

The Transformed Muzembo Funerary Ritual of the Tonga People of Chikankata in Zambia, 2013-2023

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ABSTRACT

This study aimed at investigating the *Muzembo* funerary ritual of the Tonga people of Chikankata, in the Southern region of Zambia. The *Muzembo* is an important funerary ritual in the Tonga culture that is performed after burial, usually on the third day after the occurrence of death. Methodologically, a qualitative research approach was applied using a purposive sampling technique in selecting 32 participants drawn from different communities in three villages of Mwenda Chiefdom in Chikankata District, namely Chikankata, Haampande and Moonga. Semi-structured and Open-ended interviews were conducted to obtain primary data, while the research also drew upon secondary data sources. Results were analysed thematically and the findings highlight five main emerged themes. It has been found that despite the influence of Christianity on the *Muzembo* funerary ritual, the Tonga people of Chikankata preserved the original old ritual name by referring to the name in the ritual performance that characterised the events of the last day of funeral gatherings. This implies that the custom had neither been completely eradicated nor had its name changed due to the influence of Christianity. The funeral ritual, therefore had only been altered in content due to the synergy that resulted from the fusion of traditional customs and Christian beliefs. The author recommends conducting a similar study among the Tongas from other sub-regions of the Southern Province with different levels of Christian influence, to appreciate and highlight the subtle differences.

Keywords: *Muzembo*, Funeral, Ritual, Tonga people, Chikankata, Zambia.

INTRODUCTION

This article concerns the *Muzembo* funerary ritual of the Tonga ethnic group of Chikankata district in the Southern region of Zambia. The *Muzembo* ritual happens to be one of the rituals done in the traditional funeral ceremony among the Tonga people, in their Indigenous religious sense. Concerning religious adherence, Chikankata is home to two main religious traditions contending with each other, namely the African Indigenous Religion, which is the primal religion of the area, and Christianity which is an exotic

religion of Western origin. Christianity's presence in the area is mirrored through its five denominations namely the Salvation Army, the Seventh-day Adventist (*henceforth*, SDA), and the limited presence of the new Apostolic, Neo-Pentecostal, and the Jehovah's Witness. The Salvation Army Missionaries were the first Christian Church denomination to make inroads in the area in the 1940s. Provision of the detailed accounts of respective religious denominations of Christianity falls outside the scope of this study whose main focus is to examine the religious syncretism in the observance of the

Muzembo funerary ritual which has not been explored by scholars.

The gradual waning of indigenous (traditional) religion in Zambia, like elsewhere in Africa, has been a subject of interest ever since contact between Western and African cultures took place. In Chikankata, it is now well over eight decades (80 years) since these two distinct cultures first met. This length of time may make it uneasy for someone assessing the effects of the two colliding cultures to come to quick conclusions. This is because, the indigenous culture has to a large extent, been permeated by Christian concepts in most of its aspects. As a result, any conclusion drawn from an examination of the subject is prone to error of either omission or commission.

Among the Tonga people of Southern Zambia, the *Muzembo* funerary ritual usually took place on the third day of the funeral procession, counting from the day death was announced. Ordinarily, burial would have already taken place by this day. After the performance of preliminary customary acts in the series of rituals that could have started at dawn with the ritual bathing at a river, it would be now time for *Muzembo*. Some elderly female professional mourners (in the case of a funeral involving a man) who had gone to the river to facilitate the ritual bathing of the widow will be the first ones to begin the *Muzembo* procession. They move in a column consisting of women only first, towards the grave and while there, they will go around it, singing with bells and rattles, songs depicting sarcastic language - the utterances that are tantamount to voicing out what people treat as private sexual experiences in marriages, which knowledge is kept secret in ordinary Tonga life.

Men then would follow behind brandishing spears (ordinary sticks for some) in the air, and start *kuzemba* (moving forward and backwards), performing a war cry. They would keep performing this kind of dance movement, from East to West directions, up to the grave spot where they join the assembly of women. This symbolic warlike dance action typical of

the Tonga people's customs is known as *Muzembo*. However, there is a concern today that the *Muzembo* funerary ritual is diminishing, losing its original content. Critics (among them Thomson, 2005 and Colson, 2006) have attributed the waning of the Tonga traditional religious customs to the influence of Christianity in the area.

In this study, I examine the case for syncretism in the manner the *Muzembo* funerary ritual has currently been conducted in Chikankata, as a result of the meeting of two cultures namely the Tonga indigenous culture and the Western culture, over a period spanning eight decades. I close by exploring the religious aspects of the indigenous beliefs of the Tonga people of Chikankata in this part of Zambia, highlighting the negative judgments that have been made on their indigenous religion by Christianity since the 1940s when it made inroads into the area.

The Problem

There exists a notable gap in our understanding regarding the evolving dynamics of the *Muzembo* funerary ritual among the Tonga people in Chikankata. While there are intuitive suspicions regarding its altered nature, possibly attributed to the declining adherence to traditional customs influenced by Christianity, or perhaps stemming from a synthesis of African Indigenous Religion and Christian practices, these conjectures lack substantiating evidence. Furthermore, the trajectory of African Indigenous Religion in the region remains uncertain. Neglecting a comprehensive study on the diminishing *Muzembo* ritual would be a disservice to the people of Chikankata, who rightfully seek to safeguard their cultural legacy for future generations.

Study Objectives

The general aim of the study was to investigate the *Muzembo* funerary ritual performed by the Tonga people of Chikantaka, since the 1950s.

Specific objectives were:

- i. To establish the influence of Christianity in the performance of the *Muzembo* ritual.
- ii. To find out what changes have taken place in the observance of *Muzembo*
- iii. To determine the future of the African Indigenous Religion in the area

Theoretical Underpinning

This study is premised on Emile Durkheim's sociological theory of '*functionalism and religious ritual*'. Emanating from Durkheim's initial studies of the elementary forms of religion among small-scale religions in traditional societies, the theory is based on his definition of religion in terms of the distinction between the sacred and the profane and his conviction that religions are never just a matter of beliefs. All religions, he contends, involve regular ceremonial and ritual activities in which a group of believers meet, to heighten and affirm group solidarity in a collective ceremonial sense. Ceremonials take individuals away from the concerns of the profane social life into elevated spheres of higher forces, attributed to divine influences or gods. Ceremonies and rituals which, in Durkheim's view, serve to bind members of one group together, are not only found in regular situations of worship but also in other various life crises experienced in social transitions, such as birth, marriage, and death. Durkheim theorises further that, with the development of modern societies, the influence of religion wanes due to the increasing scientific thinking which replaces religious explanations, resulting in ceremonial and ritual activities occupying only a small part of individuals. Durkheim argues (along with Marx Weber) that traditional religion - that is, religion involving divine forces, gods, or *ancestral spirits* (italics mine) is on the verge of disappearing. "The old gods are dead", Durkheim writes (Giddens 2008: 537-539).

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Religion in Chikankata

Indigenous Religion of the Tonga People

Little has been documented on the Indigenous Religion of the Tonga in Zambia to supplement the information provided by Elizabeth Colson. In her work on the *Tonga Religious Thought* (Colson, 2001), Colson identified various religious institutions that make up the entire fabric of the Tonga Indigenous Religion. The first one centres on the cult of the '*Mizimu*,' the ancestral spirits (spirits of the dead), and the ordering of the lives of their kin. The second one is the cult of the rain shrines and the '*Basangu*', the spirits associated with matters that affected communities living together on the land. A small difference between the two cults lies in their levels of influence. While the *Mizimu* and their cult limit their influence to the village and/or household level, the *Basangu* spirits' influence is extended to the district level. Of the two cults mentioned above, the *Muzembo* funerary ritual was much more associated with the *Mizimu* cult, the veneration of ancestors.

The Mizimu and their Cult

The Tonga hold the belief that deceased family members still actively remain part of the family and as such they are commonly referred to as 'the living dead' (Colson, 2006). When a person dies, two spirits are believed to remain, one the *muzimu* and another the ghost. The ghost is always a newly created spirit and it is said that it originates in the dying breath. Not all people produce a new *muzimu* when they die and statements from informants as to how the *muzimu* originates had not been clear. Once created, the *mizimu* (plural) are not immortal like the ghosts who are independent of the devotion of living people for their continued existence. When the living cease to remember the *mizimu* and no longer call upon them by name, they become nameless spirits wondering at large, who now work only for evil. "They have become like ghosts." Over these, the living have no control over forgetting the names they have lost the means of summoning or appropriating the

spirits. Only sorcerers have direct control over ghosts. A sudden dangerous or mortal illness is therefore usually attributed to ghosts. The *mizimu* are not actively evil in the same way. They may cause injury to the living, but this is not their primary purpose nor are they free like the ghost to cause injury to anyone with whom they come in contact. The *mizimu* depend upon the living for their own continued existence and they cause injury to keep their memory alive in the living so that they may provide the offering on which they depend. If the living refuse to listen to their demands, then they are thought to enlist the aid of the ghost to inflict more severe punishment. Some Tonga people say that the *muzimu* travels always with the ghost that originated with it on a person's death and which acts as its intermediary with other ghosts.

The *mizimu* are, therefore, thought to be concerned that they should not be forgotten and so they send sickness and other misfortune to the living as a reminder that beer and other offerings must be provided. They are anxious that the living should maintain the customs that they (*mizimu*) practised when they were alive and therefore, they punish departures from custom. When the *mizimu* get offended by people who either neglect them or fail to comply with certain demands they make, then rituals are performed to appease these affected spirits. In return, the *mizimu* offer to the living protection against other spirits and sorcery. They also assist the living to obtain the good things of life – children, good harvests, cattle, and an orderly existence. These in turn permit the living to procure grain for beer, to marry wives who will brew the beer for offerings, and to perpetuate the names. In this strict sense, therefore, the *mizimu* are believed to serve the function of guarding and protecting the living from many adversities. This is better understood in the purposes of the rituals of offerings people make to them (*Ibid*).

The Concept of the Supreme Being among the Tonga People

Despite the strong emphasis on the 'lesser spirits,' such as *Mizimu* and *Basangu*, the Tonga also believed in a 'Supreme Being,' who is somewhat above these spirits in terms of power and authority. This being is called 'Leza.' This belief had been there even in the time before the coming of the Europeans introducing the Christian religion in the area. The concept of *Leza* among the Tonga of Chikankata has been shifting as people thought and rethought their experience which included exposure to the Salvation Army Mission workers and mission schools. One result was that ideas about *Leza* were becoming more firmly linked with Christian definitions of God. Coincidentally, only *Leza* of all the spiritual forces (such as *Mizimu*) recognised by the Tonga people was accepted by the missionaries who were comfortable with *Leza* as the Tonga term for the Christian God (Colson, 2001).

The existence of the *basangu* (spirits of rain shrines) was denied by the churches, or they were recognised only as demons to be combated, servants of Satan (a spiritual force previously outside the Tonga conception). Only *Leza* in the guise of the Christian God has been absorbed into the dogmas of Zambian Christianity. It is somehow not easy to understand the nature of *Leza* among the Tonga because while *Leza dwelt* in their minds, their rituals focused on other forms of spirits. For instance, one could attend consultations with *basangu* mediums and the rituals at community shrines and people could describe what should be done there. One could be present at divinations when the *Mizimu* were consulted and attended offerings poured over the living and heard the words with which they were addressed. One could watch victims of *Masabe* (*possessive spirits*) and their adepts enacting the nature of the possessing spirits in the dance drama associated with it. But there was no place, no occasion, where one could see and hear people engaged with *Leza*. *Leza* had no shrines, or priests, and received no visible offerings. People related to *Leza* on personal, intellectual, and emotional levels (*Ibid*).

In the absence of priesthood, there was also an absence of *authorised* dogma. There was

no one set of beliefs formulated to which everyone was expected to adhere. *Leza* stood behind the *Mizimu* or ancestors as a guarantor of the rightness of a way of life. The Tonga were also aware of how minimal their efforts to change their environment were against the overwhelming order of nature as created by *Leza*. Finally, the Tonga did not personify or make representations of *Leza* or any other spiritual force. They made no masks, effigies, or paintings. There was nothing to encourage them to think of *Leza* in material form.

In short, Colson (2001) describes the Tonga Indigenous Religion as one that gives a sense of a religious system that occupies the whole person, perhaps more than the universal religion of the Christian God. This is simply because the religion of the Tonga, she observes, strongly attached adherents to life and consequently to society. Though they worshipped lesser spirits, the Tonga also believed in the existence of a supreme being who was responsible for all sorts of moral conduct and a creator of everything. This being was regarded as the greatest *god* under whom existed the lesser spirits (*muzimu, basangu et cetera*). The supreme god of the Tonga, however, traded no direct involvement in the affairs of people, as did the lesser spirits. People reached out to him in their daily petitions and all manner of worship indirectly through the lesser spirits. Apart from the absence of priesthood and authorised dogma, the other characteristic of the Tonga indigenous religion includes its tendency to have many superstitions.

Westernisation and the Advent of Christianity

Scholars have written about the advent of new technology and Westernisation fused with Christianity in Africa. One of them is Keith Ward, a scholar and Professor of Divinity at Oxford University, who begins by observing that one of the lessons of the past is that one cannot safely predict the future. Ward sees a possibility of a future with literalistic and simplistic versions of Christianity dominating whole cultures. He observes, on the other hand, the growth of technology travel, and therefore cross-cultural

encounters at all levels, which seems to him to be unstoppable. With these advances, Keith Ward contends that there is reason to hope that more experiential and exploratory, less dogmatic and imperialistic forms of the Christian faith will mark the transfer of the centre of Christian gravity from the West to the Southern and eastern Hemispheres, and mark a new age of creativity for the church (Ward, 2005).

Ward (2005) further makes an observation that is crucial to what is obtained in the Chikankata community today in his conclusive remark about the future of Christianity. He contends that the expansion of Christianity into the ex-colonial worlds of the Southern Hemisphere and the Far East is likely to change old forms of acceptable beliefs of society at a particular time (*Ibid*). As these worlds throw off their colonial past and seek to establish economic parity with the West, Ward notes that it would be hard to predict what Christianity will look like when it is fully acculturated into these ex-colonial worlds. He predicts that much of it will be of a rather uncritical and confrontational nature, locked into pre-scientific worldviews and cultural conservatism and that the Christian faith will look very different when it is incorporated into different cultural histories.

The Coming of Christianity to Chikankata: A Historical Perspective

Christianity first penetrated the Chikankata area through the Salvation Army Missionaries, whose entry into Zambia can be traced from the first half of the 20th century. The Salvation Army Christian Movement was founded by a Methodist Minister called William Booth in London in 1865 with its core aim of preaching the Gospel of Christ to those untouched by the existing religious efforts of converting people to Christ, by pledging to bring whomsoever they could into a like experience of the Grace of God (Snelson, 1990). East London Christian Mission was its initial name, which was later changed in 1878 to that of the Salvation Army. The word spread so quickly that by the 1890s, the church had gained entry into Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and the West Indies. In Africa, the

Army made its first presence in South Africa's Cape Province in 1883. In 1891, General Booth met Rhodes at Cape Town, who eventually encouraged Christian missions to settle in Mashonaland. Rhodes was convinced the Mission's presence would bring about civilisation in the area and hence offered Booth over 2400 hectares in the Mazoe District. The Army, therefore, opened its first station here.

The most reliable account of the beginning of the Salvation Army's inroads into Chikankata is given by Peter Snelson, who observes that in 1923, a group of unknown Africans from Chief Sikoongo's area in the Gwembe district of Northern Rhodesia (now Zambia) went to work at Grand Parade Mine in the Zambezi valley. During their stay there, they attended some Salvation Army meetings and were converted. On their return to Sikoongo, these people were resolute in spreading the gospel to their fellow natives. This means that the Salvation Army had already gained a slight foothold in Northern Rhodesia when, in September 1926, two full-time evangelists from across the Zambezi - Commandant Matthew Kunzwi Shava and Lieutenant Paul Shumba, were sent to work among the Tonga people. They were followed in 1927 by Captain Jensen who started a mission station at Ibwe Munyama, about 100 kilometres east of Chikankata Mission. Ibwe Munyama was gradually built up as a co-education boarding school. The first boys sat the Standard VI Examination in 1936, but the girls trailed behind. Often the mission truck was sent around the village to persuade parents to send their daughters to school. In 1940 Major Philip Rive, a trained educationist took over and strengthened both the academic works of the schools and their organisation. In 1945, he arranged for the moving of the Mission station from Ibwe Munyama to Chikankata, where it has remained to date.

Oral sources from a few surviving key informants are consistent with documented facts in referring to 1945 as the year the Salvation Army established a mission station at Chikankata. This was by invitation of the local headman, Charlie Chikankata. The

headman had heard of The Salvation Army's works in Zimbabwe, as well as its influence in the Gwembe Valley's Sikoongo area. Charlie offered a portion of his land on condition that education and health services be provided for his people. In 1946 to be precise, The Salvation Army settled among the Tonga of Chikankata area and opened a school, hospital and church to serve the needs of the community (Hachintu, 2018).

What was there in Chikankata in terms of religion before the coming of the missionaries, therefore, was the African Indigenous Religion existing as a primal religion of the area, firmly embedded in the local culture of the people. Christianity came later on the scene with its sole purpose of winning souls to Christ. In its bid to do so, it had as part of its agenda to provide education and health services which were most needed at the time. Such an agenda became realised through the establishment of education and health infrastructure and the services they rendered to the community. It is, therefore, contended here that the coming of Christianity in the area meant the beginning of the decline in the (*primal*) African Indigenous Religion.

The Christian Perspective about the Death of a Believer

Writing on the subject of death, the Christians' reaction to it, and their destiny after they die, William Miller says believers in Christ do not fear death, for Christ promised that when they die, they will be with him (2 Corinthians 5:8, cited in Miller 2003: 114). He backs the Christian stance with a quotation by Apostle Paul as he faced possible execution in Rome: "I desire to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better" (Philippians 1:2As3). He says this is why it should not be a surprise for people to see Christians sing hymns of joy at the funerals of their departed loved ones, arguing that the reason is simply because they know the deceased are not dead. Rather, Miller says Christians believe the deceased have simply gone to be with Christ, and for that reason, they (Christians) rejoice at funerals, while shedding tears for the loss of the deceased (Miller, 2003).

The Future of Muzembo: Ancestral Veneration and the Christian Faith

Since the *Muzembo* is an aspect of ancestral veneration, this section discusses its future in the context of ancestral veneration and the coming of Christianity.

In his research dubbed “*The Zulu Christians and Ancestor Cult*”, Fr. Nxumalo makes two observations pertinent to the current study. First, he notes that Ancestral veneration [in Africa] is seen as compatible with the Christian faith, despite discouragement that has come from missionaries and pastors (Nxumalo, in Kuckertz 1981:70). This came to light after he observed some Christians inviting their pastors to come and bless certain aspects of the traditional funerary rituals. This, he says, happens when or if the pastor intimates to his people that he is not averse to their observing some of the customs and performing certain rites according to custom. To substantiate this, Nxumalo cites one man, a Christian convert, who said he invited his priest to execute certain customary rituals. The man further admitted that people in the area no longer hide away from pastors what they do. Nxumalo contends that this, which he calls a new pastoral approach was gaining momentum in Zululand. He narrates:

I have heard that some catholic priests are experimenting with traditional rites. For example, they may bless the animals at home where the celebration will take place. This is the reason for their embarking on such experiments: they want to purify these rites from negative elements, which may be there or follow in their consequence, and from non-essentials, which are mere superstition (ibid).

There is a sense from the above quote that the people involved believed a Christian blessing draws people away from superstition when the power of Christ takes over.

The second fundamental observation from Nxumalo’s study on the Zulu people consists of the fact that the indigenous religion of the African people had not collapsed before the influence of the Western culture along with its (foreign) Christian religion. He echoes the words of Fr. Aylward Shorter, who observed that:

African religion is alive. This means that we are not here trying to exhume an obsolete African past, but we are interested in the African present. Neither are we trying to resuscitate a dead African religion, but we make efforts to grasp and understand African cultural values and religion and their relationship with the Christian faith today; and the most important element of African traditional religion is the ancestors, since they represent one of the basic values in traditional African life (Shorter 1974: ‘African Culture and the Christian Church’, cited in Kuckertz 1981:65).

Literature Gap

Based on the literary sources analysed above, it appears that while the influence of Christianity on the African Traditional Religion in general and on the Tonga Indigenous customs, in particular, has been highlighted, sources speaking directly to the *Muzembo* funerary ritual and the influence of Christianity on it, are lacking in the review. The case of religious syncretism between Christianity and the Traditional religion of the Tonga people in the area remains unknown in the absence of formally documented literature on the subject. The current study has committed to sealing this knowledge gap.

METHODOLOGY

The current study was carried out in three villages of the Mwenda Chiefdom, namely

Moonga, Chikankata and Haampande. Methodologically, the study used a qualitative approach that employed descriptive techniques strategy. The population was the villages of the Chiefdom: headmen and their subjects. A purposive sampling method was used in selecting the total of thirty-two participants from the three villages. A snowball sampling technique was applied where the researcher started by contacting three 'key informants' (one from each village) that he already knew to be well knowledgeable in the identified categories of information required in the study, based on the two guiding criteria of 'traditionalist' (one in support of established Tonga indigenous customs and beliefs) and 'native' (born and lived in the place for the first years of their lives). These were asked to nominate other potential participants. The technique went on and on till the time the researcher obtained a total of 11 participants, enough for data analysis. This made the chance of reaching out to targeted participants willing to cooperate with the researcher much higher than if there was some kind of direct relation (Blumberg *et al.*, 2014) and enabled the study to generate a sample size that would otherwise be difficult to obtain. The 11 participants were subjected to in-depth interviews.

The participant observation method was also applied in 3 *dilwe* (funeral) ceremonies to enable the researcher to get first-hand experience in how the funeral rituals and burial episodes were conducted. Originally, the researchers had planned to observe six funeral ceremonies, representing two ceremonies in each village. However, it was not possible as the number of funerals that occurred during the study period was not much, while at one funeral gathering, physical attendance for non-close relatives of the deceased was restricted due to the cholera outbreak that hit the community at the time.

Table 1: Summary of Participants

S/n	Participant Group	Number Interviewed
1	Headmen	03

3	Senior Citizen / Traditionists	08
4	Focus Group Mourners	21
Total		32

Further, the researcher included a total of 21 Focus Group mourners aged between 18 and 70 who were close relatives of the deceased in the respective funerals targeted by the study. On these, 3 focus group discussions were conducted; one in each village, with each drawing participation of 7 mourners.

Primary data were, therefore, collected through semi-structured interview guides, focus group discussion guides and observation.

The secondary data were largely used to back the participants' views on the Tonga customs, and these were accessed from literary sources pertinent to the study. Secondary data analysis as applied in this methodology, helped in the generating of new insights required by the research (Heaton, 2008; Johnston, 2012; Smith, 2008). Throughout the study, the researcher was careful to ensure that there was a match between the research questions and the existing data for careful reflective examination.

The obtained data were analysed thematically and the Findings and Discussion section highlights the five main themes that emerged, namely the Events that led to *Muzembo* and the *Muzembo* Episode; the Impact of Christianity on the performance of *Muzembo*; the Pressure to Conform; Religious Syncretism and *Muzembo* Ritual Today.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Events That Led to *Muzembo* and the Actual *Muzembo* Episode

The findings of the study are consistent in pointing to participants' reference to the third day, counting from the day death was announced, as a day when the *Muzembo* ritual was performed at a funeral. Usually, burial could have already taken place by this day.

During the morning hours (at dawn) of the third day, mourners go to bathe at a river. The ritual bath consists of a delegation of elderly women who facilitate the bathing of the surviving spouse. The bereaved spouse, while carrying a maize stalk, joins and the entire delegation is daubed with red ochre, going to the river. There at the edge of the water, is placed a clay pot filled with ambers of fire, and on it placed a gourd ladle with *manchenya* and *bukoowa* (cucumber seeds). The surviving spouse is submerged (bathed) in water. Upon emerging from the water, she/he is made to stand at the edge of the water, in a manner that the legs are asunder, spread over a clay pot with glowing embers of fire and *bukowa* in it that is placed under, so that the plumes of smoke from the pot spread through the bottom part. According to the local cultural symbolism, this signified exorcising the clinging spirit (*cizwa*) of the dead spouse.

Then comes the time to leave the river and walk back towards the funeral home. On the way, they make a stop at a *musekese* (*Piliostigmathonningii*) tree. The bereaved spouse is made to climb the tree and while the person is on the tree, it is cut gently and other people are holding it so that the climber does not fall and is not badly injured. But when the tree is felled, the climber immediately walks to the end of it without looking back so that when *cizwa* (the ghost) tries to follow her/his, it finds that the tree has been felled and there is no longer any connection with the former spouse (Mumbi 2018:117). One participant narrated that the falling of the bereaved spouse along with the tree makes her/his jerk with fear and that the resulting shudder on the surviving spouse due to fear of falling symbolises the clinging spirit of the deceased spouse leaving her. Many other informants referred to the felling of the tree while the person is on it as symbolising the separation of the surviving spouse from the deceased.

Meanwhile, the maize straw which the bereaved spouse carried along from home to the river, and up to this point, will be abandoned at this spot as they continue walking towards the funeral home. From the

perspective of the participants, the straw in this context symbolises the spirit, and abandoning it at this spot symbolises leaving the spirit there. According to Mumbi (2018), the surviving spouse is given a maize stalk as she/he moves around to arm her against evil forces such as ghosts, witches, or even death. This is because the bereaved spouse was considered weak and to protect her/him from such forces, she had to use the maize stalk which was believed to ward off forces of evil (*Ibid*).

As they continue walking towards home, a lineage member or a clan joking partner places a bundle of thatch upon the path and on it an egg. The thatch is lit, and the surviving spouse or other chief mourner is told to walk first through the smoke while treading on and breaking the egg. Others follow, each one treading upon the charred thatch and the broken egg, while a clan joking partner calls out that they should now cease their wailing. Then the surviving spouse is taken either to the grave or to a termite mound (Colson 2006:191). One informant told the researcher that as the parade nears the funeral home, the surviving spouse is told to run towards the grave, and upon reaching there, falls upon it. Her/ his kinsmen receive her/ her by picking her up from where she has fallen, and take her elsewhere, to an appropriate seclusion within the confines of the funeral home, but not *kumasasa* (a special place in the funeral house designated for the widow/ widower during the funeral). At this point, the two groups (kinsmen of the surviving spouse and those of the deceased husband) will now separate to take different occupations in the funeral home, where they will sit waiting to be served with sample (*musozya*) comprising a mixture of maize grain and *mbwiila* (*vigna subterranean*, commonly known as a black-eyed pea).

At fourteen hours, *ngoma yabukali* (the lead drum) would be sounded. This drum rarely sounded and when it did, people knew exactly what it meant because it had a specific purpose in the context of a funeral; to send a signal to mourners that it was now time to execute the awaited *Muzembo*. Mourners prepared and those from afar would get the

sound of the drum and come to join those already gathered at the funeral house.

Some elderly female professional mourners who had gone to the river to bathe the widow would be the first ones to begin the *muzembo* procession. They moved in a column consisting of women only first, towards the grave, and while there, they went around it while singing with bells and rattles, songs depicting sarcastic language, such as:

*Omulumu wangu
kobuka!..Kosinsimuk
a, koboola
undiinduluke, ino
mboolikoonenena,
tinoondicitakabotu,
ondipa biyo komwe
masiku oonse ...*

Meaning:

*My husband, wake
up! Come and give
me a second round.
You have overslept...
I am not satisfied;
you have only done it
once throughout the
night...*

*(Interview with a Senior Citizen in
Moonga Village, Chikankata, July
7, 2023).*

These utterances are tantamount to voicing out what people treat as private sexual experiences in marriages, which knowledge is kept secret in ordinary Tonga life, perhaps just like in other African tribes. But as people say in proverbial words, “*Sidilwe tavwiililwi amalilo.*” “Do not look at the mouth that is mourning” (Mumbi 2018: 53).

Men also follow behind with spears, ordinary sticks for some, and start *kuzemba* (moving forward and backwards), performing a war cry. They do this from East to West directions, a kind of dance movement they keep performing up to the grave spot where they join the assembly of women. But their songs sound somewhat ‘milder’ in language

compared to those of women; they depict the language of eulogising the dead and/or pouring tribute to him, while their gesture of brandishing spears and sticks in the air depicts a different symbolism. Their action is warlike. One narrator explained that ancient Tonga never believed in natural death (*lufulwang’anda*). For them, behind every death there was a culprit; someone responsible. So the brandishing of spears in the air during *Muzembo* was a symbolic demonstration of anger as if in search of the killer of the deceased to hunt him down. They sang thus:

*Cabija haacilongwe...
Cabija omukwesu,
Walihaamilimo,
Langa ino watusiya,*

Meaning:

*Too bad our friend ... too bad our
brother. You were industrious ... now
you have left us. Gone to the land
where no one returns*

*(Interview with a Senior Citizen in Chikankata
Village, July 7, 2023).*

After *kuzemba*, all mourners leave the grave site and come to the funeral home to eat the last meal together. A special chicken (*kakuku mulonga*) has been slaughtered to be eaten by those at the *masasa* confinement.

At this point, in the afternoon, the public funeral gathering is officially declared ended; only close relatives of the deceased and the widow’s relatives remain at the funeral house. People from the neighbourhood and those from afar will return to their respective homes.

In the evening of the same day, the two separate families - the relatives of the deceased (*basimukowa*) and the affine will convene a meeting to consider matters relating to choosing the administrator of the estate left by the deceased, and the cleansing ritual for the widow.

Impact of Christianity on the Performance of Muzembo

Some respondents observed that there were very few occurrences of *Muzembo* in the old form they still witness nowadays; most of them said it had changed. Many narrators believed that the changes were a result of the influence of Christianity and Western beliefs. One narrator explained that he no longer participated in the old *Muzembo* because it clashed with his Christian beliefs:

So far, I have not done that. I am a Christian and I feel I cannot do that. Some old Tonga customs are dying now. Christianity is taking primacy. The Christian beliefs I hold are sufficient for my religious life. The old custom of Muzembo has elements of beliefs that may clash with my Christian beliefs (Focus Group Discussion, July 15, 2023).

The Pressure to Conform

Some participants gave narratives that depicted pressure among the Tonga of Chikankata to conform to Christian ways of living with recourse to African Indigenous religious ways. Other participants gave responses that seemed to imply that they played a passive role in the conversion to Christianity which condemned some of the old beliefs found in the old *Muzembo*, as they were coerced to embrace [new] Christian beliefs:

We accepted because these people [missionaries] ruled us, there was no way that we would not follow the rule that favoured the Christian beliefs and lifestyle because it was forced upon us by the colonisers (Focus Group Discussion, July 15, 2023).

A youthful participant, while acknowledging his ignorance of what happened in the old *Muzembo* ritual, narrated:

Nowadays, it is no longer viewed as important to learn traditional rituals and how our

forefathers lived, and to make matters worse, if you are seen by Christians to associate with traditional customs, you risk being branded a heathen and suffer many discriminatory consequences, at school or at the workplace (Focus Group Discussion, July 20, 2023).

The verbatim above could have depicted the experiences of many other people who converted from the indigenous (traditional) beliefs to Christianity not necessarily based on personal conviction, but on what society had dictated upon them.

Another participant, while acknowledging that Christianity brought development to the Tonga land, said the introduction of Christian beliefs caused Tonga indigenous beliefs and rituals to be distorted and neglected. In her view, the church did not approve of *Muzembo* and other traditional rituals. She narrated thus:

Yes, this Christianity is progressive and good, but I still feel that on the other hand, it is not right. The Church does not accept that some old practices of people be continued. There are some of the old practices which were useful to people, which have unfortunately, been lost. Some people have lost their lives due to this negligence (Focus Group Discussion, July 21, 2023).

The participant in the above quote may have shared a perspective that may have portrayed the dilemma that could have engulfed many other people of Chikankata - a sense that was evident in many responses from participants during the focus group discussions (FGD).

Religious Syncretism

The above narratives from participants may explain the current religious syncretism in the

area. There is, therefore, some consistency with Professor Elizabeth Colson's findings of 2006, in her study of the Tonga people. From the perspective of Colson, some Tonga people shifted back and forth [in their beliefs] according to some circumstances they were faced with. She observes that many who had previously ignored old customs were said to have second thoughts as the onslaught of certain epidemics (such as AIDS) led people to wonder what had gone wrong. Any recourse to divination for explanation placed responsibility for misfortune on the neglect of the aspects of traditional customs and beliefs, such as beliefs in ancestors, the spirits of the land or witchcraft. She cites examples of instances where diviners did not attribute AIDS or any other illness to failure to participate in Christian rituals or live according to Christian rules (Colson 2006: 257).

Another practical piece of evidence relating to people's beliefs and behaviour towards funerary rituals is found in a similar study conducted by Hachintu (2018) on the Tonga people of Chikankata and their performance of the *Kusalazyā* (cleansing) ritual. Hachintu's (2018) findings reveal a case of a widow who died of AIDS shortly after the death of her husband. Despite the medical report from the hospital attributing the course of death to HIV/AIDS, people still opted for the recourse to divination for an explanation of death, which placed the attribution to the widow's failure to go through the ritual cleansing (*Kusalazyā*), causing the clinging spirit (*cibinde*) of her dead husband to keep following her. According to the local belief, this resulted in the widow's poor health which eventually claimed her (Hachintu 2018).

Muzembo Ritual Today

Due to the heavy influence of Christianity in Chikankata that has not spared the performance of the indigenous rituals, and because of the resistance from some people to completely abandon aspects of ancestral (indigenous) religion in the area, there seem to have been elements of religious synergy observable in many religious ritual performances today, as a result of people

mixing certain indigenous customs with Christian beliefs. In terms of *Muzembo*, this has resulted in considerable alterations in its performance from the 'old' form to its current state.

The researcher took a keen interest in this study to understand more about the execution of *Muzembo* in a Christian way. Respondents indicated that even though there seemed to be few selected cases of the *Muzembo* performed in an old form in Chikankata, it had become a common feature today to see churches being invited to conduct services on the day of *Muzembo* to mark an official end of the funeral gathering. Informants further narrated that the Christian church denominations where the deceased used to worship are the ones invited to come, and if the deceased never affiliated with any church, then the church denomination to which most members in the homestead affiliated would be the one to come.

The four informants who narrated what transpired during the day said, usually, the church would keep away from the funeral home until sometime later in that day (usually afternoon) when they would be signaled that the mourners were ready for the church service. This was to allow for the bereaved family to have ample time to settle all private aspects of the customs relating to the survivor and the states left by the deceased, such as how these would be taken care of as they waited for the final funeral ritual called *Mwensyo* when an administrator would finally be appointed.

The Church Service

When the right time for the church service comes (usually in the afternoon), either a Church pastor or his delegation would commence a mini-church service, that would constitute a prayer, scriptural reading, and a short sermon. One respondent narrated that the message in the sermon usually centres on giving hope and consolation to the bereaved family, and the Christian perspective to the status of the dead people - which assured

mourners (especially the surviving spouse) that nothing remained of the dead person to fear about, and finally, using the current funerally as a dawning reality that would remind everyone about the need for repentance. Respondents further said the preacher would close by supplication, thanking God for presiding over the entire funeral, asking for God's protection over the bereaved family, and asking for travelling mercies for those who had come from afar to show solidarity, as they return to their respective homes. This, then, marked the official ending of the activities comprising the day of *Muzembo* and therefore, officially terminating the funeral gathering. And finally, another key informant added:

Even though the termination of funeral gathering done in this [Christian] way does not involve subjecting the surviving spouse to the ritual bathing in a river and the performance of dances at the grave, a few other minor aspects, such as the cooking of kakuku mulonga [ritual chicken] are still done as part of private preliminary activities before calling for the Church service (Interview with a Convert to Christianity, Haampande Village, Chikankata, July 29, 2023).

Theory and Findings: The Nexus

There is a connection between the Transformation of the *Muzembo funerary ritual* of the Tonga people in Chikankata and Emile Durkheim's theory which posits (at the expense of repetition) that, with the development of modern societies, the influence of religion wanes due to the increasing scientific thinking [aligned with Christianity] which replaces religious explanations, resulting in ceremonial and ritual activities occupying only a small part of individuals. Durkheim argues further (along with Marx Weber), that traditional religion is on the verge of disappearing. "The old gods are dead", he writes (Giddens 2008: 537-539).

Currently, the signs of the slowly diminishing *Muzembo* ritual in Chikankata are so overt, as the aspects of Christianity gradually replace its content. An example to cite is the conducting of Bible devotion that has replaced *kuzemba* (symbolic ritual movement going forward and backward, at the grave). However, the Tonga people of Chikankata have preserved the original ritual name, as they still insouciantly refer to the performance as *Muzembo*. Something crucial to the current study from Durkheim's theory, therefore, is his observation that "yet, there is a sense in which religion, in altered forms, is likely to continue (*Ibid*). The *Muzembo* is still being observed by the people of Chikankata, in altered form, anyway.

CONCLUSION

The study focused on investigating the transformed *Muzembo* funerary ritual of the Tonga people of Chikankata in Zambia. An exploration of the observance of old *Muzembo* backdating to the time before the contact between Christianity and the Tonga People (the post-1950s when Christianity came to Chikankata) up to the current decade which has witnessed the remarkable changes in the execution of the ritual due to Christian influence, has been given. Five major themes emerging from the findings have been highlighted. The events that led to the performance of the 'old' *Muzembo* have been discussed and the actual episode of the original *Muzembo* funerary ritual has equally been presented. The study has revealed some changes in the manner the ritual has been observed over time, which has been largely due to the impact caused by the presence of Christianity, facilitated by its local converts working together with the missionaries in the area. Since some converts were simply coerced to conform to Christian norms, the conversion to the new/foreign religion was never total. This resulted into religious syncretism because people kept shifting back and forth in their religious allegiance, depending on the nature of circumstances they were faced with. The performance of the indigenous rituals, and *Muzembo* in particular, were not spared from the Christian

influence. People's resistance to completely abandon old indigenous customs were reflected in the observance of what had become the transformed 'Muzembo', which mirrored a hybrid of religion, with aspects of both Christianity and African indigenous religion.

These findings are therefore consistent with Emile Durkheim's theory that guided the study, which postulates that with the development of modern societies, the influence of religion wanes due to the modern thinking which replaces religious explanations and that there is a sense, however, in which religion in altered forms, is likely to continue.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of the current study, the author makes the following recommendations:

1. To conduct an independent study to highlight the subtle differences in the performance of *Muzembo* among Tonga people from other sub-regions of the Southern Province of Zambia, as was noted in the review of literature, something which is arguably due to different levels of the Christian impact.
2. To conduct a specific study on why some Tonga people in Chikankata who have converted to Christianity seem to have carried on with the practice of their Indigenous Religion along with Christianity, implying that their conversion was never total.

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