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Domestic morality, “traditional dogma”, and Christianity in a rural Zambian community

Bernhard Udelhoven*

Hugo Hinfelaar described, for precolonial times, a comprehensive domestic religion and family spirituality which he called “traditional dogma” or “family dogma”. What is left of it in Zambia? When and for what purposes are traditional religious beliefs invoked today and scrutinised in marriage and the domestic sphere? While many say, “We have no culture left!” traditional dogma continues to function as a “moral grammar” that anchors cultural identity. The marital life of a couple becomes scrutinised along traditional beliefs during family crises. When people accept this scrutiny, they (re-)submit themselves under the wider family and thereby reconstitute the family under the traditional moral compass. On the one hand, Christian churches came with meticulous moral and sexual standards which were to replace traditional beliefs, while on the other hand, they belittled and bypassed the domestic self-regulating mechanisms that enforce morality, because they were linked to traditional beliefs. I am writing this paper from my perspective as a Catholic priest, who experiences, much like Hugo Hinfelaar did, that the void left by tradition has not been filled by the Christian faith. Hinfelaar’s concern for a creative dialogue between Christianity and traditional dogma still waits to be adopted.

Introduction

Christians’ ideas about marriage, kinship obligations, belonging, morality, sanctions for moral transgressions, and ritual-religious redress are not only determined by church rules, but also by the demands of tradition. Hugo Hinfelaar used the term “traditional dogma” or “family dogma” to describe – from the example of Bemba speaking people – an ancient religion and spirituality that once guided people in Zambia through married life and family life. As an historian, Hinfelaar investigated how traditional ideas may have underpinned popular Zambian religious movements, by giving a sense of agency and authority to women. As a theologian, he advocated for a respectful dialogue with women who constantly try to negotiate concepts of traditional dogma. He considered that the idea of inculturation, often used in Catholic circles, must prove itself on the domestic level, but it failed to do so. His research had a clear pastoral aim: how to develop or restore a primeval image of mutual harmony in the household between the two sexes, sustained by daily ritual, thus providing a foundation for a domestic, Christian spirituality.

* Fr Udelhoven is affiliated to the Faith and Encounter Centre Zambia (FENZA)

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I look at Hinfelaar's ideas and those of his critics in order to draw out more clearly by whom, and to what purpose, traditional beliefs are invoked and scrutinised today. My research is gathered from the parish in which I work as a Catholic priest, in the Luangwa Valley, that is inhabited mainly by Wiza, Senga and Chewa-speaking people with various cultural traditions. They are organised through matrioseneal clans among the Wiza and bilineal descent among the Senga. People first and foremost belong to a wider family, which provides access to land, security, help for work, connections, and care during times of sickness. This sense of belonging influences the decisions that people take and the questions they are required to address in times of crisis.

An example of a non-negotiable belief

During a visit in one of our prayer centres, a woman approached me, with a baby in her arms, asking for prayers for her marriage.

This is my sixth child, but I nearly died during delivery. I never had such problems before; I bore all other children easily. But this one did not find the path. It blocked itself. At the clinic they referred me to Kamoto hospital [100 km away]. There my family ordered my husband to come. He confessed. He was going out with another woman. Still, I needed a caesarean.

Of course I agreed to pray, but also wanted the husband to be present. Here is his side of the story, given to me in the presence of his wife:

We had a good marriage. I love my wife and the children. God has really blessed me. But then came Satan. I started to go out with this other lady and jumped. For no reason, really. While my wife was pregnant, I told the other woman that I would take her as my second wife.

There is a common belief in many Zambian societies that a man who commits adultery while his wife is pregnant will cause problems at childbirth. Such misadventures can lead to the death of the unborn child and of the mother, unless he confesses and counteracting medicines are administered. He may also secretly administer such medicines himself through her food or drinking water. Suspects, including those no longer sharing this belief, will be subjected to strong cultural sanctions. Since the man pleaded guilty, he had paid some fines to the family, including the high costs for transport to and from the hospital, for several people.

I did not share the underlying belief-system of the couple. I did believe, however, in the power of prayer and was concerned that it connected with their own experience. I was also searching in my mind for the unspoken reasons

as to why the husband would buy into the traditional discourse. At the same time, I recognised in the narratives a sense of wonder that moral transgressions have biological consequences. Biology and spirituality/religion are not strictly separated in Zambia. I felt it would be wrong for me as their pastor to downplay this sense of wonder about the spiritual and moral world.

I did not want to endorse beliefs that I do not hold myself – I would not be congruent. At the same time, I wanted to build a bridge between our prayers and the woman's bodily awareness of approaching death as pointing to a spiritual condition in their marriage. And her survival, and that of her child, as a call for greater mutual commitment. I am not sure whether my intervention helped the couple to overcome their crisis. But it grew out of an attempt to respect and work with their own religious sensibilities. The difficult childbirth had become her bodily felt awareness for divining the unfaithfulness of her husband. Her belief was not negotiable. I guessed that the man's relationship with the other woman had shown itself also in other signs. I would have acted differently if he had not confessed. But I had to admit that the belief had provided her with an effective means for redressing his adulterous affair. The husband on his part, by confessing to the family, acknowledged their authority to scrutinise his marital life on the terms of traditional belief. As a result, he reintegrated himself back into the family.

Audrey Richards' "dogma relating sex and fire"

The belief that played itself out in the above drama is part of a whole system of beliefs related to what Hinfelaar called "traditional dogma". A dogma is a normative foundation taken for granted by a community, a basis that should not be questioned, on which communal life depends. In relation to the Bemba worldview, the word was first used by the pioneering anthropologist Audrey Richards, who did her fieldwork in Northern Rhodesia during the 1930s. She called it the "dogma relating sex and fire" and believed that Bemba ritual behaviour could not be understood outside of this dogma (Richards, 2005: starting at location 544). Sexual relations convey to a couple the ritual state of being hot. In this state it is dangerous for them to approach the ancestors, and they pollute the cooking fire when touching it. Babies who eat food prepared from this fire may get sick or die. Richards described the need for parents to purify themselves after sex, with the help of a tiny pot that the girl obtains from her paternal aunt at marriage. "It is still spoken of with the utmost secrecy and shyness and still survives even in the face of strong opposition from missionaries." Since adulterers cannot purify themselves, their ritual state of hotness can bring disaster on both children and spouse. Richards described the art of Bemba motherhood as guarding children and household from the dangers of polluted

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fire. This becomes somehow eased after the “kupoka mwana” ceremony, an act of sexual intercourse by the parents and the lighting of a new fire.

Richards also described dogma in relation to chiefly rites, funerals, and other parts of ritual, economic, and social life, as well as the utmost care taken to prevent menstrual blood from contaminating the family. “On her handling of the hearth depends her husband’s power of access to his ancestral spirits, ... the blessings which are available for gardens, bush and village, political life and warfare” (Kindle location 2680). It was not only sex that made a person “hot” and liable to pollute a fire, but also murder or the killing of a lion. The dogma established boundaries between hot and cold spheres of life and structured daily life and relationships. A girl’s initiation rite (*chisungu*), which made her become part of the adult women’s world, confirmed for all the participating women the dogma for the next generation.

Sexual scrutiny as a form of governance?

The relationship of “sex and fire”, or the regulation of hot and cold spheres of life and body states, as Morris (1985: 30) and Wolf (2001: 97) called it, has been affirmed also in other Zambian cultures. The countless daily practices surrounding the traditional belief system had at their root the desire to protect health and life, and to protect especially the innocent (small children, the elderly, a spouse) from deadly defilement. Megan Vaughan restudied the work of Audrey Richards and reflected (in an article of 2008) on the high level of public scrutiny of the sexual life of married people that Richards had observed. Vaughan therefore asked if Foucault’s concept of governance through “productive power” (as outlined in his *History of Sexuality: The Will to Knowledge*) could be applicable to the dogma relating sex and fire in precolonial society. In contrast to “repressive power” (say a chief’s power to kill, mutilate, sell people into slavery, punish, and control trade), “productive power” is not enforced by one group of society over another. People participate in the creation of productive power with every speech act, work and gesture through which they make themselves part of the group and internalise its categories and standards of health and of the human body. It is a way that society regulates itself from within. Since people scrutinised each other on such interiorised health categories, society – scattered over a vast territory – became governable as a social body, once royal authority managed to link the body of the chief to this form of productive power:

The sex life of the Chitimukulu and the purification rites connected with it were central to the well-being of the entire country, and the same principles applied to the sexual lives of his subjects. Through these symbolic mechanisms, then, the life and death of the Chitimukulu were connected to the life and death of every subject (Vaughan, 2008: 386).

The elaborate burial rites of Chitimukulu, the Bemba chief, brought this point home in the most gruesome fashion. The king's death meant absolute disaster and was followed by killings and a lengthy period of anarchy, in which the land itself became cold and broken. The chief's real power, both Richards and Vaughan argued, rested not in his army but in people's beliefs: that the fertility of the land and the welfare of the people had a connection to the body of the chief. These beliefs brought the polity together as a single population.

Both Richards and Vaughan were interested in the question how precolonial structures and beliefs continued to play into colonial experiences in times of radical transformation. The same question should of course also be asked in regard to postcolonial and "Christian" times. Richards had presented a down-to-earth and open interpretation of the traditional dogma relating hot and cold forces of the cosmos, mainly in relation to the overall functioning and maintenance of Bemba society. Vaughan looked at it in terms of governance and "regulation from within" (Foucault's productive power). Hinfelaar had a different entry-point: for him, traditional dogma should first and foremost be seen as a house religion that, through many ordinary details of tradition, opened up a way for approaching and communicating with "the Transcendent". By this he meant the spiritual world of ancestors, various divinities, and ultimately God who sustain and protect family, offspring, the land, and fertility.

Hinfelaar's view of traditional dogma

Unlike Richards, Hinfelaar considered chiefly power as a secondary and distorting structure imposed on a religion that belonged to the realm of domestic life and the extended family, and that received its meaning from the family. Women played the vital roles when approaching "the Transcendent". Harmony between husband and wife was crucial in this process, but this harmony was lost. Hinfelaar noticed much nostalgia when women talked about the past: about a time when the traditions were kept. He tried to reach an old stratum that continued to give women energies and religious animation.

Women described their past religious roles to Hinfelaar as "*chibinda wa ng'anda*", "*kabumba wa mapepo*" and "*NaChimbusa wa Chisungu*". The first term, which he translated as "the enabler of the domestic cult", greatly overlaps with Richards' "dogma relating sex and fire". Hot and cold spheres of life became a creative and productive force, when correctly brought together, as could be witnessed in cooking, beer brewing, pottery, blacksmithing, or the rhythm of the rainy season that follows the cold and the hot season. Hinfelaar recognized in the channelling of the sexual energy of a married couple towards fertility a stronger religious dimension than Richards. Harmony with the spiritual world came from following the traditions of the ancestors. Sexual and bodily fluids

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(menstrual blood, sperm, etc.) were feared and handled with utmost care because they were related to the sacred, mysterious and creative forces. Out of balance, life's energies could unleash a destructive side. Such defilement could come from actual or intended adultery, understood as a "mixing of blood". Hinfelaar argued that sex was understood as a religious act that had to take place in a mood of harmony and understanding between husband and wife. It was preceded by lengthy conversations during which they also invoked the ancestors, and followed by a cleansing rite. Adultery and other misconducts needed to be confessed for the cleansing to be effective. Hinfelaar believed that this primeval understanding attained many complications with the proliferation of polygamy and the imposition of centralised rule, that connected ideas of fertility to the royal cult. The second term (*kabumba wa mapapo*, "initiators of public worship") established the woman as the vital link to the ancestors: she kept the *lufuba*, the ancestral spirit shrine. Women were indispensable for intercessory prayers and for discerning the messages coming from the ancestors, for example through the world of dreams. Disaster and hunger were signs that the ancestors were displeased. Female agency was crucial for re-establishing relationships with the spirits. The third term, *NaChimbusa wa Chisungu*, "protector of the miraculous event" (of a woman's first menstruation) describes women as masters of the girls' initiation rites, held partly in the forest and partly in the village. In a worldview that depended on complementarity between male and female roles, women always protected their rites from intrusion of the male folk. Men had a role to play in the rites, but important teachings took place in a women-only zone. The leading initiators (*banacimbusa*) were highly respected across families as guardians of tradition and played a religious role in the life of a young couple.

These three roles gave to women a comprehensive religious agency which was linked to the daily practices of guarding the fire, recurring events of a woman's cycle and of the human life-cycle (birth, puberty and marriage, death) and the need to navigate through exceptional calamities like drought and sicknesses. Hinfelaar thought that the imposition of Bemba chieftaincy (starting in the 18th Century), then colonialism and finally the introduction of Christianity led to the marginalisation of women from their spiritual roles.

The break-down of dogma

While Audrey Richards did her fieldwork in the 1930s, Hinfelaar did his in the 1980s, with many descriptions of the dogma given in the past tense. Many domestic and agricultural rituals had lost their importance in a post-colonial, modern and largely Christian Zambia. Women's spiritual awareness and conceptions were belittled or labelled as pagan. In new generations, modern life

and school education had taken away reverential fear for tradition. Old taboos were obsolete. Hinfelaar noticed that neither state nor church had left much room for controlling the perceived consequences of sexual defilement and the spiritual perils and chaos that follow them. Only biomedical reasons were acknowledged to have real explanatory power, even when the silent horrors of the AIDS pandemic mirrored the symptoms of traditional defilements. Christianity also left little space for ancestral dreams or the ancestral community that guarded a family's moral life. The church regarded initiation rites as helpful for sustaining the moral fabric, but they needed to be scrutinised for pagan, sinful and explicit sexual elements (Hinfelaar, 2015: 151). Their link to fertility and continuity of the clan and of life was not always well understood. After independence, "The title *NaChimbusa* gradually lost its religious significance" (1994: 164-165).

In the process, Hinfelaar believed that traditional dogma degenerated into a disparate assembly of rites that were still kept out of fear, but that had become disconnected from any positive relationship between husband and wife. The man became known as the head of the household. There were few sanctions left to control promiscuity. Now, "The women lived in constant fear of contamination with its fatal consequences and now this fear became associated and exacerbated by the occurrence of sexually transmitted diseases" (1994: 132). Secretive usage of manipulative medicines proliferated. Hinfelaar pointed out the vast gulf between the ideal picture of harmony and the actual present-day realities.

Hinfelaar's attempts to recover traditional dogma

Hinfelaar examined movements at the fringes of Christianity that were giving domestic life new spiritual meaning: the Lumpa Church of Alice Lenshina and the Mutima Church of Emilio Mulolani. His research was also marked by tumults in the Catholic Church in response to Archbishop Milingo. Their enormous success puzzled mainstream Christian thought.

Hinfelaar stated that his research was greatly influenced by his experiences with the unshakable and uncompromising resolve of women adherents of Lenshina whom he encountered in his engagements with the Lumpa movement during his early missionary life. For him, it was a religious resolve. He believed that Lenshina, through her songs, teachings, and rituals, had managed to tap into an old reservoir of spiritual aspirations. Take the example of Lenshina's popular rite of baptism, that demanded spontaneous confession of past sins, witchcraft and adultery, while the husband sat on the lap of his wife. Each one handed over their charms and secret medicines. Then they jumped, husband and wife holding hands, over a wide line – imitating the jump during initiation rites – into a common new life. For Hinfelaar, it demonstrated Lenshina's ability

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to arouse a domestic spirituality that restored to women a sense of control over marital relations (Hinfelaar, 1994: 73-100).

Also Emilio Mulolani's Church of the Sweet Heart (*Mutima uwalowa uwa Makumbi*) led to a wide exodus of Catholics in urban and rural areas. At that time, Catholic worship separated the sexes, proclaimed basically an all-male Trinitarian God, and concentrated leadership (priests, teachers, catechists) amongst the men. Emilio stressed the complementary roles of the two sexes in worship and presented the female and humble side of God side by side with her male expressions, which the triumphant European Church, the companion to colonialism, was unable to perceive and live. God had prepared Africans through a long history of suffering and discrimination for the revelation of her female persons.¹

Emilio attributed a natural dignity and authority to women's ways of intelligent service. In contrast, where men's lives were marked by beer drinking, greed, laziness and promiscuity, male charisma and authority found natural limits. Emilio focused on complementarity as leading to greater communion with God. Together as man and woman, and not each in a separate way by oneself, do they become the image of God. Emilio restored marriage and the family home as the centre of prayer life and worship. The common meal after worship taken by men and women (husband and wife) together (*ubwali bwa citemwiko*), the purification rites before sexual acts, or the motherhood of God were for Hinfelaar indications that he was digging into traditional dogma and processing it in a new and creative way (1994: 101-125).

In 1971, Hugo became secretary to Archbishop Milingo. He worked with him for ten years. Milingo became known for his healing ministry and exorcisms, and the controversies this aroused with the church hierarchy. Hinfelaar witnessed this ministry as part of a wider concern of Milingo who wanted his church to become more accessible and sensitive towards people's daily struggles (Hinfelaar, 2015: 282). But what have evil spirits to do with traditional dogma? It was evident to everyone that many more women than men were afflicted by the evil spirits that Milingo was driving out. Milingo was certain about the ontological reality of the spirit world and its influence and interaction with the visible world. At the same time, he was concerned with women's increasing marginalisation and impoverishment, also inside the church. Hinfelaar approached spirit possession more from the viewpoint of history and anthropology. He referred to the work of I. M. Lewis (1989), and considered spirit possession as a "last resort of creative redress" for many women whose "status as wives, mothers, and home-makers had become dangerously insecure" in the modern Christian world (Hinfelaar, 1996: 168). Going beyond Lewis, however, he argued that women possessed by evil spirits:

saw themselves contaminated by the evil of the whole community, of the whole nation and burdened by it. ... It was not uncommon during this purification rite for women to confess the misdeeds of their family, the social and economic injustices that they were suffering as well as their illnesses. It was then that one got a glimpse of women's original role of BanaKabumba (1996: 172-173).

For Hinfelaar, the phenomenon of evil spirits running amok in the lives of so many Christian women demonstrated the failure of the Church to offer a more intuitive family spirituality after the collapse of traditional dogma. The quality of domestic, marital and sexual life clearly formed for many women the springboard for finding God in the wider world, or for finding spiritual disaster.

Hinfelaar also looked at the place of women's agency inside the Catholic Church. The agency of young and creative men in the rise of Zambian Pentecostalism has often (and rightly) been stressed. By extension, one may gain the impression that women had less religious agency or creativity. In the Catholic Church, women established themselves as its backbone, and Hinfelaar wanted to trace historically the struggle of women to transform the church into their spiritual home. This is even more amazing since he highlights the overbearing presence of clerical tutelage, insensitivities, and the belittling of women's spiritual beliefs that compromise women's vocation. Hinfelaar looked at women's understanding of the Eucharist, implicit rules about purity, confession, Catholic marriage laws, and the clear stance against abortion and polygamy, the family apostolate and the independence achieved by lay-movements. Yet the mystery of the feminisation of the laity remains not yet fully explained. Today, we have to admit that women, much more than men, have created opportunities in the church to form common mental and bodily links, symbolic worlds, in which they combine Christian and traditional teachings in their own ways (not of course without tensions). Women church groups have mapped out for themselves role models that are often based on the traditional initiation rites. The re-enactments of these rites play an important role in popular movements like the "Ba Nazareti" or the "St Anna". The Catholic Church today may rather lack meaningful role models for married men. (At that point, I believe, Hinfelaar's study and endeavour stands in need to be complemented.)

Critique

Hinfelaar showed much respect for traditional dogma, but not everybody wants to engage with it. Many pastoral agents, teachers and health workers regard it as an obsolete bundle of superstitions and outdated beliefs. Not unlike the colonial church, they want to do away with traditions that are incompatible with modern

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education. Take the example of death during childbirth. Maybe, it could be true that a woman, rightly or wrongly convinced of the adultery of her husband, developed serious and fatal complications in a situation of stress and panic; maybe beliefs can trigger a whole chain of unfortunate biomedical reactions. But should the reason for such a death not be sought in the field of biology, instead of some ancestral structure of mystical punishments? The Zambian law outlaws the attribution of death "in some non-natural way" to adultery; it can make an innocent person responsible for an unfortunate death.² And, since the quest for confession and for preparing traditional medicines consumes much time in the critical situation preceding childbirth, they can delay the seeking of medical help. "If they had come earlier, we could have saved them!" is a standard remark given by medical personnel in clinics and hospitals, together with the viewpoint that traditional medicines administered to pregnant women may be more harmful than helpful. Similar reasons are given in response to many other practices of traditional belief. Where the biomedical model is applied in an absolutist sense, it leaves little room for cultural or spiritual health categories or discernment patterns.

When examining Tumbuka initiation rites (in the area of our neighbouring parish), Christine Mushibwe (2009) blamed these rites for the prevalence of early pregnancies and marriages, traumatising experiences, school dropouts, and the perpetuation of oppressive taboos and false beliefs about reproductive life. For her, such rites, together with many other cultural traditions, preserve the suppression of women by women under the authority of men. Her viewpoint contrasts with other studies that evaluate the rites in a more positive light and in an emic way, and as opening up ways of female agency³. But Mushibwe's point mirrors the frustrations that many pastoral workers in the church encounter, when people give much more credence to local narratives of healers and elders than to the biomedical discourse of schools, hospitals and church.

Hinfelaar's way of dealing with the gulf between traditional and modern voices was to promote dialogue. He recognised that women's agency is largely based on the religio-cultural heritage. Chammah Kaunda (2015) argued that the denial of that heritage will almost always lead to crippling people's agency. Hinfelaar saw in traditional dogma not a second-class option for those who do not make it into the modern world, but a religion, a way of communion with "the Transcendent". As such, it cannot be reduced to or solely judged by biological, social or psychological categories. It deserves respect in its own right, and has the right to pose a challenge to other ways of life. Eventually, traditional dogma needs to find its own way of becoming meaningful in the modern world, a challenge that every religion has to cope with.

At this point another set of critique sets in, from within the academic

community. Malcolm Ruel endorsed the broad lines of Hinfelaar's analysis but also pointed out that he attributed a certain abstract version of "the Transcendent" to Bemba domestic dogma, which he then conveniently identified with *Lesá* (the Bemba divinity). The project of inculturation made *Lesá* resemble and become identical with the Christian God. Indeed, many inculturation theologians have been criticised for aligning African traditional religious visions too easily with theological concepts derived from the Western Christian worldview and dissolving the former in the latter⁴. Hinfelaar presented problematic elements of tradition (for example exaggerated fears of defilements, polygamy, or teachings that place a woman under the authority of a man) as historical distortions that were brought by the royal intruders and political turmoil; he seemed to absolve original religion from any contradictions with modern, Christian sentiments. Ruel did not doubt that there was a family cult prior to chieftaincy. But since evidence is sparse, the idealised version that Hinfelaar presented may be rather an ahistorical picture. Audrey Richards had looked at Bemba dogma in a more profane way: for the actors, rituals seemed to bring their results simply through correct performance. While Richards recognised the role of the ancestors as foundation of traditional dogma, she was surprised about the lack of religious vocabulary in the rites she observed and in people's descriptions of the rites. She did not witness much outreach to "the Transcendent". Ruel finally asked if Hinfelaar's endeavour for inculturation "is not itself on a par with the way in which incoming Luba-Lunda chiefs assimilated pre-existing ideas in the development of the royal and chiefly cults" (Ruel, 1997: 88).

I keep this critique in mind when I look at the place of traditional dogma in a contemporary Zambian rural community. Here, I merely want to make a remark on Ruel's last point. It is obvious that Hinfelaar's aim of research was not only on the academic level of history but also part of his missionary vocation of sharing and at the same time struggling with his faith. Ruel rightly says that Hinfelaar endeavoured to assimilate pre-existing ideas for the Church's purposes. Inculturation for Hinfelaar meant "That the new religion of Christ should not destroy the old tradition, even when it has become archaic, but complete it and bring it to perfection" (1994: 91). He expectedly judged "completion" and "perfection" from the viewpoint of the Christian faith. But to put this position on a par with chiefly power presumes that the aim had to do with ruling or governing. While it may not be possible to exonerate the Church at large from this assumption, I believe that Hinfelaar's writings, (together with the research that he asked Catholic seminarians to perform by sending them back to their grandparents and elders) were aimed at facilitating greater dialogue and mutual appreciation. The same people who struggle today with tradition also seek meaning from their Christian Church; in the process both may change in their expressions.

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A final point of critique with which I want to engage suggests that Hinfelaar expected too much from the symbols that he analysed and also from traditional beliefs, maybe more than the people who used them. David Gordon researched the Lumpa Church (nearly fifty years after Hinfelaar's own encounters with Lenshina's followers): "In my many interviews, Lumpa Church adherents did not agree with Hinfelaar's interpretation of Lumpa symbols" (2012: Kindle Locations 4184-4185). For Gordon, "Bemba religious dogma" had little or nothing to do with Lumpa's success. Maybe, the old religion of women was, and is, much less fundamental than Hinfelaar thought?

Obviously, judgement about the validity of Hinfelaar's interpretation of Lumpa symbols belongs to women adherents of Lumpa⁵. Gordon did not elucidate with which specific interpretations his own interviewees disagreed, and which meanings they gave in their place. Instead, he devalued symbolic interpretation altogether in favour of linking Lumpa agency directly to the spirit world. "For Lenshina's followers, the spirit world was real, not symbolic." (Kindle Locations 4187-4188). Gordon himself made use of interesting symbolisms in his analysis. His point vis-a-vis Hinfelaar is, however, that Lumpa's adherents found legitimacy and motivation for their actions not in a new way of living an old religious dogma, but in Lenshina's meeting with Jesus upon her death and coming back to life, her mission from God, her authority against witchcraft, her vision of a new Jerusalem, and her rejection of corrupted, backward-pointing powers that seemed to legitimise the mission churches, chiefs, and UNIP. Lumpa's agency rested in a promise of help coming directly from the world beyond, mediated by Lenshina's vision.

The priority of the future over the past in many believers' motivational horizon is important to keep in mind when discussing traditional beliefs. Hinfelaar stressed that the quest for a better and a different future was inherent in traditional dogma itself, which he described in Bemba mythology as a journey from the West (the past, the ancestors) to a new dawn in the East. (1994: 3-6). Walking in tradition ("*ukwenda mu ntambi*") means going forward, not backwards. Gordon must be credited for his forceful stress on the agency of the heavenly world when explaining believers' actions. But he did not pursue the same question that Hinfelaar tried to answer (successfully, or unsuccessfully): How did the agency of women of the new Jerusalem connect with their day-to-day practices, among themselves, not only as an agency against (witches, rosaries, Catholics, Protestants, "*abalwani*" – enemies), but also as a religious spirituality (Hinfelaar) or – in secular terms – a "productive power" (Foucault, Vaughan) that regulated life from within? To experience a vocation or an encounter with the "spirit world" is one thing, but to sustain it over time, with the help of discipline, routine, and daily rituals, is another.⁶ The creation of mental and

bodily enacted connections (symbolism) seems rather crucial in this process. When Gordon built up a dichotomy between a symbolic/intellectual and a literal understanding of the “spirit world” (he associated Hinfelaar – incorrectly – only with the former),⁷ he may have himself impoverished an analysis of agency within the complexities of life. Hinfelaar looked for the symbols that Lumpa hymns connected to Lenshina’s vision of the New Jerusalem – many were clearly taken from the initiation rites, even if Gordon claims that their meaning had not much influence on the movement.⁸ Lenshina offered a new future, but it was dependent on a full cleansing and deliverance from witchcraft and secret medicines. Hinfelaar knew that these were located especially in the wider family and in marriage. He explored how Lenshina in her return to the sources (“*ukubwelela kwi shinte*”) linked her evangelical call for conversion to the ideals of monogamous marriages for those who have been cleansed (“*abasambwa*”). For Hinfelaar, this was a new version of the dogma around “Seed, Blood, and Fire” (1994: 105).

The northern part of the Luangwa Valley (the area of this research) was heavily marked by the Lumpa church. In my own interviews with Lenshina’s supporters and opponents (Udelhoven, 2015: 184-191), I was told that many people walked to Sione (Kasomo, Chinsali) *as couples* together with their witnessing families. Some went full of hope and wonder, “because we wanted to see Jesus with our own eyes” and “hear God speaking to us directly.” Others, returning miners, were forced upon arrival by their wives’ families to receive Lenshina’s baptism and hand over their charms as a precondition for reintegration in the village. Maybe the quests for a direct encounter with the heavenly world and the demand for more structure in married life and in relations with the wider family were not exclusive of each other as a neat exclusion of traditional dogma from Lenshina’s success would suggest. Where both meet, Hinfelaar’s concern for a meaningful family spirituality would be addressed.

* * *

I have presented in this first part Hinfelaar’s argument and those of his critics. They pose important questions that I now take up in the second part: Which space does traditional dogma occupy today? In which ways, if any, do people understand traditional dogma in a religious or spiritual sense? How does it constitute agency for sustaining family life from within?

The loss of tradition in the Luangwa Valley

I shift my reflection now towards the area in which I live and work, and towards the present tense, ninety years after the fieldwork experiences of Audrey Richards and thirty to fifty years after those of Hinfelaar. Culturally and

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historically, it is a different area from that of Richards and Hinfelaar, even if Wiza people see themselves as relatives of the Bisa of the plateau among whom Hinfelaar lived. But there are enough similarities. Christian churches have only a limited impact on people’s domestic lives. In 2018 and 2019, we interviewed individuals and couples, groups of headmen and headwomen, women’s groups as well as men’s groups about the meaning of blessings in a marriage and the challenges of married life. I have assembled the following quote from selected answers that were given as summaries of group discussions:

Blessings in marriage means that there is understanding (“kupulikana, kuumvwana”). They have children who remain united and supportive. They have good relationships with family and neighbours. They succeed in what they do.

But today? Marriage is just a game (“sewero chabe”). Marriages break because we have thrown away our traditions. The youths just marry themselves – the parents are the last ones to know. Girls become pregnant before any marriage negotiations. This year, eight girls got pregnant in grade 7, in this school alone. When they teach about HIV, they show them everything. So they try it out. The “alangizi” [traditional teachers of initiation] are no longer consulted.

In the past, parents married their daughters early and these marriages lasted, because the families were supportive. But now, the girl chooses herself without any regard to her parents, and it ends in divorce after the first fight. And a girl not married? She is free for all and asked by all! In the past, girls were really taught [in initiation]. Today we cannot confine them anymore for a long time, because of the schools. And there is no longer anything like the “mphala” [open shelter, where boys learnt from the elders]. Boys just learn from the streets and from the phone [pornography].

The introduction of “gender” [an assertive women-rights approach] has taken away our culture but has failed to replace it with a new culture. In the past, chiefs and headmen punished boys and men who misbehaved. But today to be a chief is just a business. Headmen have no longer any power. There is no fear left.

Family solidarity (“ubale”) is low because of competition after divorce. Children of one wife compete with those of another wife for resources. The sparsity of [marriageable] men brings much competition and suspicions between women.⁹

A good marriage is one where they understand each other’s point of view. But today, couples do not know how to deal with the expectations for money and wealth (“chuma”). Nobody prepares them for that.

This narrative blames the loss of tradition for all the ills and crises in marriage and family life. People associate traditional dogma with a golden past that is no longer recoverable but that has not been replaced by anything meaningful. Outsiders' advice and also the churches' advice may work in another world, maybe a better world, but not in theirs.

Hinfelaar was (rightly) criticised by Ruel for presenting an idealised version of traditional dogma of the past. But for many people today the golden past is such an ideal world. They strongly affirm Audrey Richards' descriptions of the workings of the dogma: "It is true!" Tradition brings a sense of rootedness and rightness, and the void left by tradition has made common living precarious.

The "local narrative" contrasts sharply with another narrative, stronger among salaried workers, teachers, and health workers, known as "*alendo*" (visitors but also outsiders): They experience local traditions to be very much alive, but as a hostile force:

Here in the valley tradition is still very strong. People don't want new ideas. You can't argue. In your "milandu" (legal cases), and even in your marriage, they drag in all the wider family. And they even threaten you directly [with witchcraft]! You can't fight tradition.

While the local narrative bewails the loss of tradition, the "*alendo* narrative" shows that tradition continues to constitute a power, and that local families know how to invoke it over and against others when their common interest is at stake, a point to which I will return.

Tradition as a shared grammar

Do people see traditional dogma as a religious spirituality in the sense of some conscious "communion with the Transcendent", as Hinfelaar saw it for the past? For some, we could call it religious in an inversed sense: when bad things happen, one feels punished by tradition and at odds with the mysterious forces that suddenly reappear – after having been ignored all through life. On the other hand, tradition continues to maintain a vision of cultural identity and of morality – or the loss thereof. It is associated with the ancestors, with protecting life and harmony and comes with a sense of wonder and responsibility. It gives an appreciation to whom one belongs and provides the moral compass for this belonging.

People digest traditional beliefs today through various explanatory models. Take the example of death in childbirth due to adultery that tradition attributes to the mixing of blood ("*kusakanizga ndopa*", "*kusakanya mulopa*"). Some link the mechanism to the power of the ancestors, which explains for them why biology may work differently for other nations and peoples. One initiator

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(*mlangizi*) referred to child psychology and explained that “the unborn child knows adultery by the mixing of blood, is sad, and no longer wants to live.” Another one explained that adultery opens the body to demonic influences and “establishes a covenant” and “the price of sin is death”. Mixing of blood here goes hand in hand with mixing with the devil. For others, tradition simply works; they are not much bothered about the why and how. “It is God’s own secret!” (“*Chinsinsi cha Mulungu!*”) Already Audrey Richards (2005 [1956]: part iii) had left us with a differentiated pattern of ways in which people explain their beliefs to themselves and to others.

Traditional beliefs are believed, rejected or followed in different degrees and situations with variations regarding age, gender, levels of formal education and class. Some accept them in certain circumstances, “just in case”. And, quite a few people who rejected traditional beliefs during their time in school, reaccepted them when they became older. It is also obvious that beliefs change over time. Consider, for example, their interplay with biomedical concepts in the wake of the AIDS pandemic,¹⁰ or the shifting boundaries of the “dual medical system”, the traditional and the modern (Mkandawire, Lugina and Bezner-Kerr, 2011). People negotiate with tradition in order to make sense of present challenges, and in the process may also modify, reduce or develop tradition according to their needs and sense of morality.

Nevertheless, people have maintained a strong sense of correctness when using cultural expressions. The terminology follows a shared grammar, in Wittgenstein’s sense, external to the speaker, about shared “rules for use of a word”.¹¹ People correct each other about the proper ways of applying traditional concepts. They follow an established pattern against which a given application has to prove itself. One becomes an elder not just by age but by one’s ability to distinguish rightful from wrongful usages of cultural terms, even if one believes in them only in a partial way. Confusing the terms violates the sense of cultural and historical identity. An analogy can be found in the usage of proverbs: a given proverb can be applied to new situations. But it cannot be stretched out indefinitely. An elder maintains a sense of rightness and congruity about the representations of cultural terms – by virtue of being better attuned to the shared grammar and the ability to recall previous occurrences. This applies also to the beliefs that are related to traditional dogma.

Scrutiny

When is tradition invoked as a moral compass, by whom, and to what effects? I answer this question by looking at contemporary practices that can be associated with Hinfelaar’s tripartite dogma. Let me start with the woman’s role as “the enabler of the domestic cult”.¹² The secret marriage vessel, so crucial in

Richards' and Hinfelaar's reports, is important also in our area, including for young couples. Most refer to it as "*kabiya*" (small clay pot) and it is kept by the wife. It is used for gentle cleaning and massaging after a conjugal meeting and for the rites of mutual shaving of pubic hair. From time to time, the wife also warms up water for massaging the body of the husband as a reward (or request) for a good performance. In our discussions, cleansing was presented as a hygienic and erotic venture, not as religious or ritual.¹³ It was not associated with removing hotness from the couple.¹⁴ However, it gives people a sense of rootedness in tradition and is followed because of this. In one meeting, even young men who had married by eloping with a girl without going through traditional marriage instructions expressed much interest in the presence of the *kabiya*: "It is bad not to be taught!" The *kabiya* gives the status of a recognized marriage.

The rite of mutual shaving of pubic hair is scrutinised by couples themselves (shaving oneself is considered a proof of adultery) and, in the event of sickness or death, by their families. If found "dirty", the other spouse can face serious accusations in the inter-family meetings of having neglected an essential marriage duty. Different traditions exist about the correct procedures of this rite in polygamous unions. But there are also many complaints about a lack of clarity and non-compliance.

Audrey Richards' "dogma relating sex and fire" is known especially in regards to defilements. Much in line with Richards' account, old people prefer to eat their food prepared in their own pots and cooked on a fire that is undefiled by "hot" (potentially sexually active) people, less they contract "*mdulo*" – the "cutting disease" (pl. *midulo*) in form of a serious coughing sickness. I do not intend to specify all the instances of *midulo*, as they are well documented for other areas, past and present.¹⁵ People insist that "normal sickness" and *midulo* have different symptoms. Nevertheless, there is much overlapping, and foregoing treatment in the clinic is frowned upon even in case of *mdulo*. Traditional and biomedical answers are not seen in entirely exclusive terms.

Depending on context and symptoms, a specific *mdulo* may be attributed to adultery, secret abortions by a neighbour or family member, neglect of menstrual taboos, or non-compliance with socially imposed restrictions ("*mijungulo*"), especially the required times of sexual abstinence i.e. during a funeral (especially of an own child), after the birth of a child, or the initiation rites of a daughter. After a miscarriage, the affected woman stops greeting and speaking to others, while her husband should remain close to the house, until released from this obligation. Also the failure to correctly perform a required ritual (like *kutenga mwana* – the equivalent of *kupoka mwana* in Audrey Richards' description) can be blamed for *midulo*. Many medicines are known

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and used to mitigate the effects of *mdulo* on a personal level. But some demand arbitration. This is a matter for the concerned families. "The vast majority of cases of *mdulo* are settled out of court", wrote William Rangeley in 1943 (p. 35), and this is also the case in our area today.

The most tragic case of *mdulo* is death during childbirth. High amounts of compensation may be claimed by the bereaved family, but often a compromise is found if the accused husband accepts responsibility.¹⁶ Threats of witchcraft may be uttered when he refuses to confess or when his family refuses to honour its financial obligations. Village headmen may mediate. In rare cases, where the two families fail to come to a settlement, they may decide to bring the case before the chief in view of enforcing the required cleansing rites for the surviving husband. The usual locus for arbitration, however, is a meeting between the two families.

The "mixing of blood" principle knows important nuances. A polygamist does not threaten the life of his pregnant wife if he goes to his second wife. "All have become of the same blood," is the answer to this puzzle. "The blood therefore does not mix." He does, however, mix blood and cause her death when he sleeps with a woman not his wife. The fatal law of *mdulo* does not strike indiscriminately, like gravity or a virus, but is attached to *legal* marriages and sustained through regular sex. Straight after a formal divorce a couple is no longer "one blood".¹⁷

In most cases, scrutiny about *mdulo* belongs to the family and to nobody else. By family ("*banja*", "*lupwa*"), a person understands the collective of significant relatives whose genealogy he/she can trace in a precise way to either of the two parents. For the Wiza and Chewa, one's own matrilineal clan has priority in many legal matters. Husband and wife have their own separate families, but for their descendants these will form one family – theirs. Family in this stricter sense, capable of enforcing sanctions, may cut across matrilineal clans ("*mikowa*" – those of the four grandparents), but is limited to known relationships.

The same applies also to other rituals that we can associate with Hinfelaar's dogma: Scrutiny that has teeth belongs to family and not to the general public. Take, for example, the rite of "*kumeta*" (of shaving) at the end of a funeral. One of its expressed purposes is "*kutaya chiwanda*" (to remove the bad spirit/shade) associated with death – from family members and from those who were closely involved in the burial. Take the following description, given by Headman Mtampuka:

After a burial, there are two rites of kumeta (shaving): the public one ("pa walo" – in the open yard) and the private one ("mu nyumba" – inside the house). The public one, well, there are many opinions. W̄achitawala (Jehovah Witnesses) and some churches will never do any kumeta in public. Many churches don't want kumeta, because it is "ncha chikunja"

(pagan) and they say it cannot remove any chiwanda, or that there is no such thing as a chiwanda. Look, we call people for kumeta, but often we just place a pair of scissors on their head. Some do it, others don't, and people are not really much concerned. But the kumeta mu nyumba, ah, that one is another matter. If you don't do it and something happens later, like someone gets depressed or sick, the family will blame you.

The *kumeta mu nyumba* consists of the mutual shaving of husband and wife, which is followed by the couple resuming conjugal relations. Without this rite, the dead person will be ill disposed against the household, especially against his/her close relative. The chief of our area enforces the rules about the *kumeta pa walo*, but does not get involved in the *kumeta mu nyumba*. If a suspicion arises because of a mysterious (often mental) sickness in the house, they are dealt with internally, by the wider family, in their own council. Here the guilt of trespassing is established, confessions are given and accepted or refused, promises of change are made, and warnings are issued. These family councils are of no concern to outsiders.

Concerning the second role of women, the link to the ancestors, an occasional *kavuwa* (ancestral shrine) can be found among the Senga, usually kept in response to a dream of an elderly woman of a clan with an acknowledged history. Otherwise, the ancestors have very limited public appearances. Nevertheless, they play a crucial role in constituting the boundary of a family. This becomes evident at funerals. While funerals are very inclusive and many of its tasks are performed by classificatory or biological grandchildren (“*azukulu*”), the spiritual force linked to the dead person is precarious and can only be handled by the immediate family (for the Wiza only its matrilineal part). To the remaining spouse, who was “one blood” with the deceased, it becomes a *chiwanda*, a dark and dangerous force, from which he/she needs to be cleansed.¹⁸

People recognise that women formed the crucial link to the ancestors in the past, and that more women than men are possessed by various types of (non-ancestral) spirits (known here as “*vimbuza*”, “*mashawê*”, “*mizimu*”, “*wangelo*”, and demons). The appeasement of such spirits goes along with certain taboos, since the spirits demand a conditioned lifestyle. Women either follow the promptings of the spirits (especially when they become healers) or deny and ignore them because of pressure from family or church. In either case, we may speak of a spirituality in the sense of a continued struggle with or against the spirits. It provokes a sense of crisis and very often calls for domestic readjustments. People with spirits may cause public concern or amusement. But, again, the required adjustments are a matter for the marriage partner and family, not the wider public.

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Finally, initiation rites (mostly known as “*usungu*”) are proudly practiced. The concluding part of the rites is public and an occasion for celebration, gift-giving, beer drinking and dancing. It is assumed that a girl “who has been taught” has practiced labial prolongation before the rites and that she knows the standard etiquettes of cultural and marital behaviour. These include the rules about respect, hygiene, proper behaviour towards the husband (and men/adults in general), in-laws, and sex, as well as the sexual dance, but also many practical matters. She is also taught the teachings around the *kabiya* (the secret marriage vessel), the important times of sexual abstinence (*mijungulo*) and the taboos around the *mdulo* complex. Church-led initiations separate puberty from marriage rites and removed explicit teachings from the former. They downplay teachings about *mdulo* and removed elements that they consider repulsive or that clash with church teachings. During the last stage of pregnancy, women come again together for the “*usungu ukulu*” (the great *usungu*, strictly attended only by women), after which her dress code changes and other protective measures set in.

Not everybody can afford a public rite for their daughters. But all girls need to receive the teaching lessons “inside the house”, when in confinement. These are compulsory. A family wants their daughter to be a respectable and accepted person in society and eventually to become part of the adult women’s world. But society’s scrutiny no longer has teeth. Scrutiny about the teachings that the girl received is an issue at the point of marriage – for the family of the boy, and also her own family, for example for fear that “she will be returned”.

Megan Vaughan’s point about the politics of scrutiny begged the question about who scrutinises and to what purpose. People may comment about practices related to traditional dogma, but scrutiny in the narrower sense belongs to specific parts of a family (matrilineal, agnatic, or affine). Of course there are exceptions. For example, in closed groups on a dangerous mission (i.e. a hunting/poaching expedition in the “cold” forest), effective scrutiny about sexual abstinence can take place also outside of kin, about each member in the group and their spouses, when something has gone seriously wrong. The exception of a tight group on a specific mission, I believe, confirms the rule that scrutiny about traditional dogma belongs to the family.

Tradition provides frames of reference for this scrutiny, but not always an unambitious roadmap. In the struggle to make sense out of events in the context of competing explanatory schemes, a family reconstitutes or reaffirms a sense of family morality, under which its members need to submit. A person who stays outside the common moral code established by specific parts of traditional dogma becomes estranged. Reference to tradition seeks adherence to a binding moral code and allows pressure for compensation. It is a search whose outcome cannot always be predicted. Compare the following cases:

Case 1. A death in childbirth

A woman died in childbirth in a village of one of our prayer centres. Her family understood that the husband's adultery had caused the death, and consulted four different diviners, who confirmed this perception. The husband refused to attend the divinations and denied the accusations. His wife's family then denied him the cleansing rites unless he paid 2000 Kwacha (then 200 US\$). He did not pay. They confronted him with the offer to pick any diviner of his choice for the proof of guilt or innocence, which he accepted. However, the night before the agreed consultation, he fled to town and has never come back. He was not cleansed by his late wife's family, for whom he has become an outcast. He seems uninvolved in the lives of his children. Defying the demands of tradition, he remarried in town, "after he shaved himself in a barber shop".

Case 2. The refusal of a confession of guilt

In the same village, more or less at the same time, a woman was accused of having caused the death of her husband, who had vomited blood before his death, a sign of "mphongo". This form of *mdulo* points to adultery on the part of the wife. She vehemently refused the charges, in spite of her own family trying to persuade her to make a confession and pay a fine, if only for the sake of peace. "According to the tradition of our parents, you are guilty!" She stuck to her not-guilty plea. Eventually she remarried without visible obstacles. She continued to live in the same village and seemed to be on reasonable terms with her own family and somehow even that of her late husband. She had managed to defy tradition, against all odds. However, she later died with anaemia. Many people then related her death to the fact that she had not been properly cleansed because of her defiance of tradition.

Case 3. Another child's death

In one prayer centre, I was called by a man: his seven months old daughter had died. I went to see him to express my sympathy and pray with the family. Obviously, the man was devastated.

The child was coughing. First, I bought medicines in the shops. When this did not work, we took the child to the clinic. They attended to us and also gave us medicines to take home. To no avail. Then we brought her to the traditional healer. He gave some medicines but said he could not deal with this case. Now the child is dead. It is exactly the same death that all the other children died. There was something in the chest that was moving, and it became very hot. I don't know how my wife's relatives will react. I will go and beat the drum [consult a diviner about witchcraft].

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The man had two wives; this was the fourth child of his second wife to die within a few years, in addition to several miscarriages; all her children now were dead. Sadness gripped everybody. Hardly a year earlier, at the occasion of the death of the third child, her family had given him a very strong warning: "We will not tolerate another death!" There were several suspects for witchcraft. But among the scrutinising rumours, there was still another possibility: "*chisoni*", which translates as being sorry, broken-hearted, sad, rueful, or ashamed. As a local medical condition, I was told, it causes the death of all small children of a woman whose husband sleeps with one of her close relatives.¹⁹ The father eventually did not become accused by his wife's family of having caused *chisoni*. But it was clear that a man who went to look for a witch in his own family would himself be scrutinised about his sexual behaviour. Traditional dogma is invoked as a moral power.

In the three examples, a given couple's marital and sexual life was subjected to scrutiny *during times of life-crisis* caused by unexplained death. Tragedy is rarely viewed in complete isolation from crisis in relationships and norms of morality, and more specifically within the family. Sometimes we find several schemes of explanation that compete with each other. But even when biomedical causes are discerned, they are also made part of a moral discourse, for example when they function to acquit a close relative from moral wrong. ("It was malaria, not *mdulo*.") People's gossip has moral overtones and are part of a process of reshaping a public sense of morality. But the scrutiny with teeth is that of the family, "the owners of the case". People who confess their misconducts on traditional lines place themselves under the authority and sanctions of the family. People who refuse to confess, place themselves outside. In the above cases, a known world of trust and belonging had fallen apart. Traditional beliefs were invoked as a moral certainty when the family itself was at stake and where people needed to once again affirm common rules (a dogma) for belonging.

Conclusion: church and family power

For more than a century, health, education, and church discipline have tried hard to debunk family dogma as false belief. But which other form of moral knowledge and ritual practice has replaced this powerful force that is able to reconstitute an extended family in times of crisis? On the one hand, the Christian faith came with meticulous moral and sexual standards in replacement for traditional beliefs. On the other hand, it belittled and bypassed the domestic self-regulating mechanisms that enforce morality ("family power"), because they were linked to traditional beliefs and labelled superstitious. The church was left with many rules but no solid grip for scrutiny within the family. From outside, the church could reject promiscuity, polygamy or divorce. But it had little to offer in terms

of “productive power” (Vaughan) or “intuitive spirituality” (Hinfelaar) on the level of domestic life and the wider family. The Christian family was toothless for implementing its own domestic ethics. Morality was fiercely preached in church and without too many consequences rather easily evaded at home. In contrast, tradition still kept a firm grip to scrutinise and sanction marital life in the Luangwa Valley – and in many other areas of Zambia too. Many people no longer hold traditional beliefs in a strong sense. But, “If something happens in my family, these points will be looked at.” As long as “these points will be looked at”, they continue to constitute a critical point of surveillance, a moral compass, through which a wider family reconstitutes itself in times of crisis.

Important beliefs in the traditional discourse are linked to indigenous biological models of causality that can be incompatible with modern biology and ignorant of established scientific insights. Hence, many view them as superstitions. But when people appeal to tradition, they don’t only intend to give lessons in biology but also in morality and identity. They appeal to a mysterious dimension in life to which they have a specific connection because of their ancestors and history. We have seen that traditional beliefs are invoked as a response to crisis that is linked to relationships, and where people expect a binding consent. Hinfelaar respected the quest for a common moral life even when the explanatory biological schemes are no longer viable. He asked what the scrutiny and sanctions attached to beliefs try to protect. For him, they pointed to a sacred dimension of married life and family, in which he himself believed, that once was and could again become the springboard for a wider spiritual life. He wanted to link the Christian faith to daily domestic rituals in search for an intuitive family spirituality. In other words, to link Christian morality to “productive power” that helps to regulate family life from within. In the church, his quest has lost nothing of its relevance.

End notes

- ¹ Emilio version of the Trinity (or Quintity?) contains God the Ancestor (with the complementary spirits of “Shikulu” and “Mama”), God the Son (with the complementary spirits of “Tata” and “Mayo”) and “the Spirit of all”. The *Nakabumba* (Mary the mother of Jesus and senior to him) brings salvation to the Africans whom she loves in a very special way.
- ² Section 3 of the “Witchcraft Act” (Chapter 90 of the Laws of Zambia).
- ³ See especially Rasing (2005) – focussing not on the (patrilineal) Tumbuka but on (matrilineal) Bemba *ifimbusa* practices, which have, nevertheless, many similarities. Also Mutale Mulenga Kaunda (2016), while pointing out incompatibilities of traditional *ifimbusa* teachings with modern life and aspirations, believed in the possibility of making initiation rites compatible also with the ambitions of modern working women.
- ⁴ See Hale’s discussion (2008) on the controversy between John Mbiti and Okot p’Bitek.
- ⁵ Hinfelaar’s analysis concerned the early years of Lumpa that preceded the entrenchments, apocalyptic violence, and the exodus of the survivors to Mokambo.

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- ⁶ I consider that Hinfelaar’s quest was not disconnected from reflections on his own faith (how it developed over time), and from his prolonged work with young, Catholic seminarians who saw themselves directly called by God into the ministry – but whose vocation could quickly evaporate if not sustained by a ritual and symbolic dimension in daily life.
- ⁷ Obviously for Hinfelaar the spiritual world was real too, and not exclusively symbolic; such a position would be unusual for a priest. Hinfelaar tried to link people’s symbols to spiritual emotions – having in mind people well versed in the initiation rites and experienced in the dangers of defilements. Youth adherents may have given a different meaning to the new life offered by Lumpa than adult married women did.
- ⁸ Examples are the morning star (*mulanga*), the new moon, the light (*lubuto*), God building on the stone (*ilibwe*), the “crossing over” for those who are cleansed (*abasambwa*), the boatsman (*umulondo*), or the prohibition of turning back.
- ⁹ The numbers of marriageable men and women start to diverge in a demographic pyramid when men tend to marry younger women. After divorce, chances for remarriage are much lower for women than for men.
- ¹⁰ Biomedical concepts could reinforce traditional concepts (through overlapping symptoms) but also weaken them (the effectiveness of ARVs undermined the explanatory power of traditional models). Traditional healers used biomedical explanations to charge traditional notions with new meanings. In other circumstances, traditional and biomedical notions were clearly distinguished and coexisted side by side. See for example Wolf (2001).
- ¹¹ Forster (2004: Chapter 1).
- ¹² Note that many people today translate “*chibinda wa ng’anda*” simply as “owner of the house” and give this title to the man, not the woman.
- ¹³ Culture makes room for discussing marital and sexual issues in a special forum, but they should not be shared with outsiders. Here I only write about the points that are important for my argument and that have been part of academic discourse since the time of Audrey Richards.
- ¹⁴ An old ritual (now largely defunct) for removing “hotness” is known in our area only for the time after a marriage has ended: a woman would be bathed in medicines (*phozo/ntembusha*) that “make cold” and thus enable the person to cook for her elderly relatives. A daily rite for removing hotness from a sexually active couple, as Richards and Hinfelaar alleged for the Bemba, is not known here. To prevent defilement, medicines are given to the elderly and vulnerable (the possible victims of defilement), not to the sexually active (the possible causes of defilement).
- ¹⁵ See accounts about *mdulo* in Hodgson (1933: 129-131), Rangeley (1948: 34-44), Morris (1985), Van Breugel (2001), Phiri (2014), Chondoka and Bota (2015: Chapter 7).
- ¹⁶ If the woman dies after childbirth “upon seeing her own blood”, she herself (and not the husband) is guilty of adultery and has brought death upon herself.
- ¹⁷ Also unmarried, promiscuous youth do not become “one blood” until a pregnancy is involved (though this point was heavily discussed).
- ¹⁸ Unless he/she remarries within the same family. Today the cleansing is no longer performed through sexual intercourse as in the past, but simply by rubbing backs or shoulders with a sibling of the late spouse and a blessing with flour, performed on a mat.
- ¹⁹ Note, however, that *chisoni* does not apply when a man legally marries as his second wife the sister of his first wife (for example in response to an offer by the family of the wife, not uncommon among the Senga and Tumbuka). Like the “mixing of blood”, also *chisoni* knows legal marriages from illegitimate affairs.

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Ishita – Atemporality in Bemba Eco-existentialism

Chammah J. Kaunda

Yonsei University, South Korea; University of the Western Cape, South Africa

This article delineates Bemba eco-existentialism of atemporality. It demonstrates inshita as lived which is deeply entrenched in the quest to become Lesa (God). Bemba atemporality is never conceived in terms of the past or the future. Rather, as the locus of intercourse, a critical site of spiritual interaction, transaction, and exchange aimed at actualizing equilibrium of all vital relationships that make up the cosmos. In this way, inshita is lived and a manifestation of meaningful actions that promote flourishing-becoming of all things.

Keywords:

Inshita; Eco-relationality; Bemba Eco-existentialism; Lesa; Atemporality

Introduction

The focus of this article is *inshita* - atemporality in Bemba eco-existentialism. The Bemba-speaking people are a dynamic and fluid constellation of ethnicities forming the largest unofficial ethnic group(s) in Zambia¹. They occupy much of the Northern Province, Muchinga Province, Luapula Province, and are found in large number in the Copperbelt, along with those who are scattered in various provinces within the country and those living in the diaspora. The Bemba are matrilineal in social, political, and spiritual organization.

This article frames the Bemba philosophy of *inshita* within a contemporary global search for planetary well-being and wholeness. Indigenous philosophies that embrace and recognize all life forms as kith and kin are increasingly perceived as offering viable options for rethinking human (a)temporalities. This process of rethinking is connected to what Karen Barad (2007: 3) has argued as the inseparability of “matter and meaning”- “are inextricably fused together and no event, no matter how energetic, can tear them asunder.” Human beings live in a primordially meaning-entrenched and meaning-making cosmos. Every question concerning meaning relates to the universe as becoming an everyday existence, and the disturbing implications for either collective flourishing or doom. The existential humiliation this evokes is an invisible thread through which the Bemba idea of *inshita* is articulated. Despite being aware that the *inshita* is translated uncritically as time, I am reluctant to classify the percept as such.

To avoid the pitfall of losing the meaning of *inshita* in translation, I engage the concept from Catherine Malabou’s plasticity. In plasticity, all things, including the past and future; the invisible and visible, are mutually constituted

and radically entangled in the mutual eco-relational dialogical process of becoming. Plasticity allows for permeable boundaries between all modes of existence – past as present and future as past (an always atemporality), time of time, complex terrains of multiplicities of reality. The existence which is resistance to easy categorization and taxonomization. To exist and experience in the multiplicities of reality. Malabou argues, to posit the reality “as ‘plasticity’ amounts to *displacing* the established definition of the future [and the past] as a *moment of time*” (2005: 5-6, italics as found). Malabou’s view of reality subverts “ordinary connotation, that of the ‘future’ as a tense. It is not a matter of examining the relations between past, present, and the conventional sense of the future” (2005: 5-6). Plasticity resists the linear logic of grammatical categorizations of time as tenses of temporality. Plasticity is “an agency of disobedience to every constituted form, a refusal to submit to a model” (Malabou, 2008:3). Indeed, many scholars have underlined that the whole idea of ‘Western mathematically and the linear oriented notion of time’ distorts and fractures concrete indigenous perceptions and conceptions of (a)temporality² and existence (Mbiti, 1966; Masolo, 1994; Adjaye, 1994).

Therefore, to delineate *inshita* as plastic means, first, to appeal to its intrinsic plasticity to transform it into the sort of comprehensive concept that grasps the multiplicity of the whole existence. *Inshita* itself is plastic and should be treated plastically. In other words, the received indigenous concept of *inshita* is inherently plastic which makes it open to receiving a new form. The process of writing is plasticity, a way of giving form or substance to the concept. To write is to give birth, to give existential content to the concept. It is to see it becoming itself and that power to see a plastic concept allows us to see coming plasticity itself. As Malabou argues, “A continual transformation and radical interruption, a process and an explosion, plasticity, and gelignite” (2005: xiii). Nimi Wariboko (2014:173) stresses, “with plasticity, there is no going back, no return to any original form;” but carries “the power of formative destruction of forms,” anyone or anything including God that seeks to thwart planetary flourishing. Plasticity is about fashioning purposeful meaning for the planetary flourishing and maintaining the equilibrium of forces between meaning and the lived reality. The inquiry into Bemba atemporality is plasticity, because *inshita* is an in-betweenness of giving and receiving form and meaning.

Inshita Yaba Shani? Inquiry into Atemporality

Inshita is a Bemba construction, experience, and perception of atemporal reality or symbolic (liminal) order. I am contending that the pre-assimilative nature of indigenous philosophical notions enabled them to resist total erasure and surrender as empty receptacles to be uncritically filled with the modern scientific

content of reality. Their pre-assimilative power enabled them to reconstruct and reappropriate their own content of reality within the framework of post-Enlightenment and postmodernism without losing indigenous essence. The indigenous philosophical systems have risen outside “the universal house of knowledge” as “‘options’ and not ‘alternatives’” (Mignolo, 2011. xxviii). They have resisted positioning themselves as the only palatable systems of knowledge that can adequately promote eco-emancipatory imagination. Rather, they respect various “existing options” among which they have entered “claiming its legitimacy to sit at the table when global futures are being discussed” (Mignolo, 2011: xxviii). Indigenous people are “not looking for alternative modernities but for alternatives to modernity” and scientific secular epistemology. The search to reconstitute indigenous ideas of life and (non)humanisms is not about revivalism, rather reformism to provide life-giving meanings to life worlds. Rauna Kuokkanen (2007: 25) argues “that indigenous philosophies offer a timely [option] paradigm for the entire world, which is increasingly characterized by tremendous human suffering and environmental destruction.” Indigenous philosophies of atemporalities such as *inshita* are inhospitable to such dichotomies as visible and invisible; linear view of past and future; sacred and secular; human and nonhuman forms; and other dichotomies. Rather they are deeply entrenched in the oneness of life in which all (in)visible (non)beings and (non)human forms mutually participate in the ultimate life.

Such conceptions and perceptions of atemporality can best be described with Catherine Malabou’s idea of plasticity. To argue for the plasticity of *inshita* is to plasticize it as a means for resistance against erasure by the prevailing dark side of modernity. *Inshita* has been outspeeding and pre-empting the powers of colonial modernity as a counterbalance to the chaotic modern vagaries which have exorcised African people out of history and fictionized them into metaphysical and ontological temporalities of fantasies. Plasticity “may be said to comprise a ‘poetics’ in the broad sense of that term - an exploration of the human powers to make (poiesis) a world in which we may poetically [and liminally] dwell” (Kearney, 1998: 9). Plasticity as an approach seeks to transcend “both the empire of reason and the asylum of un-reason” (Kearney, 1998: 9). The Bemba atemporality (*inshita*) is dynamic and fluid; open-ended; clandestinely subversive and yet reflects ongoing adaptations; and always in motion and involving contingency at the level of form and meaning. It is a distinctive atemporal mode of existence underpinned by the quest to maintain the equilibrium of cosmic forces (humans, nonhumans, the living dead, spirits, God). It calls for living *supersensitively* and *supernaturally* (not in mystical terms but a poetic imagination that affirms that there is more than one way to understand and interpret reality) within the *immediacy of*

the always. This is a ritualistic understanding of life and atemporality as the moment of the always, where the past, present, and the future have always primordially collapsed into each other, that only the (in)visible reality exists. The always moment, the space of multiplicity and totality, where (in)visible reality realizes its fully plastic moment and is completely entangled in a totality of experience from nonbeginning to nonending. *Inshita* has to do with every incomplete, every becoming and unbecoming. It is a peripatetic or nomadic spin oscillating existence that is not linear or circular but dynamic, fluid, and filled with truncations of the excursions, detours, reverses, and contradictions. Becoming is not a smooth sailing process but an expedition filled with furious seas, untamed storms, avenging ghosts, and inner contractions. The conscious species, such as humanity, is always in danger of regressing or obliterating its humanness into primal animality (*Iciswanga*).

Inshita is an atemporal struggle, where there are no quick claims to victory or defeat. The struggle is the condition and the essence of being. Creation is trapped in an incessant struggle for the realization of eco-relationality – the fullness of life embedded in *Lesá*. For every victory is at once a fresh defeat; every defeat is at once a victory to begin again. As Slavoj Žižek (2012: 20) argues, “– victory and defeat – these are all absent; the ‘truth’ of the struggle emerges only in and through defeat.” The seeming victories and defeats are simply the gaps and ruptures that visibilize the constant struggle. *Inshita* is a site of struggle to become what humanity and nonhumanity have primordially been, namely, *Lesá* (I return to this point below). However, it is important to point out that Bemba people do not perceive struggles for justice and dignity of all-things as following a logical straight line. As David Ngong (2021:36) maintains, the forces that humanity struggles against in the search to become are never “transcended or left behind with each new victory.” The chaos or void is always in collision with order and abundant life. The struggle to become is the condition of being – victories and defeats are mutually constituted forces of becoming. To be a conscious being is nothing other than a step toward the creation of new forms of life.

Here, we can agree with Mbiti, “When Africans reckon time, it is for a concrete and specific purpose, in connection with events but not just for the sake of mathematics.” However, Mbiti’s “time is a composition of events” (1969: 19). In some ways, *inshita* might be thought of as ‘composition of events’, if every human action could be defined as an event. The weakness of Mbiti’s time is that which moves, and people set their minds on events that have already taken place. Mbiti considered that such an understanding differentiates the African concept of time from the linear notion with its unitary accounts of the indefinite past and future, or from antiquity and to futurity. For Mbiti, the indefinite

future is virtually absent in the African system of time because events that lie in the future have not taken place. They are abstract, unrealized, and cannot, therefore, constitute 'African time'. Mbiti might be right about some Africans not thinking in futuristic terms because of their conception of reality and not necessarily a lack of future tenses. However, to argue for time as a movement, or an orientation, either forward or backward is to misunderstand the ritual theoretical world of some African people such as the Bemba people. In the Bemba thought system, *inshita* is a locus of "struggle aimed, ultimately, to produce life, to eliminate the forces that combine to mutilate, disfigure, and destroy life" (Mbembe, 2021:228). Achille Mbembe, (2001:14) underlines, "*time as lived*, not synchronically or diachronically but in its multiplicity and simultaneities, its presence and absences, beyond the lazy categories of permanence and change beloved of so many historians." He sees time as a combination of several temporalities "made up of discontinuities, reversals, inertias, and swings that overlay one another, interpenetrate one another, and envelop one another: an *entanglement*" (Mbembe, 2001:14). Mbembe is not arguing for the movement of time but for multiplicities of reality that co-exist, intermingle, clash, embrace, contradict, negate, affirm, interpenetrate and possibilise each other either for cosmic flourishing or sometimes for cosmic doom. *Inshita* is a site of cosmic exchange and intercourse in the search for the viable meaning of life that can promote cosmic flourishing. *Inshita* is an atemporal struggle for meaning within the material universe. It is the condition of the possibility of becoming, a foundational character and framework for apprehending the meaning of life. Let me say a few things about the relationship between *inshita* and meaning.

***Inshita* and Meaning**

We cannot deal with the Bemba idea of *inshita* without giving attention to meaning. *Inshita* is a framework through which Bemba people perceive the meaning embedded within the fabric of the universe. Humanity lives by making sense of this cosmic meaning. As Karen Armstrong (1994: 457) observes. "Human beings cannot endure emptiness and desolation; they will fill the vacuum by creating a new focus of meaning." This temporality is an "inescapable entanglement of matters of being, knowing, and doing, of ontology, epistemology, and ethics, of fact and value, so tangible, so poignant" (Barad, 2007: 3). In the Bemba eco-relational ontology, there is a subtler and more complex relationship among the material and spiritual aspects of life. In the dilemma to make sense of reality, the meaning becomes an unfathomable prison of human existence. The human is entangled with making meaning that makes meaning out of the human. The power to make meaning or sense out of the cosmic abyss of the meaning of existence is the human condition. The human materializes itself and contributes

to the cosmic household as the shadow draws meaning and existence from its substance. The power to make meaning is not just the power to (be)come, but the power to act even (un)become, the power to create mastered aspects of reality from the untamed, volatile, and malleable primordial ultimate symbolic order. Because meaning is lived reality, we can assume that the meaning human beings give to their reality is real and significant in themselves. As the ancient Stoic philosopher Epictetus declared, what unsettles the human mind is not events, but rather, the meaning created from them. Meaning is socially constructed and is determined by preserving social conditions. This signifies that the lived meaning is not given but a dynamic product of human interpretations, interactions, and intra-actions with the material symbolic order (reality).

The material world is the theatre of meaning and the site of unfolding social dramas of existence. As Victor Turner (1966: 26) observed among Zambian ethnic groups, meaning is “a union of ecology and intellect that results in the materialization of an idea.” Once the idea materializes, grasped by the human mind, made capable of being thought about, the meaning becomes mastered and embodied in the collective psyche and appropriated in everyday social life. At that stage, the human has become its own idea, or rather the idea has become the human itself. There is no way of transforming societies without reorienting their collective framework or cultural substratum of meaning-making. This also indicates that it is the meaning attached to the reality that enables them to go beyond or to a more-than-human interpretation and understanding of reality. The human exceeds itself through meaning-making. Reality exists as that which is perceived by the human mind. Asserting the reality of the Bemba percepts of *inshita* is not intended to negate European metaphysics of time or pass a judgment as to the metaphysical reality of time (the nature of temporal reality). The lived reality is not a given fact, but a construction. By implication, once human beings define their reality as real, that reality is real, not in the metaphysical or ontological sense, but in the concrete consequences. Such a reality is no longer a mere abstract concept but a lived experience with real consequences in the real-life experience. This also means that ideas are meaningful to the extent they are appropriated in the real world of human struggle. However, one does not underestimate the power of an idea for human existence is fundamentally a site of struggle for meaning and ideas are prisoners of contradictions “of words loaded with myths and theoretical phantasmata” (Boulaga, 1977: 26). Human beings cannot know the nature of temporal reality, but only human perceptions of the temporal reality.

To construct reality from a symbolic ultimate signifies resistance to the discontinuity of the indigenous views of reality. *Inshita* functions as an atemporal system of meaning-making for the flourishing of society. The idea of

time as progress has failed to receive general validation in Zambia, and thus, has negatively impacted the everyday construction of lived reality. James Ferguson (1999: 252) discovered that many Zambians do not think in terms of, and speak of “being ahead or behind, progressing well or too slowly. Instead, people are more likely to speak in terms of nonlinear fluctuations of ‘up’ and ‘down’... or in terms of niches and opportunities that might provide a bit of space here or there.” He underlined that “Such usages evoke less the March of Progress than an up-to-date weather report—good times and bad times come and go, the trick is to keep abreast and make the best of it” (Ferguson, 1999: 252). He believes that “this new style of understanding is driven by a pragmatic logic, the need to come to terms with a social world that can no longer be grasped in terms of the old scripts” (Ferguson, 1999: 252). Ferguson realized that Zambian people felt imprisoned in “the linear teleologies on which virtually all conventional liberal and leftist political programs have rested.” They have proved inadequate to help deal “with the sorts of challenges raised by the contemporary politics of global inequality, on the Copperbelt or elsewhere” (Ferguson, 1999: 252). Naomi Haynes (2020) also observed what she described as “the expansive present” as “a new model of Christian time” in Pentecostal churches in Zambia. She argued that these churches “collapse the space between the biblical past and the present in order to affect a future that is so near as to be almost indistinguishable from today” (Haynes, 2020:63). However, this view of atemporality, which both Ferguson and Haynes are quick to declare as “new”, is fundamentally an African postmodernist resistance to discontinuity of indigenous understandings and perceptions of lived reality. In the case of Pentecostalism especially, they have been described as taking a complete break with their traditional past in their radical conversions; yet, as Haynes observes, they align themselves with biblical ancestors. As David Shank (1994:171) observes of Prophet William Wadé Harris of West Africa, Zambian Pentecostal churches have “simply changed family connections, now based on faith in Christ as known through the Scriptures but utilizing a spirituality of vital participation totally indigenous to [their] African way of being and which [they identify] with the ‘spirit of Pentecost.’”

The importation of secular scientific informed notions of time in Zambia, while it appears to have shifted traditional patterns of life, has not transformed the spiritual soul of many Zambians. Many African urbanites especially have imported cerebral-based views of time grounded on analytical, and linear logical thinking. However, at a deeper sacred-secular level, Zambian notions of time remain deeply entrenched in holistic, nontime, and mystical thought. In other words, they embrace *inshita* embedded in the idea of eco-relational theory of naturehood and its potential for limitless flourishing-becoming. Consequently, the continuous function of the mystical view of atemporality and the continuous

struggle to replace it with secular linear logic time constitutes an ongoing traumatic encounter with reality that defines contemporary Zambia. Kwame Bediako (1995:5) classifies the ongoing split or fractured, or traumatic reality as a lingering dilemma “of an Africa uncertain of its identity, poised between the impact of the West and the pull of its indigenous tradition.”

Plasticity and Reversibility of God

The Bemba worldview does not spend its energy trying to explain the *how* and *when* God created the universe. There is no concept of *creatio ex nihilo* (creation from or out of nothing). They take it for granted that *Lesá* is the primordial matter of creation. The view is that originally there was only the fullness of *Lesá* – unmultipliable, unaddable, unsubtractable, and indivisible all-reality. The all-thing was *Lesá* - boundless, nontemporal, nondefinable always (*umuyayaya nomuyayaya*) divinity. This beingness was disruptive when *Lesá* performed a Cosmic Ritual of Creation. This ritual of self-subversion enacted a paradox in *Lesá*. The alienation of the divine from the divine. This is not to say that *Lesá* is incomplete, but to underline the ritual paradox in atemporalization and visibilization of the nontemporal, invisible God. This is where the eco-existential concern or agenda of Bemba people is flourishing-becoming *Lesá*. Becoming *Lesá* requires first becoming fully-conscious and nurturing extraordinary capacities for self-determination and freedom, to act in ways that can enable humanity and the cosmos arrive at the original point (*Lesá*). The Bemba worldview does not function with the idea of the coming God, but rather, the God who is to be arrived at. The ultimate singular-plurality of all-things, the convergence of all existence - (in)visible³. In the Bemba mind, *Lesá* is not posed as an unattainable beyond, nor is the relation to God conceived as a split between two sides. *Lesá* is that which humans and creation are becoming. The dynamic and impermanency in *Lesá* is the manifestation of *Lesá* as creation. Creation is *Lesá* becoming *Lesá*. The idea of *inshita* is deeply rooted in Bemba eco-existential wisdom. It is driven from atemporal understanding of reality in which *Lesá* is the predominant dimension. *Lesá* is the blueprint and paradoxical ontological basis of potentiality and thus of becoming. People never worshipped or built places of worship for God because to worship is to act and live justice in concrete ways as giving life to other vital forces in the cosmos.

Lesá is the original chaos and the becoming order. This order is constantly realized through acts of justice and life-giving and constantly undone through selfishness and acts that deny others the opportunity to flourish. The Bemba worldview functions with what could be described as subversive sociopolitical evolution – a symbolic journey of creation that started from *KwaLesá* (*kukabanga*, meaning the ultimate) and is the point of fulfilment of all-things.

The whole atemporal reality could be conceived as divine ritual space. In Bemba society, *Lesá* is the Cosmic Ritual which is imitated in various micro-rituals. These ritual “theoretical worlds” of Bemba people is mind-bending and remains incomprehensible to those with inflexible linear logic who constantly regarded African rituals as ‘raw data’ which must be analyzed using European theoretical categories. Robin Horton (1967: 52) warns until Africanist intellectuals grasped that ritual thinking forms African theoretical worlds, many of their so-called new contributions to African studies would remain superficial. And at worst, they are likely to fall into the trap of proposing indigenous thinking as new theories or alternative perspectives. To argue that the cosmos is the ritual manifestation of God is to underline the primordial divine action of creation as the original ritual performance. The ritual is a space of liminality- a *Deus Inversus*.

Through the divine primordial ritual, God attains a self-inversive being, an ambivalent atemporalization characterized by both disorder and confusion, a locus of the paradox of atemporality and space, singular and plural, finiteness and imperfection or a site of the endless search for the equilibrium of the multiplicity of the self. Creation is divine liminality – the self-inversive God. The creative ritual places God in the ambivalent, abrogated, contradictory space that is at once sacred and defiled; infinite and finite; nontemporal and atemporal, good and evil. Here we are not dealing with logical causality, we are haunted by a conceptual ambivalence, dilemma, aporia or paradox managed by plasticity. For the ritualized God is neither God nor non-God, both God and non-God; neither material nor spiritual, both material and spiritual; neither natal (always beginning and never-ending) nor mortal (always dying and never dying), both natal and mortal; neither the creator nor the created, both the creator and the created; neither sacred nor profane, both sacred and profane and so on. What appears to be millions of years in the atemporality is but only the first move in the divine ritual of the dance of creation. Hence, creation appears as disorder or confusion because it is divine inversive order. This is the enigma of life and the mystery of existence. And yet, creation is neither God nor non-God, rather a *deus inversus* (reverse of God).

There is nothing orderly about the ritual because creation arises out of chaos. God is the original chaos and the original order. Hence, every ritual among the Bemba is a ritual (restoration, healing, birth, death, infertility, etc.) of performance of primordial chaos and creativity. The ritual is a locus of incessant beginning of chaos. It is the re-enactment of the void into order for primordial creative energies to create life over again. Hence, cosmic atemporality is a journey to realize *BuLesá* existence - an intricate eco-relational balance as found in *Lesá*. Metaphorically, *Lesá* is the Bemba conceptual framework for life-giving relationships, of mutuality, awesome-wholeness, flourishing, and fully balanced

existence (Kaunda and Kaunda, 2019). The Bemba notion of *Lesa* seeks to strike an intricate balance between femininity and masculinity on the one hand, and humanity and creation on the other. *Lesa* is conceived as complete perfection, possessing the fullness of all models of being, including human (maternal and paternal) and nonhuman (Hinfelaar, 1994). *Lesa* is the ideal, category, concept, and percept from which Bemba people derive meaning and engage the problem of ultimate concern. *Lesa* serves as a *telos* of society. *Lesa* is the point of the fulfilment and singular plural of all things. Therefore, the idea of *inshita* is itself a liminal view of reality. It is deeply rooted in indigenous concepts and percepts of *Lesa* (God) as the fullness of reality. As argued above, *Lesa* is the cosmic blueprint (agenda), and that which all-things are ever (un)becoming. *Inshita* refers to the symbolic process of intentionally subversive evolution from *kumasamba* (ever-present chaos) to becoming all-things-in-all-things – *Lesa (kukabanga)*. *Inshita* is essentially about existential chaos and the paradox of the divine search for the realization of *Lesa*. This is the vision and destiny of creation. Thus, the search for gender balance, eco-justice, and flourishing of all-things are imperative to defining humans as an action or a praxis in creation.

Realization of the Living

For Bemba people, *inshita* is atemporality for achieving or becoming *Lesa* (Hinfelaar, 1994:7). This is the autonomous capacity to transcend self-interest to promote the common good. *Inshita* is not the limit of existence. It is the condition of possibility to act in concrete and meaningful ways that promote self-transcendence. To transform and be transformed. *Lesa* is thought of as a transcendent being, not in terms of the supernatural, rather in the ultimate capacity to be the only reality that not only gives life but is the life itself. Since life is the mystery of the material world, in Bemba thinking every action that promotes life is an action of self-transcendence. The meaningful (human) action is the excess of existence over existence. Hence, motherhood is conceived as a social symbol of self-transcendence. Meaningful (human) action is connected to the relationship. God's primordial action is a relational action that sets the pattern for all actions. Meaningful action is an intentional and deliberate socio-action intended to give life to the other or the community. Hence, *inshita* is lived, is an even, an incessant resistance against accepting the current and dominant understanding of reality which is humanly constructed as the best alternative there could be. The human is an eventful praxis. It is realized through relational struggle of becoming. The human is an event. It exists not for itself but as a praxis intended for others. As Katherine McKittrick (2015: 3-4) argues, "Being human is a praxis of humanness that does not dwell on the static empiricism of the unfittest and the downtrodden and situates the most marginalized within

the incarcerated colonial categorization of oppression; being human as praxis is... ‘the realization of the living.’ The human realizes itself or rather becomes truly conscious of itself through relationships and a configuration of actions of abundant life. As Mbembe (2001:6, italics as found) argues, “The African subject does not exist apart from the acts that produce social reality, apart from the process by which those practices are, so to speak, *imbued with meaning*.” The eco-relational praxis of life is intended to shape and inform atemporality.

The human itself is a praxis. To be human is the capacity to act meaningfully in creation. Hence, culture is the crystallization of human relationships with the natural world. It is the unification of human thought and perceivable wisdom in nature. It is a dynamic rational and practical wisdom drawn from the knowledge, and the meaning primordially embedded within the natural world. As already underlined, Bemba people’s concepts and perceptions of God are deeply entrenched in the way human beings act meaningfully within natural reality. Bemba people affirm their natural entanglement with all things (visible and invisible) and a radical place within and with the natural world of both animate and inanimate and a sense of common origin, mutual interests, and values. The community of life is an eco-relational society of the (in)visible world – symbolically manifested as a physical reality, and a mythical, metaphoric-poetic, and symbolic spiritual reality. God is the ultimate symbol that drives the universe as the reality always becoming. *Inshita* is a cosmo-socio-political event that is a dramatization and passionate action that seeks to promote eco-relationality of all things. It is a synergistic liminal space of undifferentiated reality, an assemblage space where the spiritual and the natural dimensions of the world collapse into each other in the quest for the totality of life. *Inshita* is a site of possibility and locus of creating purposeful meaning that can enable human beings to nurture primordial *supersensitive* and *extraordinary* capacities to live, act and relate graciously, hospitably, redemptively, and ecologically rooted in the “fact of natality” (Arendt, 1958: 177). The maintenance of the eco-relational equilibrium of forces is regarded as a precondition for the flourishing of all beings.

Conclusion

This article demonstrates that in the Bemba worldview, “the relative material world is not the imperfect nor the compromised. It is the sole realm of reality” (Zuesse, 1991:174). The cosmos carries within itself the burden of infinity. “As a result, one does not seek to separate oneself from the world, but to integrate oneself with it” (Zuesse, 1991: 173). The quest is to become the cosmos by becoming *Lesa*. Hence, as Evan Zuesse (1991: 173) observes, “What some other religions consider ‘secular’ concerns are entirely appropriate spiritual concerns in African religions, and rightly so according to their logic”. *Inshita* does not change; it is meaning and

relationships that change. *Inshita* is an event. It is a praxis of transformation and the locus of sociopolitical and religious action. It is site producing life-giving meaning that incessantly strives to transgress or exceed *kumasamba* (chaos). The events of *inshita* are ripples of hope in the expansive reality of contradictions. They bring in the idea of incessant beginning, these new beginnings may not last, but are means for constantly subverting existential chaos. This gives humanity some glimpse of what the fullness of life could look like and inspires the struggle and search for emancipation and social transformation. It is not just God who acts in creation, but rather, creation acts in God as God. To act meaningfully, and what constitutes meaningful human expressions, arises from mutual intra-action of God as human and human as God.

Endnotes

- ¹ The Cibemba language is widely spoken not only by eighteen, official, related ethnic groups but generally by most Zambians. There is a distinction between Bemba-speaking people and the official ethnic Bemba people. The official ethnic Bemba people refers to those under the traditional kingship of Chitimukulu.
- ² I do not want to give the impression that all Africans think the same concerning reality. There are various views of reality.
- ³ This is different from Teilhard de Chardin's (1959; 1969) omega point which is 'the cosmic personalizing center of unification and union of humanity with the whole cosmos - the ultimate state of God'.

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Absent Fathers and Child Maintenance Rights in the Copperbelt Province of Zambia: The Dilemma of a Postcolonial Bemba Matrilineal practice

Mutale Mulenga-Kaunda*

Being matrilineal and matrilocal, the Bemba people believe that “children belong to the mother”. This cultural belief and practice is so resilient that even in the event of divorce men have lost paternity rights to their children. Colonisation shifted Bemba women’s status as men were forced to migrate to work in the mines on the Copperbelt, leaving women to raise children as single mothers often without support from their absent husbands. Yet, even though Bemba people believe that children belong to the mother, the responsibility of raising children was traditionally shared with the father of the child. In postcolonial Zambia, the practice of abandoning children with women without maintenance from the estranged father has continued. Further, the Bemba endorsement that children belong to their mother has also influenced urban dwellers in Zambia. This article employs an African feminist jurisprudence framework to critique this pervasive cultural belief and practice of “children belong to the mother”, arguing that it promotes male irresponsibility and acts as a social driver of increasing the numbers of absent fathers, feminization of poverty and the vulnerability of children. Furthermore, the laws favour the rights of men over women. The article concludes this Bemba matrilineal practice and the current legal system undermine efforts to promote child maintenance rights in Zambia.

Introduction

The struggle for women-friendly laws is critical, particularly in African nations that often have statutory and customary laws that both put women’s lives in jeopardy. In dealing with the issue of child maintenance rights in Zambia, there is a dichotomy between statutory law and customary law. There is a divide between the law and the people’s worldview and due to this dichotomy many men choose to not financially support their children if not married to the mother of their child.

Hugo Hinfelaar in *Bemba-Speaking Women of Zambia in a Century of Religious Change* discusses how the impact of Christianity among the Bemba people changed the political, social and economic lives of Bemba women, leading to changes that were a dislocation of the Bemba worldview. The Bemba people’s worldview is that a child belongs to the mother. This cultural belief and practice is so resilient that in the event of divorce, men lose custody of their children.

* Mutale M. Kaunda is an independent researcher. Her research focuses of African women’s experiences, *Imbusa*, ecumenism, women’s work and culture.

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However, custody is not all that children need; there are financial, social and other needs. As a matrilineal people, Bemba women had economic standing and possession rights that enabled them to raise their children. However, the contact with the White Fathers¹ and the colonial regime changed Bemba women's status as men migrated to work in the mines. This promoted a form of separation in which women were left to raise children without support from their estranged husbands. Paradoxically, even though Bemba people believe that children belong to the mother, the responsibility of raising children is traditionally shared with the father of the child.

Research conducted by anthropologists and missionaries on Bemba people's culture noted changes that came with Christianity and colonialization (Hinfelaar, 1994; Audrey Richards, 1982; Ault, 1983). The position of Bemba women began to deteriorate as the Bemba interacted with missionaries and other cultures. Bemba women who historically held many prominent societal, community, religious and family positions began to lose out as men were the desired workers for both the colonial administration and missionary institutions. This shift in women's status coupled with the Bemba belief that children belong to their mother contributed to a pattern of men abandoning their children and not providing financial maintenance. Children born out of wedlock or those that have experienced their parents' divorce are often left in the care of their mother who may not be financially able to provide for her children's basic needs. This pattern of estranged and negligent fathers has continued in postcolonial Zambia. This article employs African feminist jurisprudence to critique how this cultural belief and practice of "children belong to the mother" is promoting male irresponsibility in the context of increasing numbers of absent fathers, feminization of poverty and the growth in poverty rates among children. My argument is that men have been leveraging a cultural practice to abandon their children and take no responsibility over the children they fathered.

This paper does not in any way suggest as a solution that the Bemba belief should convert to 'children belong to their father' as both men and women are responsible for raising children. Rather we need to interrogate the consequences and impact of this burden on women and children and the need for men to take more responsibility. How can the state law of Zambia engage with this customary law that currently denies women and children the wellbeing that gender activists are bringing to discussion in various settings? The law has often tended to side with men rather than women and therefore women have continued to suffer at the hands of the law that should be protecting them.

African Feminist Jurisprudence: Theoretical Framing

In discussing feminist jurisprudence, Silvia Tamale (2011:4) wrote:

At the turn of the twenty-first century, the largely uncharted territory of gender and sexuality began to be more deeply explored by African feminists, led in the main by social scientists. Anxious to deepen our own understanding of the link between women's sexualities and their subordinate status in society, in 2003 the African Gender Institute (AGI) at the University of Cape Town in collaboration with the Institute of African Studies (IAS) at the University of Ghana organized a pan-African workshop on "Mapping African Sexualities".

Discussion about child maintenance rights and absent fathers is inadvertently a conversation about women's sexuality. Women have continued to face oppression and marginalization even though there have been years of trying to counter this. African women have to contend with many issues and for Bemba women the role of raising children weighs heavily on their shoulders. While the law is not a magic wand that would automatically reset women's experiences and make them better, it plays a critical role in the transformation of certain aspects of their lives. Feminist jurisprudence according to James Fieser and Dowden Bradley (Undated) seeks to bring "the law and its practitioners to recognize that the law as currently constructed does not acknowledge or respond to the needs of women, and must be changed." It further seeks to interrogate whether a male centered law can legitimately frame women friendly laws. There is a need for the law to be able to be responsive to women's experiences and for the processes of adjudication to be women friendly. As James and Bradley argue the law has to engage with "how women and men are 'located in society' with regard to issues, norms and rules." This is vital because when adjudicating, norms and rules have historically been hostile toward women. Underscored by the belief that children belong to their mother, these adjudicating laws have often placed women in difficult situations. The African feminist jurisprudence framework takes into consideration the culture in which Bemba women find themselves. The law therefore has to take into account worldviews like children belong to the mother in times of divorce, at the death of a husband or for a child born outside of marriage. In addition, the law should take into account the fact that men are breadwinners in most Zambian families, resulting in women and children being impacted negatively at divorce or even during an unfortunate death of a husband. This means the law needs to critically engage child maintenance responsibilities in order to ease the burden on women's shoulders. Men have to accept that sexual relations that produce a child are not free but come with responsibility for child maintenance.

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In cases where there is no marriage, women are expected to care for that child or children alone. The law has to critically engage with this cultural belief and enforce maintenance rights. African feminist jurisprudence is concerned with women's position in society and how the law engages with women. This implies that the law has to engage critically with many factors surrounding women in its adjudicating process. Silvia Tamale (2011: 3) highlights that in Africa:

Legal feminist activism on the continent came of age during the late 1980s when women lawyers who doubled as gender activists organized to pursue gender equality. Prominent among such national and regional organizations/networks were the various country chapters of FIDA (Federacion Internacional De Abogadas or International Federation of Women Lawyers), Associations of Women Jurists (Francophone Africa), Women and Law in Southern Africa (WLSA), Women and the Law in Eastern African (WLEA), Women and the Law in West Africa (WLWA), Women Living Under Muslim Laws (WLUML) and Women in Law, Development for Africa (WiLDAF)

African feminist jurisprudence engages with the cultural experiences of women in order to promote gender equality. Tamale (2011: 3) notes that "The starting point for legal feminists... is women's lived experiences with the law". Any form of feminism in Africa has to engage with cultural beliefs in order to be relevant, because culture is pervasive in all aspects of African life. Mohd Aqib Aslam (Undated) argues that "feminist legal theory is dedicated to changing women's status through a rework of the law and its approach to gender." The law has to take seriously women's struggles with culture, which consequently means struggles with the law. The law has had unfavorable impacts on women and children as it has sided with the men and left women and children in desperate circumstances. Women's economic base is lower than men's and that can place women in circumstances where they are unable to provide sufficiently for their children. Tamale (2011: 1) argues that "Not only are legal feminists on the continent actively lobbying for women-friendly laws but they are also filing test cases designed to achieve social change. Legal advocacy for women-friendly legislation goes back several decades in post-independent Africa".

Precolonial Bemba Matricentric Notion of Children

In the precolonial era Bemba people lived in a matrilineal society in which women owned property. Bemba women were admired and honored for their industry and assertiveness (Richards, 1982: 48; see also Rasing, 1995). Matrilineal custom privileged women's ownership of land and family property and after marriage,

the Bemba man moved to the woman's village or community (Richards, 1982; Chondoka, 2001; Rasing, 1995; Kaunda, 2017). Bemba cosmological belief was informed by the creation myth that Lesa gave the women agency over their sexuality and economic independence. Hinfelaar (1994: 9, see also Kaunda and Kaunda, 2016: 161) described the Bemba myth of creation thus:

In the beginning, Lesa created two genderless beings. Lesa gave to one of them two parcels with the command to open them only after they had reached mutuality and oneness. In the unfolding of time, one of the parcels started to emit a bad odour. The being that was carrying the parcel threw it away and opened the other. Immediately thereafter, the disobedient being was endowed with ubwaume (maleness). Seeing what had happened, the second being returned to Lesa and was bestowed with female sexuality.

With this endowment, *Lesa* also gave the woman three further presents: *imbuto* (seeds), *ishiko* and the *ilibwe* "the knowledge of the Bored Stone (*Libwe*) as symbols of agriculture, domestic science and productivity" as Hinfelaar (1994: 9) has shown. These three gifts from *Lesa* point to the woman being given the power of industry. *Lesa* is empowering the woman to be in charge of all that she needs to fulfil her responsibilities as a woman. The three gifts would translate in contemporary times to being able to work the land and corporate careers and working in partnership with the man.

Ishiko or the hearth is a very important part of family and community among the Bemba. In a home it is not just a fireplace, it is used for cooking, for marital sexual purity and keeping the family warm during cold or stormy weather, as well as a place where family disputes are discussed, resolved and decisions made. At the community level, there are similar uses of *ishiko* as in the family. *Lesa* gave a woman agency and decision making capacity when she was given *ishiko*. *Ishiko* gives women a place at the decision making table. A woman was endowed with power of creation as a co-creator with *Lesa* and the ability to be economically independent. This worldview has both protected children from maltreatment after divorce and remarriage, and shielded Bemba women because they had the means to take care of their children.

Karla Poewe (1981:iv) argues that matrilineal people follow a sexual parallelism pattern that is different from the central "relationship of dominance-dependence that characterize the West". Being matrilineal, couples consisting of Bemba women and men made a living without one depending completely on the other, with each contributing to the family's wellbeing. Women and their children used to work for themselves and hire other people to work for them if there was a need, because they understood this worldview very well. Poewe (1981:16)

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suggests that matrilineal systems fitted with industrial contexts. However, the robustness of matrilineal systems was not demonstrated during colonial times.

Bemba women's agency means that girls and women were trained to be self-reliant and to never totally depend on men for their economic wellbeing. Furthermore, women are taught how to be responsible for children. Women in the Bemba community as in many African societies, are seen as custodians of culture and also as 'the home' as evident in the emphasis on *imbusa*² teachings before a woman gets married. If a woman gets married without this teaching, she is ridiculed and always carries the stigma of the "untaught" wherever she goes. Rasing (2004:280) has succinctly asserted, "Initiation rites express and confirm solidarity and unity among women. Norms and values concerning gender, production and reproduction, and cosmological ideas are passed on" during these rites. This situation begins for most Zambian women from the time they are young. From a young age, girls are taught how to take care of their siblings as this will translate in how well they will take care of their own children later in life. Women therefore grow up with a responsibility for children which often men do not have. Tamale (2015: 16) is right in stating that "Sexuality and gender go hand in hand; both are creatures of culture and society, and both play a central, crucial role in maintaining power relations in our societies." Bemba women are culturally constructed to be chaste and therefore an unplanned pregnancy is a shame to the family because that demonstrates that the girl or woman has not received instructions in her home from her parents.

Colonialism and Christianity and Bemba Women

With the dawn of colonialism and Christianity, the tables began to turn. In relation to women, while anthropologists and other scholars (Richards, 1939; Hinfelaar, 1994; Poewe, 1981) have argued that the shift in the Bemba culture occurred before the arrival of missionaries and colonialists, it is important to note that missionaries and colonial officials endorsed patriarchal standards because they preferred to work with men. Bemba women lost out on so much with the advent of Christianity. Hinfelaar (1994: x) explains "I became slowly convinced that somewhere something had gone amiss in the proper transmission of Christ's message of liberation". Hinfelaar's observation is that the Bemba women had come to accept the missionaries because they sided with the poor and marginalized and hoped the "new way" that was being taught by the missionaries would eventually lead them back to regaining the power and position they had previously held. By the time the women realised that the missionaries had preference for men it was too late (Hinfelaar, 1994; xi). All these changes were leading to Bemba women being stripped of their power, the religious, political and economic positions that they had held. The religious change that Hinfelaar discusses in his

book: *Bemba-Speaking Women of Zambia in a Century of Religious Change (1892-1992)* affected various aspects of Bemba people's life. The change in the religious wellbeing inadvertently means the change in Bemba women's economic, social and political position. Bemba women held three positions: *chibinda wa ng'anda*, *nacimbusa wa cisungu* and *kabumba wa mapepo* (Hinfelaar, 1994; Kaunda and Kaunda, 2016; Kaunda, 2017). Elsewhere I have argued that "In her social and spiritual status as both *cibinda wa ng'anda* (head of the house), and of *kabumba wa mapepo* (priestess), the woman mediates between the man and the Supreme Being, *Lesa*." (Kaunda and Kaunda, 2016:165). Matrilineal worldview had the needs of women, men and children at the centre of decisions that were made. The patriarchal texts, both biblical and cultural, undermined women who were not accepted as priests or even as workers in copper mines for wages. Hinfelaar is insightful as he observes that "trying to adapt some of the traditional religion to the teaching of Jesus Christ was believed to ask for trouble. Nothing good could come from African culture" (Hinfelaar, 1994:185).

According to Arie Nicolaas Ipenburg (1991:33) Bishop Joseph Dupont "believed sincerely that he had been appointed, at least temporarily, king of the Bemba by the dying Chief Mwamba.... He expected to include all the Bemba in the White Fathers' sphere of influence." The White Fathers and the colonial officials were the ones who undermined matrilineal systems by bolstering men. The paramount chiefs of Luba Lunda would have found cultural ways of diving into the division between women and men much more cautiously. White Fathers and colonial officers viciously forced themselves into the Bemba women's *imbusa* space. The colonialists and missionaries were not only colonizing the nation of Zambia, they colonized *imbusa* as well (Corbeil, 1982:6). For example, the White Fathers wanted to know and witness the *imbusa* rite in order to know how to teach the Bemba regarding Christian marriages. The colonization of *imbusa* contributed to the distortion of Bemba indigenous beliefs, which also contributed to the change in the discourse and how it was taught. *Imbusa* as a womanhood-centered rite was changed by a patriarchy facilitating a focus on the submission of women and pleasing the husband sexually (Kaunda, 2013: 43). The transformation of that space catalyzed the transformation of marital relationships and impacted related beliefs including children belonging to their mother. Jonathan Friedman (1992:837) asserts that people's realities are formed out of specific socio-historic contexts that should be taken into account when interpreting a culture different from one's own. James Ault (1983:181) discusses the shift in marital relationship between women and men as well as "the effect of modernization on the status of women". This shift in marital relationships inadvertently meant the belief that children belong to the mother began to work against the women and children.

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The discovery of minerals caused the migration of men from their homes to the Copperbelt. Women were not able to join their husbands in the work camps and as Hinfelaar (1994:57) shows, women needed to produce marriage certificates in order to visit their spouses on the Copperbelt and could only stay for a limited time. Away from their spouses, men were more able to start relationships with single women who had migrated into the Copperbelt province (see Hinfelaar, 1994 and Ault, 1983). The matrilineal worldview believed that male sexuality was destructive and put in place checks and balances in case a man became sexually active outside his marital home. Bemba women had the agency to seek clarity from their spouse if they suspected an extramarital affair and had every right to discontinue sexual relations with him until there was certainty regarding his sexual activities (Hinfelaar, 1994; Rasing, 2001). Indeed, the belief that a man's sexual misdemeanors can cause havoc was one of the contributing factors to the women's agency.

These relationships could result in men having children in town as well as children from their matrimonial homes. In the era when Bemba women owned property in the village and they worked together with their spouses for the family wellbeing, there were no child maintenance rights complexities. Scholars agree that there was a shift in the way of life for the Bemba women due to the migration from rural Northern Province to the Copperbelt (Richards, 1939; Hinfelaar, 1994; Ault, 1983). Bemba women were left with a huge and strenuous responsibility of taking care of children alone (Richards, 1939).

With wage labor in the Copperbelt Province and men involving themselves in multiple sexual relationships, children that resulted from these relationships were often left to be raised by their single mothers. Unfortunately, this trend has continued. Children belong to their mother whether the mother has income or is able to provide for the children or not. Whether a man and woman have a child together as an unmarried couple or at divorce, women are left with the responsibility to raise these children and the burden is now worse because it is men who have economic standing. Currently, men occupy decision making spaces in both private and public spheres. These are fathers who are alive and well but offer no financial support towards their children. Many women still have little or no awareness of how they can demand child maintenance for children from their spouses or former husbands.

Patriarchal Laws and Social Change Regarding Bemba Women's Status

African women theologians (Isabel A. Phiri, 2008/9; Sarojini Nadar, 2009; M. Oduyoye, 2001) have argued that heterosexual marriage is dangerous for African women because that is where most women suffer some injustices. The unfairness is deepened by legal judgement at divorce that leaves women to raise

children without an established economic stand while the men go on to remarry and start their lives over.

African feminist jurisprudence has to critically engage with African culture in order to be relevant. Tamale and Bennett (2011:1) argue thus, “Feminist struggles in Africa are fought from various fronts, with the law representing but one of them. While law and judicial reforms are not a panacea for gender inequalities, the legal front is a central plank in this struggle as both shield and sword – a shield to protect women against discrimination and the violation of their fundamental rights, and a sword to challenge and overturn unjust sexist practices and to effect fundamental change to the status quo.” The notion that children belong to the mother would require the law to intentionally engage with culture for justice to be reached for mothers caring for children with absent fathers. Feminist jurisprudence seeks to explain ways in which the law has played a role in women’s subordinate status and is dedicated to transforming the status of women through revising the law and its approach to gender (Tamale and Bennett, 2011).

The state law that came with the Western jurisprudence was patriarchal in nature and as a result favored men over women. With the legal courts there have been instances where the cultural courts, *insaka*³ (See Tembo, 2012 and Kaunda, 2017 on *insaka*), have been sidelined and overlooked, and yet at other times families are asked to settle their disputes within cultural customary courts. Both neglecting the customary courts or asking disputes to be settled at customary courts completely are a recipe for disaster. The legal courts need to find a way of engaging and working with the customary courts for relevance. This means often calling on *bashi bukombe*⁴ and *banacimbusa*⁵ to assist in settling disputes. However, “feminist legal academicians on the continent are especially critical of the sexism, patriarchy, stereotypes and ethnocentricity that is part of the received law, imported with colonialism. They also analyse the position of African women within the multiple legal systems that are a direct legacy from the continent’s colonial history.” (Author Unknown: The Status of Legal Feminism in Africa). The existence of these dual courts has continued to negate women’s experiences and often women just assume responsibility for their children because of the worldview that children belong to their mother.

The fact that almost all African countries adopted two or more legal systems at independence presents complex questions and contradictions for women’s rights. The majority of countries operate under a dual system whereby statutory formal laws (based on British, French, Portuguese, Roman-Dutch legal systems) operate side-by-side with uncoded customary laws. Others have three systems operating simultaneously: for example, Cameroon (English law, French law & custom), Guinea (French

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civil code, customary law and Sharia – Islamic law) and Nigeria (English law, custom and Sharia). The application of universal rights under international law further complicates the equation. (Author unknown “The Status of Legal Feminism in Africa: Gains & Limits”)

Silvia Tamale (2015: 24) argues that these draconian statutory laws have negated African women’s rights and instead have been “an elaborate system of control”. As demonstrated in this article, contemporary African cultural discourses have largely drawn their construction from the colonial systems that are patriarchal in nature. Women found themselves vulnerable under these laws that continue to marginalize them and their voices are often not heard. The idea that children belong to their mother is a patriarchal assumption which leaves women and children vulnerable.

Currently with men being the breadwinners, this notion needs to be re-conceptualized in order to have shared responsibility for children between mother and father. It should be noted that these fathers are not only absent, some are unknown by or undisclosed to the children. Whether a woman has custody of a child or children after divorce or the child was born out of wedlock, there are many children who are raised by single mothers in Zambia and co-opted into new families when or if the mother remarries. The men move on and remarry or begin new families and often times never mention that they have a child elsewhere. This becomes problematic when that child begins to want to know her/his biological father, threatening the man’s new family or the mother’s current marriage. Suspicions of the mother wanting to destroy and sabotage this man’s life are always part of the discourse.

Most of these single mothers have no jobs and may find it difficult to remarry as a focus on virginity of the bride is still rampant and a woman who has a child out of wedlock is perceived to be unreliable and unable to take care of her home/marriage. This is a situation that most men leverage by denying responsibility for the pregnancy and or by asking the woman to go for an abortion because the man is either married to another woman or he is not interested in having children yet. Therefore, the cycle of feminization of poverty continues.

How can the practice of children belonging to the mother be taught differently to include the father in the financial affairs of the child? Often divorce is seen as failure on the woman’s part because she was after all the one who received instructions on how to care for her home and family. The burden of bearing the stigma of a failed marriage and becoming a single mother who receives nothing in terms of financial child maintenance is overwhelming for women. The legal system in Zambia has to find ways of assisting single mothers who cannot access financial help for their children from men who refuse to

provide for their children. The fact that there has been a shift from the times when Bemba couples lived in matrilocal spaces and women had land in order to care for family, calls for critical engagement with the law in order to have men take responsibility. Currently men have become breadwinners in families, own land and receive better salaries than women often with the same qualifications and therefore they need to have responsibility for their children.

James Fieser and Bradley Dowden (undated and un-paginated) succinctly explain that “In general, the feminist concern with equality involves the claim that equality must be understood not simply as a formal concept that functions rhetorically and legally. Equality must be a substantive concept which can actually make changes in the power structure and the relative power positions of men and women generally.”

Postcolonial Bemba Matrilineality and Child Maintenance

Musimbi Kanyoro (2002:14) explains that African culture is viewed as a cord that holds the community together and to be critical of cultural practices is a threat to the community “for there are elements in these cultures, which are the very veins through which the solidarity of communities is nurtured”. The concept of matrilineal systems, especially concerning the understanding that children belong to the mother, has been utilized in ways that have left single mothers behind in terms of making absent fathers accountable. In contemporary times this cultural worldview perpetuates patriarchy and gives absent fathers leverage. Matrilineality is a concept that has been perceived as bringing equality between women and men (Poewe, 1983), but the practice that children belong to the mother fails to ensure that men take responsibility for the lives of children that they have fathered.

Men have got away with leaving children in the custody of single mothers without financial support for a long time. Women and children can end up in abusive relationships due to the negligence of the men who are supposed to be involved in the lives of their children. Children may not know who their father is or where he is or a father may never be talked about in the home for various reasons. There is a need for an African jurisprudence that is able to re-engage, reformulate and resituate culture to give women an opportunity to call absent fathers to account. In the context that continues to change within modernity, culture can easily become a tool for perpetuating patriarchy or it can be navigated and used as a tool to negate patriarchy (Obiomma, 2003).

Conclusion

The Bemba cultural belief and practice that children belong to the mother embedded within the matrilineal Bemba worldview is critiqued in this article

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as perpetuating patriarchy and contributing to current injustices faced by single mothers in Zambia. Tracing back this practice to pre-colonial times exposes the corruption and dislocation of the relationship between husband and wife through colonialism and mission enterprise. This concept of a child belonging to the mother is underpinned by Bemba cosmology. The migration of rural Bemba men to the urban Copperbelt to work in the mines left women to stay to care for children without their spouses. The interdependent work done between men and women was completely disrupted and destroyed the economy of rural dwellers especially women. Feminist jurisprudence has to engage in the culture of the society in order to be relevant and helpful to women and children.

Endnotes

- ¹ The White Fathers were the first missionaries among the Bemba people in Northern province of Zambia. Specifically, French Catholic Missionary Bishop Joseph-Marie-Stanislas Dupont who was nicknamed Moto Moto by the Bemba people, he was the pioneering White Father to do mission work in Northern Province Zambia. He joined forces with the British South African Company to penetrate the heartland of Northern province.
- ² *Imbusa* are traditional teaching aids (symbols) carrying moral teachings for family and social harmony.
- ³ *Insaka* has numerous functions ranging from a factory where carving household implements such as axes, mortar, pestles and stools to weaving reed mats and baskets is done to a court of law where families and communities share, hear, attend and make decisions about village disputes such as dowry amount. Issues of adultery are settled in this space (it operates as a court of law in that sense) as well as approval of potential marriages and children's wellbeing are discussed.
- ⁴ *Bashi bukombe* is a man who negotiates on behalf of the groom during the time the groom asks for the hand in marriage of the woman he wants to marry. *Bashi bukombe's* duties continue throughout marriage.
- ⁵ *Banacimbusa* are women who instruct young brides regarding marriage and how to take care of their marriages.

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Book Review

Cheela Chilala
University of Zambia

Nation-Building in the Context of 'One Zambia, One Nation'.

By Mubanga E Kashoki. (Lusaka: Gadsden Publishers, 2018), 107pp.

Consisting of seven chapters, *Nation-Building in the Context of 'One Zambia, One Nation'* may be described as a collection of writings published or presented in a variety of contexts during earlier phases of the author's academic life. While Chapter 1 (What is Zambia's Cultural Identity?) was published for the very first time and provides a foundation for the rest of the book, Chapter 2 (Language and Nation in Zambia vis-à-vis National Integration) was first published in 1971 in *The Journal of the Language Association of East Africa* before being published in *The Language Factor in Zambia* (1990), a book authored by Kashoki and published by the Kenneth Kaunda Foundation, now known as Zambia Educational Publishing House (ZEPH). Chapters 3 (The Dilemma of National Integration) and 4 (The Path to National Integration) were also initially published in *The Language Factor in Zambia*. Chapter 5 (Language, Tribe and the Concept of 'One Zambia, One Nation') was first published in 1973 in *The Bulletin of the Zambian Language Group*, while Chapter 6 (Variety is the Spice of Life: The Place of Multilingualism in the Concept of 'One Zambia, One Nation') was first published in 1977 in *Zango* 21, 11. Chapter 7 (Language, Communication, and National Unity in Zambia into the 21st Century) was first published in 2007 in the *University of Zambia Journal of Humanities*.

It is worth noting that the oldest chapter was first published in 1971 while the latest was first presented in 2012. This means that the content spans a period of four decades. This point is further buttressed by the fact that the book exhibits evidence of the author having made efforts – albeit minimal – to revise some aspects of earlier versions of the publications.

Despite originating from different time periods and source texts, the chapters were purposefully selected to confront the difficult but pertinent questions of nation building, national integration and national unity. These questions are still very relevant to present-day Zambia.

The only downside, if indeed it is, of the book is the risk of anachronism emanating from the fact that much of the content deals with the period between the 70's and 80's. To illustrate: in Chapter 3 the book talks about the attempt to turn the bush suit into a national dress for Zambian men during the 70's and 80's (p23). The young generation of Zambian readers, unfamiliar with life under

the Kaunda government, might not understand the significance of the point because the bush suit has lost currency as a form of national dress. That said, the author provides a caveat by clearly indicating the date of initial publication, therefore placing the point in the appropriate historical context.

However, what might appear to be the downside is also an advantage, if for no other reason than at least because it eloquently demonstrates that, first, the question of nation-building has been at the core of Zambian life and politics since independence and, second, that the factors that drive the process of nation-building remain largely the same despite changes at social and political level. And as Kashoki argues in the book, nation-building is an ongoing process which cannot be achieved by merely pursuing unity without diversity but rather by pursuing unity in diversity.

Kashoki's book is not only a laudable attempt at tackling the complex question of nation-building in the context of a multilingual and multiethnic country like Zambia, but it is also a brave attempt: it tackles the uncomfortable topics and concepts of tribe, language and nation. It points out, for example, that one of the major challenges of nation-building and integration in Zambia – and a source of tribal conflict – is the misconception that language and tribe are the same. He thus disputes the common belief that Zambia has 73 languages and 73 tribes, postulating that Zambia might only have about 20 languages and about 80 variants.

Kashoki's book confronts the question raised by Surer Mohamed: "What is the trouble with 'tribe'?"¹ Like Mohamed, Kashoki recognises the challenge of defining tribe. In defining tribe, however, Kashoki fundamentally differs with the view expressed by, among others, Chinua Achebe who argues against the classification of some African groups as tribe instead of nation. Achebe contends that the Igbo people of Nigeria, for example, are not a tribe but a nation.² Thus, what Kashoki calls tribes Achebe calls nations.

After conducting a poignant analysis of the challenges of nation-building, Kashoki concludes that, first, government alone cannot foster national unity through imposition of language policy without the involvement of ordinary citizens; second, that tribal conflict is more than just a product of tribal division: it is also a result of inequitable distribution of national resources; third, that what Zambia needs is unity in diversity, not unity without diversity because tribal identity will remain regardless of the changing times and should be treated as a national asset rather than a liability; and fourth, that nation-building is also influenced by constantly changing communication patterns, residence patterns and increasing cases of intermarriages. Fifth, that in Zambia it is not possible to pick a single language as a means of building national unity – not even English. The only realistic future for Zambia, as Kashoki sees it, is one where English

continues to be used as the language of government and commerce while the local languages all continue to play a role – to varying degrees – in the process of nation-building.

- ¹ Surer Mohamed. 2014. "The Trouble with Tribe: Beyond a Monocausal Explanation for Ethnicized Violence in Sub-Saharan Africa." In *The Undergraduate Awards*, Paper 1.
- ² Chinua Achebe. 2000. *Home and Exile*. Canongate: London:3-8.

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