals, they have hours of daily Bible Studies each day of the Feast, recreational activities, evangelistic meetings, and festive meals. They plan long in advance, and every festival has some time devoted to proclaiming God's Sabbaths to others. We are called to be servants of others, not spiritual hermits and isolationists. Our faith should result in action, a life well-lived, not just a creed of belief. May true believers everywhere exhibit these zealous characteristics.

Sabbath Roots by Charles E. Bradford, is not just a book for black people, but for all of God's children. We all have, or should have, **Sabbath Roots in Africa**.

Sabbath Roots: The African Connection, by Charles E. Bradford. Ministerial Association of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, 1999, 234 pp. Available from: Bible Sabbath Association, 802 N.W. 21st Ave. Battleground, WA 98604, \$15 plus \$2 postage.

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