

NICOLE MUSIOŁ

CHRISTIANITIES AMONG BEMBA WOMEN:
THE INFLUENCE OF CHRISTIAN TEACHINGS ON THE WAY
OF LIFE IN THE NORTH OF ZAMBIA

INTRODUCTION

*Blessed is the nation whose God is the Lord,
the people whom he has chosen as his heritage!*
Psalms 33:12¹

Zambia has been officially, that is, by constitution, a Christian country since 1996.² Accordingly, this manifests in political decisions like the abolition of the death penalty, whose last execution took place in 1997.³ Similarly, political discourse and election campaigns are not free from religious rhetoric. Some people “[fear] that certain political leaders have entered into covenants with the Devil.”⁴ Even the current president, Hakainde Hichilema, has been labeled by opponents before he was in office “as a practitioner of witchcraft and a Lucifer pretending to be a Seventh Day Adventist.”⁵

NICOLE MUSIOŁ, BA, the John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin, Applied Anthropology;
e-mail: musiolnicole@aol.com.

¹ *ESV Study Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2008).

² The Constitution of Zambia (Amendment), Act No. 18 of 1996, preamble.

³ Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, *Zambia’s Pledge to Abolish the Death Penalty* [Statement from 27 May 2022].

⁴ Naomi HAYNES, “‘Zambia Shall be Saved!’: Prosperity Gospel Politics in a Self-Proclaimed Christian Nation,” *Nova Religio: The Journal of Alternative and Emergent Religions* 19, no. 1 (2015): 6. Her paper concentrates especially on the relationship of Pentecostal communities to politics in Zambia.

⁵ Austin M. CHEYEKA, Nelly MWALE, and Joseph CHITA, “Of Jamesons and Satanists: Politics of Labelling in Zambia, A Christian Nation, 2015–2018,” *Journal of Church and State* 64, no. 3 (2022): 369.

Accordingly, I expected a strong incorporation of Christian teachings and beliefs in the everyday lives of the people that I was studying during my field work in a town in Northern Zambia. In this essay, I will elaborate on the role Christianity plays in the community but also in the lives of individuals. Particularly, I want to describe the dynamic interplay between Christianity and the permissive traditions of that region. Many of the identified trends and patterns will surely be generalizable, nonetheless, it is important to keep in mind that the Bemba people dominating this region have historically been very distinct in their cultural heritage, which is often attributed to the fact that for a long time they were separate from other states by being united under a kingdom.⁶

After a short description of the field and the methods, I believe it will be useful to shed light on the current role of traditional spirituality. Afterwards, I will present a statistic about the religious denominations of the children at the local Catholic school, because these families comprised part of the community I studied. Thus, the statistic further describes the specific religious context of the field work. The following description of Christianity in everyday life will start with some observations to paint the scene. In the main part, I describe the specificities of Catholic mass and local congregations of Brothers and Sisters. Overall, I will especially point out observations that seem to conflict with Christian values. Accordingly, I will present the attitudes on marriage, divorce, having children out of wedlock, and more.

Generally, I purposefully digress into topics that are maybe not strictly necessary but are nonetheless closely related to the points. This is done to avoid the situation in which readers unfamiliar with that cultural environment misunderstand my account due to imagining it in the wrong historical or social context. Notably, the dynamics of the region changed fundamentally from the first extensive ethnographical reports provided by the anthropologist Audrey Richards about the Bemba tribe in the 1930s. Several years after her first research, she herself already noted that the ceremonies and traditions, like the initiation rites she studied before, “seemed to be dying out”.⁷ The observations in my report only confirm this shift. Nowadays, the spiritual landscape among the Bemba appears to be dominated exclusively by Christianity. Similarly, other structural aspects of the society underwent

⁶ See Douglas WERNER, “Some Developments in Bemba Religious History,” *Journal of Religion in Africa* 4, no. 1 (1971–1972): 1.

⁷ Audrey RICHARDS, *Chisungu: A Girl's Initiation Ceremony Among the Bemba of Zambia* (London: Routledge, 2013), xiii.

fundamental transformations. Whereas Richards noted that “organized marketing does not exist”,⁸ I was staying in a town with a centre full of shops, including barbers, gas stations, banks, and restaurants.

1. METHODOLOGY

In this part, I want to briefly outline my personal background because I am, like everyone else, biased. That said, I will only mention the aspects that I believe had the strongest impact on my perception and categorization of information. Additionally, I want to shed light on the methods I used to collect information. Certainly, the character of this essay demands a focus on the aspects that are different from what I associate with Christianity. That said, nowhere in this text do I display my own views and interpretations of Christianity. Instead, I considered merely the basic principles of Christianity, which arguably most people would agree with.

Most importantly, in the context of the topic of this paper, I am used to being surrounded by Christianity, most specifically the Roman Catholic Church and people affiliated with it. That said, I spent almost the entire three months of my stay with Roman Catholic Sisters from a local congregation. Nonetheless, as will be clear from the statistical analysis that I put forward in a later chapter, the collected information represents a community of various Christian Churches. In fact, every day I was closely engaging with people, mostly women, from different denominations. There were several tribes among those people, the most common of which was the Bemba tribe. This is one of Zambia’s most populous tribes, and it has traditionally ruled this region. Usually, unless otherwise indicated, my information is only representative of the community of women.

Due to the otherwise present language barrier, all the people that I talked to were educated. Most of my informants had a diploma from a Zambian university. The amount of time I spent there was not enough to acquire the local language to a degree sufficient to expand my pool of informants to non-English speakers. Trying to integrate into the community as naturally as possible, I received comments describing me as *basically Zambian* because I showed a high appreciation for the local dress and customs. Nonetheless, all

⁸ Audrey RICHARDS, “The Political System of the Bemba Tribe: North-Eastern Rhodesia,” in *African Political Systems*, ed. M. Fortes and E. E. Evans-Pritchard (Oxford University Press, 1950), 95.

of my accounts and experiences are certainly stained by the fact that I am immediately classified by locals as coming from Europe due to my appearance.

Knowing from experience that relying on one's memory is tricky, I made daily notes during my stay. These included transcripts of conversations but also descriptions of observations, which I usually followed up with asking confirmatory questions in order not to misunderstand the experiences. While not all of my over fifty pages of notes were relevant to the issue of religion, I incorporated as much information as reasonably possible.

2. TRADITIONAL STRUCTURES AND RELIGIONS

You shall have no other gods before me.
Deuteronomy 5:7

Firstly, let me introduce the basic sociocultural hierarchy among the Bemba. Significantly, this tribe is governed by a chief. The dominion of those chiefs is the tradition and culture of their respective tribe. This position is usually hereditary. However, while the chief is generally always a man, among the Bemba, the position is passed down matrilineally, and historically the important role of matrilineal descent has always been emphasized among all members.⁹

Notably, the chiefs have the highest social position in society. One can even find road signs pointing to the lodging of chiefs, referring to him as "His Royal Highness". As a consequence, even the president of the country is required to greet them with the traditional gestures of respect. Moreover, I was told that whatever the chief commands, it is a matter of respect to do it. This includes violating legal regulations like fishing bans. Disobedience to his commands can lead to you being asked to leave his territory. In the past, before chiefs became Christian, it was even common for the chief to choose whoever he wanted as a wife, and sometimes if the women did not abide, they were killed. In fact, even less than a century ago, at the time of Richards' ethnographical research, chiefs were still practising polygamy, having up to fifteen wives; "commoners", on the other hand, usually had only one.¹⁰

⁹ RICHARDS, *Chisungu*, 38.

¹⁰ RICHARDS, "The Political System," 89.

One of the duties of these chiefs is the performance of religious rituals on behalf of the people. These rituals were directed toward ancestral spirits.¹¹ In this case, the chiefs “act as intermediaries between the people and these ancestral spirits”.¹² Even though regular worship is becoming increasingly rare as most chiefs and people are Catholics, one can still find shrines where those rituals were performed in nature, such as on top of the Ntumbachushi waterfalls. The shrines resemble small, simple huts and were surrounded by a rather poor fence. Many chiefs stopped practising this due to the increased abandonment of traditional beliefs by the population. This includes the population of rural places where one can see church buildings, which sometimes function without a priest or pastor by serving as place for organized prayers.

On another note, that does not necessarily have anything to do with the chiefs, witchcraft is present in Zambia. When I tried to delve deeper into this topic, I ran into the problem that most people only know about this practise through hearsay and do not know any specific witches personally. Significantly, on the public news channel on TV one can sometimes hear reports about illicit activities, for example, theft, which by the victim is being attributed to witchcraft. That said, the news reporters utilize a non-evaluative tone in the report, neither warning people about witches nor denying the validity of the presented accusation.

In conclusion, for major parts of the region, Christianity did not complement but substitute the traditional religion, which revolved around the worship of ancestral spirits.¹³ Nonetheless, researchers like Richards have already noted in the past that magical traditions and ceremonies tend to be talked about only in secrecy because people are aware of the Church’s opposition to them.¹⁴ Therefore, my perceived affiliation with the Catholic

¹¹ Interestingly, the importance of ancestral worship in traditional African religions is being attributed by authors like Wiredu to the fact that elderly people are usually considered the most respectable group in society. Therefore, ancestral spirit worship is only an extension of this practice. That way, the respect that was due to them in life, is also shown post-mortem. See Kwasi Wiredu, “African Religions from a Philosophical Point of View,” in *A Companion To Philosophy of Religion*, 2nd ed., ed. Charles Taliaferro and Philip L. Quinn (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 39.

¹² WERNER, “Some Developments,” 7.

¹³ One relatively successful reconciliation of elements of both of these religious systems was attempted by the so-called Lenshina Movement. This was a development in the Bemba region in the second half of the last century. This led to the emergence of the later banned Lumpa Church (WERNER, “Some Developments,” 22ff.).

¹⁴ RICHARDS, *Chisungu: A Girl’s Initiation Ceremony*, 32.

Church might have inhibited my informants from admitting related knowledge or experience.

3. THE CHRISTIANITIES

I appeal to you, brothers, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same judgment.

1 Corinthians 1:10

The next part of this paper includes a presentation of the diversity of Christian denominations at a local private Catholic school, to whose admission register I had access. Being aware that the proportions are not representative of the entire region, I nonetheless believe it to be utterly interesting to see the variety of Christianity already present in such a small sample.

The data was provided to me by the school director, who received the information from the parents of the children. It is taken from the admission register for term one of the 2022 school year. One academic year in Zambia is usually made up of three terms. From one term to the next, the school notes only a few changes due to transfers. The school comprises four pre-school classes and one class for each primary school grade from one up to seven. In total, the body of pupils was made up of 372 children.

That said, I did not have access to information about one preschool class of 32 learners because the report papers of the parents were lost. Additionally, scatteredly, some other pupils also did not provide further information for the admission register. To make the proportions clearer, deducting the number of pupils in the grade with the missing report papers, leaves me with 341 pupils.

Then again, only 307 of those provided information about the sex of the child, and I did not want to fill in the missing ones with my assumptions based on their names. Notably, there are slightly more females than males in this school, the numbers being 160 and 147. Coupled with the fact that attending this school demands the payment of fees, this is notable because it means that parents are not more concerned with the future of their sons than their daughters. In other words, it is not the case that girls are sent to the free public schools while only boys receive the privilege of going to a private school. Even though teachers at public schools have a substantially higher salary, the number of pupils in one class usually comes close to 100, and

sometimes one teacher can be responsible for three different classes. In contrast, the classes at the private school I am analysing consist of around 40 pupils. While education is a very interesting and important topic, there is enough room in this paper about religion to go further into it.

Regarding the children's religious affiliation, I had data from 296 students. Since I did not receive any information about interpreting the lack of information in this category in the case of children whose parents did provide the remaining information, I will not make any assumptions about whether this might mean that the family is not affiliated with any religious institution, is atheistic, or simply forgot to fill in that field on the form. Notably, as far as the school director and staff are aware, there are no pupils or workers in the school affiliated with a religion other than Christianity.

Table 1 below shows the number of children affiliated with the respective Churches as self-described by the parent or legal guardian of the child. The second table, or rather a list, on the other hand, shows only the number of different Churches that at least one student at the school was affiliated with.

Table 1. Number of pupils affiliated with different Churches

Church	Roman Catholic	Seventh Day Adventist ¹	United Church of Zambia	Pentecostal ²	Jehova's Witness	Christian Missions in Many Lands	Apostolic Church	
							New	Old
Affiliated pupils	133	75	26	18	16	9	6	1
Church	Church of Christ	Baptist	People's Assembly of God	Winner's Chapel	Fountain of Life	The Rock Community Church	Gospel of Grace	Endtime Message Tabernacle
Affiliated pupils	4	2	2	1	1	1	1	1

¹ This includes one belonging to the group of reformed Seventh Day Adventists.

² This includes one belonging to the Pentecostal Apostolic Church and two to the Pentecostal Assembly of Zambia.

Table 2. List of Churches represented by the pupils

1. Roman Catholic	7. Pentecostal Assembly of Zambia	13. Baptist
2. Seventh Day Adventist	8. Jehova's Witness	14. People's Assembly of God
3. Reformed Seventh Day Adventist	9. Christian Missions in Many Lands	15. Winner's Chapel
4. United Church of Zambia	10. New Apostolic Church	16. Fountain of Life
5. Pentecostal	11. Old Apostolic Church	17. The Rock Community Church
6. Pentecostal Apostolic	12. Church of Christ	18. Gospel of Grace
		19. Endtime Message Tabernacle

Even though the S.D.A.s dominate in this region,¹⁵ it was interesting for me to observe the substantial proportion of children from S.D.A. families at the Catholic school because it was said that S.D.A.s do not like Catholics. This is supposedly due to disagreement about the role that Mary, Mother of Jesus, is supposed to play in prayers. Importantly, this controversy seems rather institutional and does not affect everyday interactions or personal relationships. Nevertheless, it is a noteworthy observation because the school incorporates strictly Catholic elements into their routine, like the weekly praying of the rosary, with attendance (not praying) being mandatory.

The most curious part of this research was not analysing the proportion of students affiliated with specific Churches but becoming acquainted with the diversity of denominations within Christianity. Nonetheless, this statistic is not representative of the entire town or region because it is a private Catholic school. Also, there are alternative private schools. However, the school fees there are higher.

¹⁵ This statement is solely based on the perception of the people living in the region, since I did not find any statistics on that matter. Their proportion is explained by the fact that they were the first Christian Church to settle in this region.

4. CHRISTIANITY IN EVERYDAY LIFE

*Jesus said to him, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life.
No one comes to the Father except through me."
John 14:6*

Clearly, Christianity in Zambia is very diverse. Just by cruising around, one will pass various religious buildings, which are usually well-signposted, therefore, easily identifiable from the road. This holds true especially for the Kingdom Halls of the Jehovah's Witnesses. Others refer to this Church as "Watchtowers". Also, Christian denominations differ in regards to their days of worship. Significantly, all are expected to attend church services. Consequently, stores run by people affiliated with the S.D.A. Church will be closed on Saturday. Each week on this day, the respective people spend their days from morning to sunset in church (approximately 7.30 am to 5.30 pm). Apart from meditations and mass, they have classes in the morning about general topics like malaria prevention.

Notably, there are some meta-frictions between the denominations that, however, do not influence everyday interactions at all. In particular, frictions or accusations of the same kind as the resentment of the S.D.A.s towards the Catholics because of their emphasis on praying to the Virgin Mary. Another example is the Catholics' annoyance with the Jehovah's Witnesses because younger generations of JW can dress quite revealingly, whereas in the past they always accused Catholics of being too permissive with regard to clothing and self-presentation by wearing too much make-up and skirts that are too short.

In addition to attending church services, it is not uncommon to use one's religious convictions in speech, as car decoration, or as a store name. To give an illustration, cars can have half of their windscreens covered in stickers spelling out the words Jesus or Blood of Christ, as well as trucks or buses with inscriptions like "God is God," "Jesus saves," or "God is watching". Moreover, store names have biblical references, in small as well as large towns; examples of this include the "No Jesus No Life" general dealers, "Divine Victory" selling agricultural goods and the "Thank U Jesus" furniture store (latter two, see figure 1).



Figure 1. Stores named “Thank U Jesus” and “Divine Victory Ltd.”
Photo by Author.

By contrast, religious terminology is not used in greetings, farewells, or other basic conversations, whether in English or the local language, Bemba. Occasionally, when involved in a conversation about future plans, they will drop sentences like “if God willing,” or when wishing someone a good journey or a happy birthday, blessings from God will surely be mentioned. Even children will refer to God when, for instance, talking about their nature. One common reference to God that made me quite uncomfortable and which I found problematic for obvious reasons was about my appearance. I heard several complaints that *God did not bless them with such nice hair and eyes* (as mine). Notably, the most common complaint was about hair, which came from both children and adult women and referred, as far as I could tell from their answers, to the fact that straight hair feels softer, wobbles with my movements, and is easy to keep long. Accordingly, the fact that I, a woman, cut my hair off purposely so that it does not even reach my shoulders was completely incomprehensible.

Furthermore, I also observed naturalness and joy with which all passengers chimed in on a prayer that was led by a Sister at the beginning of a 15-hour-long drive on an intercity bus. This prayer was followed by enthusiastic shouts of “Amen” and “Amen, Sister”.

Concerning the national policies, Zambia does not have a public holiday on All Saints’ or All Souls’ Day, yet they do have a yearly public holiday called “National Day of Prayer”, during which districts come together to pray. This is strongly announced on the public news channel, and its importance is stressed by officials because they see it as an occasion for uniting

the nation and bringing it closer together, which they see as a key to success in line with the country's motto, "One Zambia, One Nation."¹⁶

Furthermore, religious education is included in the Zambian Ministry of Education's official curriculum for the subject "social studies". As for the local Catholic school in my field, this focused on Christianity while also presenting the basics of Islam and Hinduism. During exams (which consist mostly of multiple-choice questions), the respective primary grades were expected to know that the Qur'an is the Holy Book in Islam, that Muslims believe in the Prophet Muhammad, and that they are expected to pray five times per day. The children were also taught to distinguish the different places of worship of those three religions. Notably, the material about Christianity and the Bible was much more detailed. In fact, during exams, they are asked questions about the number of sons that Jacob had or the name of Joseph's brother.

Last but not least, it is worth briefly mentioning that there was no noticeable presence of Muslims in my field. Generally, the knowledge about the presence of Islam in Zambia was rather speculated about. Even though local Christians told me that the first Muslims arrived in Zambia in the 1990s, I discovered an Islamic primary school in Zambia's capital, Lusaka, that claims to have opened in 1978.¹⁷

5. CATHOLIC LIFE

5.1 CATHOLIC MASS

A key norm for everyone is the attendance at church services. Accordingly, Catholics go to church on Sunday like a duck takes to water. Most Catholic churches hold three kinds of masses on Sunday: the first one is a mass in English; the second is a mass for children; and the third is the High Mass. The latter one lasts about two hours and is conducted in the language of the dominant tribe in the area, in my case, Bemba. As is crucial to the Catholic tradition, the mass is built up by the same elements as everywhere else.

¹⁶ "National Day of Prayer Should Inspire Us to Uphold National Values, Principles – President Hichilema," *Lusaka Times*, October 18, 2022, <https://www.lusakatimes.com/2022/10/18/national-day-of-prayer-should-inspire-us-to-uphold-national-values-principles-president-hichilema>.

¹⁷ MAKENI ISLAMIC SOCIETY, "History and Overview," accessed January 5, 2023, <http://www.makenislamic.org/MIS.html>.

Nonetheless, there are some particularities that stick out. Firstly, the songs that are being sung are longer, and both the instrumentals and the choir remind more modern hip-hop than classical liturgical music. Moreover, except for times like Advent, anticipating the celebration of the birth of Jesus Christ, not only the choir but also the other attendants of the service are dancing during the songs. During these exceptional times, they also refrain from the usual practice of accompanying the songs with instruments like drums, keyboards, guitars, and maracas. The dances of the choir are coordinated, and also the altar boys and girls present simple choreographies. Actually, the Catholic parish I visited is not the only one in Zambia allowing altar girls to serve next to altar boys as helpers of the priest.

The sermons usually concern recommendations on how God wants His people to lead their lives. I witnessed one relating to sticking to one's vision no matter the challenges. Obviously, one's vision of one's own life should be one pleasing to God. However, there was a strong emphasis on pushing one's children to become what you envisioned them to be in the future. The argumentation was as follows: If you ask God for a child, you have a picture of what that child will be; God grants you that wish because he wants you to have a child like you envisioned it. Therefore, following the example given by the priest, if you want your son to become a priest, but he wants to become a soldier (a not uncommon wish to be expressed by youths), you should push them to become what you wanted because God gave you the child on the assumption that they will become a priest. The second speech revolved around the LGBT community. First, the priest claimed that many people are unaware of the "success of the propagation of LGBT even in this community". Then, he dismissed the idea that marriage between same-sex couples is a human right as "nonsense". This reflects the attitude of the wider society. In Zambia, communities often marginalize people belonging to a sexual minority.¹⁸

There are a few other notable details about the masses. Firstly, occasionally, you will see somebody on their phone writing messages during mass. This, however, is rather looked down upon. Secondly, while kneeling to pray, people will rather look down than up, often even resting their foreheads on their arms that are crossed on the backrest of the bench in front of them. Additionally, it is the norm to keep one's eyes closed. Therefore, it

¹⁸ Adrian VAN KLINKEN, "Roundtable on LGBTIQ Persons in Africa: Queer Love in a 'Christian Nation': Zambian Gay Men Negotiating Sexual and Religious Identities," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 83, no. 4 (2015): 952.

may look almost as if the people were sleeping. Thirdly, the dioceses that the local parish belonged to announced a theme for each liturgical year. For example, the year can be dedicated to the elderly or to Mother Nature. Furthermore, there are unanimously accepted principles regarding the dress code. Although I will elaborate on the general norms governing clothes later on, it is important to note that going to church in a dress or skirt is a very strict norm. Even though one can see some young women wearing off-shoulder tops or showing cleavage, no female will put on trousers to church. Last but not least, going to mass is not the only regular collective activity that Catholics are expected to engage in. In fact, participation in so-called *small Christian communities* is seen as equally crucial to one's faith, like the institution of confession. Even the children of the parish belong to their own small Christian communities. They are commissioned into those communities by a vow. These communities meet outside of church, with the location and frequency determined by the members of the respective community. Each community is assigned responsibilities in the church, like sweeping the church, cleaning the toilets, or bringing group offerings (each week a different group makes one big collective offering during the collect). The communities rotate their responsibilities each week, and the total amount of the offerings is announced at the end of the mass.

5.2 NUNS AND MONKS

*For as in one body we have many members
and the members do not all have the same function,
so we, though many, are one body in Christ,
and individually members one of another.*

Romans 12:4–5

Undoubtedly, Christianity plays an important role in community life in Zambia. Therefore, it is no surprise that there are many congregations and Brothers and Sisters are respected in communities and society in general. Accordingly, members of religious orders are greeted with the local signs of respect, the most common one being a curtsy. The higher the rank in the hierarchy of the clergy, the lower the curtsy. Since during my fieldwork, I was staying with nuns, I am more familiar with their role in society and everyday life.

Notably, there is a wide variety of different congregations present in Zambia. To name only a few, on the one hand, there are local congregations like the Teresians, Good Shepherds, and Sisters of the Child Jesus; on the

other hand, there are international congregations like the Salesians, Franciscans, and Dominicans. Notably, the Sisters of the Child Jesus are the oldest local congregation of Sisters in Zambia. In the beginning, they were known as *Servants of the Infant Jesus*. There are many personal connections between the members of the different congregations.

Each congregation of Sisters usually wears distinct, simple habits, veils, and a crucifix. To give an example, the Sisters of the Child Jesus wear an azure veil and a white habit (see figure 2). Alternatively, they can wear a cream-coloured habit on non-formal occasions. By contrast, many (even international) nun orders in the neighbouring Democratic Republic of the Congo wear a habit made of *chitenge*¹⁹ with (for their taste) simple patterns and a head wrap rather than a veil; some do not even wear any headcover at all. Nonetheless, all Sisters from one congregation are dressed in uniform prints. The argument is that the *chitenge* or even complete elimination of any habit lowers the distance to ordinary people so that Sisters are perceived as more approachable. In Zambia, it is rather the norm that Sisters have easily identifiable habits and veils.



Figure 2. Sisters in Church wearing the official habit of their respective congregations. Photo by Author (some faces blurred).

¹⁹ A *chitenge* is a popular cloth in this African region. It is usually made out of cotton with colourful patterns on it and is 3 metres wide and 1.5 metres long. Traditionally, it is worn by women as a skirt by wrapping it around their hips. It is common to have it tailored into a dress or shirt. I will elaborate a little more on this in a different context later in this paper.

By contrast, in Zambia, it is not common at all for Brothers to wear any kind of visible sign of being consecrated to God. They will be wearing ordinary clothes, either simple or with colourful prints. It is impossible to distinguish them from others; they do not even have to wear a crucifix. Notably, they do have formal cassocks, but they will wear them only to very special formal celebrations. Even during Advent High Mass, one will see them dressed casually in a white hoodie and jeans.

Being in a religious order means one will be treated with more respect. Additionally, Sisters can receive privileges like being invited to skip long queues. On the other hand, laypeople associate the Church with money. Therefore, Sisters are perceived as rich even though they themselves do not receive a high allowance. This misconception has the consequence that people will even lie in a Sister's face to take more money from her.

Furthermore, it was interesting to hear that many children consider becoming a sister or priest when they grow up. However, many children grow out of it when they attend boarding schools and *get to know the world*. Be that as it may, some children express this wish even though they simultaneously want to have a child and do not like attending prayers. Therefore, one can speculate that the popularity of this answer might simply be due to the strong presence of sisters and clergy in the community and their good reputation.

6. A LIFE GUIDED BY CHRIST

*For with the heart one believes and is justified,
and with the mouth one confesses and is saved.*

Romans 10:10

I want to preface the description of how areas that can be governed by Christian principles actually look in a proudly Christian community that keeps formalities like attending church services dear to their hearts by eluding an important conceptual difference. Undoubtedly, in Western religious thought, God is usually considered an ethical guide and a moral authority. By contrast, Wiredu identified “that Africans tend not to base their conceptions of the meaning of morality on their belief in God.”²⁰ Instead, “morality

²⁰ WIREDU, “African Religions,” 35

is the harmonization of the interests of the individual to the interests of the community on the principle of empathetic impartiality. On this view, morality derives, rationally, from the desiderata of social existence, not from any transcendent source” (36). This could be one explanation why the implementation of Christian teachings in practice is not considered vital to one’s faith in communities coming from such traditions, even if they have now accepted Christianity.

6.1 LYING

And you shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.
Deuteronomy 5:20

Notably, children in school are taught that lying is bad. Therefore, it is not the case that there is simply some cultural unawareness about the wrongness of deceiving others. That is to say, lying in order to be able to profit from the other person or denying one’s wrongdoings in order not to be held accountable for them and not to suffer the consequences is considered bad. Nevertheless, it can even happen that people swear to their religious convictions and claim to want to become priests themselves in order to convince another person of the truth of their statement, while in the end, it turns out that what the person said was nonetheless a lie. Occurrences of this sort will happen more in anonymous cities than small towns. Still, there is trust among people. I base this on the observation that children will be playing outside after dark, and also that hitchhiking is very common, even in the late evening.

6.2 PUNISHING CHILDREN

*Train up a child in the way he should go;
even when he is old he will not depart from it.*
Proverbs 22:6

The issue of lying can be put into the context of punishment in the Catholic private school.²¹ Notably, I was told that it is becoming less and less common to use any sort of corporal punishment in cases of children’s misconduct. However, it is definitely something that can be considered an eve-

²¹ I do not think that this is a topic for the chapter about Catholics specifically because less than half of the children as well as the teachers are affiliated with the Roman Catholic Church.

ryday matter. That said, it did surprise me to observe the assessment of children's misbehaviour and the choice for a perceived just punishment. For example, leaving the classroom dirty even though it is one's turn on sweeping duty will result in the child having to pick up papers from the; school ground. Also, except for one set day a week, the children are required to wear school uniforms on this one day, by contrast, they wear their ordinary clothes. Even though the children are officially not allowed to wear very revealing clothes, breaking this dress code is usually ignored, even if the skirts only reach their mid-thigh, or they wear off-shoulder dresses. Likewise, being loud or disturbing other students when studying usually goes unpunished. On the other hand, if the children wear the wrong kind of stockings with their school uniform, they receive five strokes on their palms. Other common punishments are slaps across the face or strokes with a stick on the child's behind. This can be the consequence of not bringing the report books from home, punching another child, or something trivial like not taking off one's jumper quickly enough after the teacher told you to do so because it is hot. That said, lying or insulting others can also remain unpunished, and the children will only have a talk with the director, who wants to emphasize the school's mission of creating good people through good will.

6.3 EMANCIPATION

*Likewise, husbands, live with your wives in an understanding way,
showing honor to the woman as the weaker vessel,
since they are heirs with you of the grace of life,
so that your prayers may not be hindered.*

1 Peter 3:7

Something that struck me from the moment I arrived in Zambia and was obvious throughout my stay was that women contribute a lot to the local economy and are represented in various kinds of jobs. This reflects the long-standing tradition of Bemba women enjoying a high status in society as already noted by Richards.²² Nowadays, women normally continue their education to pursue a profession and are relatively independent. Furthermore, there is no emphasis in the news or during conversation on the country's progressiveness, feminism, or emancipation; it is simply a completely accepted fact that women are taking jobs as moderators, teachers, officials, and even vice president. There seems to be no problem with

²² RICHARDS, *Chisungu*, 49.

men being subordinate to women in their jobs, and I have not witnessed any reference to women's inferiority. Surely, there are jobs that are more reserved for men. For example, being a driver, for the practical reason that this usually implies carrying heavy loads. On the other hand, raising a child is considered to be predominantly a woman's matter, however, mostly for practical reasons like breast-feeding.

6.3.1 Dress code

*A woman shall not wear a man's garment,
nor shall a man put on a woman's cloak,
for whoever does these things is an abomination to the Lord your God.*
Deuteronomy 22:5

Next, I want to outline the most noticeable aspect, namely, the dress code. Principally, attending church services basically requires women to wear a dress or skirt (this includes chitenges wrapped around the hip). Coupled with the observation that most women wear skirts or a chitenge around their hips, and that there is a strong connection between the degree of rurality of a region and the lack of women wearing trousers, it seems intuitive to conclude that the trend of short skirts and skinny jeans is only now gradually coming as a consequence of the consumption of Western movies, whose influence is stronger in cities because rural areas largely lack access to electricity. However, this is wrong. Indeed, the older generation will rather walk around covered, and the chitenge is the most traditional dress (see figure 3). However, there was already a trend toward wearing more revealing clothes, namely, as I was told, in the 1960s.

Traditionally, girls were introduced to the chitenge when they hit puberty and were expected to wear it outside and also inside the house when there were people around as a sign of respect. In theory, this practice is still a cultural rule, but it is not being promoted by people because the youngest generation would call it too *old-fashioned*. Thus, it would not be implemented by the largest part of the population anyway.



Figure 3. Elderly women in their casual dress: a colourful chitenge wrapped around the hip and headscarves. Photo by Author (some faces blurred).

Around the 1960s, Zambian women were wearing very short mini dresses, plateau shoes, wide bell jeans, and rocking the afro. This fashion was obviously influenced by European trends at the time. Now, knee-length skirts are definitely more common, but jeans are making their way back, as are shorter dresses and tight skirts. In bigger towns, one can even notice some women wearing ripped jeans.

Yet, Sisters do disagree with those revealing fashion trends. Likewise, the school uniforms in public schools prescribe a skirt covering the knee for girls. From the point of view of Sisters, to look professional, you have to wear a skirt that reaches mid-calf. Additionally, strong make-up like long fake lashes and colourful eyeshadow with strong eyeliner is considered inappropriate. While the female teachers at the Catholic private school wear skirts or dresses like they have to, the length of them and the amount of make-up they wear cause occasional debates with the Sisters.

Regarding hairstyles, rastas and box braids, which are now the most common, are not at all traditional. This should be self-evident, considering that the needed extensions were imported from Europe and popularized only at the end of the last century. I want to give a few examples of traditional hairstyles. Firstly, there is threading, which is still common. For this, hair is separated into small sections and fixed, for example, as small buns, with

thread. Alternatively, cornrows or the separation of the hair into sections and plaiting them into braids that stand up from the head at a right angle are also considered traditional hairstyles. One method to style women's hair, which is not being used any more, needed a wire around which wool was bound. This was then plaited around with hair so that one could make different patterns with it because the wire was flexible. A few decades ago, it was also common to straighten one's hair. Due to the lack of electric straighteners, they used to put a metal comb on the stove and comb the hair with it, or put hot charcoal into a metal tin with holes on the bottom and stroke over their hair with it. Later, cremes and perms to straighten one's hair were popularized. These procedures are rather uncommon now because women wanting to wear straight hair simply put on a wig, which is very popular. Some women claim that the next trend will be the buzz cut for women, coming from South Africa.

By contrast, men should wear long trousers, and I have not witnessed any adult deviate from that rule. Notably, the only occasion where men can and even should wear the chitenge is during traditional dancing. For this dance, they will borrow chitenge from the women around them, fold and knot it so that it only covers their hips, and paint their faces white. That said, men often do use the chitenge *material* to have it tailored into a shirt. While virtually all men have very short hair in rural areas, one can occasionally see a small afro or a man wearing dreadlocks in the bigger cities.

Let me now enter the domain of jewellery. Surely, Catholics sometimes wear rosaries around their necks, while other denominations will wear a crucifix. The use of other jewellery, even wedding bands, is uncommon. Indeed, rings are exchanged during wedding ceremonies. However, people rarely wear them. It is in no way a reliable guide to assess people's relationship status. That said, this is not caused by any questionable motives; it is simply not common.

6.3.2 Marriage

And you shall not commit adultery
Deuteronomy 5:18

Unfortunately, Zambia has not yet completely overcome the problem of child marriage. This is especially a problem in the capital city. Notably, some young girls do want to marry early. Some even drop out of secondary school against their parents' will in order to get married and have children.

While I visited a local all-girls secondary school, I was asked by the deputy head to say something to the pupils that would inspire them to continue education “and not just get out of school and get married.” By contrast, forced child marriage was not perceived as an issue in the community, but there are murals spreading awareness about the harmfulness of that practice (see figure 4).



Figure 4. Mural on the wall of a public school sending a message against child marriage; in-between a mural presenting the mission statement of the school and one spreading awareness about COVID-19. Photo by Author.

Coupled with the strong presence of Christianity, I found it very surprising that the people I talked to, namely women under 35 of different Christian denominations, are not really eager to marry in a church. This does not go hand in hand with not wanting children. In fact, having children together is considered less of a commitment than marriage. Actually, marriage is perceived by some as unnecessary and restrictive because one is then required to always consider the other person. Accordingly, divorce or separation is also considered normal, and no one bats an eye when people commit to another partner, even after having several children with the first one. These people will still take on active roles during mass, like doing the reading. The only instance where even Sisters will become involved is in the case of secretive affairs. I was informed by Sisters, who are very engaged in the community, that it is not uncommon for women to have children by married men and outside of marriage in general. However, this usually does not stem from the fact that the women who are engaged in those affairs do not care, but ra-

ther because of false promises by the men about a divorce or future marriage. On another note, married women do not officially change their names when they marry. Nonetheless, they will introduce themselves and be referred to by their husband's last name. Similarly, children receive the last name of their father.

Interestingly, permissive attitudes are actually perceived to be declining. In fact, in the past, it was very common to have children outside of one's marriage (while remaining married). The younger generations are less tolerant of those behaviours. The trend can be described as going towards serial monogamy. Nonetheless, in some parts of the country (I was informed about the rural Lungu tribe), polygamy, more specifically, polygyny, is still practised. Notably, people involved in those practices consider themselves Christians, even though, for example, the Catholic parishes deny them further sacraments.

Another occurrence that I experienced too often to omit is connected to the wish of some to marry a person who, to them, looks European. This goes for men and women. Thus, as a white woman, it was impossible for me to avoid receiving marriage proposals²³ while staying in areas outside big cities. While those invitations or commands did not seem too serious, they were definitely too insistent considering that the men were usually already married. Notably, affiliation with very conservative Churches known for the strict ascetic lifestyles of their members will not stop people from expressing those desires. Likewise, I had encounters with women who did express the strong wish to marry a white man from Europe.

A topic that is sadly connected to marriage is domestic abuse. Obviously, it happened in my field, as it probably does virtually all around the world, usually at the expense of women. Notably, the government does address gender-based violence in general, and when going to the hospital, women have to report it to the police, who keep a record, but many women do not take advantage of this. While I did not have extensive enough insights to report on this issue, other people perceive the issue of domestic abuse as becoming less and less common with younger generations. Especially educated people will fight with words rather than physically.

Moreover, it is true that older generations still consider children like a retirement insurance. Therefore, to have many children is considered being

²³ Admittedly, proposal is probably not the right word because those were always rather declarations stating that there will be a wedding.

wealthy. Notably, people normally have four to ten siblings. However, the younger generations choose to have fewer children, usually for economic reasons. In fact, now, it is no rarity any more to only have two or four children. Last but not least, a cultural curiosity that I want to add is that babies are given a name only after the remnants of the umbilical cord fall off.

CONCLUSION

*Why do you pass judgment on your brother?
Or you, why do you despise your brother?
For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God.
Romans 14:10*

I started this essay by describing the current role of traditional spirituality and the variety of Christian Churches present in my community. The following description of Christianity in everyday life focused on the significance of Christianity in community life as well as the actual impact and guidance that Christian principles provide in the lives of individuals, concentrating on the more permissive attitudes, especially towards marriage.

Personally, I realized the mistake on which my false assumptions were based. It was the misconception about traditions. Coming from Europe, I associate traditions with being strict and rigid. In my field, however, the default position in the past was rather permissive. Hence, Zambia is definitely traditional. Their traditions, however, look very different from mine. In light of this, I found it to be an additionally fascinating experience to observe the situation now and identify the influences of Christianity and globalization, especially through the media, on a society with a very different cultural starting point.

In a nutshell, Christianity plays an important role in Zambia. Certainly, one can make arguments about the hypocrisy of attending church every Sunday while failing to incorporate the teachings and beliefs, even as basic as all ten commandments, into one's own life. Moreover, one might claim that the tolerance of the community towards such behaviours contributes to their popularity since people do not suffer any consequences in the form of social sanctions. However, one has to keep in mind that social sanctions are not very Christian either. That is to say, "let him who is without sin among you be the first to throw a stone at her."²⁴

²⁴ John 8:7.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- CHEYEKA, Austin M., Nelly MWALE, and Joseph CHITA. "Of Jamesons and Satanists: Politics of Labelling in Zambia, A Christian Nation, 2015–2018." *Journal of Church and State* 64, no. 3 (2022): 367–88.
- ESV Study Bible: English Standard Version*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2008.
- HAYNES, Naomi. "'Zambia Shall be Saved!': Prosperity Gospel Politics in a Self-Proclaimed Christian Nation." *Nova Religio: The Journal of Alternative and Emergent Religions*, 19, no. 1 (2015): 5–24.
- MAKENI ISLAMIC SOCIETY. "Makeni Islamic Primary School: History and Overview." Accessed January 5, 2023. <http://www.makenislamic.org/MIS.html>.
- "National Day of Prayer Should Inspire Us to Uphold National Values, Principles – President Hichilema." *Lusaka Times*, October 18, 2022, <https://www.lusakatimes.com/2022/10/18/national-day-of-prayer-should-inspire-us-to-uphold-national-values-principles-president-hichilema>.
- OFFICE OF THE HIGH COMMISSIONER FOR HUMAN RIGHTS. *Zambia's Pledge to Abolish the Death Penalty* (May 27, 2022).
- RICHARDS, Audrey. *Chisungu: A Girl's Initiation Ceremony among the Bemba of Zambia*. London: Routledge, 2013.
- RICHARDS, Audrey. "The Political System of the Bemba Tribe: North-Eastern Rhodesia." In *African Political Systems*, edited by M. Fortes and E. E. Evans-Pritchard, 83–120. Oxford University Press, 1950.
- VAN KLINKEN, Adriaan. "Roundtable on LGBTIQ Persons in Africa: Queer Love in a 'Christian Nation': Zambian Gay Men Negotiating Sexual and Religious Identities." *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 83, no. 4 (2015): 947–64.
- WERNER, Douglas. "Some Developments in Bemba Religious History." *Journal of Religion in Africa* 4, no. 1 (1971–1972): 1–24.
- WIREDU, Kwasi. "African Religions from a Philosophical Point of View." In *A Companion To Philosophy of Religion*, 2nd. ed., edited by Charles Taliaferro and Philip L. Quinn, 34–43. Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010.

CHRISTIANITIES AMONG BEMBA WOMEN: THE INFLUENCE
OF CHRISTIAN TEACHINGS ON THE WAY OF LIFE IN THE NORTH OF ZAMBIA

Summary

This essay sheds light on the contemporary attitudes (especially of women) towards ethical issues in the Christian context in the Luapula Province in Zambia. After outlining the role of traditional religions, I present my own data on the diversity of Christianity in the region. Based on this, I describe the dynamics between different denominations and point out particularities of the Catholic community. Then, I illustrate how religious convictions influence the way of life. This includes the explication of norms surrounding the dress code, the role of women in the society, and marriage.

Keywords: Zambia; Christianities; women; church

WYZNANIA CHRZEŚCIJAŃSKIE WŚRÓD KOBIET BEMBA.
WPLYW NAUCZANIA CHRZEŚCIJAŃSKIEGO NA SPOSÓB ŻYCIA
W PÓŁNOCNEJ ZAMBII

Streszczenie

Esej prezentuje współczesne postawy, szczególnie kobiet, wobec kwestii etycznych w kontekście chrześcijańskim w prowincji Luapula w Zambii. Autorka omawia społeczną rolę tradycyjnych religii, przedstawia wyniki własnych badań nad różnorodnością religijną w tym regionie i na tej podstawie opisuje dynamikę relacji pomiędzy różnymi kościołami i wskazuje na charakterystyczne elementy społeczności katolickiej. Następnie ilustruje, jak przekonania religijne wpływają na sposób życia, opisuje normy dotyczące ubioru i roli kobiet w społeczeństwie oraz małżeństwo.

Słowa kluczowe: Zambia; wyznania chrześcijańskie; kobiety; kościół