


## Lamba-Lamba healer-diviners in Mbala District, Zambia: the intermingling of Christianity with African indigenous spiritual flair, 2021-2023

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### ABSTRACT

This article aims to establish the relationship between Christianity and the Lamba-Lamba Healer-Diviners in Mbala District of Zambia. The study objectives were to find out the challenges experienced by Christians and healer-diviners, respectively, based on values and spiritual differences between them and establish what influence modernisation and socioeconomic changes have on the Healer-Diviners' existence in the area. To explore these, the study used descriptive techniques of the qualitative strategy, where a Phenomenological Research Design served as the foundation for data collection. The research drew upon a sample of 28 participants who were selected using purposive and snowballing methods. In-depth interview techniques were applied to obtain the required primary data, which were analysed thematically. Findings: It was revealed that there was a relationship between Christians and Healer-diviners, as evidenced by some respondents who could not differentiate between being a Christian and consulting the traditional Healer-Diviners. Despite the services of traditional healer being cast in a negative light; viewed as embodiments of a disgraceful legacy equated to paganism, some sections of the Christian community welcomed the services of the traditional divers (Ng'anga) in the district and believed in their efficacy to cleanse the society of witchcraft. The changing socioeconomic life in society prompted by modernity greatly affected the Healer-diviners. Through propaganda, agents of modernity, mostly the mass media and the Church, campaigned against the presence of the Healer-diviners. The study recommends the need for community education on exploitative religious practices, strengthening partnerships between authorities and faith organisations, and context-specific culturally sensitive spiritual guidance.

**Keywords:** Lamba-lamba, Healer-diviners, African indigenous religion, Christianity, Zambia

### INTRODUCTION / BACKGROUND

In terms of Zambia's ethno-geographic distribution, Mbala District is home to two main tribes, namely, the Mambwe and Lungu. The two ethnic groups are commonly known as the Mambwe and Lungu of Tafuna. While recent publications are generally preferred, the authors made a rare exception by utilising

the classical works of William Brelsford (1956) and William Watson (1971) to provide historical context for the origins of the Mambwe and Lungu people, given the unusual situation where the study focuses on a niche (less explored) topic. According to Brelsford (1956), the Mambwe and Lungu are two tribes that can hardly be distinguished. He says the two are believed to have migrated

from North East Africa along with the Fipa, Namwanga, and other Tanganyikan peoples to whom they are related. He further contends that the ruling line of the Mambwe is said to have been founded by a man called Changala, a Mulua who is believed to have come from Kola in Angola. For Ziwa (2024) who explored women's leadership in pre-colonial Zambia regarding Mwenya Mukulu, her study revealed that Mwenya Mukulu, who migrated from Congo with her sisters, came to settle in present-day Zambia; she had one of her sisters rule over Malaila in present-day Mbala; the second sister was assigned to rule in Mukatuya in present-day Mpulungu; the third sister became the chieftainess of the Tabwa in present-day Mporokoso, and Mwenya herself later chose to settle at Mapembe near Isoka. The sisters lived and ruled the lands and became the founding Queen Mothers of the Tabwa, Lungu and Mambwe chieftaincies in the present-day Northern Province of Zambia. Ziwa's (2024) findings from literature were supported by Mwenya Mukulu's great-grandson, who indicated, in an interview, that since Mwenya Mukulu was married to a clan which subscribed to a patrilineal system of kingship, her sons have since then been ascending to the throne as chiefs of Lungu land even in present-day Zambia. As Ziwa (2024) puts it, there might be unanswered questions on pre-historical accounts of the Lungu and Mambwe people, but the knowledge acquired in this section is enough to shed more light on their existence in Northern Province.

During the colonial period, the main part of Mambwe country under Chief Nsokolo is said to have been under the external authority of Northern Rhodesia while the other came under Tanganyika, led by Chief Muti, a descendant of Funda. In his account of the Mambwe people, William Watson describes them as follows:

*They tend to regard strangers with suspicion, an attitude justified by their past experiences. Though insular, they are hardy, and*

*resilient and cherish the independence that has been assailed so often in the past (Watson, 1971).*

The main economic occupations of the Mambwe and Lungu people are agriculture and entrepreneurship. The agriculture sector is seen as Mbala District's 'engine' of socio-economic growth, providing livelihoods for 70% of residents (ICED, 2016). Mbala town acts as a regional trade hub and supports rural communities. The district's informal sector is large (95%). Mambwes and Lungus are famously known in Zambia to be both arable and pastoral farmers. The main crops grown include maize, beans, cassava, finger millet, ground nuts and soya beans. In terms of livestock, they mainly keep cattle. Mbala is, therefore, a trade hub for cereals, livestock and non-food goods. Its trade covers most of the Northern Province of Zambia and areas of Tanzania. Cattle are exported on the Tazara railway via Choji. There are low barriers to market entry, and retailers and wholesalers conduct business with few constraints. The town acts as an economic hub for surrounding rural communities providing valuable trade and services. Mbala is also linked to nearby Mpulungu Port, which provides trade links across Lake Tanganyika through to East Africa (*ibid*).

Most Mambwe people today are Christian, many of them Anglicans; Jehovah's Witnesses, Catholics or mainstream Protestants. Traditional Mambwe religion recognises a supreme god called Leza, with worship being directed to the spirits of chiefly ancestors called *impact yamwene yafwe* (Willis, 1966). Studies have shown that many Bantu-speaking people still believe in some aspects of their native religions, especially in the powers of the ancestral spirits. For instance, the study by Podolecka & Cheyeka (2021) revealed that even though Christianity was the dominant religion in Zambia, it was far from homogenous and that apart from world religions like Roman Catholicism and Protestantism, many grassroots churches were not immune to ancient spirit veneration,

which were believed to cooperate with spirits as healer-diviners.

Despite the available exploration of the intermingling of Christianity with African Traditional religion in general, a gap remains in the academic discourse concerning the resilience of African traditional religious and cultural beliefs in some parts of Zambia. Specifically, no research has been conducted on the relationship between the *Lamba-Lamba* healer-diviners and the local communities in Mbala. This sparked the curiosity of the researchers, who felt the need to know the relationship between the two. The need to unearth what underlies this relationship was also inspired by the fact that there was no documentation on the matter.

Guided by the *Acculturation Theory*, this article looks into how the *Lamba-Lamba* Healer-Diviners in Mbala related to Christianity, under the following themes: the coming of the *Lamba-Lambas* to Mbala, the Mission of the *Lamba-Lamba*, the Reception of the *Lamba-Mba* Healer-diviners by local people, the Unmasking of the *Lamba-Lamba* Healer-diviners, as well as the Aftermath and Legacy

## **THEORETICAL LOCALE AND REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE**

### **Acculturation Theory**

This study employs *Acculturation Theory* to examine the relationship between Christianity and the activities of the *Lamba-Lamba* Healer-diviners in Mbala District. *Acculturation Theory* explains cultural exchanges, blending, and conflict between Christianity and African Indigenous spirituality (Berry, 1997; Bhabha, 1994; Mbiti, 1964). This theory helps to analyse challenges arising from value and spiritual differences, and the influence of modernity and socioeconomic changes on traditional practitioners.

### **Religious Adherence in Zambia**

In Zambia, an estimated 85% of the population professes some form of

Christianity. Another 5% are Muslim; 5% subscribe to other faiths, including Hinduism, Baha'ism, and traditional/ indigenous religions; and 5% are atheists. The majority of Christians are either Roman Catholic or Protestant. There is also a surge of new Pentecostal churches, which have attracted many young followers. Muslims tend to be concentrated in parts of the country where Asians have settled along the railroad line from Lusaka to Livingstone and in the Eastern Province (Zambia Religions 2019).

### **Divinities, Diviners, Witchcraft, Sorcery and Magic in African Religious Ontology**

The African religions recognise a group that is popularly known as divinities. Mbiti (1975) observes that these beings have been given various names by various writers, such as 'gods', 'demigods', 'nature spirits', divinities, and the like. He explains that the term divinity covers personification of God's activities and manifestations, the so-called 'nature spirits', deified heroes, and mythological figures" (p. 117). Other scholars (Ekeke and Ekeopara, 2010) acknowledge the presence of divinities everywhere in the world, and not only prominent in Africa. Njoku (2002:127) contends that in West Africa, where the concept is clearly expressed, there are many divinities. He cites the Yoruba pantheon, for example, where he says there are over 1700 divinities

In many cultures, divinities and diviners are distinct concepts. Ekeke and Ekeopara (2010) describe the Divinities as functionaries and ministers whose duties are to carry out the full instructions of the Supreme Being. They can be referred to as deities or gods, often considered supernatural beings with divine power, worshipped or revered in various cultures. Diviners, on the other hand, are individuals who are practitioners of divination. The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language defines a diviner as one that practices divination, seeking to gain insight, guidance or knowledge about the future or unknown event, through the use of

various techniques such as reading omens, interpreting dreams, or using sacred objects.

### **Diviners as Medicine Men**

Because the services of the diviners were synonymous with the wicked use of the same force in the form of witchcraft, magic and sorcery, Professor John Mbiti suggests calling their services 'medicine'. He gives a scenario where a sick person would be told by one of the 'friends of society' not only who caused him to fall sick, but what needs to be done to cure him and neutralise the evil forces working against him. The medicine man or diviner would give him herbs, and often told the sick man to perform certain rituals. In addition to physical medicine, the sick person would be given mystical medicine believed to deal with mystical causes of his troubles which he might eat, dig into the floor of the house, place on the foottop, carry about with him, or do other things with. Alternatively, the medicine man would go to the home of the sick man to apply his mystical medicine to drive the evil forces thought to be at work there (Mbiti, 2003: 171).

### **Diviners as Friends of Societies**

In sections of many cultures where the services of diviners were perceived as contrary to those of the witches, sorcery and magicians, Mbiti says the diviners earned themselves recognition as 'friends of society'. These friends of society, he observes, know mystical powers which they use for the good of society (*ibid*). He contends that what added to the growing prominence of diviners in African society was the tendency that when things went wrong, people did not end at finding out the causes, which were often believed to be human agents using magic, witchcraft or sorcery. People did not only stop at what and who had caused things to go wrong. They tried to put right what had gone wrong; to heal, to cure, to protect, to drive away evil, and to counteract or neutralize the evil use of mystical forces. To do this, Mbiti observed that African people used medicine. For African people, therefore, the term medicine employed in this context meant a lot. The term lacked an English equivalence. In its

African Traditional usage, the term was used for many purposes, one of which was to put things right and counter the forces of mystical power (*ibid*).

### **Healer-Diviners in Zambia: The Ng'anga**

Podolecka and Cheyeka conducted research in 2021 to establish if pre-Christianity beliefs in Zambia influenced Pentecostal Christianity and to find out what the healer-diviners' relationship with the Pentecostal Churches was. Even though their research was streamlined to investigate only one Christian denomination, it made revelations that are crucial to the current study. For instance, it established that many Bantu-speaking people still believe in some aspects of their native religions, especially in the powers of the ancestral spirits. The study revealed that even though Christianity was the dominant religion in Zambia, it was far from homogenous and that apart from world religions like Roman Catholicism and Protestantism, there were many Pentecostal, Charismatic, and grassroots churches, most of which were not immune to ancient spirit veneration. The study referred to people who were believed to cooperate with spirits as healer-diviners who were believed to be called to their profession by spirits. Perhaps the most critical revelation from the duo's study is that a great majority of the healer-diviners claimed to be Christians who combined Christianity with their native beliefs (Podolecka & Cheyeka, 2021).

### **Witchcraft Accusation**

According to Ellis and Ter Haar (2004), some of the clearest expressions of a search for justice expressed in a spirit idiom are the discourses of witchcraft, so widespread in Africa today. The duo describe witchcraft in its classic use in English, and in the way it was used by Evans-Pritchard, the founder of modern anthropological studies in this field in his work on the Azande of Sudan. They define the term 'witchcraft' along with Kgatla *et al* (2003) as a 'manifestation of evil believed to come from a human source' (Kgatla *et al* 2003: 5, in Ellis & Ter Haar 2004:149). Evans-Pritchard, on the other hand, described the term as designating a perception of spiritual

power employed in an evil manner or for evil purposes (Evans-Pritchard, 1937 cited in Ellis and Ter Haar 2004:149).

Ellis and Ter Haar (2004) also observe historical examples such as during the days of the overseas slave trade when there was a common practice of selling alleged witches to which gave an incentive to unscrupulous chiefs to abuse their powers. The betrayals, suspicion and opportunities for gain created by commercial slavery encouraged accusations of witchcraft (Ellis, 2002). Ellis and Ter Haar also observe that in precolonial times, an accusation against witchcraft was often made against a person whose source of wealth seemed inexplicable and who was therefore assumed to have used mystical power to become rich, probably at the expense of others and therefore in an immoral manner. The duo notes that even today, wealth can be reckoned not only in material terms but also in spiritual terms. Hence, a person advanced in age and knowledge may be seen as having accumulated spiritual wealth. They argue that this may be one reason why old people are often liable to be accused of witchcraft. Women too, because of their ability to produce life, as well as diviners and other ritual experts, are particularly vulnerable in this respect (Ellis and Ter Haar, 2004).

### **Witchcraft Accusations: Its Relation to Modernity and National Economy**

Colson (2006) observes that in Zambia, particularly among the Tonga people, the decline in the national economy, job losses and high inflation, and the rise of modernity in the 1970s were associated with the obtaining witchcraft accusations at the time. She contends that the resulting malaise and the belief that one worked without proper reward lie behind the growing frequency of witchcraft accusations and the resort to witchfinders. Colson notes that despite the bad times, some people had been able to prosper even in rural areas (*ibid*). She informs us that the last decades of the twentieth century were also associated with increased complaints by people that *muuya* (the soul) was being stolen during the night by witches,

who used it as forced labour. She says when people woke to find themselves without energy and with aching bodies prompted them to believe they had spent the night working in the witch's field or some other enterprises. She notes that nighttime fears reflected people's daytime perceptions that young people accused old people of causing great trouble to them and that they threatened to summon witchfinders to test all the old people of the villages and force them to give up their witchcraft (Colson, 2006: 227).

### **The Mingling of Christian Beliefs with Those of African Folk Religion: Religious Syncretism**

Ghansah's (2012) study on the encounter between Christianity and African traditional religion in Ghana, discusses areas where there have been conflicts and compromises. He, along with Opoku, informs us that there have been many reported cases where conflict has occurred between adherents of the indigenous religion and Christianity in Africa. Though his work focuses on the encounter of the two religions concerning the *funeral practices of the Fantes in Ghana*, it also covers some general areas where there have been conflicts and compromises, making it relevant to the current study.

According to Opoku, the conflict between Christianity and African Traditional Religion arose as a result of the insistent demand of the early missionaries that converts cut ties with the traditions and beliefs of their people (Opoku, 1978:167). Opoku observes further, that the early missionaries believed that before full conversion to Christianity could be possible, one had to first become a European of a sort. This meant that one first had to imbibe Western culture and civilisation. At the time, the Traditional Religions were seen as all evil with nothing good to offer. This perception of the Traditional Religions, in Opoku and Ghansah's view, came under heavy criticism and scrutiny. This was because the resulting conversion led to the neglect of Traditional Religious rituals as well as to the disregard of the gods, priests, and other functionaries who were critical to the efficient running of the



indigenous religion. The neglect of the gods meant that the taboos and other prohibitions which were attached to the worship of gods were no longer observed in most Akan areas.

### **Western Education as Agent of Conversion**

Opoku (1978) argues further that the agenda of the early missionaries was greatly aided by the introduction of Western education, which in turn produced a new order and a new set of values. This created a situation where the products of these Western institutions no longer felt like belonging to their original communities (Opoku, 1978:167-168). Many of the Traditional ways of transferring knowledge suffered low patronage because the products of the Western Mission Schools refused to make themselves available for the performance of Traditional practices. Some of these practices were the rite of initiation and puberty rites. These rites enabled the transfer of indigenous knowledge. This also meant that people became more secular than religious in their perspectives about life (Opoku, 1978:168). Ghansah, 2012).

Opoku opines that the attainment of self-determination by African states from their colonial masters has led to an increase in the upholding of African cultural values which has made it much possible to be an adherent of the Traditional Religions than during the colonial era. This means that to some extent, African culture is seen in a much better light by the highly educated elites in African societies than previously.

In Ghana, the pouring of libation, a rite associated with the indigenous religion is performed on national events like the annual Independence Day parade, alongside Islamic and Christian prayers. Ghanaian governments also implicitly support cultural events by honouring special invitations given to them by traditional authorities to attend these events. Besides their patronage of these cultural events, government leaders also provide state assets like loudspeakers, sheds and platforms for the use of the Traditional Authorities (Opoku, 1978:167).

According to Opoku, aside from the conflicts, accommodations between Christianity and the Traditional Religions have also made a remarkable impact on Christianity. The versatility of the indigenous religion in Ghana can be seen in the *modus operandi* of the African Independent Churches that absorb aspects of the Traditional Religions into their liturgy. The new churches have been able to cater much better than the missionary churches for the spiritual needs of Ghanaians because they have adopted the *Akan* worldview, which promotes wealth, prosperity and well-being, as well as the belief in evil spirits who are believed to be the causal agents of all problems of humanity. The new churches have seen an increase in membership largely because they operate from this perspective, which is still relevant for most people. A large chunk of the members of these churches were previously members of the missionary churches.

Since it has been generally argued that the African culture presents more similarities than differences across ethnic divides, is the experiences of the Akan community in Ghana similar in context to that of the Mbala community (study area) in Zambia, or can the Akan scenario offer the basis for analyzing the case of the Lamba-Lamba Healer-diviners in Mbala?

### **METHODOLOGY**

The study predominantly pursued a qualitative approach with a combination of two methods: phenomenological method and Document-Analysis.

#### **Phenomenological Method**

The phenomenological method focuses on lived experiences. It explored the study participants' subjective religious, and socio-economic experiences, perceptions about healer-diviners and meanings. It sets aside preconceptions and embraces openness and curiosity. An interview technique was used, guided by the phenomenological catchphrase "*back to the things themselves*". The 'things themselves', as phenomenologists understand

the phrase, are phenomena that present themselves immediately to us as conscious human beings (Crotty 1996; Crotty 1998; Hachintu 2023). Phenomenology suggests that if we lay aside, as best as we can, the prevailing understanding of the phenomena in question and revisit our immediate experience of them, possibilities for new meaning emerge for us, or we witness at least an authentication or enhancement of the former meaning (*ibid*). The researchers, therefore, sought to pursue new meaning and authentication of the understanding of the intermingling of Christianity with African Indigenous spiritualism based on participants' views in this regard. The researchers drew upon a sample of 28 participants consisting of 15 men and 23 women, intentionally selected from different Christian church denominations within the Community of Mbala which hosted the Lamba-Lamba Healer-Diviners. These were subjected to interviews, which served as the foundation for primary data collection. The recorded transcripts of the interviews were analysed thematically to determine participants' perceptions of the relationship of Lamba-Lamba Healer-Diviners with Christianity in Mbala, based on their values and spirituality.

The Document Analysis was relied upon in this study, as a supplementary source to the primary data obtained through interviews.

### ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

The study carefully observed and adhered to ethical precepts such as informed consent, confidentiality, and anonymity at all stages to build trust and confidence among respondents and participants (Kumar & Mandhar 2020; Kang 2023). Three ethical considerations, 'informed Consent', 'voluntary participation', and 'respect for privacy', were applied.

**Informed consent:** Consent for participants to take part in the study was sought from the local authorities and churches in Mbala while the proposal for the study was cleared of any human subjects' rights infringement by the

Research Ethics Committee from Kwame Nkrumah University. Researchers ensured that participants understood the study's purpose and benefits.

Voluntary participation was sought to ensure that participants were not coerced or pressured into the study. Respect for privacy was also sought to maintain confidentiality and protect participants' information. The participants agreed to be interviewed on condition that their identity (in terms of their names) was not disclosed.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

### Religious Affiliation of Participants

The findings on religious adherence of participants in the current study reveal a paradoxical situation where the adherence to the faith tradition claimed was not always consistent with the held religious beliefs. This came to light when responding to the question on religious affiliation, where most participants claimed to be Christian. However when asked whether they supported the activities of the *Lamba-Lamba* diviners, some of the participants answered in the affirmative, while a few of them (21%) responded in the negative. When asked to justify their stance on the subject, those in support of the diviners' activities said they believed in the existence of witches within their community and that they welcomed the idea of having the diviners and witchfinders in their midst to cleanse society of the witchcraft. One participant said:

*They [diviners] were well received by headmen, chiefs and by some sections of the Christian community; though some Christians were compelled to welcome them in fear of being called witches. The work of the Lamba-Lamba diviners was supported by many people since they were removing*

*witchcraft which killed a lot of people. After the Lamba-Lambas left the district, there was a change in the suspects' behaviour, as they feared to be exposed if the Lamba-Lamba were to come back. (Interview with Kawimbe Village Resident, Mbala, August 17, 2024).*

The quote above depicts some elements of pressure to conform, religious compromise and syncretism among people in Mbala. Other scholarly work (Ghansah, 2012; Hachintu, 2024) suggests a similar back-and-forth swing in the religious adherence among African converts to new (Christianity / Islam) religions, implying that conversion to these Semitic religions has never been total. Ghansah (2012), for example, indicates that scholars of religion have observed that some Christians revert to the indigenous religion in times of difficulties such as an inability to give birth or due to recurrent misfortunes such as fatal deaths, and loss of wealth in weird circumstances.

This scenario is also a demonstration of retained beliefs in witchcraft (which is an aspect of the traditional folk religion) among members of the host community in Mbala, which is predominantly profess Christianity. This is consistent with Professor John Mbiti's observation that "it is a widely known fact that many African Christians remain immersed in their folk religion and that "the African is notoriously religious" (Mbiti 2003:2). Mbiti observes further that no matter how long a person has been a member of a Christian church or how educated he/she might be, the old ways of the local folk religion has left a big impression on his/her life. He contends that even though many Christian leaders openly oppose the local folk religions, most people (throughout Africa) are still influenced in many areas of their lives by the folk tenets and practices.

In Zambia, Hachintu's (2024) study of the 'Transformed Muzembo Funerary Ritual of the Tonga People' revealed a similar tendency where, although there were some changes in the manner the ritual had been observed over time, largely due to the impact of Christianity and modernity facilitated by its local converts working together with the missionaries in the area, 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 also draw similarities with that of a legendary scholar-Professor Elizabeth Colson, who noted a similar resistance by some people in Zambia to abandon their old customs at the coming of the HIV/AIDS. From the perspective of Colson, some Tonga people shifted back and forth in their beliefs according to some circumstances they were faced with. She observed 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).

### **Lamba-Lambas' Early Settlements in Mbala District**

According to informants in this study, the *Lambalamba* healer-diviners first entered the Mbala district from Tanzania around 2021 and settled in the rural area on the outskirts of Mbala town, especially around the surrounding villages. They eventually gained entrance into the township and became prominent in shanty compounds like the *Zambian Compound* (commonly called *kuma-*



Rounds) and around the St. Paul mission area. The desire to establish themselves among Zambians continued to grow. One interviewee said:

*They were first found in the rural parts of the district and later started moving from one village to another. They could be spotted a few times in town; eventually, some of them settled in shunt compounds of Mbala (Interview with a Ma-Round Compound Resident, Mbala, August 17, 2024).*

Informants also said the Lamba-lamba healer-diviners became prominent around the Lake Chila and Luse-lwa Lesa areas of the Mbala district.

### **The Lamba-Lambas' Mission**

How could the mission of the *Lamba-Lamba* Healer-diviner in Mbala be described? Simply put, the *Lamba-lambas* were witchcraft eradicators or witchfinders who came to Mbala with the core mission of cleansing the Mambwe and Lungu communities of witchcraft and healing the victims of witchcraft-associated afflictions. Interviews with participants in the current study revealed the use of magical practices to detect, remove, and destroy juju (charms) from suspected witches. Narratives from participants indicated that the Diviners/witchfinders employed charm-casting techniques under trees to protect communities from alleged witchcraft. They also used magical rituals to confiscate charms from perceived witches, which were then destroyed or neutralised.

### **Reception of the Diviners by Local People in Mbala**

The arrival of the healer-diviners in Mbala, aimed at eradicating witchcraft, elicited enthusiastic support from traditional leaders and some of their subjects but sparked vehement opposition from some Christians in

the district, who condemned their practices as evil. According to the Key Informant interviewees (KIIs), the *Lambalamba* Healer-diviners were welcomed by headmen and chiefs at their first coming to the district. For instance, informants said one of their early settlements was at Kawimbe

**Fig 1:** A Scene of Witchcraft Cleansing Ritual under a Tree



Source: Field Data

village, where they settled near the headman's farm and began their mission. Interviewees explained that the host community members were happy about them. However, they also indicated that their presence in Mbala did not mean well to some sections of society, especially within the Christian Community. A nurse at Mbala Hospital recounted:

*Community members were happy about them, but some Church members were not happy. As we speak now, many Lambalambas have since gone back to Tanzania, but some have married the local people and have decided to stay back (Interview with a Mbala Town Resident, Mbala, August 18, 2024).*

The widely varied opinions of people in Mbala district, therefore, reflected people's deeper-seated differences based on religious beliefs within the Mbala district. In other words, the community seemed to have been split between

those who regarded the diviners as beneficial and those who viewed their practices as malevolent.

### **The Unmasking of the *Lamba-Lamba* Healer-Diviners**

The influx of *Lamba-Lamba* Healer-Divers in Mbala sparked religious tension and syncretism within the Christian community, particularly among vulnerable populations seeking solutions to socioeconomic challenges.

**Exposing Deceptive Practices:** Informants said the *Lamba-Lamba* Healer-Divers exploited rural farming communities during harvest seasons, preying on suspicion and fear. Key informant in this study explained that over time, residents discovered the manipulative tactics used by these healer-diviners which included collusion with locals to target economically prosperous individuals, the use of toxic substances (Terylene) to induce a semi-conscious state and coerce false confessions through what they termed as psychological manipulation.

Interviews with key informants narrated that the *Lamba-Lamba* Healer-diviners had a timing where they usually executed their operations to 'hunt' for alleged witches, usually during the crop harvest season, since most of the rural population in Mbala is into farming. They revealed that with time, people discovered a conspiracy where the diviners played on people's minds using trickery methods. One informant recounted:

*...they popularly carried out their activities during crop harvest season; they would go to the homes of a suspect witch in the village after being tipped by locals about the suspect's economic viability, and place a chemical substance called Terylene in a toilet, without the suspect's knowledge. The suspect would then inhale the chemical which*

*affected the central nervous system, making him/her semi-conscious. In this state of mind, the diviners would then shout any command to the victim and he/she would comply, including admitting certain accusations in the hearing of the public viewers. Upon the victim admitting to the, otherwise, false accusations, they would prosecute and charge him/her and the payment would go to the diviners (Interview with a Rural Resident, Mbala, August 16, 2024).*

Concerning the alleged witch-hunt, the obtained suspicions about the presence of witches may not be unique to the Mbala communities. According to Ellis and Ter Haar (2004), this is a clearest expressions of a search for justice expressed in a spirit idiom backdating way back in history. The duo explains that before the establishment of colonial states whose institutions were designed on a European model, witchcraft beliefs in Africa might result in accusations against individuals and in their condemnation and even execution. They observe that this would normally take place in a context where there was a degree of consensus concerning which authority could legitimately decide on such matters. De Craemer *et al.* (1976) add that such occasional 'anti-witchcraft drives' at the time, "aimed to cleanse communities by identifying suspected witches and rendering them harmless, often through some form of ritual purification".

The findings are also consistent with Ellis and Ter Haar's (2004) observation that "an accusation against witchcraft was often made against a person whose source of wealth seemed inexplicable and who was therefore assumed to have used mystical power to become rich, probably at the expense of others and therefore in an immoral manner. They

may also reflect Elizabeth Colson's association of the decline in the national economy, job losses and high inflation, and the rise of modernity with witchcraft accusations, where she contends that the "resulting malaise and belief lie behind the growing frequency of witchcraft accusations and the resort to witchfinders. (Colson, 2006: 227).

The findings of the current study regarding the witch-hunt in Mbala, therefore, may be mirroring some common expressions of discourses of witchcraft, so widespread in Africa today, as indicated by the renowned scholars above.

**Community Backlash and Authorities' Intervention:** Participants narrated that as deception reached unsustainable levels, the community revolted, prompting local authorities to intervene. A pivotal incident at "Danger-Hill" led to an immediate ban on the *Lamba-Lamba* diviners, revoking their operation permits and resolving to arrest any one of them found practising in the district.

### **The Aftermath and Legacy**

The future of the *Lamba-Lamba* Healer-diviners in Mbala came to a threat after the community rose against them in what they termed "a moment when issues got out of hand". People could not contain the deception any longer. In describing the episode marking the peak of the moment, a participant narrated an incident in which community leadership reported the matter to the local authority at the Mbala Municipal Council, who came with armed police officers to immediately effect an arrest on the diviners who were caught in their action at a place called "Danger-Hill" in Mbala District. She recalled:

*The authority further revealed the Lamba-Lambas' activities in the district and ordered them to flee immediately. This marked the official end of the Lamba-Lambas' existence in the district.*

*Since then, the local authorities no longer issue permits to the Lamba-Lamba to operate in the district, and their illegal existence is only reported in remote rural areas (Interview with a Senior Citizen Luse-lwa Lesa Area, Mbala, August 16, 2024).*

Since the authorities' crackdown, the *Lamba-Lambas'* influence has waned, with reduced visibility in Mbala's urban areas. Today, the diviners' limited clandestine operations reports can only be heard from remote rural areas, and there is enhanced community vigilance against their exploitative practice.

### **The Nexus between Theories and Findings**

There is a connection between the findings of the study and the *Acculturation Theory* employed to make meaning of the findings. For instance, the theory examines the relationship between Christianity and aspects of the African Indigenous spiritualities, such as witchcraft and divinities, which resonates well with the activities of the *Lamba-Lamba* diviners. Most critical to the current study is the theory's explanation of the cultural exchanges, blending, and conflict between Christianity and African Indigenous spirituality, which helps analyse challenges arising from value and spiritual differences in the intermingling of Christians and the *Lamba-Lamba* Healer-diviners in Mbala.

### **CONCLUSION**

This study has explored the *Lamba-Lamba* Healer-diviners' presence in Mbala District, Northern Zambia; their coming to the district, their mission and how they were received by the local people. The study has revealed the events that led to the *Lamba-Lambas* exit the district and the aftermath of their brief mission in the district. The relationship between the *Lamba-Lamba* Healer-diviners

and the Christian community has been established.

Upon coming to Mbala, the *Lamba-Lamba* Healer-diviners found themselves in a diverse religious landscape, with Christianity and African Traditional Religion (ATR) being the dominant faiths. The district was home to various Christian denominations, including the United Church of Zambia, the Seventh-day Adventist Church, the Roman Catholic, the Methodist Church and the Anglican Church, coexisting with the traditional folk religious beliefs and practices. The study reveals some mischief for economic gains in the guise of religious performances, at the core of the *Lamba-Lamba Healer-diviners'* mission. The *Lamba-Lambas'* ultimate episode as revealed by this study, therefore, highlights the dangers of syncretism, exploitation and manipulation in the name of spirituality. This study, in other words, has revealed a paradoxical situation surrounding religious syncretism in Mbala stemming from the complex interplay between the traditional folk religious practices and tenets of Christianity and modernity where, on one hand, syncretism is encouraged by local residents (Christians) who supported the healer-diviners, as a means of cultural expression and contextualizing Christianity within an African culture. This blending of traditions allows for a more nuanced understanding of spirituality and acknowledges the cultural heritage of an African community.

On the other hand, the study has highlighted the episode of community backlash against syncretism, resulting in legal actions against the healer-diviners. This pushback can be attributed to the influence of Western Christianity, modernisation and fear of the unknown. The study, therefore, underscores the need for critical discernment within Christian communities, collaboration between authorities and faith leaders and contextualised ethical spiritual practices.

## RECOMMENDATION

Based on the study's findings, the author recommends the following:

- Providing Community Education on exploitative religious practices
- Strengthening partnership between authorities and faith organisations
- Providing Context-specific, culturally sensitive spiritual guidance

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