

On Sabbath Keeping and Sabbath Theology among Younger African Churches

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Abstract

Unter den Christen Afrikas sind mehr als 15 Millionen Sabbatarier. Anhand von Zeugnissen über die Sabbatpraxis dieser Christen zeigt dieser Beitrag drei zentrale Aspekte der Sabbattheologie jüngerer afrikanischer Kirchen. Die Sabbatfeier stellt eine rituelle Theologie dar; gleichzeitig wirkt sich die Heiligung dieses Tages gemeinschaftsbildend aus. Vorschriften zur Gestaltung des heiligen Tages wiederum stehen symbolisch für ein ethisches Systems, das das Evangelium im afrikanischen Kontext Wirklichkeit werden lassen will.

The theology of the Sabbath has remained a marginal enterprise among leading Christian thinkers until very recently. Karl Barth and Jürgen Moltmann are notable exceptions to this picture (Barth 1958 and 1961; Moltmann 1985), and all in all an increase of interest in the Sabbath can be observed in the last generation (cf. Meier 2001). However, this small theological renaissance seems to have hardly influenced the Sabbath practice of Christians in the environment of the scholars concerned. Interestingly, a reverse situation is found in Africa. On this continent, the greatest concentration of Saturday keeping Christians is found today with more than 15 million sabbatarians in denominations founded in the last one and a half centuries.¹ They emphasize and practice Sabbath keeping, but this results in little if any academic Sabbath theology.

This study explores the implicit theology in African Sabbath practices, but its intent goes beyond a mere account of what people believe and how they reason far away from the Northern hemisphere. A major motive for this investigation is that theology has become a polycentric endeavour; in spite of the strong Greco-Roman-Germanic heritage in theological reasoning, thinking about the Christian faith today must take into account the fact that peoples all over the globe contribute to an understanding of the gospel. Another impetus for the reflections presented here is the role of experience in theology, which is particularly marked in deliberations about a religious practice such as Sabbath keeping.

¹ This is a conservative estimate given the fact that Seventh-day Adventists alone had an adult membership of more than 5 million plus roughly an equal number of unbaptized youth and children. When one adds the membership of other sabbatarian churches, especially those in Southern Africa, Kenya, and Ghana (cf. details on page 41), the total clearly exceeds 15 million.

A third reason is the statistical insight that probably the majority of contemporary sabbatarian Christians live in Africa. Some Ethiopian Christians celebrate the Sabbath even today, a custom that has its roots even in the pre-Christian era.² The following discussion, however, deals with churches of more recent origin, i.e., those that trace their origin back to the 19th and 20th centuries.³ Apart from a few African religious groups that regard themselves as Jews today and therefore are sabbatarians but non-Christians (cf. Sobol 2002; Kaplan 1992), there are two clusters of sabbatarian movements: a significant number of African Instituted Churches⁴ and two mission churches, Seventh-day Adventists and Seventh Day Baptists.⁵ The following discussion seeks to discover common concepts from these groups in an attempt at drawing conclusions about an “African Christian Sabbath theology”. One problem that one may imagine in such a project is the diversity of Saturday keeping practices and the convictions connected with them. However, it is remarkable that one can find among the sabbatarian churches of Africa theological patterns with notable similarities.⁶

An endeavour such as this constitutes a challenge to the Euro-American concept of theology from the outset. In contrast to traditional theology, which is (1) theoretical, (2) academic, and (3) critical-analytical, the African theology that this study investigates is primarily (1) concrete, life related, (2) congregation-based and thus “church theology”, and (3) narrative and performed. This article focuses on these elements by presenting three aspects of the Sabbath in Africa which illustrate them.

1. On Sabbatarian Churches in Africa

The number of Christians in Sabbath keeping African Instituted Churches is so large that some classifications treat them as a group of their own.⁷ Bengt

² Cf. Hammerschmidt 1963 (a study of the historical sources). In the mid-20th century the Sabbath was celebrated in some rural areas while in Addis Abeba people commonly worked until the early afternoon (ibid., 2). For more on Ethiopians and the Sabbath, see Heye 1968 and Ullendorff 1956.

³ It is only for lack of better terminology that they are combined here under the label “younger churches”. This designation does not imply any value judgment, and “young” is obviously relative, but what is meant is those who are not the product of the first centuries of church history.

⁴ On African Instituted Churches in general – sometimes still called African Independent, African Initiated or African Indigenous Churches – see Barrett 1968 (the classic) and Ositelu 2002.

⁵ On the latter, see Sanford 1992. Seventh Day Baptists have a significant following in Malawi and West Africa, but altogether they have not spread much in Africa.

⁶ Charles Bradford’s work (1999) is an attempt at gathering historical materials on African sabbatarianism. The present study, in contrast, seeks to do some theological reflection on these materials. It should be noted that evidently this treatment of African Sabbath theology is by no means comprehensive; however, by portraying representative voices, it seeks to show the picture at large.

⁷ Pauw 1960, 135, classifies “Sabbatarian-Baptist” churches as a separate group besides Ethiopians, Zionists, and Pentecostalists. With their inclination towards the Old Testament, some of these movements are close to H. W. Turner’s “Hebraist” category (cf. Turner 1967, 6–10).

Sundkler's South African list of 1945 contained 25 denominational names out of approximately 800 which contained the words "Sabbath" or "Seventh day"; others observed Saturday without noting this in their official designations (Sundkler 1961, 354–374). What is particularly remarkable is that several large movements honour the Sabbath, as the amaNazaretha of South Africa, founded by Isaiah Shembe with more than one million adherents today, John Maranke and his Bapostolo in Zimbabwe with 150,000 adherents in the early 1970s and possibly one million today (Jules-Rosette 1975; Mazambara 1999), and the Korsten Basketmakers, who counted about 500,000 believers in Zimbabwe in 1975 (Dillon-Malone 1978, 43). Others who should be noted are the Bamalaki of Uganda, who experienced their peak in the 1920s and 1930s with more than 90,000 followers (Welbourn 1961, 31–53), and several sabbatarian churches in Ghana (Nortey 1990, 180–192; Oosthuizen 1968, 58–59) and Kenya.⁸

The literature regarding these churches hardly deals with their theology; the main focus is usually historical, sociological, and anthropological. Themes such as their origin, their interaction with society, unique rituals, dealing with disease, and the like, prevail, while theology is commonly not a point of special interest. This is understandable, for most of these movements do not engage in academic theologizing.⁹ However, religious movements cannot only be viewed as interesting historical phenomena, as alien religious species, or as an equivalent of "tribes" in modernity. They should be taken seriously with their *beliefs*, their theological reasoning, as well, even if they do not explicitly call use the term "theology".

The comparison of African Instituted Churches and African Adventists reveals striking parallels. African Seventh-day Adventists number about 5 million baptized members today. In contrast to African Instituted Churches, relatively little research has been devoted to African Adventism so far,¹⁰ which may be explained by the fact that it does not emphasize its Africanness very much. Thus, this denomination appears less exotic than movements initiated by Africans. However, the fact that this denomination continues growing in much of the continent under national leadership and with very little financial support from outside indicates that it is as much African as churches that trace their origin to African prophets. The comparison of Adventist and African Instituted Sabbath conceptions will elucidate this and constitutes a remarkable example of a trans-denominational African lay theology.

⁸ Among the sabbatarian churches of Kenya are the following: Roho Israel Church of God, Nomiya Fueny Maler, Nomiya Luo Sabato, Roho Revelation Church, Luong Mogik (God's Last Appeal Church), Roho Singruok, Roho Mowal, and Musanda Christian Church of Kenya (cf. Kuhn 2001).

⁹ An exception is the (non-sabbatarian) Kimbanguist Church (full name: "The Church of Christ on Earth by His Special Envoy Simon Kimbangu") in Central Africa, which runs a theological seminary that resembles Western colleges. On this church and its founder, see (although somewhat dated) Martin 1975.

¹⁰ For an overview of literature on African Adventism and approaches used in these studies, see Höschele 2004.

2. Sabbath Celebration as Ritual Theology

A representative case of African Sabbath keeping is found in Sundkler's account of the amaNazaretha.

Shembe's amaNazaretha Church. Sabbath service at Ekuphakameni, the Mecca of the Church. For weeks the Nazarites – some 1500 of them – have been living together at this place ... to take part in the annual “July” festival. The climax of the festival is from Thursday to Sunday in the last week. On Thursday evening there is the Washing of the Feet and the Passover. On Friday and Sunday dances are held. On Saturday all congregate in the “Paradise”, an open space in the centre of Ekuphakameni... All are dressed in white, only a few of the priests wear long blue vestments... There reigns a dignified quietness throughout the service, contrasting with the vivid gaiety of the dancing on Friday and Sunday. The Sabbath service – with its lengthy exhortations on the keeping of the Sabbath and the observance of the *hlonipha* (rules of the Zulus) – is read by priests and congregation. (Sundkler 1961, 187)

An outstanding element of African Christian Sabbath celebration is its ritual dimension. Rituality is, of course, not limited to Sabbath celebration. It is a major aspect of African religiosity altogether; Theo Sundermeier emphasizes this when he speaks of the African *homo ritualis* (1990, 67). At the same time, rituality is a constitutive factor in religion everywhere. Still, among sabbatarians, this weekly day of worship and rest provides an overall framework of religious experience comparable to annual observances and those feasts that are connected with the life cycle. Jules-Rosette's observation (1975, 156) regarding the Bapostolo is telling:

Both with respect to their performance and on a personal basis, the semi-autonomous events of confession, curing, prophecy, instruction sessions, and palavers are linked to kerek [(Sabbath) worship service]. The Sabbath ceremony also provides the background and model for another category of ritual events: baptism, funerals, and confirmations in high ecclesiastical office.

Similar dynamics may exist in the Sunday celebration of other Christians as well to some extent, but it is significant that normally the enthusiasm of sabbatarians for their holy day clearly exceeds that of their non-sabbatarian fellow Christians. The Sabbath becomes a quasi-sacramental time. This is understandable in view of the fact that sabbatarians can refer to a biblical command, and one must remember that many African Christians do not differentiate between the two Testaments; some actually emphasize the Old Testament above the New.¹¹

¹¹ This has led Oosthuizen to write a whole section about what he calls somewhat judgmentally “The abuse of the Old Testament in the African context” (1968, 169–174). For a more positive view of the use of the Old Testament in African Instituted Churches, see Mbiti 2004. Mbiti discusses food, worship, and death taboos and customs as well as sacred places, but does not touch the Sabbath issue except on page 230, where West African Aladura churches are reported to reject sabbatarianism.

Before the theological implications of such a ritual practice are considered, something should be said regarding the context of African Christian Sabbath rites. It has been correctly observed that many Protestant mission churches transported an anti-ritualism to Africa which was often neither understood nor adequate (Sundkler 1961, 180). In general, this observation applied to Seventh-day Adventists as well. However, in spite of their non-liturgical tradition, they also carried with them a latent ritualism through their Sabbath observance. Thus, the transition from Western-type Adventism to a fully African church as it is today was a rather complex matter in which silent but significant rearrangements of emphasis and comprehension took place. At the very least, what took place in African Adventism as in other African sabbatarian churches was what Sundkler called a “ritual *interpretatio Africana*” of the gospel (ibid., 181).

An example of the ritualization of Sabbath observance that may serve to illustrate this is a circular by a Tanzanian Adventist national youth leader. In it, he directed his fellow pastors to teach that every single hour of this holy day should be filled with spiritual *activity* and specified these as follows:

Teach the Holiness and the Way of Keeping the Sabbath

1. On Friday evening, all Adventists should attend church to open the Sabbath.
2. In the late evening after supper, songs in the homes should be sung and texts be recited, especially those that speak about the Sabbath.
3. Morning: in the morning prayers in the homes, recite the fourth commandment.
4. Worship attendance.
5. On Sabbath afternoon, every member should be involved in some activity: the young people in learning songs and Pathfinder slogans and texts; in visiting the sick; opening and leading branch Sabbath Schools; and reading the Bible to people in their homes. Loitering and common conversations should be avoided.
6. Closing the Sabbath. Go back to No. 1.¹²

These detailed instructions demonstrate the results of a shift from Euro-American Adventism to an African sabbatarian practice. The Sabbath was neither reinterpreted as a whole nor was it simply taken over as it arrived, but two major aspects were Africanized: (1) the stronger emphasis on the communitarian component, which is part of each of the six instructions, and (2) the fact that the whole of the Sabbath was viewed as a time for activity related to God rather than primarily as rest from work. These two aspects converge in the rituality of the African Sabbath; the holy day becomes a ritual space.

¹² Kuyenga 1973. The last injunction means that as in no. 1, “all Adventists should attend church”, this time to close the Sabbath. I have translated this text from Swahili; some quotations below are translated from German. Kuyenga’s text is representative of Eastern African Adventist Sabbath keeping. For similar patterns among Adventists in Madagascar, see Keller 2005, 85–116.

While it is undisputed that the ritual dimension of faith is of special weight in Africa, it should be emphasized that it may be regarded as a type of theology, especially vis-à-vis the developing academic African theology. The latter treats many aspects of African Christians' thinking and concerns, but remains secondary to living faith. As Hans-Jürgen Becken argues correctly in his account on African Instituted Churches in Southern Africa:

In the culture of Africa with its lack of writing ... Karl Barth is admired, but is not being read. African Theology is event and experience, it is being sung and danced, preached and prayed, celebrated and suffered. If one ... wants to know their faith, one has to go to their emotional night worship services, to visit their overflowing healing homes.¹³

It is, therefore, adequate to speak of a *ritual theology*. This does not mean, of course, that the theology of these African Christians is exhausted in ritual or that it only focuses on ritual, but there is a prominence of the living dimension of faith, and thus theology is being determined by ritual, not vice versa. This constellation challenges, and contains the potential for rectifying, a situation in which this relationship is inverted or seems to be so. African Christian sabbatarianism reminds us of the original configuration of adoration and reflection, of doxology and theology, of believing and understanding, by emphasizing the primacy of worship.

The term "ritual theology" has been used by scholars in a few cases but has received little attention yet.¹⁴ If ritual theology is understood as theology *in* rituals,¹⁵ actions are considered not only a *consequence* but a necessary *prerequisite* for Christian thinking. Relating to God takes precedence over thinking about God. Rational reflection is relativized by experience without replacing it. As in Eastern Orthodox theology, doxology is the centre, not academic pursuits.

Evidently, the performance character of ritual theology implies limitations. Its experience character, if divorced from reflection, may lead to an inappropriate

¹³ Becken 1985, 11. Becken adds, "All this the mission churches are not able to provide for them, for in them one cannot fully take off the Western clothes in which the message came to Africa, in spite of all efforts to make the church indigenous. (12) This statement, however, is true only partially. Mission churches differ a lot and offer Africans many other things, which are often more attractive than the seemingly "indigenous" religious products of African Instituted Churches. In some respect, larger mission churches may be, through their tolerance of traditional religious practices, even more "traditionally African".

¹⁴ Only one monograph that uses the term in its title could be found (Caron 1993). Characteristically, the term is most common in the Coptic context, i.e., in a church that originates in Africa. A publication series containing this expression is *Studies in Comparative Ritual Theology* (Cairo: al-Amba Ruweis, 2000ff), and Coptic colleges in England und Australia teach a subject called "ritual theology" (see "Theological College", n.d.). However, in the Coptic context the term denotes liturgics.

¹⁵ The alternative is to speak of ritual theology as signifying theology *regarding* rituals or theology. In this understanding it addresses the theology and practice of worship. Here religious performance as a crucial aspect of faith is viewed as necessitating a reflection which ideally influences all of theology.

dichotomy of believing and thinking, which makes the very label “theology” illegitimate. However, ritual is always related to thinking processes, only that they are embedded in a context that is larger than intellectual discourses. The strength of African sabbatarian churches is thus the ritual connection of doxology and a theology that is largely implicit yet emphasizes God as the Creator and Saviour, the one to be worshipped and one who can be experienced.

3. Sabbath Sanctification as Community Constitution

Worship rituals such as Sabbath services do not only establish a sense of connectedness to the divine, they also strengthen a fellowship of performers through their common orientation towards their God. At the same time, such practices also reinforce a sense of separation between worshippers and non-worshippers. Sabbath theology may therefore also be understood as both contributing to constituting a community and as dynamics of disassociation from the environment. This observation can be derived from both African Instituted Churches and African Adventists.

A notable example for this mechanism may be found in the biography of Isaiah Shembe, the founder of the amaNazaretha. Shembe was a pastor of the African Native Baptist Church, ordained at the age of 36 years immediately after his baptism in 1906. He had worked as a healer and exorcised demons with the conviction that God directed him. In 1911 he broke with his church over the Sabbath issue and started the amaNazaretha, which means “Nazarites”, for Shembe declared that all verses in the Old Testament referring to Nazarites were to be applied to his followers as well (Sundkler 1961, 111). In this context, even the Sabbath became both a sign of holiness and a sign of detachment from society at large.¹⁶

Similar patterns of thinking are found among other African Instituted Churches. They defend the Sabbath as earnestly as Seventh-day Adventists (an observation of Shorter 1978, 536–538). For instance, members of the Church of God and Saints of Christ, who are also called Israelites, argued:

The right day on which to worship God is the Sabbath, as it is written in the Book. To worship God on Sunday is not written in the Book. People who worship God on Sunday are hypocrites, for if they study the Scriptures they would find that they ought to worship on Saturday. The calendars show that

¹⁶ A further motive may have been that Sunday was celebrated in almost all churches initiated by Whites; Sundkler argues that Shembe chose the Sabbath in the context of racist South Africa as a sign of disagreement with the Europeans; “Jehovah” became the “Sabbath God” in contrast to the “Sunday God” of the Whites (Sundkler 1961, 331). He also maintains that the rejection of the White Sunday God implied the setting aside of Jesus, but this is a matter of some debate in the literature on the amaNazaretha. For an analysis that comes to the conclusion that the amaNazaretha are a “post-Christian” movement, see Moodley 2004; similarly Oosthuizen 1968.

this is true, because there the first day is Sunday and the seventh is Saturday. Our church is the Church of God and Saints of Christ. We do as the first Church of Christ did. (Sundkler 1961, 188–189)

African Adventist Sabbath theology resembles this line of reasoning in that they commonly root their identity in the “right day of worship”.¹⁷ Evangelists at times emphasized this with unusual methods, such as the call to find a Biblical text that proves the shift from Sabbath to Sunday and the promise to give a car or a large amount of money to the person who finds it. Evidently, stressing this central mark of difference to non-sabbatarian churches is an effective method of advertisement, though this may imply that salvation, grace, and other central theological topics shrink in comparison. However, this is not completely avoidable, for any theological *topos* and every religious practice can serve to unite a group of believers and to demarcate the boundaries of their community, even if this may mean threatening the balance in the accentuation of beliefs.

Parallels can be observed in African Instituted Churches as well. As Sundkler wrote, once more in his classic, *Bantu Prophets*,

It is an experience common to all independent Bantu Churches that as communities they need distinct *codes*, which every member has to obey and follow... [E]very Church uses its own distinct formulae in worship ... Customs about cutting or not cutting the hair; eating or not eating pork; the Day of Rest being celebrated on Saturday or Sunday; entering church with or without shoes; all these are rules which distinguish one's own particular Church and thereby integrate it as a group. (Sundkler 1961, 163)

What conclusion can be drawn from these observations? First of all, the Sabbath possesses, like many theological issues and religious practices, uniting and separating functions. The latter function corresponds to two classical *notae* of the Church: (1) holiness, i.e., distinction from the other days of the week and, analogously, from those who do not keep this day of rest and worship, and (2) apostolicity, i.e., harmony with scripture and continuity with the ways of the apostles.

At the same time, African Sabbath observation, as the biblical Sabbath, is related to the other two *notae* of traditional ecclesiology – unity and catholicity – even if this link is not conspicuous at first. As much as African Sabbath observance appears structurally exclusive, it is still intended as a sign of universality. The Sabbath challenges the world around to participate in the worship of the one Creator and is meant as a promise of fellowship that transcends the manifold divisions of African society – families, clans, ethnic groups, and nations. Sabbath fellowship points toward inclusiveness: the fact that the day of rest is commemorated in a tangible manner by men, women, and children and that it is

¹⁷ That the Sabbath is the correct day of *worship* (and thus not only and not primarily a day of rest) is one of the most important assertions among Adventists in East Africa; it can be encountered among believers and church leaders of several countries.

viewed as a divine institution for the whole of humanity relativizes the very hierarchies of this world and, in the final analysis, perhaps even some elements of sabbatarian exclusiveness.

4. Sabbath Rules as Symbols of Christian Ethics

Both belonging and separation are made visible for many African Christians in concrete behaviour. Positively, Sabbath practice means ritual communion and shared persuasion; the rejection of certain well-defined activities should be viewed as the negative correspondence to these positive aspects. As a day of worship, African Christians view the Sabbath as a call to be ritually active; as a day of rest, the day implies for them to remain passive in matters considered to be work. Sabbath prohibitions are, in a way, the logical implication of Sabbath prescriptions.

Among African Adventists, as among orthodox Jews, rest from work has always been defined by clear rules.¹⁸ Apart from traditions that came to this mission church from Europe and America (cf. “Sabbath” 1966, 1120), African church leaders in Tanzania canonized various items which were to express the holiness of this day. Cooking, travel (except emergency travel to hospitals), games, receiving or making payments, wedding preparations, attending the chief’s council, ironing, listening to the radio, and even church board meetings were all labelled unsuitable for God’s holy day.¹⁹ Since this day belonged to God, actions during the Sabbath were all to be related to the him and his church.

The church leaders’ detailed prescriptions could be interpreted to have been caused by a general neglect of Sabbath observation or as being only concerns of a pious elite. But this is not the case. Many common Adventists took this issue very seriously as well. In some areas, it was unheard of that someone would pay a bus fare on Sabbath; people would rather walk or go by bicycle. In other regions, receiving visitors on Sabbath was discouraged, for doing so would usually imply many “secular” activities. Sabbath preparations were at times started on Thursday to make sure everything was finished before the beginning of the day of rest on Friday evening. At times even activities related to funerals were regarded as breaking the day of rest.²⁰

¹⁸ Similar observations may be made about Adventists in Eastern Europe and many parts of Latin America and Asia. A comprehensive survey of Adventist Sabbath observance is Colón 2003.

¹⁹ Throughout the decades, this topic was brought up in church committees in order to ensure that members honoured the memorial of God’s creation and authority. Cf. Pare Council Minutes, 18–21 April 1929, 21 March 1932, 8 January 1934, and 26 May 1947, North East Tanzania Conference Archives, Suji Materials, Files 1, 4, and 7; Tanzania Union Minutes, 20 November 1970, No. 1065, and 3–6 December 1972, No. 276, East Tanzania Conference Archives.

²⁰ Interviews (for details see Höschele 2007, 206–207); “Mkutano wa Mtaa Uliokaa Gonjanza, 14-3-82”, Suji Materials, File 50.

One could dismiss some of these attitudes as extremes of individuals, as being derived from a traditional taboo mindset, or construe them as implying that those who emphasized them did not grasp the New Testament gospel.²¹ Taboo thinking made Sabbath restrictions more plausible indeed, and if an invitation to legalism is inherent in Adventism, it has been observed that it is also common in African Christianity in general (cf. Sundermeier 1971). However, such an interpretation alone would unduly simplify the complexity of the matter. Rather, legalisms of the soteriological and the moralistic kind are in no way limited to sabbatarians; rather, they constitute a phenomenon which is widely spread beyond the continent of Africa and deeply ingrained in humans. Moreover, the fact that certain activities were proscribed only among some groups shows a degree of diversification that implies that variations were possible and expressed the earnestness of believers in their respective environments.

This is confirmed even by critics from non-sabbatarian denominations, who make a distinction between African Adventists' observation of the law and "legalism". Two studies focusing on Adventist worship and teachings in Tanzania by Lutheran pastors explore the Adventist use of the law. One comes to the conclusion that Adventists are Christians who do believe, at least in theory, that "salvation is never earned" but is "a gift from God" and that good works are "the result of salvation and not a means of salvation" (Mkiramweni 1998, 21, 22). Another study notes that Adventists "are proud of being among those few who keep the commandments of God and the faith of Jesus" but that "they also insist on salvation by grace of God", although "this is not with a big ONLY" (Mtango 1999, 105, 49; emphasis in the original). Thus, the dialectic of the law and the gospel is not necessarily threatened by an emphasis on keeping commandments.

In many African Instituted Churches, Sabbath rest is likewise realized in a radical way. Among the Bapostolo of Zimbabwe, the Sabbath lasts from Friday 6 p.m. to Saturday 6 p.m., and bathing is forbidden as much as is any act of buying, selling, or work. The Kristo Asafo Mission Church in Ghana adds unnecessary travel to the list of Sabbath restrictions, and for the Roho Israel Church of God in Kenya, as among some other sabbatarians, sexual intercourse is taboo on the holy day as well as the night before (Jules-Rosette 1975, 283; Nortey 1989, 33; Kuhn 2001, appendix, 11). The amaNazaretha stress the complete prohibition of cooking. Becken comments appropriately:

[O]n Saturday, the Sabbath of this community ... one sees in the whole camp no smoke nor any flame: no one is allowed to work on this day, housewives as well, one has to subsist on what was prepared on the day before. This sounds rather legalistic in our ear; but in a context where cooking does not only mean transporting foodstuff up the mountain but also collecting firewood and carry-

²¹ Oosthuizen 1968, 73, criticizes that the amaNazaretha view the Sabbath as the "key to salvation" and compares them to Seventh-day Adventists who, according to him, are "very legalistic" and "rely on the magic of moralism" (72).

ing it on the head, this institution is helpful, for only in this way can the housewives experience this uplifting worship service as well. (Becken 1985, 99)

In traditional cultures, specific prohibitions commonly mean security; if such safety measures are disrupted, the whole system can disintegrate. By way of comparison: strictly individual property and the “private sphere” of the nuclear family, which Europeans and Americans frequently value so much and which thus constitute a major taboo for them, do not exist in many African cultures. In contrast, for Africans, codices of behaviour such as Sabbath observance are commonly taboo spheres. To break them would probably be viewed as a serious offence such as theft is in Western thinking – only that the breaking of such religious taboos is much more embarrassing because it is publicly visible. In addition to these cultural considerations, one should bear in mind that Sabbath theology has to be articulated in some practical way. Without making the commemoration of the fourth commandment a way of salvation by works, Adventists and other sabbatarian Christians in Africa attempt to obey it as conscientiously as possible in order to honour God.

Despite the danger of overemphasizing the law and, as a consequence, a relativizing of the centre of the Christian faith, the forgiving grace of God, one should bear in mind that the strict adherence to Sabbath rules is a cultural necessity. Just as traditional taboos usually had a distinct function in the society concerned, such rules may be viewed as a concretization of faith and, thus, a dimension of inculturation.

5. Summary and Conclusion

The almost sacramental weight given to the Sabbath by those African Christians who celebrate it necessitates further reflection on its soteriological significance. While the visibility and repetitive character of the weekly day of rest and worship can help to emphasize God’s presence in the life of humans, this strength does not necessarily turn into a tendency of overstressing a day at the expense of the centre of the Christian faith. The Sabbath may be regarded as a symbol for an enhanced role of the Old Testament in Christian theology and life, an enhanced role that does not need to contradict a Christianity patterned after the New Testament.

There is much that can be learned from the Sabbath theology of African churches – mission-initiated and African-initiated churches alike. This article has highlighted three key aspects of African Christian sabbatarian practice: Sabbath celebration as a ritual theology, Sabbath sanctification as an instrument of religious community building (and, at the same time, as a means of separation), and Sabbath rules as ethical symbols. The fact that Sabbath observance serves several purposes at once should not surprise anyone. Like religion as a whole, this holy day contains complementary dimensions. It is honoured ritually as a realm that is distinct from the rest of life as God is distinct from the world. As an

element of faith rooted in the theology of ordinary Christians, it is believed and practised in community and thus establishes fellowship while, at the same time, the Sabbath discourse demarcates the boundaries of this fellowship. As a symbol of rigorous obedience to God, it points towards well-defined ethics.

Thus, performance, ethical aspects, and theological content demonstrate the composite nature of the African Sabbath. The fact that it can have multiple functions indicates its potential as well as the intricacies it contains. The holistic nature of the African Christian Sabbath is a good example for the complexity of religion and the resultant necessity to do theology in a multidimensional manner, calling for more than intellectual activity. The theoretical, academic, and critical-analytical approaches to theology prominent in Western scholarship are to be complemented by elements of performance, communitarian identity constitution, and faith practice as they are visible in the faith of Christians globally.

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