

Pentecostal Pastor Calls Kenyan Leaders to Reject Symbol of Idolatry

Bonifes Adoyo has stirred controversy in the African nation after claiming that the national motto invokes a Hindu goddess

A Pentecostal pastor in Nairobi, Kenya, is challenging the use of the country's long-held national motto, saying the word is having a negative spiritual effect on the East African nation because it translates as an invocation to a Hindu goddess.

A year and a half ago, senior pastor Bonifes Adoyo of the Nairobi Pentecostal Church wrote a newspaper article in which he claimed that the Hindu word harambee refers to a Hindu goddess, Ambe. The article raised a storm in the capital.

That's because the word itself is central to Kenyan tradition. One of the most important streets in the country, located in downtown Nairobi, is named Harambee Avenue.

It is home to many national government buildings, including the office of the president, called Harambee House, and also the vice president's office and parliament buildings. Also situated on the street are the key government ministries of education, finance, defense, foreign affairs and national planning, as well as the attorney general's chambers and the national headquarters of the police force.

The word harambee is the most distinctive expression of the Kenyan idiom, and it serves as the national rallying cry. Its

origins as a commonly used term are with Hindu laborers who constructed the country's trans-national railway, yet the word has spiritual roots as well.

According to Ram Krishan Sharma, the pandit—or “preacher”—at the Arya Samaj temple, harambee is an invocation. “When one says harambee, they are saying, ‘O god mother, take our pains and sorrows away.’”

In 1834, the British began practicing the policy of taking indentured laborers from India to work in the empire's other colonial possessions, including East Africa. The workers took their gods with them.

Vibhakar Patel, writing in an anthology of essays published last year by Rhastriya Seva Sangh—the India-based Hindu religious organization and the power behind India's ruling Bharatiya Janata party, says: “During the days of the Kenya-Uganda Railway, the Hindu laborers used to utter the names of Bhagawan Shankar and Ambe Mata to get inspired and pull heavy loads together. They used to shout in one voice, ‘Hara-Ambee’. This ‘Harambee’ has become the national slogan of Kenya, which means ‘work together.’”

“Shri Kenyatta, the first president of independent Kenya, used to make the crowds shout ‘Harambee,’” Patel adds. “This word has acquired a permanent place in the vocabulary of Kiswahili and also in the minds of the people.” Kiswahili—or Swahili—is the national language of Kenya.

Adoyo believes that Kenyan Christians and Muslims should not be forced to pay homage to a deity acknowledged by less than 1 percent of the population. “A national motto should be

neutral,” he says.

The Hindu pantheon has millions of gods, and various clans and families worship most of them.

Some, however, are worshiped universally. These include the Paramathma, or “the highest spirit,” who expresses himself in a sort of trinity called the Trimurti.

In the Trimurti, Brahma is creator of the universe, Vishnu is its preserver, and Shiva is the one who destroys and restores it. Their powers reside in their “consort,” or wife. Ambe is one of the names of Shiva’s wife.

Adoyo has been accused, among other charges, of giving false information. But he will not be deterred.

He plans to research evidence of what he believes is the truth and to write a book on the issue. If necessary, he says he is prepared to go to court to protest “the curtailment of my constitutional right to freedom of worship.”

Adoyo is convinced that the reason why Asians control 20 percent of the Kenyan economy is that they worship what they know, while the rest of Kenya commits unwitting idolatry.

“There are those who say that a word can acquire a new meaning. But Ambe is not a verb or just another noun—she is a goddess,” he states.

Adoyo ruefully compares “Harambee” with “In God We Trust,” the

motto on the U.S. dollar, saying: “[Americans] started on the right footing, and now the dollar rules the world. Not so us!”

Every Kenyan banknote and coin carries the national coat of arms with the slogan “Harambee” on it.