

The persistence of indigenous mystical cosmology among Bemba Catholics in Mpika, Zambia

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Abstract

In the contemporary Mpika District of Zambia, Bemba Catholics have continued to maintain their belief in and practice of the mystical powers of the indigenous Bemba cosmology and spirituality. This is despite a century of evangelisation and condemnation of the mystical beliefs and practices. To understand the enduring nature of this belief and the reasons for its endurance, a descriptive case study was employed within a qualitative research approach. In-depth interviews and focus group discussions were used to collect data, and thematic framework analysis was utilised to analyse the data. Lay Bemba Catholics, Catholic clergy, and community headmen were studied. A homogeneous purposive sampling method was applied to select 34 participants. Bemba Catholics integrate traditional beliefs and practices into their Catholic lives, shaped by their native cosmological worldview. This merging of cultural values influences their religious practices and identity, highlighting the intersection of socio-religious and cultural factors behind the persistence of this belief. The pervasive fear and anxiety associated with mystical reality also contribute to their belief in supernatural powers. The study contributes to the appreciation of the relevance of indigenous belief and practice in modern Christians' experience and to awareness of cultural sensitivity in dialogue with indigenous African belief and practice. The study recommends that the Church engage with knowledgeable indigenous people in African beliefs and practices to appreciate and enhance the coexistence of indigenous beliefs in supernatural powers and the Catholic faith.

Di Distrik Mpika, Zambia, masyarakat Katolik Bemba masih mempertahankan kepercayaan dan praktik terhadap kekuatan mistis yang berasal dari kosmologi dan spiritualitas asli Bemba. Hal ini tetap berlangsung meskipun evangelisasi Katolik telah berjalan selama lebih dari satu abad dan meskipun kepercayaan serta praktik mistis tersebut kerap mendapat penolakan. Untuk memahami mengapa kepercayaan ini tetap bertahan, penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif dengan desain studi kasus deskriptif. Data dikumpulkan melalui wawancara mendalam dan diskusi kelompok terarah, kemudian dianalisis menggunakan analisis kerangka tematik. Informan penelitian meliputi umat Katolik Bemba awam, rohaniwan Katolik, dan para kepala komunitas. Sebanyak 34 partisipan dipilih melalui teknik purposive sampling homogen. Temuan penelitian menunjukkan bahwa umat Katolik Bemba mengintegrasikan kepercayaan dan praktik tradisional ke dalam kehidupan Katolik mereka, yang dipengaruhi oleh pandangan kosmologis asli mereka. Perpaduan nilai-nilai budaya ini memengaruhi praktik dan identitas keagamaan mereka, sekaligus menunjukkan adanya keterkaitan antara faktor sosial-keagamaan dan budaya yang membuat kepercayaan tersebut terus bertahan. Rasa takut dan kecemasan yang kuat terhadap realitas mistis juga turut memperkuat kepercayaan mereka terhadap kekuatan supernatural. Penelitian ini berkontribusi pada pemahaman mengenai pentingnya kepercayaan dan praktik indigenous dalam pengalaman kekristenan modern, serta menekankan perlunya kepekaan budaya dalam dialog dengan kepercayaan dan praktik indigenous Afrika. Penelitian ini merekomendasikan agar Gereja melibatkan orang-orang yang memahami kepercayaan dan praktik indigenous Afrika agar dapat membangun pemahaman yang lebih baik dan mendukung koeksistensi antara kepercayaan terhadap kekuatan supernatural dan iman Katolik.

Keywords: *Cosmology, Culture, Mystical powers, Traditional healing, Witchcraft.*

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Introduction

The Catholic Church has evangelised Muchinga Province in Zambia for over a century. Since then, many Bemba people have converted to the Catholic faith. Although Catholicism has a rich history among Bemba Catholics, some have not fully discarded the beliefs, practices, worldviews, and cosmologies of their homeland. These beliefs continue to endure in contemporary times despite technological progress, widespread urbanisation, and globalisation. The persistent belief in supernatural abilities among Bemba Catholics demonstrates that these traditional aspects still hold importance (Hinfelaar, 2004). Chanda (2024) and Hinfelaar (2004) noted that Catholics sometimes sought witch-finding and divination, revealing fear of and interest in magic, and employing charms and traditional medicines in specific situations. In this study, supernatural powers, mystical powers, and magical powers are used interchangeably to refer to impersonal forces or influences that affect people's events and lives, as believed in the indigenous cosmology of the Bemba people.

The persistence of African indigenous beliefs among African Christians can be organised into several thematic categories, especially the psychological, cultural, and theological dimensions that sustain these practices despite evangelisation and formal Christianity. Numerous studies indicate that syncretism operates as an important mechanism for this integration, although not always explicitly labelled as such. Zaluchu (2025) stresses that Christian doctrines are frequently adapted to local customs, particularly through ancestral veneration, while Galvin et al., (2024) demonstrates a synthesis of spiritual and medical modalities among traditional healers. Aluede & Ikhidero (2024) argue that indigenous beliefs can harmonise with Christian values and strengthen cultural identity, and Kgatle (2023) observes that syncretistic practices are prevalent in new prophetic churches. Collectively, these studies suggest a strategic adaptation characterised more by negotiated incorporation than outright rejection (Chanda et al., 2026).

The belief in supernatural powers is a worldwide phenomenon (Gehman, 2005). Even with globalisation, socio-economic shifts, religious influences, and other changes that have transformed human existence, African perspectives on supernatural forces remain strong and consistent (Kagama, 2020). The belief in impersonal or mystical powers is dominant in African thought (Turaki, 2000), deeply rooted in many African indigenous religions (Mbiti, 1991), and prevalent among African Christians across the continent.

The study of the Tumbuka and Chewa of Malawi indicated that many who claimed to be Christians still held onto a dual religious cosmology. Sub-Saharan Christians adhere tenaciously to AIR's beliefs, practices and cultural values (Mlenga, 2016). She clarified that this phenomenon has not translated into the practice of both Christianity and AIR, but the holding onto and practising of certain traditional beliefs from AIR. Bascom and Herskovits (in Sounou, 2014) argue that the concentration of Christian missionary undertakings of evangelisation, which have marked various parts of Africa, has not affected African religions, continuing to manifest vivacity everywhere. The liveliness can be observed in the respect paid to ancestors, the use of divination, sorcery, and other customs that are followed by African traditionalists and those who have embraced Christianity.

To comprehend cultural significance, religious interactions, and misconceptions, it is crucial to investigate how Bemba Catholic adherents maintain their supernatural beliefs. This study deepens the understanding of the contemporary religious landscape, promotes dialogue between traditional beliefs and Christian practices, and provides a distinct view through in-depth interviews and focus groups among Bemba Catholics, priests, and traditional leaders.

Indigenous belief systems are deeply embedded within the African worldview and spiritual cosmology, which contributes to their resilience. Yeboah et al., (2024) argue that African mental frameworks are strongly influenced by traditional beliefs, while Sisiani et al., (2023) assert that traditional spirituality

continues to express and reshape cultural identities in Christian practices. Sarfo (2023) and Magaya (2021) similarly contend that traditional religions remain dynamic, adaptable, and capable of coexistence with Christianity through cultural continuity and communal tolerance.

Nevertheless, tensions arising from colonisation and missionary endeavours persist and continue to shape contemporary practices. Asamoah & Kpalam (2023), Opuni-Frimpong (2021a), Mawere et al., (2021), and Ugba (2021) critique the insufficient critical engagement within African Christianity concerning traditional beliefs, including missionary suppression, marginalisation, and rejection of indigenous healing methodologies. These tensions encouraged a narrative of incompatibility, but also promoted covert retention, reinterpretation, and cultural resistance. Heto & Mino (2022) emphasise the resilience rooted in traditional authority structures and cultural familiarity, which continue to sustain indigenous knowledge systems in the face of globalisation and colonial legacies.

Ugba (2021) highlights that the colonial encounter, where European missionaries harboured a strong sense of cultural superiority, ultimately contributed to the resilience of indigenous beliefs. He argues that the cultural and worldview differences between European Christianity and African traditional religions positioned these indigenous beliefs not only to survive but to flourish as integral components of Shona identity and spiritual life. This phenomenon represents a legacy of cultural resistance, tied to historical power imbalances, wherein indigenous communities preserved their beliefs as a means of affirming their culture while simultaneously pushing back against colonial dominance. Kwaku & Apaah (2024) further discuss the historical influence of indigenous beliefs on African Christianity. They reference African Church Fathers who, in their interactions with Christian teachings, found that indigenous practices did not simply disappear; instead, they remained a vital part of the religious landscape. This suggests that indigenous beliefs are not mere additions but are deeply ingrained within African Christianity, thus creating a syncretic tradition that

continues to evolve through ongoing dialogue between different practices.

Chibuye & Buitendag (2020) emphasise the ongoing relevance of indigenous beliefs in ecological matters, arguing that they can naturally integrate with Christian teachings. Uwaegbute (2021) attributes the persistence of certain beliefs to cultural attachment, community identity, and revivalist movements, indicating that indigenous practices are deeply integrated into daily communal life and social unity.

Resane (2024) addresses the disappointment that arises when prophecies fail or remain unfulfilled, leading individuals towards indigenous practices within New Prophetic Churches. He advocates contextual studies that take indigenous worldviews seriously. Opuni-Frimpong (2021b) similarly critiques the insufficient integration of indigenous beliefs into Christian theology and supports community-based, culturally relevant theology that reflects the lived experiences and spiritual expressions of African Christians.

The history of 124 years of the Catholic Church's presence and evangelisation in Mpika illustrates the foundations of Catholicism among the Bemba people. However, Oger (1991) and Chanda & Cheyeka (2024) observed that during crises such as sickness, death, disputes, and distress, some Bemba Catholics tend to turn to traditional beliefs for answers and solutions. Hinfelaar (2004) emphasises that Bemba Catholics share in the broader Bemba belief in mystical powers. Ogez (1991) indicated that fear leads them to believe in supernatural powers and practise rituals such as witch-hunting, magic, sorcery, and witchcraft. Ogez (1991) supports Garvey (1974) and Chanda (2024), who show that fear of occult powers influences self-fortification, the fortification of children, and the protection of homes, belongings, and fields with charms. According to Hinfelaar (2004), some Catholics, in certain circumstances, turn to witch-finding divination, charms, and traditional medicines.

As Pope John Paul II stated in *Ecclesia in Africa* (as referenced in Sourou, 2014), peaceful and careful dialogue about AIR could help protect Catholics from

negative influences that affect many African Catholics. In support of this, Cyprian, a Catholic bishop (Mbuka, 2002), stated that all Africans have African traditional religion as their social and religious background. The inquiry into why Bemba Catholics continue to believe in supernatural forces, even after years of criticism and condemnation of Bemba indigenous beliefs, practices, perspectives, and cosmologies, is therefore deserving of examination.

Ancestral spirits have a dual role in protecting people from starvation, droughts, sickness, and witchcraft, and punishing those who break moral rules (Scott, 2006). Traditionally, Bantu people believe that worshipping ancestral spirits brings good health, prosperity, and success in life (Amanze, 2010). Rheenen (1991) observed that African people often lived in fear of spiritual powers believed to bring evil. Garvey (1974) observed that some Bemba Catholics become involved in supernatural powers because these are part of culture and tradition, while Magesa (1998) noted that some community members engage in mystical rituals because their families hold such beliefs. Brendan Patrick Carmody's studies of conversion to Catholicism in Zambia highlight the complex relationship between cultural change, missionary endeavour, and spiritual awareness. Carmody (1999) contends that missionary instruction strengthened Catholic dedication, while Oger (1991) argues that partial assimilation into Catholicism created an environment where mystical beliefs remained significant. Carmody (2001; 2007) highlights how local cosmological worldviews influenced Catholic converts' reversion to African beliefs and practices. Arguably, catechetical approaches have not fully deterred Bemba Catholics from embracing the cosmological heritage of supernatural powers because, as Mbiti (1991) argues, Africans cannot be separated from culture and tradition.

This persistent belief in magical powers among Bemba Catholics poses a significant challenge to understanding the connection between their traditional beliefs and the current religious landscape in Mpika District, Zambia. Despite evangelisation and modern knowledge, such beliefs continue to exist well into

the twenty-first century, raising questions about their origins, cultural significance, and the elements that sustain their existence. Therefore, this study investigates the persistence of belief in mystical powers among Bemba Catholics by focusing on two related concerns: the nature of this belief and the reasons behind its endurance despite more than a century of Catholic evangelisation and teaching. By situating the inquiry within the lived experiences of lay Catholics, clergy, and headmen, the study clarifies how belief, fear, cultural identity, and pastoral response interact in a local African Catholic context.

Methodologically, this study used a qualitative research approach with a descriptive case study design. The study was conducted in Mpika District, Zambia, and the population comprised Bemba Catholics, Catholic priests, and community headmen. In-depth interviews and focus group discussions were used to gather primary qualitative data. A homogeneous purposive sampling method was applied because the study targeted respondents who shared relevant characteristics and were expected to have adequate knowledge of the research problem. The sample consisted of 34 participants: twenty-six lay Bemba Catholics, four Catholic priests, and four headmen. The participants were coded as P1 to P22 for Bemba Catholics, A-D for Catholic priests, F-I for headmen, and FGD for focus group discussion participants.

The data were analysed using thematic framework analysis, which was appropriate for uncovering participants' viewpoints, convictions, and experiences. The researcher familiarised himself with the data, identified recurring themes through manual coding, developed a systematic framework, and interpreted relationships between themes and the research questions. The findings were then presented coherently and supported with direct participant quotations. The study observed research rigour and ethics by maintaining confidentiality, privacy, autonomy, and freedom of the participants and their data.

Horton's intellectual conversion theory

As noted in Horton's (1971) intellectualist theory of conversion, conversion to Christianity in Africa was influenced by social changes brought about by colonialism and modernity rather than by religious conviction alone. Given the tenacious adherence of Bemba Catholics to traditional and cultural beliefs, especially those related to supernatural powers and the cult of ancestors, these Catholics may be understood as negotiating between the Christian faith and the local macrocosm. Modernity and colonialism, which helped facilitate conversion, cannot be expected to sustain faith or address all issues that emerge in changing times. According to Horton, conversion is a social-religious phenomenon with both social and religious causes. African change does not simply isolate traditional beliefs while adopting new ones; instead, non-holistic conversion can allow mystical beliefs and practices to persist.

It can therefore be argued that modernity and colonialism no longer maintain the faith of the indigenous people or offer solutions to their issues in today's world. In his view, modernity and colonialism, as effective solutions to problems of existence and society, have become increasingly limited. However, this premise also indicates that in those situations where modernity and colonialism have not fully provided for the spiritual and practical needs of local people, individuals have been inclined to return to or reconcile with an indigenous belief system when, precisely and holistically, cultural relevance in coping with the challenges of life is lacking from the perspectives of religious institutions. Bemba Catholics continue with their deep-rooted tradition that still influences their values, even after converting to Catholicism; some of their indigenous cosmologies remain in existence. They have continued to believe that a spirit world exists and that mystics and spirit beings can influence their daily lives because the Catholic teachings and practices are labelled inadequate in addressing specific socio-economic hardships, fears and uncertainties.

The gap created between the religious ideology and what people experience daily leaves space for traditional truths to appear more relevant and efficient in interpreting and managing local believers' problems. Also, borrowing from Horton, Bemba Catholics could be said to be upholding indigenous beliefs because of some form of cultural syncretism formed out of exasperation over the perceived spiritual thinness of modern religious institutions. Their conversions tend to be non-holistic or superficial, whereby their traditional beliefs are not rejected but retained and reinterpreted. Many Bemba Catholics revert to old sacrificial practices and mystical rites, mostly to restore and reclaim what they feel has been deprived of them by the West and colonialism. Their continued participation in mystical-related rituals is a sign of resistance and adjustment, explaining how traditional cosmologies and spiritualities serve as a backup for the spiritual voids caused by disenchantment or inadequate religious experiences.

The belief in supernatural powers among contemporary Bemba Catholics

Bemba Catholics' belief in supernatural powers in contemporary times appears through several key themes, including religious syncretism and cultural identity, fear of witchcraft, traditional medicine and healing, divination, ancestral spirituality, rituals, vows, oaths, and magic-related practices

Religious syncretism and cultural identity

The Bemba Catholics' acceptance of the supernatural aspects of Bemba cosmology is influenced by their engagement with the beliefs held by other tribe members and traditional religious practitioners. For instance, P1 argued that her belief in supernatural powers was rooted in Bemba culture and traditions, making it challenging to abandon even as a Christian. P1 further emphasised that Bemba Catholics possessed a deep connection to the traditional, religious and cultural belief systems that encompass a cosmology of mystical powers. Headman G affirmed the deep-seated nature of belief in supernatural forces among Bemba

Catholics, noting, “Mystical powers provide us with the essential understanding that explains every phenomenon in the world and all occurrences that affect us daily as Bemba people.” The Bemba Catholics identify with their culture and engage in syncretic behaviours, evident in their engagement in the manifestations of supernatural powers. As Hinfelaar (2004) and Chanda (2024) note, even while avowing Catholicism, certain situations led some Catholics to participate in divination practices related to witchcraft, indicating their apprehension and interest in magic through the use of both charms and traditional medicine. Arguably, supernatural beliefs function as a key component of cultural identity for Bemba Catholics.

Bemba Catholics integrate their cultural beliefs in mystical powers with their Catholic faith. However, this integration causes occasional tension between these belief systems and the impact of catechetical education on religious identity and practices. For instance, Headman F added that he believed that there were individuals in society who utilised malevolent supernatural powers to cause harm and even death. P20 affirmed that magical powers existed in various aspects, such as divination, traditional medicine, traditional healing, magic, charms and rituals, many of which were seen as benevolent manifestations of such powers. Additionally, participants also expressed their faith in good individuals in society who utilised these supernatural powers for benevolent purposes, such as protecting, healing, and blessing people, land, property, and nature. Unpleasant events in life, such as suffering, illness, and death, are attributed to the cause of witchcraft, sorcery, magic and spirits. P17 further supported this claim by stating, “Supernatural powers are the root cause of illnesses, suffering, death and other misfortunes experienced by individuals in this world.”

The Bemba people’s cultural and religious practices are the foundation of this belief, informing their understanding of the spiritual world. Despite receiving catechetical education and continuing to do so, there is a division in behaviour among Bemba Catholics. The findings of this study contradict Carmody’s (1999)

claims that catechetical education was a fundamental tool employed by Catholic missionaries to facilitate conversions by educating individuals, promoting adherence to rituals, shaping religious identities, integrating faith with knowledge, and cultivating unwavering religious commitment among the converted individuals.

Fear, witchcraft, traditional medicine and divination

Bemba Catholics weave their traditional beliefs in witchcraft and traditional healing into their Catholic lives, and the coexistence of these worldviews and their influence on daily life, rituals, and perceptions of suffering within the community. There is tension between traditional practices and the teachings of the Church, particularly in addressing fears related to supernatural powers. According to Rheenen (1991), a pervasive fear of malevolent spiritual forces characterises the lives of many Africans. For instance, participants conveyed the belief that incisions had the potential to shield them from negative magic, witchcraft, and sorcery. The majority of Participants confirmed that certain rituals could manifest mystical powers. According to Priest C, the Bemba people believe in the influence of the supernatural world on their daily lives. For Bemba Catholics, supernatural powers explain various aspects of life and community practices, including rituals and social interactions. They interpret their daily experiences through the lens of mystical powers, believing that these forces impact their lives. Some Bemba Catholics attribute supernatural powers to practices such as witchcraft, sorcery, magic, spells, curses and rituals.

P7 asserted, “Supernatural powers are believed to be used by ill-hearted people in society to cause harm and even death to others and their belongings.” P9 similarly argued, “We believe in supernatural powers present in divination, traditional medicine, healing, magic, charms and rituals.” This belief leads many Bemba Catholics to fear the wrath of these powers and to believe in ritual practices such as witch-hunting, magic, sorcery, and witchcraft. They also believe

that these powers can possess objects, humans, and nature, and can move from one body or person to another. Oger (1991) and Chanda & Cheyeka (2024) contend that belief in and fear of witchcraft and sorcery lead to the widespread use of protective charms and rituals against occult forces. To the Bemba people, suffering, sickness, death, and evil are often understood as the doings of supernatural forces beyond their control.

Traditional spirituality: cult of ancestors, rituals, vows and oaths

Bemba society views natural, physical, spiritual, and social phenomena as having magical causes linked to ancestral spirits. Spirits of the ancestors and the dead are believed to bless or punish a child's future life and influence people's lives. P4 argued, "Many of us Bemba Catholics also share in the Bemba traditional belief that mystical powers, the spirit world, and spirit beings influence the course of our lives." The belief in mystical realities governs the social, physical, and spiritual phenomena of the Bemba people, whether Christian or traditionalist. P2 argued that traditional healers possess mystical powers, while P18 asserted that traditional body cuts and incisions protect people from bad magic, witchcraft, and sorcery. Priest A alleged that some sicknesses and misfortunes are consequences of curses and broken oaths and vows. Headman H, a medicine man, also stated that oaths and vows mean agreement with ancestral spirits, the spirits of the dead, and non-human spirits. In the African context, ancestral spirits protect the community from hardship and punish those who transgress moral norms (Scott, 2006). According to Amanze (2010), the Bantu traditionally believe that health, prosperity, and life success are linked to veneration of ancestral spirits.

Belief and practice of magic rituals

Bemba Catholics believe that magic rituals in Bemba cosmology contain supernatural powers and can affect agriculture, personal development, career

success, and health. For P5, certain rituals manifest mystical powers, showing that rituals remain central to Bemba cultural and social life. The supernatural powers believed to be inherent in rituals, especially those that benefit human well-being, explain why agricultural, personal, and health rituals remain important. Difficult periods, such as infertility, prolonged illness, financial troubles, and family disputes, also give rise to this belief (Oger, 1991). This situation unconsciously formed an environment favourable to syncretism, allowing traditional beliefs to fuse with Church doctrines and making it easier for some individuals to shift to the new faith.

The persistence of the belief in supernatural powers among Bemba Catholics

The findings of this study have revealed that the reason the belief in supernatural powers has persisted among Bemba Catholics was because of the Bemba people's conceptualisation and application of mystical elucidations for events and circumstances, understanding of the supernatural, their perceptions of causation, cosmologically induced fear and anxiety, socio-cultural and religious dynamics, the perceived inefficacy of the Church in addressing spiritual issues, and the integration of the Bemba AIR with daily life, alongside the challenges of converting to Catholicism.

Supernatural powers are behind every event and circumstance

Despite the Bemba Catholics professing the Catholic faith and following its teachings, and a century of their Church's influence, some of them continue to believe in the supernatural abilities of traditional beliefs. The Bemba people's beliefs and practices in supernatural powers lie in their conceptualisation of the supernatural. Headman D argued, "Bemba people's traditional understanding of the supernatural entails a relationship between the mystical world and our world; we apply supernatural reasons to events and circumstances that happen to us."

According to Garvey (1994), this situation arises from the considerable rejection by early missionaries and indigenous Catholic priests of the supernatural explanations used by the Bemba cosmology and spirituality to make sense of events and circumstances, which they viewed as primitive and irrational. Therefore, Bemba followers of Catholicism have embraced and still embrace the traditional Bemba understanding of reality, which emphasises the supernatural as cause.

The Bemba community has long acknowledged the presence of a supernatural dimension that greatly impacts their lives and everyday practices (Garvey, 1974). Priest B argued, “Bemba people’s traditional knowledge explains and provides answers to the phenomena of misfortunes such as illness, suffering and death, which they believe the Catholic Church does not provide.” Oger (1991) argued that Catholic theological and scientific interpretations of common events such as suffering, illness, and evil might not completely fulfil the spiritual requirements of Africans. The Bemba traditional understanding of the supernatural influences a Bemba Catholic’s interest in mystical powers.

The Bemba people’s conceptualisation of the supernatural

The Bemba people possess a distinctive comprehension of the supernatural and maintain a link between the mystical realm and the physical world. They attribute supernatural reasons to events and circumstances that happen in their lives. Priest A asserted that there was a significant difference between Catholic and Bemba traditional understandings of the supernatural. The Bemba community believe that the supernatural is the force behind ordinary life events, while the Church rejects these explanations and instead promotes Church ordinances and the influence of the Holy Spirit. Priest C similarly argued, “Bemba people are aware of the presence of the supernatural world, and this world influences their lives and daily activities.”

The study also revealed that Catholic explanations of suffering, sickness, and evil did not seem to satisfy some participants. They believed that their traditional knowledge explained misfortune more effectively. Garvey (1994) noted that early missionaries and local Catholic priests often regarded Bemba supernatural explanations as primitive and illogical, creating a complicated dynamic between Bemba Catholics and missionaries. As a result, Bemba Catholics embraced a traditional view of reality that emphasised the supernatural. Garvey (1974) indicated that the Bemba held a firm belief in a mystical world that influenced daily life, while Oger (1991) argued that Catholics in Africa were dissatisfied with theological and scientific interpretations of suffering, illness, and evil. Based on the evidence, Bemba Catholics' pursuit of the mystic is rooted in their traditional conceptualisation of the supernatural.

Bemba people's perceptions of causation

Bemba people perceive what causes evil in their lives and the world as evil spirits, punishment from ancestors and witches manipulating mystical powers. The majority of participants firmly believed in the power of witchcraft, sorcery, magic and ancestral spirits. They were convinced that such supernatural forces cause illnesses and misfortunes. In their opinion, the only way to counteract these malevolent powers was through traditional means such as consulting witch doctors, medicine men and women, and traditional medicine. P18 asserted, "Evil powers or someone evil is responsible for every unfortunate event that occurs in our lives and the community." Most participants expressed that solely relying on prayers was insufficient to address challenges and that stronger actions were necessary. Bemba Catholics and headmen participants believed that traditional means such as witch hunting, charms and magic were as effective solutions. Priest C alleged, "The fear and anxiety of the supernatural powers are palpable in the Bemba Catholic community." Despite some participants not believing in the

existence of witchcraft and magic, they still reported experiencing feelings of fear and anxiety about these beliefs.

Most participants felt that such practices were deeply rooted in their culture and traditions. They believed that these powers had a significant influence on their daily lives. To further emphasise this point, P8 argued that he did not blame those who did not believe in these supernatural powers because they had never encountered the evil ones. However, Priest B acknowledged the Bemba Catholics' firm belief in mystical powers. While some community members may participate in these traditions to fulfil their social obligation, others genuinely believe in their power to protect and bless the people. Oger (1991) affirmed these findings, stating that during crises like illness, loss, conflicts and hardship, certain Bemba Catholics often revert to traditional beliefs in search of answers and solutions.

In contemporary Bemba society, traditional beliefs, Catholic teaching, and modern scientific understandings interact to shape community worldview. Traditional knowledge remains vital because many Bemba attribute health issues and misfortunes to mystical powers and ancestral spirits. Catholicism offers spiritual guidance but often fails to address specific challenges, prompting a blend of Catholic rituals and traditional explanations for suffering. This interaction enables Bemba society to combine cultural heritage with contemporary influences in everyday life.

Cosmologically induced fear and anxiety

The Bemba Catholic community indicated a deep-rooted fear and apprehension towards the mystical world, which significantly influences their conduct and affects their daily lives in various ways. Priest E revealed that the fear of the forces of the mystical world was widespread among Bemba Catholics, although it was mostly unfounded. Despite that, the fear has a profound impact on their lives. P10 shared his experience of seeking the help of a witch doctor, driven by their fear of witches who themselves were afraid of witch doctors. To guard themselves against the evil plans and actions of witches, some Bemba Catholics resort to fortifying themselves with herbs, amulets, and tattoos. The fear and anxiety of mystical powers are deeply ingrained in the Bemba Catholics. P1 shared an experience of how losing a beloved to suspected witchcraft and magic led her to believe in the existence of witches and wizards.

The fear of these practitioners and their ability to cause harm is a terrifying thought for many Bemba Catholics. Priest C observed, “Children in the Bemba Catholic community wear protective charms and amulets, and parents perform rituals to summon ancestral spirits to protect themselves and children from the evil eye.” This practice is not just based on societal beliefs but also on the belief in the existence of the spirit world and the world of the dead. The Bemba people name their children after deceased family members.

This is done mostly for two reasons: first, to avoid angering the spirits and second, to appease them by bringing their names back, primarily because of the fear of the mystic powers of the ancestors. Ogez (1991) argued that it is due to fear that Bemba Catholics associated with the wrath of the mysterious powers that caused many of them to believe and practise rituals related to this belief. Ogez also noted that a significant number of African Christians acknowledged the ongoing impact of African traditional religious views in their lives after conversion. The fear and anxiety exhibited by the Bemba Catholics towards the supernatural powers are generated from their typical personal and external

experiences of evil in society. This same fear and anxiety led the Bemba Catholics to seek protection from those perceived to possess counteractive powers.

The social production and transmission of fear within Bemba communities arises from cultural beliefs, personal experiences, and societal practices related to the mystical world. Shared stories, family teaching, protective charms, and rituals to honour ancestral spirits illustrate how fear is managed and passed down, sustaining a persistent framework of fear among Bemba Catholic and wider Bemba communities.

Socio-cultural and religious dynamics

The Bemba Catholics have a unique cultural and social practice of relating to mystical powers. It is a belief that has been intensely ingrained in their culture for generations and has survived even after a century of Catholicism and evangelisation. Despite attempts to fully integrate the Bemba people into Catholicism, their conviction in supernatural forces has persisted firmly. Priests B and D acknowledged that certain Bemba people's cultures were still strong and that traditional elements were entrenched in their beliefs, including witchcraft, magic and traditional medicines. Bemba Catholic and headmen participants also affirmed these assertions of entrenchment. For instance, P1 emphasised, "It is challenging to forsake our culture and traditions." This suggests that their faith in supernatural forces is important in their day-to-day existence. Most participants expressed that some individuals used these powers to harm others, while others used them to protect and bless the community.

Priest D noted, "Some members of my parish engage in mystical activities such as witch-hunting and divination." He explained that these members were often part of a community or social group that practised these activities, and they felt compelled to participate due to social pressure and fear of being suspected otherwise. P19 echoed this idea, suggesting that faith in supernatural abilities was a more familial and societal requirement than a personal conviction. The Bemba

people's belief in magical powers was deeply ingrained in their culture and was passed down from generation to generation. Despite the influence of the Catholic evangelisation, the Bemba people's culture remains resilient. Some believe in and practice supernatural powers as part of their culture, which is socially accepted in their society (Garvey, 1974).

This study has revealed the challenges Bemba Catholics encounter in relinquishing belief in supernatural forces because it is deeply embedded in cultural practices, religious customs, and social interactions. Those who want to abandon indigenous elements may fail because of pressure from relatives or society (Garvey, 1974). These results suggest that faith in supernatural forces and engagement in mystical practices are not solely individual pursuits but socio-cultural traditions. Magesa (1998) similarly notes that some African community members practise mystical rituals and rites because their families believe and practise them.

Inefficiency of the Catholic Church in dealing with spiritual problems

The ineffectiveness of the Church in dealing with the spiritual problems of the Catholic members is a reason some Bemba Catholics practise mystic activities, as purported by the majority of participants. Nevertheless, they feel that witch doctors, diviners, medicine men and women provide solutions to their problems, which the church turns its back on. This study argues that because everything in the Bemba worldview is religious, society has created a reality where the Bemba people expect solutions and answers to all their life problems from the Catholic Church, which rarely provides them. Most of the priest participants argued that many members of their parishes believed in and sought help from supernatural powers such as witch doctors, diviners and traditional healers. P15 asserted that individuals with supernatural abilities could offer answers to challenges that the Catholic Church could not address. According to P10, the Bemba people associated long-term suffering, illnesses, infertility, natural calamities,

unexplained deaths and other unexplained phenomena with the influence of mystical powers, hence could only be solved with such. The Catholic Church attribute these events to God's will and does not offer any solutions to such problems.

In support of the claims made by participants 10 and 15, Priest D expressed concerns that if the church had allowed the charismatic movement to operate freely and address the mystical dimension of the Christian life, then the problem of members frequently seeking help from witch doctors, witch-finders and diviners could have been minimised. This highlights the tension between traditional belief systems and the teachings of the Church and the need for a more holistic approach to religious practices in the Bemba community. It is this perceived ineffectiveness and inefficiency that is the reason that whenever the Bemba people face issues of infertility, poverty, family tension and other complex issues, they ask *Ing'anga* [witch doctors and medicine men and women] for solutions (Oger, 1991). This phenomenon further coerces the Catholics into an endless search for answers and solutions to their problems. Bemba Catholics do not believe that Catholicism addresses all of their problems (Oger, 1991).

Oneness of indigenous religion with life

In Bemba society, traditional beliefs and practices are integrated into every aspect of life. Religion shapes problem-solving and answers life's questions, creating an expectation that the Catholic Church should address all issues. Priest D saw this as a dilemma, while P18 argued that the Church ignored the local people's established ways of dealing with life problems. According to Mbiti (1991), Africans view everything through a religious lens, so traditions, cultures, social, economic, moral, and spiritual activities are intertwined. This worldview explains why local Catholics often seek traditional answers when the Church cannot provide them.

Conversion dilemma to Catholicism

Participants argued that continuing to hold on to beliefs in supernatural powers and participation in mystical practices was due to not fully and holistically embracing Catholicism. This revealed that the Bemba traditions, beliefs, spirituality, cosmology, values and customs were misunderstood by the missionaries, who labelled them as pagan. The Catholic missionaries imposed their Western traditions, cultures, and values on the Bemba people, resulting in a loss of cultural identity and a void in their lives, as per the participants' allegations. P6 attributed the conviction in mystical abilities and related practices to the inability of Catholic missionaries to grasp the traditional beliefs, values, and customs of the Bemba people. The missionaries caused distrust among the Bemba converts by imposing Western traditions, cultures, and values on the local people. These points are in line with arguments against the conversion of local people to Catholicism (Garvey, 1991; Oger, 1991; Ogez, 1991; Hinfelaar, 2007; Udelhoven, 2017).

Priest A believed that the continuous belief in supernatural powers and related practices could be because of poor conversion during the missionary times of the local people. P2 thought that the church's failure to accept and integrate the traditional and cultural beliefs of Bemba followers and ignorance of their tenacious behaviour towards their traditional beliefs further perpetuated the resilience of this belief and practice. This research suggests that this vacuum may have created a reaction formation, which explains why some still cling to their cultural traditions more than ever before, yet still practise them in secret. Bascom and Herskovits' (Sourou, 2014) relate to these findings through the assertion that, despite the intensity of Christian missionary efforts of evangelisation and conversion all over Africa, the African traditional worldview and spirituality have remained resilient. They postulate that the demonisation of African cultures, traditions, customs and indigenous knowledge may have caused the great mistrust that the missionaries planted in their local followers.

Horton's (1971) theory of conversion suggests that colonialism and modernity influenced conversion more than deeper religious conviction, contrary to Carmody's (2007) contention that catechetical education facilitated deeper inculcation of Catholic faith. This study argues that the Church's inflexible and selective attitude in accepting and integrating Bemba traditional beliefs contributed to the tenacity of mystical belief and practice. Behringer (2004) suggested that early missionaries made minimal attempts to understand African culture, causing prohibited activities to continue in the background and secretly. Although some allegations may be sweeping, this approach may have led to a less-than-holistic conversion experience for many.

Conclusion

Despite the long presence of Catholicism in Mpika District and ongoing efforts by missionaries and local clergy, Bemba Catholics still engage with the traditional cosmology and spirituality of mystical powers. The findings indicate that belief in supernatural powers is not merely a remnant of pre-Christian religion but part of a continuing process of religious negotiation, cultural synthesis, and identity formation. Many Bemba Catholics maintain that supernatural powers influence life events, especially suffering, illness, death, protection, healing, family life, and social relations. This belief remains rooted in traditional family values, socio-cultural heritage, fear of mystical harm, and the perceived ability of indigenous practices to respond to practical and spiritual problems.

The study shows that the relationship between Catholic teaching and Bemba cosmology is complex. Rather than representing a simple rejection of Catholicism, the persistence of mystical beliefs reflects the continuing relevance of indigenous knowledge systems in the everyday religious lives of Bemba Catholics. Their engagement with charms, healing, divination, rituals, ancestral spirituality, vows, and oaths demonstrates how local religious identity is shaped through the interaction between Catholic faith and Bemba cultural worldview.

Therefore, the Catholic Church needs to engage more seriously with the cultural and religious contexts in which it operates. Such engagement would help develop a more culturally sensitive and holistic approach to faith, pastoral care, and dialogue with indigenous African beliefs and practices.

Furthermore, Horton's theory explains how Bemba Catholics continue to seek meaning, control, and practical responses to lived realities that modernity, colonial Christianity, and formal Catholic teaching have not always addressed adequately. The persistence of belief in mystical powers therefore demonstrates the resilience of Bemba cosmology and its role in shaping contemporary Catholic experience. Future research may further examine the influence of traditional Bemba cosmology on younger Bemba Catholics, particularly how cultural heritage and Catholic faith interact in daily life, religious practice, and community engagement.

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