

The Inquest in a Traditional African Society: The Chikondo Ritual among the Kaonde and Lamba People of North-Western and Copperbelt Provinces in Zambia

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ABSTRACT

It is intrinsic to human nature to want to know why the death of a person occurred. The question of what caused death is almost inevitable. This happens in almost all societies, whether it is in advanced western, modern developing or in traditional societies. The need to know is driven by a universal desire to assume peace for the departed and perhaps an attempt to find closure by those that remain. In western societies, this inherent human trait has led to significant investment in advanced technology and technical skills designed to confirm or indeed detect cause of death. This has given rise to fields such as forensic and related sciences, all in a quest to determine cause of death. Developing countries such as Zambia benefit from these sciences. When the need arises, autopsies are conducted by qualified personnel to determine the cause of death. While it is common for the living to want to ascertain the cause of death, be it through western-style autopsy in contemporary society or divination in traditional societies, in some African societies, apparently, the dead reveal who caused their demise. The process is steeped in mystic rituals such as the chikondo. The ritual is common in Northwestern and Copperbelt provinces of Zambia. This study investigates chikondo ritual among the Kaonde and Lamba People. It also examines chikondo in the context of the African belief systems, highlighting the enduring belief in witchcraft which is the driver of cultural practices such as chikondo rituals.

Key Terms: Chikondo inquest belief system witchcraft spiritual

INTRODUCTION

From the beginning of time, man was and continues to be mystified by death. Humans have accepted the occurrence of death. However, they remain interested in discovering why death occurred. As Henryk Zimoń observed, 'The phenomenon of death has always intrigued man. In the course of history each human civilisation has tried to solve the problem of death, take an attitude to it, "tame" it and find the answer to the question why man dies.'¹ In many African societies, the answer to the mystery, is that, death does not just happen. This is part of the African belief system that was common in pre-colonial African societies and survives in the modern era. It held that death was caused by malevolent beings in the spiritual realm or the living who invoked supernatural forces or practiced witchcraft, which, as John Mbiti observed, was believed to be the commonest cause of death.² However, people generally accepted that death by other causes existed. This was the case among the Kaonde people who, as Melland observed, believed that death was sometimes caused by Lesa (God), viewed as an "Act of God" or 'death from natural causes'. Inevitably, as in many African belief systems, the human factor prevailed. The firm belief in witchcraft, he noted, meant that

¹ Henryk Wincenty Zimoń (2007), 'Burial Rituals among the Konkomba People of Northern Ghana,' *Český Lid* (94), p. 43.

² John S. Mbiti (2015), *African Religions and Philosophy* [Revised Edition] (Nairobi: East African Educational Publishers), p. 153.

‘someone is often blamed for using this method to cause the death of another’. As Melland further observed, the Kaonde believed suicide and homicide were also instigated by people through ‘witchcraft by prompting of tuyewera’ (sprights created to cause harm).³ This does suggest that mysticism and fascination with the mystic dominated African societies. It was encased in their belief systems which defined a person’s existence in the community and the requirement to participate in all its activities. As Mbiti observed:

To be human is to belong to the whole community, and to do so involves participating in the beliefs, ceremonies, rituals and festivals of that community. A person cannot detach from the religion of his group, to do so is to be severed from his roots, his foundation, his context of security, kinships and the entire group of those who make him aware of his existence.⁴

It is not surprising, then, that every individual was intricate part of the community and moulded by its culture, its belief system, including the belief in witchcraft. As other writers have observed, it was a way of life among Africans and continues to be an integral part of traditional and modern African society. According to Tembo:

The belief cuts across the spectrum of time in the past, present and indeed future.... The belief in witchcraft is as hot today as it was when the missionaries came and at the attainment of independence. It is one belief which has not been affected in any way by modernization. In fact, the belief and fear of witchcraft are marching concurrently with the march towards industrial development and technological development.⁵

The belief systems of old traditional Africa, steeped in witchcraft, ritual and the afterlife, were so strong that western functionaries such as Christian missionaries and Government officials that endeavoured to destroy and replace them with western religion and its values, admitted it was not an easy task. Africans retain many of their cultural practices, albeit, modernised or diluted with traits of the western values. Retention of old cultural practices was not unique to Africans. It was a trait noted among other people who found themselves in different cultural environments. This is the argument Margaret Creel makes of the descendants of former American plantation slaves, the Gullah (mostly of West African origins), who practiced Christianity and ‘professed to believe that God “called” his servants to heaven’, at the same time, ‘still viewed death as an instrument of the powers of darkness’.⁶ She argues that ‘contrary to assertions that slavery in the United States destroyed African social structures and practices and that they learned ‘new patterns of thought and behaviour which they adapted to their use’, certain practices akin to the traditional African religion remained. This includes those regarding death, the afterlife and the rituals that went with the transition from the physical to spiritual life.⁷

This was true of the Kaonde people who had retained many of their traditional beliefs long after the onslaught of the European conversion mission among them. Melland wrote that ‘all natives in their natural state LIVE [Melland’s emphasis] this belief: the belief in the omniscience and universal presence of spirits.’ He observed that, ‘a tribe consists of the souls departed and the souls living’.⁸ In the same way, a human was a physical and spiritual being. This dual aspect of humans allowed them to move from one realm to the other and the passage was death. It was, as Creel noted, ‘a journey into the spirit world, not a break with life or earthly beings’, a belief which suggested ‘the perpetuity of life through time, space and circumstances’⁹

As a result of their belief in the continuity of life from the physical to the spiritual, the Kaonde sought to conduct proper burial rituals to ensure peace with and the munificence of the spirits of the deceased family

³ Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, p. 153 and Frank H. Melland (1923), *In Witch-bound Africa: An Account of the Primitive Kaonde and their Beliefs* (London: Frank Cass & Co. Ltd.), pp. 82-3.

⁴ Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, pp. 1-5.

⁵ Cited in Mwizenge S. Tembo, ‘The Witchdoctors are not Wrong: The future Role and Impact of African Psychology on Individual Well-being’, p. 5. Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the African Studies Association held in Boston held on 4 -7 December, 1993.

⁶ Margaret Washington Creel (2005), ‘Gullah Attitudes toward Life and Death’ in Joseph E. Holloway, *Africanisms in American Culture*. 2nd ed. (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press), p. 85.

⁷ Creel, ‘Gullah Attitudes toward Life and Death’, pp. ix and 81-85).

⁸ Discussion derived from Melland, *In Witch-bound Africa*, pp. 300-303 and 298.

⁹ Creel, ‘Gullah Attitudes’, p. 81.

members.¹⁰ As Creel also suggested, the ‘underlying idea of funeral rites is to appease the spirits of the dead’. She further noted that ‘their fears arose from the belief that ‘the deceased, dissatisfied with the sendoff, might return and bring evil’.¹¹ Similarly, the Kaonde believed that their departed relatives exerted influence over their lives from the spiritual realm. As Melland observed, ‘The family spirits, having lived on earth for some time, and having their own ideas on human affairs, impose on the living the duty of following the tradition of their elders’.¹² As was the case with many other Africans, they were terrified of the possible return of a deceased person’s spirit, *mutala* (Kaonde word for adverse spirit), which could be avoided with a good sendoff.¹³ Interestingly, these are fears that Christianity and education failed to allay. Modern Zambian society continues to avoid situations that would prompt spirits of the dead to return and haunt them (*ukubukila ichibanda*),¹⁴ one of which was ensuring a proper burial of the deceased relative.

What was equally important to the Kaonde, was the need to determine the cause of death, which although mainly attributed to witchcraft, still invoked the desire to expose the person behind the demise of a relative. This was done through divination.¹⁵ It is a cultural trait that they have continued to practice. They still seek answers in the occult even when the cause of death appears obvious or has been determined by an autopsy as arising from a known medical condition, suicide or homicide. Even in instances of death arising from traffic or other accidents, Kaonde and Lamba people would look beyond the events and attribute them to witchcraft. In 2017, the *Lusaka Times* reported an incident in which two elderly men in rural Solwezi were assaulted by a moving coffin. Mr. Daka (Northwestern Provincial Commissioner of Police) observed that the duo, 76-year-old Richard Salimu and Oswald Chakaba (about 70), was accused of causing the death of 42-year-old Patrick Salimu, who drowned in a stream in the area.¹⁶ In such cases, the people seek the timeless *ng’anga* (traditional doctor/diviner) to provide answers, after which they seek appropriate punishment for the person or people accused of instigating the death. Many of the people involved in these practices profess to be Christians.

When Christian missionaries and other Europeans arrived in the country, they encountered African religion and belief in the mystic upon which they embarked on a mission to uproot everything they considered primitive and abhorrent and replace them with western civilisation. This meant fighting the core of the African belief in the enduring presence and influence of the living dead, the spiritual world, as well as their belief in witchcraft, which Melland conceded was an uphill battle. He saw parallels between Africa and Western Europe with regard to their strong belief in witchcraft at different times in their histories. His argument was that, Europe, considered highly civilised, still grappled with witchcraft beliefs in the late eighteenth century. He observed that, ‘The most brilliant minds, the keenest intellects, the greatest investigators, were among the believers.’¹⁷ Melland went on to cite John Wesley, a fervent witch hunter and advocate of witch trials, who was disappointed that ‘most men of learning in Europe had given up all accounts of witches and apparitions as mere old wives’ fables.’ Melland’s argument then was, if learned men in Europe clung to their belief in witchcraft, how much more ‘backward, uncivilised’ Africans.¹⁸ Not surprisingly, as many contemporary writers have concluded, human beings tend to hold on to their traditions and in Africa, belief in witchcraft persisted in the colonial period and continues in modern-day Zambia. In spite of converting to Christianity, some of their traditional rituals and practices such as chikondo persist among the Kaonde and Lamba.

Theoretical framework: This study was guided by Vitalism, a theory by Placide Tempels, to explain the Kaonde and Lamba cultural beliefs and their need to perform death rituals such as the chikondo. Developed by

¹⁰ In Kaonde culture, the spiritual realm was made up of benevolent and malevolent beings. The former offered protection and goodwill to those who remained, while the latter, referred to as *mitala* by the Kaonde, were a source of trouble to a person, his family and future generations, see Melland, *In Witchbound Africa*, p. 141

¹¹ Creel, ‘Gullah Attitudes’, pp. 85 and 86.

¹² Melland, *Witchbound Africa*, p. 299

¹³ Melland, *Witchbound Africa*, p. 92.

¹⁴ The fact that Africans generally believe in the return of bad spirits that haunt the living was highlighted by a group of 4th Year History Students (Class of 2024). Group discussion on 16 May 2024.

¹⁵ Melland, *In Witchbound Africa*, p. 84.

¹⁶ Support Editor, ‘Coffin assaults two elders in Solwezi District’. <https://www.lusakatimes.com>. 10 August 2017.

¹⁷ Melland, *Witchbound Africa*, pp. 185 and 186.

¹⁸ Melland, *Witchbound Africa*, pp. 186-190

Tempels, who noted that ‘the key to Bantu thought is the idea of vital force, of which the source is God,’¹⁹ the theory has been adapted in various ways to explain African philosophy and cosmology. Ngangah, for example, explains vital force as ‘a peculiar trait of African philosophy and cosmology which defines and shapes the framework within the interwoven concepts of personhood and community as extensions of African concept of being’. He further highlights the interconnectedness of humans and the supernatural – God, the spirit of the ancestors, the other dead, and the living.²⁰ It aligns with the view that the purpose of human life, ritual and morality is to maintain, increase or restore the equilibrium of these forces. It seeks to prevent disequilibrium where death is not perceived as the end, but as a transition to another state, a category of existence that possesses its own life force.²¹ It is, however, still seen as a disruption, hence the need to restore the equilibrium. The theory resonates with the practices of the Kaonde and Lamba that see death as a disruption in the physical realm and perform rituals such as the chikondo to regain that equilibrium by organising a good send off for the deceased and knowing why they died. This is done because an unresolved cause of death traps the spirit of the dead and prevents it from moving on to the other realm where it attains a different form of power. The idea of the chikondo is to allow the deceased to reveal who caused their death before joining the spiritual world and acquire a different vital force that enables them to restore harmony and prevent cosmic deterioration or misfortune for those left in the physical realm.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative research approach to investigate chikondo. This is because qualitative research is ideal for understanding social phenomena from the perspective and experience of participants within their natural environment.²² Qualitative research was appropriate in this study because of its focus on the chikondo ritual, which is deeply embedded in the cultural beliefs, traditions and lived experiences of the Kaonde and Lamba people. This approach enabled the researchers to gain detailed and contextualised information to decipher the meaning, nature, objectives and significance of the chikondo. Furthermore, the approach allowed the participants to freely express their views, interpretations, and experiences and the relevance of the ritual to contemporary society, as they view it. It is also ideal for investigating cultural practices, traditions, and social interactions that require profound interpretations.²³ The study adopted the phenomenological research design which facilitated in-depth engagement with the participants who possessed cultural knowledge and had practical experience of the chikondo.

The study was conducted in communities within the North-Western and Copperbelt provinces of Zambia where the Kaonde and Lamba predominantly reside. The two provinces were purposively selected because the ritual is common in these cultural settings. The two areas provided the relevant environment for the researchers to interact with the people who possess knowledge about the chikondo. To achieve this, the researchers identified a group of people (target population) with information relevant to the study. The target group for this study comprised four (4) Village Headpersons, two (2) chief’s representatives – one male and one female, speaking on behalf of Chief Mukutuma, in which whose area the research was centred, twelve (12) Village Elders, one (1) Church Pastor and one (1) School Head Teacher who was selected for being western educated and a Christian. These participants were selected because they were believed to be eyewitnesses, possess adequate knowledge, experience and understanding of the chikondo ritual and its implications within traditional and modern African society. This made a total of twenty (20) participants. The sample size was considered adequate for a qualitative study because this approach emphasises depth of information rather than large numbers.²⁴ It provided a balance between manageability and diversity of perspectives. This ensured that the findings reflected a wide range of experience within the selected community.

¹⁹ Stephen O. Okafor (1982), Bantu Philosophy: Placide Tempels Revisited. *Journal of Religion in Africa* 13(2), p. 84.

²⁰ Innocent Chijindu Ngangah (2019), Vital Force, Personhood and Community in African Philosophy: An Ontological Study. *The International Journal of Humanities and Social Studies*. Vol. 7, Issue 10, p. 52.

²¹ Ngangah, Vital Force, Personhood and Community in African Philosophy, p. 50.

²² J. W. Cresswell and C. N. Poth (2018), *Qualitative inquiry and research Design: Choosing among five approaches* (5th ed.), (London: Sage Publications).

²³ N. K. Denzin and Y. S. Lincoln (2018), *The Sage handbook of qualitative research* (5th ed.), (London: Sage Publications)

²⁴ M. Q. Patton (2015), *Qualitative Research and Evaluation methods* (4th ed.), (London: Sage Publications).

This method provided for the scrutiny of the primary sources through semi-structured interviews with traditional leaders, their subjects and other people in Lufwanyama District, where this cultural practice is common. The sources were reinforced by articles from traditional and online newspapers. The study also used secondary sources such as journal articles and books in the libraries and electronic media for material on Kaonde and Lamba traditions. This helped to establish the study's scholarly credibility and illustrate the historical perspective of the chikondo rituals. The data were qualitatively analysed and a number of themes on the chikondo emerged. These were: i) the enduring belief in witchcraft as the number one cause of death ii) sustained belief in the spiritual world and its influence on living beings and iii) the desire to identify who caused the death of a departed relative.

The Inquest in a Traditional African Society

In modern society, an inquest is conducted to investigate an unexplained or unnatural death with a view to determine the cause of death. The inquest in many traditional African societies was also an investigation into the cause of death. However, unlike the western inquest, which sought to determine what caused the death, the African process sought to discover who caused it and whose outcome was more or less predetermined. Mbiti observed that in the African belief systems, death was attributed to two phenomena. Africans accepted that death could be natural, caused by the entity that that was a god or gods to them.²⁵ For example, among the Kaonde, there were deaths attributed to God the creator, which sometimes included being struck by lightning contrary to current trends where it is associated with witchcraft. However, as discussed earlier, Africans also believed that the actions of evil beings, living or dead caused death. As a result, traditional African societies conducted inquests to determine the cause of death or in this case, who caused it. Such inquests ignored any cause recorded by the western autopsy in favour of the traditional African inquiry. They did this, mostly after the burial of the deceased person, by consulting medicine men, any of which could variously be referred to as diviners, herbalists, traditional doctors, *ng'anga*,²⁶ or much more commonly, witchdoctors.

The African inquest into the cause of death varied and the method depended on the medicine man carrying it out. The mwavi ritual was the commonest method used. This involved oral administration of a concoction of herbs to the suspect. The accused proved his innocence if he survived the ordeal and considered guilty if he died. Among the Kaonde, the accused did not always take the mwavi. The concoction was administered to a chicken whose survival or death determined the innocence or guilt of the accused person. Using mwavi was common in many African societies, but Melland observed a method that appeared unique to the Kaonde, the chisoko (basket test). In this method, the medicine man placed a basket on the head of the accused, which he then attempted to take off. An innocent person stayed seated. On the other hand, when one was guilty, the basket stuck to the head like a magnet and when the medicine man attempted to take it off, it did not come away and the person was pulled up along with it.²⁷

Then there was the investigation which involved calling upon the spirits of the dead to reveal the person that instigated their death. This involved throwing bones, shells, beads and other objects on the ground. The medicine man then read the message in the pattern of the objects. Sometimes, the medicine man used horns, figurines or whatever objects he worked with and invoked the spirit of the deceased to speak and reveal those behind their death. Hearing the spirits 'speak', left the people awestruck and without a doubt about who was responsible for the death of a relative. Such ordeals were witnessed by colonial officials such as Melland, who lived with and worked with the Kaonde people of Kasempa. He was not convinced by these displays and suggested that such powerful revelations could not have been much more than the work of experienced hypnotists and ventriloquists and clairvoyants.²⁸ Nevertheless, when the medicine men identified who caused the death, some form trial followed and then punishment for the guilty party. In this case, according to Melland, 'the witch-doctor is the person who divines, finds convicts and sentences the witch.'²⁹ The stages from witchcraft accusation through to the punishment were the same for all accused persons. Melland observed

²⁵ Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, p. 153.

²⁶ Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* p. 164; Melland, *In Witchbound Africa*, p. 222.

²⁷ Melland, *In Witchbound Africa*, pp. 224, 226-7.

²⁸ Melland, *In Witchbound Africa*, p. 201.

²⁹ Melland, *In Witchbound Africa*, p. 199.

that ‘after the divination and conviction, the mulozhi [(witch or wizard)] is tied up and a kind of inquest follows to find out why he killed so-and-so, and also what manner of witchcraft was used... After the inquisition the mulozhi is speared to death and his body is burned’.³⁰ There were instances when the witch was not speared to death. This was when the mwavi was administered and a guilty verdict was returned when the accused died, and also when the witchcraft involved mulombe (a snake charm) whose owner died when it was killed.³¹

People in contemporary rural society have continued to practice non-scientific traditional inquests, which have been observed in some Kaonde-Lamba cultures. Like other people, the Kaonde-Lamba people seek to establish how a person died, but beyond that they desire to uncover person behind the death of a relative, a practice that is common in parts of rural North-Western and the Copperbelt provinces. The method used to detect the killer is the chikondo ritual. In recent years, more cases of chikondo have been reported in both provinces. As expected, people have been accused of causing death and unlike it was in the past, where the guilty person was speared or burned to death immediately, in the present era, the punishment is equally horrendous. It involves beatings, burying people alive or burning of houses, which leads to death unless the accused manages to escape from the angry mob.³²

The Chikondo Practice

Funeral processions often unite mourners as they lay their loved ones to rest but they can quickly become violent and fatal witch-hunts for those that engage in the traditional practice called chikondo. Many Kaonde, Lamba as well as other ethnic groups attribute most deaths to witchcraft. They do not often bother with the logic, but believe that people die because of it. Although people die from various causes – diseases, accidents, murder or even suicide, it is frequently supposed that the person has been bewitched. Whenever someone is taken ill and dies suddenly or after a long time, it is often attributed to witchcraft. For example, when a man in Kawambwa died after a long illness, having sought treatment from the hospital and a traditional doctor, his family accused ‘Senior headman Musashi, who was also Chief Chama’s secretary of bewitching their relative’; he was killed shortly after the accusation. Commenting on the event, a Christian leader, noted that people feel the need to find and give immediate causes of death. In this incident, the surviving family members made it a point to uncover the cause of that death. He observed that in traditional (and even modern) African societies there were very few deaths whose cause was known and accepted as a natural occurrence and did not need investigating. But he erroneously included murder and war because the cause is known. In such cases, he suggests, the surviving relatives ‘seek punishment for the person who caused this [death] and feel relieved when justice is meted [out].’³³

Adding to the discussion, another clergyman observed, ‘It is a different matter when it is a natural disaster. Who do you blame for it? When lightning strikes a person dead, it is totally divine. There is no human involvement.... You cannot blame anyone for it.’ This is far from the truth. On the contrary, even in such cases, there is always the lurking suspicion of evil forces being involved in one form or another; death resulting from illness, an altercation, in a war situation and sometimes accidents, where the cause of the accident was known, is not accepted at face value. Families look for causes other than the direct cause. As the Pastor also concedes, ‘I know in African culture, we will always want to find a human being to blame. Thus, if

³⁰ Melland, *In Witchbound Africa*, pp. 206-207

³¹ The mulombe is also called mulolo or ilomba in Lunda. The last term, ilomba, currently widely used in Zambia is described as a magical snake with a human head (a miniature of the owner). It is made by witch doctors (*ng’anga’s*) whereby the human’s essence entwines with the snake. The ilomba may have been part of the witchcraft landscape in North-Western Province for a long time for killing enemies or wealth generation, but seems to have emerged and enthralled the urban Copperbelt population in the 1980s (It featured in a 1986 song ‘Church Elder Pole’ by P. K. Chishala, a Zambian musician renowned for his Kalindula music) during the country’s economic meltdowns in the 1980s same way that Satanism and accusations of Satanism seem to have emerged and captivated people in the 1990s. This, perhaps, explains why the focus on the reason for possession of an ilomba appears to have tilted more to wealth creation than it had been in the distant past. Other than that, little has changed about the ilomba magic; it still kills people as directed by its owner and when it is killed, the owner dies at the same time wherever he/she may happen to be. For more details on the snake charm, see Melland, *In Witch-bound Africa*, pp. 207-209).

³² Interview with Alfred Mwamba in Lufwanyama on 3 February 2024

³³ Christine Chihame ‘Headman stoned to death over witchcraft accusation’ *Sunday Mail*, 12 February 2023, p. 2.

a tree falls on someone's house and crushes them to death, we want to find the jealous uncle who visited a witch[doctor] and used powers of the underworld to kill the nephew.' The religious leader further observes that many people in Zambia believe that lightning can be generated through witchcraft and used to attack people. Indeed, there are places in Zambia which are renowned for their out of season lightning strikes.³⁴

As a result of the enduring beliefs in witchcraft, the bereaved seek witchdoctors and other mediums to reveal the person who bewitched their relative. A local Zambia newspaper once reported that 'when it is believed that foul play or witchcraft was involved in one's demise, relatives resort to chikondo to identify the person responsible for it.'³⁵ In modern times, those who defer to the mystic to explain the occurrence of death that is beyond their understanding have moved away from the methods of the past such as the mwavi ritual and the summoning of the spirit of the deceased. The two methods placed the medicine man in direct conflict with the law for accusing people of causing death 'without' evidence or of causing death of the accused after the mwavi ritual. The rationale in the current environment is that no one makes the accusation and therefore no one is liable to the law. Since the dead person 'identifies' the guilty party, there can be no indictment under the Witchcraft Act.³⁶ The law serves to prohibit accusations of witchcraft or engaging another person (*ng'anga*) to use charms which lead to death. It holds accusers in breach of the law punishable by a fine or a jail term or both. The Act further provides for punishment of witch doctors or witch finders,³⁷ although this is only acted upon when there is a complaint against such persons. The seriousness of the punishment depends on the outcome of the accusation (for example, death from the mwavi test) and the actions of the 'victims' of witchcraft, who verbally or physically confronted those identified as witches or wizards. In this case the people concerned would be charged with murder or assault, respectively.³⁸

Impact of the Law on the Belief in Witchcraft.

The law on witchcraft was introduced in 1914 by the British South Africa Company (BSAC) administration in a bid to eradicate witchcraft. As Friday Mufuzi observed, this was because, during this era, the western world considered itself duty-bound to carry the burden of "civilizing" Africans through the introduction of western civilization, which in essence meant Africans embracing European lifestyles and abandoning their indigenous culture and belief systems, including witchcraft, and replacing it with Christianity.³⁹ Obviously, this did not work as people in Zambia still believe in the existence of witchcraft. As early as the 1920s, Melland conceded defeat in solving the issue of witchcraft using laws that targeted the perceived perpetrators of the mystic such as witch doctors and those who accused others of practicing witchcraft. He suggested targeting the belief in witchcraft through education having observed that there were more witchcraft accusations than there were actual acts of witchcraft. He pointed out that the people believed in the existence of witchcraft and could not be persuaded by punishing the people they considered an antidote to witchcraft. He believed that the key to eliminating the belief in witchcraft and witchdoctors was education as opposed to trying to 'cure ideas and beliefs with a penal code'.⁴⁰

The law failed then and has continued to fail in modern day Zambia. Although the approach has changed slightly by prosecuting people believed to practice witchcraft, it still targets those who accuse others of

³⁴ This discussion is derived from: Pastor Chanda's 'Your Family Matters: Heartache of natural disasters', *Sunday Mail*, 12 February 2023, p. 11. There are common stories told of lightening being readily available for sale in areas such as Mununga in Luapula Province, Zambia.

³⁵ 'Chikondo: Flying Coffins and a Gruesome Witch Hunt' *The Zambian Observer*, 26 January 2023: <https://zambianobserver.com>. Accessed, 11 July 2024.

³⁶ The Witchcraft Act was interpreted as 'including the throwing of bones, the use of charms and any other means, process or device adopted in the practice of witchcraft or sorcery which was passed to 'provide penalties for the practice of witchcraft; and to provide for matters incidental to or connected therewith.' See, Witchcraft Act No. 13 of 1994 derived from the original Witchcraft Act of 1914 and amended many times by 1994.

³⁷ Chapter 90 of the Laws of Zambia. Witchcraft Act No. 13 of 1994. See also, J. Orde Browne (1935), 'Witchcraft and British Colonial Law' in *Journal of the International African Institute* 8(4), p. 481; Melland also referred to the prosecution of witch doctors, see Melland, *In Witch-bound Africa*, p. 307

³⁸ Refer to, Penal Code Act of Zambia, CAP 87. *The Laws of Zambia*. Chapters, XIX, XXI, XXII and XXIV

³⁹ Friday Mufuzi, (2014), 'The Practice of Witchcraft and the Changing Patterns of its Paraphernalia in the Light of Technologically Produced Goods as Presented by Livingstone Museum, 1930-1973' in *Zambia Social Science Journal* 5(1), pp. 50-51.

⁴⁰ Melland, *In Witchbound Africa*, p. 307

practicing it and the witchdoctors who validate such accusations and more significantly, the belief in witchcraft persists. One Zambian tabloid aptly summarises this situation, stating that ‘witchcraft is real and it’s rife in Zambia.’⁴¹ In this regard, it is easy to understand why practices such as chikondo persist – even advanced scientific methods fail to persuade people to accept the cause of death as determined by modern forensic investigations. This is not surprising as there is a common belief among Africans that science does not work against witchcraft. In addition to this, is the notion that western style forensics and autopsies cannot deduce the cause of death in a case of witchcraft. For example, as Munyaradzi Mawere observed in Mozambique, South Africa and Zimbabwe, people were not persuaded to change despite the governments’ campaigns to suppress the use of traditional healing methods (herbal medicine and spiritual healing techniques) in favour of conventional/scientific methods. In South Africa, he noted, ‘between 60% and 80% of the population continued to rely on the traditional medical sector as their first contact for advice and treatment of health concerns.’⁴²

The Burial Rituals in Pre-colonial and Colonial Kaonde Society

The origin of chikondo is somewhat obscure. The practice does not clearly come out in the early history of the Kaonde people. Even Melland who worked among the Kaonde people in Kasempa for about eleven years and wrote a book on their beliefs, especially their religious beliefs, witchcraft and their strong link with the spirit world, did not mention the chikondo ritual. However, his writing includes a clear description of the Kaonde handling of death, including the funeral and burial rituals, but made no reference to chikondo as it is practiced today. It is likely that the funeral and burial rituals he observed were pared back due to his presence. This assumption is premised on the fact that these were private rituals which the Kaonde may not have wanted to perform in front of a stranger, in this case, a government official. Melland recognised the difficulty in obtaining all the information on the culture of the people that saw him as an outsider.⁴³

In writing about Kaonde burial rituals, Melland explained that not all the mourners went to the burial site. A few people carried the body and stopped when they reached a crossroad where they laid it across the ‘fork’ and said goodbye to the deceased by throwing leaves on the body.⁴⁴ Afterwards, he wrote, one member of the burial party, usually the deceased’s father would say, ‘someone has been responsible for your death – you must now revenge yourself on him’. The burial party then carried the body to the location chosen for burial.⁴⁵ Melland does not say whether or not there was divination to identify the person who caused the death before the burial. But the last words to the deceased provide a significant link between old and current beliefs which attribute death to malicious people and witchcraft. So does the appeal made to the spirit of the deceased to take revenge, which ties in with the chikondo – to identify and seek punishment for the culprit.

It is notable that practices similar to chikondo are not confined to the Kaonde or Lamba people. A few cases have been observed outside these areas, for example, some cases have been reported in Luapula and Southern Provinces.⁴⁶ Neither is it a uniquely Zambian ritual and has apparently been observed in other parts of Africa, for example, in Cote d’Ivoire, where it was referred to as the ‘flying coffin’.⁴⁷ In Ghana, a similar practice was observed among the Konkomba people of colonial Ghana. The ritual bore an uncanny resemblance to the chikondo ritual of the Kaonde and Lamba people. Zimoñ, who studied the burial rituals of the Konkomba of northern Ghana, observed that one of the practices involved carrying the body to the home of his friend for him

⁴¹ ‘Police urged to ban ‘moving coffin’ practice in Solwezi’, *Lusaka Times*. <https://www.lusakatimes.com>. 6 March 2022. Discussion derived from the comments on the article.

⁴² Munyaradzi Mawere (2011), ‘Ethical quandaries in spiritual healing and herbal medicine: A critical analysis of the morality of traditional medicine advertising in southern African urban societies’ in *Pan African Medical Journal* 10(6), pp. 2 and 3.

⁴³ Melland, *In Witch-bound Africa*, p. 202.

⁴⁴ Melland, *In Witchbound Africa*, p. 84.

⁴⁵ Melland, *In Witchbound Africa*, pp. 91 and 84.

⁴⁶ ‘Hichilema, Chikondo and Witch Hunting in Zambia’: https://www.thisdaylive.com/index.php/2023/02/25/hichilema-chikondo-and-witch-hunting-in-zambia/#google_vignette. 25/02/2023. Accessed: 08 August 2024. In this article, The Advocacy for Alleged Witches suggested chikondo ritual practice is pervasive in Chikankata, Neganega, and Mazabuka districts in the Southern Province and appealed to the president of Zambia, Hakainde Hichilema, to take necessary measures to stop the attack and persecution of persons accused of witchcraft in the country.

⁴⁷ ‘A Flying Coffin used as a Weapon Kills a Person in Cosroo, Ivory Coast.’ (<https://m.youtube.com>). 11 June 2015.

to bid farewell to the deceased friend. The practice, he explained, originated in the pre-colonial era, when 'carrying the dead body to different homesteads of the village used to have the purpose of pointing at the person guilty of the death'.⁴⁸ He observed that on the day of the burial, the people expected the person that caused the death to be revealed by the spirit of the deceased. He went on to explain that the 'Konkomba believed that the spirit of the dead knew the sorcerer that had caused the death'. And much like the Kaonde belief, among the Konkomba, 'the dead body was tied to a pole and carried round the village. Hitting the pole on the wall of a homestead, the spirit of the dead person showed where the sorcerer was. That person was killed on the spot'. It is striking that this old Konkomba practice is much like that of the Kaonde even in the manner those that carried the body moved with it. According to Zimoń, 'They carry the body at a hastened pace',⁴⁹ something that is also observed about the pallbearers when chikondo has been activated.

What is Chikondo?

Chikondo, variously referred to as *kikondo* among the Kaonde and *chitaleme* among the Lamba, or what the media calls moving coffins⁵⁰ or flying coffins in some cases, refers to a situation where the coffin, in which a deceased person has been laid for burial, 'refuses' to be buried or directs pallbearers to the people who caused the death.⁵¹ It is a ritual carried out in some African societies when they believe that the death of a relative was not natural. In such cases, 'when it is believed that foul play or witchcraft was involved in one's demise, relatives resort to chikondo to identify the person responsible for it.'⁵²

The Need to Perform Chikondo: The chikondo ritual served a three-fold purpose. Firstly, the practice of chikondo, as is the case with other death related rituals, is a coping mechanism to mitigate the psychosocial impact of bereavement and to promote healing.⁵³ It can be seen in the context of other funeral rites conducted by different people. For example, the funeral service or mass among Christians serves as an occasion to formally honour the dead, but also provides comfort and healing to the bereaved. And much as the case is with traditional rituals, the funeral service provides some kind of connection with the spiritual realm. Secondly, chikondo among the Kaonde and Lamba people was meant to expose the people that caused the death and punish them and lastly, it was to appease the spirit of the deceased.

Although cases of chikondo do not happen every time there is a funeral. They are still part of the fabric of traditional societies among the Kaonde, Lamba and related ethnic groups. In this regard, when a death occurs, and witchcraft is suspected, the family decides to search for the witch through the chikondo ritual. They engage the services of a traditional doctor to provide the necessary material for chikondo or for the administration of the herbal detector of the killer.⁵⁴ As Mwamba, a native of rural Lufwanyama District on the Copperbelt observed, people believe that through this ritual, the coffin that contains the dead body, would move and identify the person responsible for their death. Once the person assigned or engaged to perform the ritual completes his task, the coffin points the mourners to the 'killer', if he/she happens to be at the funeral gathering, or leads them to their home. Such identified suspects are then beaten up until they confess to having killed the deceased. The confession does not change anything. As Mwamba further explained, the people 'identified by the coffin' are beaten to death with or without a confession. If they manage to escape, their homes are burnt and the livestock and any other possessions are destroyed.⁵⁵ When suspects are not beaten to death, other means are used to kill them. For example, as Speedwell Nyirenda narrated:

⁴⁸ Zimoń, 'Burial Rituals among the Konkomba People of Northern Ghana,' p. 48. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/42640048>.

⁴⁹ For more details on the old Konkomba burial rituals, see Zimoń, 'Burial Rituals among the Konkomba People', pp. 43-58.

⁵⁰ 'A Moving Coffin', *Lusaka Times*, 10 August 2017 and 22 July 2021. www.lusakatimes.com. Accessed 12 August 2024.

⁵¹ 'Bizarre - Coffin directs Pallbearers', <https://youtube.com>, 4 January 2016).

⁵² 'Chikondo: Flying Coffins and a Gruesome Witch Hunt' *The Zambian Observer*, 26 January 2023: <https://zambianobserver.com>. Accessed, 11 July 2024.

⁵³ Mpasanyana Makgahlela, Thole Sodi, Shali Nkoana and Jabu Mokwena (2021), 'Bereavement Rituals and their related Psychosocial Functions in a Northern Sotho Community of South Africa,' *Death Studies* 45(2), pp. 91-100 and Mpasanyana Makgahlela (2001), 'Beliefs in Ancestors and Witchcraft as Potential Determinants of Complicated Spiritual Grief,' *Journal of Loss and Trauma* 26(2), Abstract and pp. 192-201.

⁵⁴ 'Hichilema, Chikondo, and Witch Hunting in Zambia'. https://www.thisdaylive.com/index.php/2023/02/25/hichilema-chikondo-and-witch-hunting-in-zambia/#google_vignette.

⁵⁵ Interview with Alfred Mwamba in Lufwanyama on 3 February 2024.

A 72-year-old man of Bitondo area in Lufwanyama tragically lost his life after being buried alive during a ‘chikondo’ ritual. The ritual was conducted by a group of people who suspected him of being behind the death of his grandson, who died under ‘unclear circumstance.’⁵⁶ This behaviour demonstrates that chikondo rituals in the societies in which it is practiced is both disruptive and distractive. Apart from destroying relationships, creating suspicion and fear among the people, much property is also lost.⁵⁷

Chikondo: The Ritual and the Charm

The chikondo rituals are performed before the burial of the deceased. There are various ways in which this ritual is performed, but the process itself is very simple. One way is that ‘the charms are administered on the deceased person in the coffin’. Another method involves ‘applying the charms on the coffin carrying a dead body’. In both cases, it is done with the expectation that the coffin will lead pallbearers to the person believed to have caused the death.⁵⁸

Among the Lamba people of Chief Mukutuma, chikondo has its origins in their history and culture. A resident of the Mukutuma Chiefdom explained that chikondo was first sanctioned by the chief: ‘*Akale abantu baleefwa sana echalengele ukwebati Bamfumu baMukutuma abakutanga babike umuti muli Mitwe pakweba ati umuntu uwanwamo ulionse ngatafwile bwino kubwela.*’⁵⁹ This means: long ago many people were dying. The first Chief Mukutuma placed traditional medicine in the Mitwe stream so that whoever drank water from it would return if their death was caused by witchcraft. Apparently, the idea was to protect the people and discourage witchcraft. Present day Lamba people believe that the charm, called *chishiku*, that was placed in Mitwe stream by the first Chief Mukutuma is still active today.⁶⁰ They use this belief to justify the practice of chikondo.

The important part of the chikondo is the charm that is administered. Several objects are used to perform the ritual. Among the Lamba of Lufwanyama, when the family decides to perform the chikondo ritual, they normally use the nose of a male dog. The rationale is that dogs have a high sense of smell and better suited to sniff out witches. To prepare the charm, the dog’s nose is pounded, mixed with herbs and sprinkled in the coffin just before burial.⁶¹ Of course, at some point in the burial preparations, a family representative would appeal to the deceased to rest in peace if their death was natural and to expose the killer if someone was responsible for it. Even then, the presumption was that witchcraft was involved. As one resident revealed:

Here we don’t accept that people die naturally. Even if they do, we try by all means to use the powder of the nose of the male dog. The powder is used because male dogs smell almost everything and this will help the dead person to search for the [supposed] killer.⁶²

The use of the nose of a dog was collaborated by Able Kapansa who witnessed the ritual being performed. He narrated that in 2016, his brother-in-law died in the Lufwanyama River. The family was devastated. They believed the circumstances of the death were mysterious and the immediate concern was to identify who was behind it. On the day of burial, as they prepared the body, *Abakuchaume* (the father’s side of the family) decided to mix the ground nose of a dog to the water that was used to wash it.⁶³ Kapansa further observed that before the process of washing the body started, the family spokesperson said the following words to the dead person. ‘*Wemwana wesu, imfwa wafwa taiweme. Fyenkafulya imbwa inunsha ifilifyonse efyo nawebo ulondole*

⁵⁶ Interview with Speedwell Nyirenda in Lufwanyama on 25 June 2024.

⁵⁷ For examples of studies that examine how funerals and burials disrupt social relations, see Anita Jacobson-Widding (1988), ‘Death Rituals as Inversion of Life Structure,’ in S. Cederroth, C. Corhin and J. Lindstrom (eds), *On the Meaning of Death: Essays on Mortuary Rituals and Eschatological Beliefs* (Stockholm: Almqvist and Wiksell International), pp. 137-53; Michelle Gilbert (1988), ‘The Sudden Death of a Millionaire: Conversion and Consensus in a Ghanaian Kingdom,’ *Africa* 58(3), pp. 291-314; William Cohen and Elisha S. Atieno Odhiambo (1992), *Burying SM: The Politics of Knowledge and the Sociology of Power in Africa* (London: Heinemann.).

⁵⁸ *Lusaka Times*, 6 March 2022. www.lusakatimes.com See also, *Zambia Daily Mail*, 16 October 2017.

⁵⁹ Interview with Respondent 2 in Lufwanyama District on 25 June 2024.

⁶⁰ The *chishiku* is another type of charm that makes people reveal who killed them once they die.

⁶¹ Interview with Respondent 2 in Lufwanyama District on 25 June 2024.

⁶² Interview with Respondent 1 in Lufwanyama District on 17 June 2024.

⁶³ Interview with Able Kapansa Able in Lufwanyama on 25 June 2024

uwakulya.⁶⁴ (translated: Our son, we are not happy with the way you have died. As the dog smells almost everything, go out there and show us the person who killed you.) When all the preparations were complete, the mourners proceeded for burial. On the way to the burial site, the coffin made a U-turned much to the jubilation of the 'mourners'. Kapansa explained that the coffin led the pall bearers to the house of the suspected killer. Several attempts to lift it failed and it remained there the whole night. As a result, burial did not take place that day.⁶⁵ The burial took place the following day without any incident.

Other versions of the chikondo charm include herbal concoctions – of leaves, the bark and roots of different trees. These are mixed with a secret substance to make the charm, which is then placed at the entrance or on the roof of the deceased person's house. The charm can also be placed in the coffin before laying the body in it. This makes the coffin 'fly' once lifted by pall bearers. According to Kasokela, it can fly for about six to ten metres without being controlled until it hits the supposed killer or searches for them at their home. He further explained that if the suspect is in the house, the coffin would ram the door to break it and enter the house without any damage to the coffin itself or it would fly in through the window. It is interesting that Kasokela suggests that when this is happening, the coffin can move on its own if the suspect is within range.⁶⁶ This is against a generally held view that the coffins do not move on their own and that they do not levitate. They only seem to gain their power when they are lifted and then, it has been suggested, they take control and direct the pallbearers as they seek the guilty parties. In this regard, Kasokela's observation presents a different version of the chikondo and introduces the challenges of contextualising this unique occurrence for those engaged in investigating indigenous culture, although it could be better explained in the context of intangible culture.

On the other hand, Speedwell Nyirenda argued that no charm is placed in the coffin. He explained that in every Lamba community, they have what they call 'Mwansambala', a type of traditional medicine that people seek to be administered on them. In this case, individuals seek the services of a *ng'anga* to administer the charm on them. The *ng'anga* makes tattoos on their bodies and rubs the charm into the cuts to implant the charm. It is supposed that when such people die due to witchcraft, the coffin would not move when pall bearers try to lift it.⁶⁷ This is self-administered chikondo which was corroborated by a respondent in Masaiti, a district on the Copperbelt. He observed that some people consult traditional healers to administer the charms on them while they were alive. This is done in order for their body or spirit to show the relatives who would have killed them. In these cases, the relatives would not know before hand and only discover this to be the case when the coffin 'refuses' to be buried and guides the pallbearers to those responsible for their demise. According to the respondent, this type of chikondo, was difficult to deal with because the relatives had no power to make decisions over the ritual. It apparently puts Christian families that may have not wanted to perform chikondo in a difficult and compromising situation.⁶⁸

In their quest to reveal who caused death, Africans employ other means, which involve provoking the spirits of their deceased relatives into resolving issues in the physical realm. This behaviour, a testament of the enduring and strong beliefs that Africans have in the spirits. For example, when a person dies among the Lamba, the family members invoke the spirits with loud lamentations about the death of one of them. They curse the spirit of the deceased as well as those of the ancestors to provoke them into action. In such instances, the family spirit is expected to cause the coffin to return (*uukubwela*). They believe that the dead hear them and refuse to be buried until those who had a hand in their death are exposed. However, this method only works when charms are administered on the pall bearers. In the societies where chikondo ritual is practiced, the mourners and pallbearers usually know and expect the coffin to return based on their knowledge of their community, the nature of the death and the family of the deceased. In this case, as Kanyaka observed, 'the coffin bearers often

⁶⁴ Interview with Kapansa

⁶⁵ Interview with Kapansa

⁶⁶ Interview with Chola Moris Kasokela in Lufwanyama on 14 May 2024.

⁶⁷ Interview with Nyirenda Speedwell in Lufwanyama on 25 June 2024

⁶⁸ Interview with Respondent 3 in Masaiti District on 20 March 2024.

take traditional medicines that have the same effects as very strong drugs'. He added that 'according to traditional beliefs, this is necessary to protect the pall bearers from the wrath of the deceased'.⁶⁹

The use of charms on pallbearers was also observed by Chola Mubili, a teacher in Lufwanyama, who attended a funeral held near his school. He explained his encounter with chikondo and admitted that no charms were administered on the body or the coffin. Instead, he witnessed the charm being administered on the pall bearers. He recalled that on the day of burial of the deceased, the Pastor suggested that only church members would carry the coffin to the graveyard to which some youths in the community objected. According to Mubili, 'as the coffin was peacefully being taken to the grave site, a group of youths hijacked it and the moment, they touched the coffin it started searching for the killer'.⁷⁰

During the course of the research on chikondo, one of the researchers witnessed it among the Lamba of Lufwanyama, Copperbelt. While he did not witness the pre-burial rituals where the chikondo charm was administered, he was in the crowd of people attending the funeral. On the day of burial, observed that the pallbearers failed to lift the coffin which remained rooted to the ground. The burial had to be put off until the following day. On the second day, the pallbearers managed to lift the coffin, but instead of heading to the graveyard, it set them running in the opposite direction and led them, followed by the crowd, to two different houses. At the first one, the pallbearers stopped in front of the house for a few minutes and moved on. The same happened at the second house. Then, without any drama, the pallbearers headed to the graveyard where the deceased was buried without any incidence.⁷¹ The anticipated drama did not unfold as expected. This incident left more questions than answers. Why did the coffin stop and move on without attempting to barge in the house or even attack anyone? The answer may lie in more research in this and other similar events.

The Reality of Chikondo

The chikondo as a burial ritual, is common among the Kaonde and Lamba people of the Northern-western and Copperbelt provinces. While cases have been reported in other parts of Zambia, they are more prevalent among these two and related ethnic groups. It is interesting also that such cases are prevalent in the rural parts of these provinces and hardly witnessed in urban areas. This situation, evokes questions of the reality of the chikondo. Urbanised people in Zambia tend to be sceptical about the phenomenon of moving coffins, while among the rural folk, there is no doubt about the power of the spirits of the dead to reveal the cause of their own deaths. Their beliefs are driven by their worldview which combines reverence for a high spiritual being, Lesa the creator, the belief in ancestral spirits (and the continuum of life from the physical to the spiritual) and other forces. The last component of the beliefs feed into the traditional interpretation of events, especially misfortune, that seemingly lack logical explanation. It is the basis of their belief in witchcraft, a part of their cosmology that explains wellbeing, such as health and prosperity, and misfortune such as ill health, social and economic struggles as well as death. This exists in these modern-day traditional societies in spite of their professed Christianity. In 1935, Melland optimistically stated that 'in time education and Christianity can conquer this belief'.⁷²

Melland's optimism did not materialise as almost a century later, a Christian leader hoped the clergy would eradicate such beliefs as 'Zambia is a Christian nation and should not allow such practices'.⁷³ Instead, Christianity has created segmentation in these societies – those that have embraced Christianity wholly and apparently overcome their fear of witchcraft, the power of the dead and associated practices such as the chikondo. They believe, as Mathews Nkhuwa explained, that chikondo is a harmful traditional practice based on superstition and irrationality. He suggested that it is a hoax, 'a form of human manipulation of the coffin that is conducted to ascertain who is responsible for the death of a person in the community'. He argued that

⁶⁹ Interview with Dauti Kanyaka in Lufwanyama on 5 June 2024

⁷⁰ Interview with Mubili Chola in Lufwanyama on 25 June 2024

⁷¹ This incident was witnessed by one of the authors of this article, a teacher in a remote Lamba village in Lufwanyama District. He attended the burial of a man who had died in the village and took pictures and videos of the incident from which this discussion derives.

⁷² Frank H. Melland (1935), 'Ethical and Political Aspects of African Witchcraft' in *Journal of the International African Institute* 8(4), p. 499.

⁷³ Interview with Ilunga Shisala in Lufwanyama on 6 April 2024

this traditional practice persists and provides a pretext to accuse innocent people of witchcraft to justify murder or destruction of their property.⁷⁴

It is telling that the alleged suspects would often bear the same characteristics. According to Nyirenda, these would be people doing well economically, generally disliked or elderly relatives.⁷⁵ As Nkhuwa further observed, a 75-year-old man of Fungulwe chiefdom in Lufwanyama District was murdered when a coffin ‘directed’ pallbearers to him for having bewitched a pregnant woman that died during labour. He stressed that this was not “a new phenomenon as a number of our people have continued to die in a similar manner.” He suggested that “those that continue unleashing such a trail of barbaric and heinous crimes in our chiefdom are uncivilized beings. They are savages who ought to be sent back to the Stone Age.”⁷⁶

Musenge Kapalala also witnessed chikondo. He was skeptical about it as he observed that it “only happens when the coffin is lifted on the shoulders of four individuals [pall bearers] to carry the coffin to the burial site or graveyard. In the process these individuals seem to be controlled by the coffin, leading them to the suspected killer.”⁷⁷ Kapalala later concluded, however, that chikondo was the scapegoat used by people to settle scores with rivals. He wondered how in this day and age, people still believe that humans can simply strip naked and get on broomsticks to fly to another land to inflict pain on their enemies, easily turn into crocodiles to feast on fellow human beings, or indeed that the dead can move coffins to hunt down those alleged to have killed them.⁷⁸ Similarly, Kelvin Muliya believes that chikondo is an expression of the highest level of ignorance and that this can only be addressed through education.⁷⁹

But education and Christianity have had no effect on the belief in the chikondo. One can only agree with Melland who observed that the problem was not witchcraft, but the witchcraft accusations. He pointed to the eighteenth and nineteenth century European witch hunts and witchcraft trials in Europe and the views of people who should have known better. He had conceded that such beliefs were very difficult to eradicate.⁸⁰ This is true of the respondent of Masaiti District, an educated and a professed Christian man. He witnessed chikondo in a village near his workplace and was convinced that ‘it happens, there is no drama or acting, it is real’ and a genuine part of the Lamba culture.⁸¹ Indeed, it is an inextricable part of their beliefs reminiscent of the witch hunts in the European past where witchcraft accusations, trials and punishment went on for centuries in spite of their Christianity and expanded education opportunities. It remains part of their history and their belief system.

The failure of Christianity to address the belief in witchcraft is evident in Lufwanyama. It is possible that the clergy could have inadvertently perpetuated the Lamba’s belief in witchcraft and the chikondo in the area. This may not have been intentional, but it can be understood in the context of Fr. Miha Drevensek, a Catholic priest’s work in Lufwanyama District in the 1970s, where chikondo rituals involving coffins that ‘refused’ to move, were rife. So much so that he attempted to eradicate the practice. According to a newspaper report, ‘Fr. Miha Drevensek, in his early missionary work in Lamba land, had done much campaigning against the practice of kikondo or chitaleme He spent most of his time carrying out exorcisms of coffins that ‘refused’ to be buried’.⁸² The irony of Fr. Miha’s exorcisms was that, while they seemingly worked, they probably enhanced the same beliefs that Christianity sought to uproot and also served to confirm the potency of the chikondo and the need for the services of a priest to subdue them.

Similarly, traditional leaders contributed to sustain the people’s belief in witchcraft and the need for rituals as part of their beliefs. The views of traditional leaders suggest they believe in chikondo. They call it evil and, in

⁷⁴ Interview with Mathews Nkhuwa on 23 May 2024.

⁷⁵ Interview with Speedwell Nyirenda on 25 June 2024.

⁷⁶ Interview with Mathews Nkhuwa on 10 June 2024

⁷⁷ Interview with Musenge Kapalala in Lufwanyama on 14 February 2024.

⁷⁸ Interview with Kapalala in Lufwanyama on 14 February 2024.

⁷⁹ Interview with Kelvin Muliya in Lufwanyama on 15 June 2024

⁸⁰ Melland, *In Witchbound Africa*, p. 186-188

⁸¹ Interview with Respondent 3 in Masaiti District, 20 March 2020.

⁸² Lusaka Times. <https://www.lusakatimes.com>. 6 March 2022. Comments on the article: ‘Police urged to ban “moving coffin” practice in Solwezi.’ Accessed on 21 October 2024.

many instances, discourage their people from the practice. However, they do not condemn it for being a ploy. As Nanyangwe explained, they condemned the practice of the rituals and in many cases, the tradition leaders do not allow it the practice does not only endanger good neighbourliness but also splits families.⁸³ Similarly, Shisala Ilunga, the Induna for Bitondo area in Mukutuma chiefdom, who believes in the potency of chikondo, claimed that the Chief discourages the ritual in the chiefdom. Even then, according to Induna Ilunga, people perform the ritual, normally without the consent of the chief and continue to do so even when perpetrators know they would be punished.⁸⁴ It is clear that the Induna does not question witchcraft or challenge the mystical powers of chikondo. He only suggests overcoming or persuading people to stop practicing something that is harmful to society.

The Induna's position is representative of the many who firmly hold on to traditional beliefs. The general view of people in the country is that the fear of witchcraft is a reality that people in Zambia live with. This is fuelled by what they have experienced and witnessed in their lives. They believe that witchcraft permeates every sphere of human life, instigating bad luck, illness and death. For example, Van Kambela's beliefs were enhanced when he witnessed the chikondo where a coffin without the body refuse to move. He explained that during the preparation of the body for burial of a man who had drowned in Bitondo River, 'the coffin started misbehaving just after family members had put the dead man's clothes before putting the body.' The coffin refused to be moved even before the body was put inside.⁸⁵ Apparently, some power was at work in this instance, but he believed it was an example of chikondo. Similarly, Machila also began believing in the power of chikondo when he witnessed it in Lufwanyama:

It's the first time that I've ever seen such a scene. I knew about the "chikondo" but I had never witnessed it. The coffin bearers were sweating profusely and seemed to have trouble breathing. Some were even screaming "Stop! Stop!" but none of them seemed able to set down the coffin or to stop moving. The coffin bearers turned the coffin 360° several times before stopping in front of the home belonging to the brother of the deceased. He was lynched by the crowd several minutes later.⁸⁶

General Perception of Chikondo

It is quite clear that people believe in the existence of witchcraft and this drives them to seek measures to counteract its impact on them. When death occurs, they resort to the chikondo ritual with the expectation that the spirit of the deceased person would lead them to the witch/wizard. They seek people, *ng'angas*, and the charm to obtain the answers that they need. While there are questions about the effectiveness of western education and Christianity in reducing these cultural beliefs, there are Christians who still believe the chikondo works. For such people, the solution to chikondo lies in the involvement of the church. Others believe that the chiefs who have authority over much of the rural population, have a role to play. That if they spoke against the practice, it would stop. Victims of chikondo believe that the ritual is motivated by jealousy for whatever economic success they may have achieved. Some people, for example, Kanyaka felt this method of justice questionable and illegal.⁸⁷ He questioned the idea of a coffin taking control and directing pallbearers because 'the coffin never seems to levitate on its own, but only moves under the guidance of the pall bearers, and in cases where the police or other community members move in to take the coffin, it's powers are suspiciously lost.'⁸⁸

It is interesting that people generally disregard the police. They argue that the police themselves are afraid of witchcraft and refrain from interfering in issues that look mysterious. This is in spite of instances where the coffin failed to 'fly' when the police were involved – the chikondo lost its power to search for those who allegedly caused the death. Generally, people believe that traditional leaders must banish witchdoctors that administer these charms together with the families that seek their services. On the other hand, those who doubt

⁸³ Interview with Mary Nanyangwe in Lufwanyama on 25 June 2024

⁸⁴ Interview with Ilunga Shisala in Lufwanyama on 6 April 2024

⁸⁵ Interview with Van Kambela in Lufwanyama on 2 August, 2024

⁸⁶ Interview with Youngson Machalika in Lufwanyama on 15 January 2024.

⁸⁷ Interview with Dauti Kanyaka in Lufwanyama on 25 June 2024

⁸⁸ Interview with Kanyaka.

the genuineness and potency of chikondo argue that it is illogical, irrational and a ruse used by jealous people to target and cause harm to others. Other people have suggested chikondo is a sham which fails to work when the pallbearers are the army. The doubt also arises from the absence of chikondo activities from church funerals and the its tendency of predominantly taking place in the rural areas.⁸⁹

CONCLUSION

The Kaonde-Lamba people of the Northwestern and Copperbelt Provinces, like other African people believed in witchcraft and that most deaths are caused by people who practice it. To counter witchcraft, people sought antidotes for protection against spells or to alleviate suffering if they were bewitched. If death occurred, they employed African style forensics; they consulted mediums to identify the cause, which only served to perpetuate witch hunts and accusations. To confirm the guilt of the accused, the mwavi ritual was widely practiced with dire consequences for most of those forced to take the poison to prove their innocence. In other instances, they consulted mediums or ‘summoned’ the spirits of the dead to speak for themselves. These methods endangered the lives of those who were accused. It was a death sentence from which few survived. Furthermore, the combination of the voice of a supposed spirit (Melland supposed it was the work of skilled ventriloquists) and high levels of superstition was enough to indict anyone. Unfortunately, these age-old methods convinced people of the guilt of the accused and are still used by some *ng’angas* to convict people of practicing witchcraft. The Kaonde and Lamba also used chikondo to identify those suspected of killing their relatives. They invoked the spirit of the deceased to identify who took their lives before they were buried as part of the burial rituals.

This study has argued that chikondo rituals and the belief in the ability of the dead to identify those who killed them were fuelled by the people’s fear of witchcraft. Evidently, Christianity and education, and the progress that humankind has made over the years have failed to curb these burial rituals which are both disruptive and destructive. The paper also found that a number of other factors have contributed to the continuation of these practices. Ironically, among these factors are the Christian clergy, which the paper argues unwittingly perpetuated the beliefs. It argued that the good intentions of Christian leaders such as Fr. Miha who carried out exorcisms of the coffins that refused to be buried, only served to sustain the belief that witchcraft was almost always at play when people died and that the spirits of the dead did indeed identify those that had a hand in their death.

Similarly, the study found that traditional leaders equally contribute to the persistence of these beliefs. Rather than seeking to explain witchcraft in ways that would reduce belief and the potency of the spiritual realm, they only threaten to punish those that dare to invoke the spirits of the dead to reveal who caused their death. Their attitude may lie in the fact that they too hold the same beliefs as their subjects and only see the practices as harmful rather than as irrational. Furthermore, law enforcement does not work effectively. This is largely because the law enforcement officials, the police, share the beliefs of the people and often run scared when faced with issues of the supernatural. It is not surprising then that the chikondo ritual continues to be the Kaonde and Lamba people’s preferred inquest.

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