

‘Chilanga Mulilo’ Marriage Rite in Zambia: Meaning, Practice and Transformation

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ABSTRACT

This study seeks to address the transformation and the confusion which revolves around the concept of ‘chilanga mulilo’ marriage rite in contemporary Zambian society which arguably fails to recognise its power and its true meaning. The study further investigates the original meaning, practice and symbolism of this marriage rite, the transformation that has occurred due to modernisation and assesses the impact this has had on marriage rites such as the ‘chilanga mulilo.’ This topic was important to investigate because it would help to preserve the cultural heritage. This study took the qualitative approach. Primary data was generated using an interview guide, Observation and a Focus Group Guide. Secondary data was generated from documents and previous research on the topic. Data was analysed using thematic analysis to identify emerging themes and categories.

Key words: Marriage, rites, varieties, ethnic groups, Bemba, culture, chilanga mulilo

INTRODUCTION

Marriage is a universal feature of humanity, but the stages towards the completion of the marriage rites vary from one society to another. In Zambia, each of the country’s ethnic groups has its own marriage customs with a series of distinct ceremonial rites. Many of the traditional marriage rites have been preserved over time and continue to be practiced in contemporary Zambia. However, some Zambian ethnic groups have adopted marriage rites from other groups, modified and altered them to fit in the confines of a modern existence. One such common marriage rite that has been copied and modified by many ethnic groups in Zambia is the ‘chilanga mulilo’, which is directly translated as “showing fire”. This is a pre-marriage rite originally practiced by the Bemba of Northern province of Zambia. The aim of this ceremony is to allow the groom to freely eat the food cooked by the bride’s family and introduce him to the bride’s ‘food culture’. This practice, which aptly served the socio-economic structure in Bemba society, is specially so in modern Zambia where mixed marriages have become common. But then, the modern chilanga mulilo has veered from the original design and has been exaggerated in the way it is conducted and sometimes shows a mix up of ichilanga mulilo and another bemba marriage ceremony known as ‘amatebeto’.

‘Chilanga Mulilo’ is a food tasting ceremony, where the bride’s family prepares various traditional meals to

introduce the groom and his family to their food culture. The meaning behind the ceremony is that the wife or whenever you go into your in-laws they will be cooking and serving you the types of food that they consume. Zambia has many cultures probably more than the recognized number of ethnic groups. Each ethnic group celebrates and observes its culture in its own style at different times of the year and for various reasons. However, chilanga mulilo traditional ceremony, consists of norms, beliefs, customs, laws, values and expectations shared by the society. To appreciate the functioning of this rite, understanding the activities that are carried out and their importance to the ceremony is paramount. For example, the utilization of songs in this context is to perpetuate cultural values, so as to ensure the continuation and survival of such cultural traditions. It was shown by the study that songs play an integral role within chilanga mulilo traditions, enabling the passing on of cultural values and morals to those intending to get married.

Marriage is an undertaking common to all human societies. In African tradition, it is a major transforming ceremony and the most important social institution.[\[1\]](#) It is essentially a rearrangement of the social structure, where new social relations are created, not only between the husband and the wife, but also between the husband's and wife's relatives.[\[2\]](#) Of the numerous cultural practices in the world, the marriage ceremony is one of those events that is easily recognisable wherever one happens to be. What is also universal is the fact that the act of marriage is a process followed as people seek to legitimise the marriage bond between a man and a woman (in some cases, another man or woman). It is in the process towards the marriage bond that variations become discernible depending on the culture where the marriage is concluded.

Culture, the complex whole which defines every bit of man's life and experiences,[\[3\]](#) determines the process that is followed for the marriage bond to be acceptable in the society that it takes place. The conclusion of a marriage can be as simple as a proposal and a signature at a registry office or the couple elopes and gets married or it can be as elaborate as having to follow set stages, rules and rituals. All these can be found in various societies of the world. However, it is in the cultural nexus that the marriage process is differentiated. Culture is very diverse. Even in people perceived to be culturally identical based on, for example, race or class, there are distinct cultural traits that may be identified in each of these groups.

Early European visitors to Africa found out early enough that their ideas of an African culture did not exist and wherever, they went in Africa, they observed a diversity of cultures. However, they were united in their abhorrence of the cultural practices of the people they encountered in this vast continent. In fact, they found the whole African way of life abhorrent – their religious beliefs, perceived barbarous behaviour and ignorance and pledged to root out this abhorrent culture to its roots.[\[4\]](#) The marriage process is another of those practices they attempted to change to conform to their Christian culture. They attacked initiation ceremonies which prepared the bride for wifehood, payment of lobola, polygamy, and other processes regarding marriage. They sought to obliterate most of the processes as they considered them as 'fetish and backward' and the African people as 'corrupt, wicked, and perverted and, therefore needed reformation'.[\[5\]](#) In the eyes of missionaries and other Europeans, sinful behaviour included participating in singing, drumming and dancing according to their traditional customs.[\[6\]](#) Newly converted Africans were instructed to stay away from such practices or risked excommunication. The fact that most, if not all African traditional ceremonies involved song and dance to the rhythm of traditional drums, they were obviously being asked to discard behaviour that came naturally to them. Nevertheless, missionaries did claim victory over much of the African cultural practices that was in conflict with Christian values.[\[7\]](#) However, this declaration was not quite accurate because many of the cultural practices continued in secret. This is because Africans, for example, the Bemba, continued to follow these processes which survived the onslaught of western distracting influences. Ironically, changes to some of these processes took place, not from the effort of those who sought to erase the African cultural practices, but by the inevitable dynamism of humans and their cultures.

Historically, the Bemba marriage process was a protracted and complex affair.[\[8\]](#) It began with insalamu

(initial bride price), ichilangamulilo (marriage food tasting ceremony), ubwinga (wedding), amatebeto (marriage appreciation ceremony) and ukwingisha (the official process of taking the bride to the matrimonial home). There were two major ways in which marriages were conducted among the Bemba. These were ubwinga bwatupundu (big wedding ceremony) and ichombela ng'anda (small but official wedding). These types of marriage wedding arrangements required customs (intambi) to be followed accordingly. The stages and elaborated rituals related to traditional marriage ceremonies, most of which have been preserved and have continued to be practiced today.[\[9\]](#)

According to Bemba customs, when a young man became of age, society expected him to start thinking of marriage. In most cases, the young men were gradually prepared for marriage during discussions in the evenings with elders at the insaka, (a shelter where small village groupings gathered in the evening around the fire).[\[10\]](#) One of the Bemba proverbs teaches that “Nga tauleikala nabakalamba pakutina ukunuka mukanwa, tawakasabilele amano.” (If you stay away from elders because of bad breath, you will not learn wisdom.[\[11\]](#) Therefore, during insaka gatherings, young men learnt about their culture and customs which included marriage customs. The depth of these teachings was dependent on the age of the young men. Sometimes arranged marriages which were prevalent, were made at the insaka as parents chose partners for their sons and daughters from esteemed families that were considered suitable.

Once a girl was found by a man or arranged by the elders, the first major step was insalamu, “a betrothal present from the man’s side which was in form of a token such as a copper bangle”[\[12\]](#) or nowadays, a small amount of money of about K100.00 – K300.00. Insalamu was placed on a small white plate covered by another white plate of the same size. This was taken to the girl’s family by bashibukombe (the go-between) accompanied by the man’s uncle, aunt and grandmother. If the girl accepted the man, she was asked to take the plates and hand them over to her father, to signify that she was the one who accepted the man, and not her father or any other member of the family.[\[13\]](#) This was known as ukukobekela (engagement). For safe storage of insalamu, the two plates were placed on a white piece of cloth which was tied up and put away. White colour symbolised light. At this stage, nothing much happened in terms of activities, from either side of the families.

However, this marked the beginning of ukwishisha, (courtship). It meant that the man would visit the girl, with the supervision of the elders. Usually, he met the girl in the yard at her grandmother’s house. Once in a while, the girl would also visit the man in the company of a small girl or boy who acted as a spy for the elders. Ukwishisha allowed the two parties to know each other well, of course not intimately. It is worth noting that ukukobekela did not signify marriage. Nevertheless, it was rare that, ukukobekela failed to materialize into marriage.

During this period the groom moved to his future in-laws’ village.[\[14\]](#) This happened because the Bemba followed the matrilineal type of marriages which required the man to shift to the residence of his in-laws, and at this stage the man, through bashibukombe, asked for what was known as imilimo or inchifwani (a portion in the field), in order for him to start working for his future parents- in-laws.[\[15\]](#) Since the ‘bulk of the Bemba diet came from agriculture’,[\[16\]](#) the major works involved were farming activities, especially ukutemena (chitemene system) and preparing the gardens. Sister Nafukwe explained that the young man worked hard to show the in-laws to be, that he was strong and that he would take good care of their daughter.[\[17\]](#) According to Bertha Kaoma, the groom camped at bashibukombe’s home during this period, especially if his village was not near the girls’ village. At this stage he was not allowed to eat food cooked by his future mother in-law,[\[18\]](#) because tradition required him to observe food taboos.[\[19\]](#) Therefore, without his knowledge, his mother-in-law to be, would sometimes send some mealie meal and relish to the wife of bashibukombe for her to cook nshima for him. (The food sent was uncooked). To discontinue what could be called “the hide and seek game”, also referred to as ‘mother-in-law avoidance’, a custom that required the maintenance of social distance between a husband and his wife’s mother’[\[20\]](#) a pre-marriage ritual called

chilanga mulilo (literally meaning “showing fire”) was performed.

Chilanga mulilo is one of the marriage rituals that has seen a number of changes in the way it is performed today, thus, raising questions about its significance. In separate interviews with Margret Chilima Lubula,^[21] and Kaoma^[22] a different view was given about chilanga mulilo. The two expressed disappointment in the way the original Bemba chilanga mulilo has been diluted and changed. Contrary to today’s ways of conducting this ritual, Lubula and Kaoma explained that chilanga mulilo did not call for a lot of people, neither was there a need for a variety of foods. Kaoma stated that only those who had gone through intambi shachupo (Bemba marriage teachings) were invited.^[23] Often the number of participants in the preparations was less than six. The bride was also actively involved in the preparations of the food.

The menu was also very simple, consisting of one chicken and nshima. Sometimes beans, impupu (pumpkin seeds) infisashi (dried green vegetables mixed with pounded groundnuts), umukoyo (sweet non-alcoholic beverage) were added. H. Mshanga Mulenga added that in some cases one chicken was added for bashibukombe, as a sign of respect for his work.

Chicken is traditionally a dignified relish which, to the Bemba people, symbolises respect for the person to whom it is presented. It should be noted that the chicken was not cut into pieces, but prepared whole. The style in which it was folded is called ukutumba (a symbolic way of cutting the chicken), which expresses secret marriage teachings. The details of ukutumba were not explained at this stage, but what was emphasised was that “the chicken served in that style/form was a sign of showing respect to the man who was now called batatafyala (son in-law). According to Bemba custom chicken prepared for batatafyala, must never be cut into pieces. A dish served with chicken pieces was meant for any other person or other family members.^[24] This was and still is a very important marriage teaching which is to be preserved by all married women and men. Those who went through this marriage instruction were expected to transmit this knowledge to children who were about to marry. The same knowledge was used when they took up the roles of banachimbusa (women traditional counsellors) and bashibukombe.

Delivering of the food to the groom did not require many people. Banachimbusa, the bride’s aunt and grandmother were accompanied by two elderly women. Lubula, Kaoma and Hellen Mshanga^[25] Mulenga further explained that there was one song for this ceremony, “chilanga mulilo twaleta”. However, a minor contradiction was noted over the singing during the event. In an interview with Hellen Kalima of Site Service in Kabwe, it was noted that no song was sung at this stage. “Chilanga mulilo twaleta” were the words spoken by banachimbusa of the bride to explain the mission of their visit. She further stated that with time people composed a song, which today is sang during chilanga mulilo and sometimes the same song is sung during amatebeto. She also revealed that when the bride’s group reached the venue, no money was to be dropped at the entrance. Once inside the house, on behalf of the bride’s family, banachimbusa showed respect to the groom’s family by laying on the ground in front of the groom (ukukunkula), first on one side and then on the other (left and right), and clapping her hands supported by her team. ^[26]

Banachimbusa then explained that “your mother in-law sent you ichipe chamulilo (cooked food)”.^[27] She untied the parcels and served the food to the groom’s team. Ukushikula (putting a small amount of money on the dish of ubwali (nsima)) was another important aspect of the Bemba custom that was done after untying ichipe chabwali (nsima). The act was done with the mention of the words, “wasanguka uwesu” (you are now our son, do not fear us, and feel free).^[28] In this context, it simply meant you are now free to eat food cooked by your mamafyala (mother-in-law). Then, bashibukombe thanked them for the respect exhibited. After this, bashikobe remained with the groom to explain the significance of ichilanga mulilo. Basically, the essence of conducting chilanga mulilo was to welcome, show respect to the groom, and tell him that he was free to eat whatever food was prepared by the in-laws at any time.

On an arranged date, bashibukombe and the groom’s aunt took back the plates to the bride’s family. It was

not mandatory to present the plates with any form of appreciation. Nevertheless, some families showed appreciation by putting some beans or small amount of money in one of the plates. According to Kalema, this ceremony encouraged the young man to work hard for the parents-in-law in the field (muchifwani) apportioned to him. She also said that the ceremony made the young man to keep his promise to the girl.^[29] Sister Sabina added that the ceremony cemented the engagement and later the marriage, and the man remained committed to the girl's family. The hard work in the fields made one to forge ahead.^[30] The man's parents, bashisbukombe and other relatives were also always reminding him about the respect shown to him by his future in-laws. That is why it was rare to hear of young men breaking their engagements. The importance of keeping marriage customs began at this stage when the two were still young.

MODERN DAY CHILANGA MULILO

Apparently, chilanga mulilo is still observed by Bemba people, but it has become common for non-Bembas to perform it as part of their marriage process. It has become a trend for almost every young man and woman to go through this Bemba ritual – with various modifications. The historiography on chilanga mulilo clearly indicates the dilution and confusion of the mix up of chilanga mulilo and amatebeto. For example, Taylors' explanation shows that amatebeto comes after insalamu has been paid. He states that after insalamu has been paid, the girl's mother and her family prepare a feast consisting of a range of different dishes, for the groom and his family and friends.^[31] Similarly, Boyd Phiri, states that amatebeto are performed when a man is about to marry. "He is feted with different types of foods to show the future groom what he can expect his wife to cook for him when he finally marries her."^[32] This causes more confusion, the two writers show a mix-up of events, thus making it difficult to understand what exactly chilanga mulilo is.

Kapambwe Lumbwe also explained that the ceremonial offering of cooked food to the groom was considered exceedingly important by the Bemba. He described in detail the processes and the common stages and activities performed during chilanga mulilo. However, like Taylor, mixes amatebeto and chilanga mulilo. More confusion about chilanga mulilo is noted when he stated that, "amatebeto refers to the ceremony at which food is presented to a son-in-law ... this act is known as ichilanga mulilo". According to Lumbwe the act signifies that "the wife must be creative in the way she prepares and serves food to her family and visitors".^[33] Apparently, Lumbwe's work also indicates how the original Bemba chilanga mulilo has been modernized and diluted.

Alice Mulenga Nsofu, in her work "*A Pragmatic Analysis of Chilanga Mulilo Traditional Songs: A Case of Kabwe Urban*", is another clear reflection of how the chilanga mulilo has been modernized. Her argument is that each stage of the ceremony was accompanied by a song. For instance, 'Mulangile Amone', a common song sung today when the groom is shown the food prepared by the bride's parents with their kin and friends. Contrary to the original Bemba chilanga mulilo, Alice's work like many other works, shows that the receivers of the food are expected to show their appreciation in form of payment at the entrances of the yard and the house, before putting the food down and before uncovering it.^[34]

Persuasive as these works maybe, they tell us more about the modernised chilanga mulilo. They have done little to advance our comprehension of the original version of the ritual. However, the fact that these works recognised the significance and symbolism of chilanga mulilo, they are appreciated and provide valuable information for the current study and future researches.

Mama Mandelena Mwape Zulu, a marriage counsellor in Kabwe, agreed with much of what appears in the literature. She said that the ceremony permitted the groom to eat cooked food from the girl's family and to dine with the relatives of girl on all future visits. She emphasized that the participants were married women who had gone through the Bemba marriage teachings and that the bride was actively involved in the preparation of the food, as this was part of the marriage teachings.^[35] Her narrative of the chilanga mulilo,

like that of the scholars was, however, mixed with the processes of amatebeto. In her explanation, she also indicated that those who received the food from the bride's family were expected to drop some money at the entrances and inside the house.

The general observation noted from the literature, observations of chilanga mulilo ceremonies and interviews, is that the chilanga mulilo is an elaborate public ceremony that involves a variety of food, sing and dancing. It is common to have women drummers at the functions and these are given a token of appreciation for their services. It is also normal practice today for the women to wear uniform attire. Bana chimbusa wears a special attire which is specifically organized for her.

THE FOOD SERVED AT A MODERN CHILANGA MULILO

The food that is cooked and served in a modern ceremony is a lavish feast designed to feed a large crowd. It is not just nshima and chicken, as the case was in the real chilanga mulimo. Although nshima and chicken (not less than three) were part of the menu, there was more variety on the menu. This would include impupu (pumpkin seeds), bush meat, dried fish, dried green vegetables, dried mushrooms, umulembwe (okra). Other food stuff would include roast cassava and ground nuts, chikanda (commonly referred to as African polony), and other foods deemed appropriate by cooking party. Drinks such as umukoyo (traditional drink), katata (local opaque beer), one or two crates of soft drinks and mosi/castle would all also be part of the menu – all characteristic of amatebeto. The man's team (sometimes involving bashiskumbe and friends of the man without any of his family members), also prepares one or two crates of soft drinks and beer, which are given to the girl's team at the end of the process. In most cases these are shared among the participants as a way of showing appreciation for their work. If these are some of major activities involved in chilanga mulilio, the question being raised today is, what then is done during amatebeto? Nkandu argued that "this is the more reason why in-laws are failing to conduct amatebeto in the later years of their children's marriages, as everything is done before marriage and besides it has become costly to carry out some of these activities today, worse still if the sons-in-law do not take care of them and their daughters".[\[36\]](#)

CHILANGA MULILO: A TRADITIONAL PRACTICE IN MODERN ZAMBIA

The mention of chilanga mulilo in Zambia is suggestive of an imminent wedding, but it also, inevitably, conjures visions of a feast that is part of the marriage process. Even the literature, which is supposed to enlighten, defines chilanga mulilo as a 'feast put on for a new husband (sometimes mixed with matebeto)' [\[37\]](#) However, this is misleading and confusing as matebeto should not even be mentioned. However, it is the definition of the modernised, transformed form or urban version of the chilanga mulilo.

The process of transformation dates back to the coming of missionaries, colonialism and the impact of its policies which led to activities such as labour migration. This perhaps explains why, as early as the 1930s, Audrey Richards referred to a version of the chilanga mulilo, which she suggested was already a watered-down practice: 'The first dish of the porridge sent to the bridegroom is considered an interesting and exciting event even in the present circumstances, when much of the ritual surrounding it has been dropped'. [\[38\]](#) Richards, however, does not explain how westerners influenced changes in the chilanga mulilo, however, the process of transformation can be located in the larger picture of the desire of the early missionaries to destroy and replace the African culture.

Early European visitors to Africa found out early enough that the ideas of an African culture did not exist. What exists is a diversity of cultures concomitant with the diverse ethnic differentiation among the African population. If, in this context, culture is seen as the 'totality of the way of life of African people, including their tangible and intangible products', [\[39\]](#) it follows then that there can be no homogenous African culture. But, whatever they encountered, as discussed earlier, and as Awoniyi noted in his discussion of religion, but

no doubt summed up what outsiders believed about African culture in general, '[m]any overzealous Christians and Islamic enthusiast have branded it as barbarian, primitive, unprogressive and unrevealed'[40]. In fact, the earliest European missionaries to Africa were convinced that they had a mammoth task to save Africans from the so-called primitive religion and all other barbarous cultural practices, hence their desire to destroy it.[41]

Marriage is one of those practices they attempted to change to conform to the Christian values. They attacked initiation ceremonies which prepared the bride for marriage, payment of lobola (dowry), polygamy, and other stages of the marriage process. Many pioneering western missionaries and anthropologists failed to understand and accept that the cultures were in tandem with the values of African societies, which had worked for them for centuries. Instead, they sought to obliterate most of the marriage processes as they considered them sinful. In the eyes of missionaries and other Europeans, sinful behaviour was participating in singing and dancing according to their traditional customs.[42] Newly converted Africans were instructed to stay away from such practices (e.g. 'ukupepa mipashi (worshiping spirits) or they risked being excommunication.[43] The fact that most, if not all African traditional ceremonies, involved song and dance, the stance taken by the missionaries, it is obvious, was a demand for indigenous people to discard behaviour that came naturally to them in favour of what they prescribed, which 'project[ed] their own image as a universal ideal'.[44] And they did claim victory over much of the African cultural practices that were in conflict with Christian values.[45] Although some African scholars have conceded that 'most African culture has been influenced by western culture', this declaration was not quite accurate. This is because while some material details of the culture changed,[46] the essence, practice and symbolism remained intact. Many of the cultural practices simply continued behind the missionaries.

African cucultivatinglture survived the onslaught of western distracting influences, albeit with some modifications that emerged as people tried to conceal their cultures from sanctimonious westerners, intent on destroying them. One informant, Nkandu, was also of the view that gradual changes in the way chilanga mulilo was conducted can be traced to the introduction of Christianity and colonialism.[47]

CHANGES IN THE PRACTICE OF CHILANGA MULILO

Today, many are the times when marriage counsellors are seen following the modernized chilaga mulilo. The current situation is that some of the people including abanabachibemba (the Bembas), banabukombe and bashimbokmbe do not know how the original chilanga mulilo was conducted. Is it because of less literature or there are no ifikolwe (elders) to pass on the information? It is difficult to specify when chilanga mulilo began to change/modernized.

The intent of the chilanga mulilo, 'to show the fire', has remained intact, however, there are noticeable changes in the structure, form and practice of the ceremony. If the chilanga mulilo and other cultural practices survived the efforts of the early missionaries, it certainly did not escape the colonial experience and its consequences such as the policies that induced Africans into labour migration, urbanisation and detribalisation. These developments were responsible for Africans pouring into the urban areas around the country, living side by side as opposed to the pre-colonial ethnically segregated living. One major change that is immediately perceived arises from the pooling together of people from diverse ethnic groups into some sort of melting pot, especially in the urban areas of the country and made their homes in those areas. The coming together of different people caused interethnic marriages and inevitably a blending of cultures generally, and in this case, the cultural practices regarding marriage such as chilanga mulilo, creating a modernised version of the ceremony.

Originally a wholly Bemba tradition, where a marriage between two Bemba people would include chilanga

mulilo, the practice seeped into the marriage rituals of other ethnic groups. This transfer of culture was initially seen among couples where one of the partners was Bemba. Later, the adoption of this Bemba cultural practice has been observed among non-Bemba couples and this could be the point at which changes or modifications are clearly perceived. But, according to one traditional marriage advisor, this cannot even be referred to as change, it was a grave dilution or distortion of the Bemba practice.[\[48\]](#) During these occasions (non-Bemba marriages) glaring compromises or outright ‘mistakes’ are made in the chilanga mulilo process. One informant who commented on the incidence of distortions in chilanga mulilo concluded that, it is no longer about the cultural implications of these ceremonies, rather it has become the thing to do, ‘it is trending’. She also concluded that people are holding chilanga mulilo because it is easy to hire people who ‘know’ what is required and are able to guide those who choose to go through that tradition.[\[49\]](#)

In the past ifimbusa (marriage counsellors), who are married and are aware of ababemba customs and culture used to teach and guide the young women who are about to get married. These were women and indeed men who not only had first-hand experience of marriage but of counselling as well. Such experienced teachers have been usurped by people whose only experience is having attended many of the functions and learned the songs. They are hired to counsel those intending to marry for money. Mandalena Zulu also noted the commercialisation of Bemba cultural practices:

Today, chilanga mulilo and amatebeto have been turned into a business. Some of the marriage counsellors, who are non- Bembas are the main organisers of chilanga mulilo, using the knowledge from women groupings, especially in high density areas and even in churches. In this way different customs are blended into the chilanga mulilo ceremony, subsequently leading to the dilution of the ceremony.[\[50\]](#)

Recently, it has become clear that the desire to perform ceremonies such as chilanga mulilo is motivated by monetary gain or as explained earlier, people consider it fashionable to go through it. The consequences of going through chilanga mulilo for the sake of meeting expectations have contributed to the confusion witnessed as some of these functions. In one instance, which left guests puzzled, was an occasion where the people who were to ‘show the fire’ arrived at the groom’s home, singing and dancing as expected, went in the house, offloaded their cargo and simply walked out of the house to wait for the groom to be and his people to enjoy the feast. Apparently, no one from that party had a clue on what was expected of them. It was very obvious they did not understand the cultural practice that they were performing, beyond delivering the food.[\[51\]](#) This part of the ceremony is the most important part. It is the moment when ‘showing the fire’ happens as the different food stuffs are shown to the future son-in-law. Obviously, banachimbusa lacked the knowledge and experience to complete the task. But this is not the only part that reveals errors that have contributed to the dilution of chilanga mulilo. It is significant to look at the whole process, from the theoretical instructions to the bride to be, through the identification and cooking process to the delivery of the food to the future groom and his party.

Ukepekanya Ifyakulya (Preparation of Food). This stage of the ceremony involves a gathering of all those invited to assist with preparing the food. All the food stuff to be cooked would have been procured and cooking begins. As discussed earlier, there are specific foods that are included on the menu. In modern times, a few non-traditional items have been added including a variety of drinks which do not replace the traditional Munkoyo and beer (millet beer), but have been widely accepted as a supplement. The cooking proceeds, appropriate songs are sung at each stage of the process. These songs were not designed to entertain those engaged in the cooking; they were instructive and carried a message for the bride. The importance of the songs, as Nsofu stressed had a bearing on the longevity of the forthcoming marriage. She observed that modern marriages did not last long due to the songs sung during chilanga Mulilo. She suggests that misinterpretations of songs due to intermarriages and the failure by traditional teachers to provide full information, presumably on the meaning and symbolism associated with the songs, was a recipe for failure of the marriage. She further stressed the importance of engaging authentic fimbusas (marriage

counsellors) to instruct those in the process of marrying. [52]

As noted, the chilanga mulilo has become more widespread among Zambians, it has been subjected to some serious modifications. This has taken the form of taking short cuts in the manner that food is prepared. For example, parents hire people to cook some of the special dishes. People known for their skill in cooking delicacies such as chikanda and ifisashi (variety of food stuffs cooked in groundnut sauce) would be contracted for their services on the day of the chilanga mulilo. Sometimes, during the cooking process, the bride-to-be is not involved in the cooking. Depending on the chimbusa, she may be brought out of the house and taken round to see the cooking going on. In some instances, she is made to hold the cooking stick as a symbolic gesture of cooking whatever is in the pot and through it all, she has to show respect and gratitude to those helping with the cooking by laying on the ground and clapping (ukukunkuka).

But the most significant departure from the norm is when parents of the bride-to be contracts a catering company to provide their services. In this case, companies specialised in catering for traditional ceremonies such as chilanga mulilo are hired to cook the required food. Much of the intended purpose of preparing the food for the ceremony is lost at this stage. [53] The instructions and the symbols are not well communicated as the mode of transmission, through songs changes. The bride only receives the theory and misses the practical part which was the preferred mode of imparting knowledge in African societies.

WHO PARTICIPATED AND WHAT HAS CHANGED?

The chilanga mulilo culture requires that the food that has been cooked is delivered to the man's home. Interestingly, this part of the tradition has remained intact in spite of the changes that are perceived in the other stages. Nsofu explained the process which followed the cooking – ukutwala ifyakulya (taking the food). She observed that the food is transported to the home of the groom by the bride's party, as was the practice in the past. Then, the delivery party of women walk all the way to where the event was to take place whilst singing and ululating. They carried the food on their heads – that was the norm. In modern times, when the distance to the groom's home is judged to be too far to walk, vehicles are used to deliver the women and their food. [54] But these modifications can hardly be seen as a transformation of the age-old tradition, rather it should be taken as a convenience that addresses the intricacies of modern living. [55] Notably, the people are not taken to the venue, rather they get off the vehicles at some point near the groom's house, offload their food parcels and walk towards their destination. According to Nsofu, they would be singing nsense tubatwalile (traditional marriage song) until they reach the house, then they would sing chilanga mulilo twaleta (we have brought the food) at the door. Nsense tubatwalile, Nsofu claims, is viewed as a message from the bride and her kin to the groom's family that they raised and trained their child for wifehood: 'the bride's family has done their work it is up to the groom to take care of the bride. If then, the significance of chilanga mulilo (and taking the food) to the future son-in-law, is appreciation, because they love him and respect him for proposing marriage to their daughter, and as a sign that the family has also accepted him, [56] the singing of nsense tubatwalile at chilanga mulilo raises issues of the confusion evident in the modern ceremony. A ceremony which is about food combined with a song imploring the groom to take care of his bride sends conflicting messages about the ceremony that is being performed.

Adding to the conflict, an informant (non-Bemba) who was married to a Bemba man in the 1990s, explained that after the marriage ceremony in the local court, she did not go home with her new husband. She was initially taken to her aunt's home and was only escorted to her marital home later that that day; the women who took her to her new husband's house sang nsense tubatwalile. It is clear that the controversy of nsense tubatwalile lies in the interpretation and meaning that is conveyed by the song. In this regard, it is difficult to see this mix up as mere dilution of the culture. It represents a significant restructuring of the essence of chilanga mulilo. This threatens the survival of the intended purpose of the original chilanga mulilo. It is

perhaps because of these perceptions of the chilanga mulilo that some scholars have investigated the growing tendency for people to mix different aspects of the Bemba marriage processes.

Commenting on the issue of mixing ceremonies, Lubula and Kaoma argued that today chilanga mulilo and amatebeto are sometimes done at the same time in a modernized way, thereby causing confusions to the young generations and the non-Bembas. Originally, amatebeto were conducted by the wife's family to show their appreciation to the son-in-law for taking care of their daughter and the other relatives. This was performed after many years of marriage. Unlike chilanga mulilo, amatebeto was a big feast which was prepared with a variety of food. The types of foods listed by Lumbwe in his thesis on chilanga mulilo were the ones meant for Amatebeto. Similarly, what mama Madelena narrated about the pre-marriage ceremony was a mixture of chilanga mulilo and amatebeto. However, Bamayo bana Nkandu expressed awareness of this merging of different parts of the marriage process and observed that:

The modernized system of performing chilanga mulilo in form of amatebeto has created more confusion, "sometimes it becomes unnecessary to conduct amatebeto because the rituals, explanation of symbols are all done during chilanga mulilo", besides both chilangamulilo and amatebeto have become exaggerated and expensive to perform. For some conducting these ceremonies has become business. [\[57\]](#)

It is evident that the socio-economic situation in urban areas have fed the commercialization trend, where the so-called fimbusa are offering their services for money. While this tendency to see opportunities to profit from, the fact that the original cultural practices are not being followed, and often combined with other traditional ceremonies like amatebeto, endangers the existence the cultures which should be preserved to ensure their survival.

A further twist in the chilanga mulilo is in the composition of the participants. In as much as part of the activities are a performed in the public arena, for example, the cooking and the delivery of the food which attracts onlookers, especially children, the actual ceremony happened in seclusion, in the house. This required, as explained earlier, the presence of specified people, with the most important being the banachimbusa, bride's grandmother and an aunt from the woman's side and the shibukombe, and his mother on the man's side. In contemporary Zambia, this composition varies according to those advising the organisers. It is not uncommon to see a man with the two people and also a number of his friends, who pass for his best men at a wedding ceremony, being part of the chilanga mulilo. Apart from these, a number of other relatives and friends of the man and his parents would have been invited to witness and participate in the feast. This trend has become part and parcel of the chilanga mulilo, which perhaps, explains why the ceremony is seen as a wedding feast by some Zambians. This is a departure from the practice of the original chilanga.

CONCLUSION

In 2016, the United Nations Education and Scientific Organisation (UNESCO) made a commitment to sponsor a degree programme at the University of Zambia with a view of promoting the cultural heritage of the country. This was motivated by the organisation's desire to preserve cultural heritage around the world. In Zambia, the organisation has recognised traditional ceremonies such as the Likumbi lya mize of the Luvale people, the Zambezi flood plains of Western Province and recently, availed funds for the programme focusing on intangible culture designed and offered by the University of Zambia. It is notable that an international organisation has interest in Zambia's heritage and the Zambian people would do well to show interest in their own cultural practices for the sake of preserving them as close to their original state as can be managed. Cultural practices in Zambia are in danger of disappearing. This, as this study has shown, is due to a number of influences, which include modernisation, nationalism, urbanisation and detribalisation, environment and climate change, each of which plays a part in effecting change in the way traditional

practices are conducted, generally. The current study identified the chilanga mulilo, one of those cultural practices that is in danger of disappearing as, it is evolving very rapidly and in its current form is a blended version of a number of different stages of the Bemba marriage process.

Chilanga mulilo, was a cultural ritual practiced mainly by the Bemba people of Northern Province. The study was not able to establish the origins of chilanga mulilo, but perhaps the answer lies in the socio-economic relations practised by the Bemba. The mother-in-law avoidance and the food taboos located in the matrilineal marriage system practised by the Bemba, created awkward position for a son-in-law whose suitability as a husband was assessed based on his ability to cut chitemene to show that he could support a wife and her children. The Bemba social structure recognised that such a person needed looking after and fed well. This was probably the motivation for chilanga mulilo.

In recent years, however, it is increasingly being identified as a Zambian tradition. This is because over the years, Zambians from various ethnic groups have, especially in urban areas have adopted the tradition, which is practised as part of the marriage rituals involving the family of the bride and that of the groom and so, it is no longer the preserve of the Bemba people. While the essence and symbolism of it remains that of 'showing the fire', the actual practice and the processes involved have undergone serious changes. To begin with, the food preparation process involves a large cooking party, including hired experts to prepare selected traditional Zambian dishes such as chikanda, ifisashi and traditional drinks like Munkoyo and millet beer. This is a factor that has significantly contributed to the distortion of the chilanga mulilo; it is a feature of matebeto that has been grafted into the chilanga mulilo. It is also in the songs. In African cultural ceremonies and rituals, songs are vital to the process as they are not merely for entertainment, but convey messages and are a medium of instruction to the new couple. In the current scenario, some songs that are not originally part of the chilanga mulilo, but part of the other ceremonies, such as the matebeto that have been infused in this ceremony. It is therefore important that the correct songs are sung. A wrong song would not only not convey the correct message or it may not be conveyed at all and the parties to whom the message is directed may miss some vital instructions.

The various innovations to the chilanga mulilo have turned a ceremony that in its original format was quite simple, into a complex, exaggerated and expensive venture. This version is almost unrecognisable from the original, which, according to a number of marriage counsellors interviewed in on the subject, was really a formal way of disposing of the future son-in-law's food taboos. A number of them emphasised that chilanga mulilo involved very few people taking the food to the future son-in-law accompanied by a few people for him to be shown the fire. They further clarified that, the food that was served was not a feast for the man's family and friends, but that it was symbolic introduction to bride's family cuisine involving ubwali (maize/millet) meal porridge and a chicken (or two – one for the shibukombe). It is significant that, singing and dancing, another matebeto intrusion, was not part of this pared back process of the Bemba marriage. As the counsellors explained, all the messages and instructions were discerned in the food items, the chicken and verbalised by those presenting the food to the groom.

The distorted and modified so-called modern version of the chilanga mulilo may have been affected by the inevitable changes that Zambia has undergone, modernisation, increased interethnic marriages, even globalisation among many factors, however, a number of scholars and social commentators including marriage counsellors (ifimbusa) insist that some of the changes that characterise this marriage ritual are motivated by opportunist who have commercialised a very straight forward cultural practice. Such people, pretending to be knowledgeable in the conduct of chilanga mulilo, apparently advise those intending to get married and their families and, apparently are partly responsible for misleading their clients and contributing to the transformation of a once upon a time straight forward process.

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Interviews

1. Interview with Kalema, Hellena. Site and Service, Kabwe, 17th May, 2022.
2. Interview with Kaoma, Berth. Marriage Counsellor, St. Annie Catholic Church, New Town, Kasama, 14th May, 2022.
3. Interview with Lubula, Margret Chilima. Marriage Counsellor, Inasaka Shafyupo, New town, Kasama, 14 May, 2022.
4. Interview with Mulenga, Hellen Mushanga. Mukulumpe Township, Kasama, 17th May, 2022
5. Interview with Musonda, Christine Nkandu. Site and Service, Kabwe, 17th May, 2022.
6. Interview with Sr. Nafwekwe, Sabina. St. Veronica Catholic Church, Kabwe, 18th May, 2022.
7. Interview with Shimbeza, Serah. New Town, Kasama, 12th May, 2022.
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Dissertations

1. Lumbwe, Kapambwe. "The Role of Music in the Traditional Marriage Ceremonies of the Bemba-Speaking people of Northern Zambia", M.A Dissertation, University of Cape Town, September 2008.
2. Mulenga, Nsofu. Alice. "A Pragmatic Analysis of Chilanga Mulilo Traditional Songs: A Case of Kabwe Urban", M.A Dissertation Linguistic Science, Kwame Nkrumah University, September 2021.

3. Zulu, Maureen. “Cultural Practices in Zambia Modernity and its Impact on the Soli People, 1935-2015”, M.A Dissertation, History, Kwame Nkrumah University, November 2020.

FOOTNOTES

- [1] John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (New York: Anchor Books edition, 1970), p.174.
- [2] A. R. Radcliffe-Brown and Daryll Forde, *African Systems of Kinship and Marriage* (London: Associated Book Publishers, 1987), p. 43.
- [3] Sunday Awoniyi, African Cultural Values: The Past, Present and Future’ in *Journal of Sustainable Development in Africa*, Vol. 17, No. 1 (2015), p. 3.
- [4] Peter D. Snelson, *Educational Development in Northern Rhodesia 1883-1945* (Lusaka: National Educational Company of Zambia Limited, 1974), p. 18.
- [5] Jonathan Kangwa, ‘Christianisation of female initiation rites by the London Mission Society: The case of Northern Rhodesia, 1883-1920’ in Janet Wooton (ed.) *Women in Christianity in the Age of Empire (1800-1920)* (London and New York: Routledge, 2022), pp. 157 and 158.
- [6] For example, Elmslie who witnessed some kind of celebration among the Ngoni described it as ‘charged with vice. It is the only theme that runs through songs, and games and dances’, see, W. A. Elmslie, ‘Among the Wild Ngoni’ in *The History of Livingstonia Mission in British Central Africa* 3rd ed. (London: Frank Cass, 1970), pp. 54-57
- [7] Oger, *Ilondola Mission*, p. 24.
- [8] Audrey I. Richards, Chisungu, *A girl’s initiation ceremony among the Bemba of Zambia* (London: 1982), p. 43.
- [9] Scott D. Taylor, *Culture and Customs of Zambia* (London: Greenwood Press, 2006), p. 99.
- [10] Different stories, and most importantly the history of the tribe and clan were told. Other stories concerned the heroic deeds of the ancestors, rites and the ceremonies, wise sayings which had hidden meaning.
- [11] Interview with Hellena Kalema Mwenya, Site and Service, Kabwe, 17TH May, 2022.
- [12] Audrey I. Richards, Chisungu. *A girl’s initiation ceremony among the Bemba of Zambia* (London: International African Institute, 1982), p. 43. For details on the preparations of African traditional marriages, see also Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, p. 176-178.
- [13] The consent of the girls’ family was a necessary step in the marriage negotiations. The girls’ father, uncle and the Grandmother were supposed to be present.
- [14] Interview with Sr. Sabina Nafwekwe, St. Veronica Catholic Church, Kabwe, 18th May, 2022.
- [15] Audrey I. Richards, *Land, Labour and Diet in Northern Rhodesia. An Economic Study of the Bemba Tribe* (London: Oxford University Press, 1961), pp.
- [16] Richards, *Land, Labour and Diet in Northern Rhodesia. An Economic Study of the Bemba Tribe*, p. xii.

- [17] Interview with Sr. Sabina Nafwekwe, St. Veronica Catholic Church, Kabwe, 18th May, 2022.
- [18] Interview with Berth Kaoma, New Town, Kasama, Marriage Counsellor St. Annie Catholic Church, 14th May, 2022.
- [19] Richards, *Chisungu. A girl's initiation ceremony among the Bemba*, p. 45.
- [20] Ayisi, *An Introduction*, p. 9.
- [21] Margret Chilima Lubula, New town, Kasama, Marriage Counselor, Inasaka Shafyupo, interviewed on 14 May, 2022.
- [22] Bertha Kaoma, New Town, Kasama, Marriage Counselor St. Annie Catholic Church, interviewed on 14th May, 2022.
- [23] Interview with Kaoma.
- [24] Interview with Nkandu.
- [25] Interview with Hellen Mshanga Mulenga, Mukulumpe Township, Kasama, 17th May, 2022.
- [26] Interview with Kalema.
- [27] Interview with Serah Shimbeza, New Town, Kasama, 12th May, 2022.
- [28] Interview with Nkandu.
- [29] Interview with Kalema.
- [30] Interview with Sister Sabina Nafukwe, St. Veronica Catholic Church,.
- [31] Taylor, *Culture and Customs of Zambia*, p. 99.
- [32] Boyd Phiri, 'Abuse of matebeto', Zambia Daily Mail, 31st August, 2014.
- [33] Kapambwe Lumbwe, 'The Role of Music in the Traditional Marriage Ceremonies of the Bemba-Speaking people of Northern Zambia', M.A Dissertation, University of Cape Town, September 2008, p.93.
- [34] Alice Mulenga Nsofu, 'A Pragmatic Analysis of Chilanga Mulilo Traditional Songs: A Case of Kabwe Urban', M.A Dissertation Linguistic Science, Kwame Nkrumah University, September 2021, pp. 20-36.
- [35] Interview with Mandelena Mwape Zulu, Nakoli, Kabwe, 13 May 2022.
- [36] Interview with Christine Musonda Nkandu, Site and Service, Kabwe. Interviewed on 17 May 2022.
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- [38] Richards, *Land Labour and Diet*, p. 128.

[39] Awoniyi, “African Cultural Values”, p. 4.

[40] Awoniyi, “African Cultural Values”, p. 1.

[41] Awoniyi, “African Cultural Values”, p. 1,

[42] Elmslie, ‘Among the Wild Ngoni’, p. 24.

[43] Louis Oger, *Ilongola: Niwe Cintamba icitambalikile icalo*, trans. Josephine Mitimangi (Ndola: Missionaries of Africa, 1992), p. 24.

[44] Eric O. Ayisi, *An Introduction to the study of the African Culture*. 2nd Ed. (Nairobi: East African Publishers, 1992), p. vii.

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[46] Ayisi refers to the fact that these influences include names of food which are attributed to Portuguese, Danish or Dutch, see Ayisi, *An Introduction*, p. 4.

[47] Interview with Nkandu,

[48] Mandalena Zulu, interviewed in Nakoli, Kabwe, 13 May 2022.

[49] M. M. Mumba, interviewed in Highridge, Kabwe, 17 May, 2022

[50] Interview with Madalena Zulu.

[51] Chilanga mulilo observed in Kabwe, 2020.

[52] Nsofu, ‘A Pragmatic Analysis of Chilanga Mulilo’, pp. 20-36, see also, Lumbwe, ‘The Role of Music’, p. 93.

[53] Discussion arises from the interview with Mandalena Mwape Zulu.

[54] Nsofu, ‘A Pragmatic Analysis of Chilanga Mulilo’.

[55] Chilanga mulilo in its current form, especially in urban areas, has acquired different forms and in some cases there is need to look at the practicality of the process. For example, a groom who lives far from the family of the bride would compromise on the part of where the food is delivered. In this case, he and his party, travel to the area (for example, the town/district) where activity takes place to avoid the inconvenience of the bride’s party transporting large quantities of food and drink to distant places. Even then, however, a place (mostly a relative’s house) close to the bride’s home, is identified where the man would have the food delivered to him and his people.

[56] Nsofu, ‘A Pragmatic Analysis of Chilanga Mulilo’.

[57] Interview with Nkandu,