

# Symbolism at the Heart of Bantu Traditional Religion

## (Research conducted in Bantu Land of Republic of Zambia and Republic of Malawi)

Ryan Contamina\*

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### Abstract

*This paper looks at the core of traditional Bantu religion and taking some particular practices and phenomena as examples to explore how the symbol plays an irreplaceable role in traditional religious circles in Chiwa tribe in Republic of Malawi and with the Bemba<sup>1</sup> tribe of Republic of Zambia. At the heart of many traditional religions especially in Africa the supreme figure called God (Lesa for the Bemba and Chauta for the Chewa) express a common essence about cultures and religious beliefs, rites and rituals through symbolic manifestation within the culture. This kind of thought gives preference to emotion over reason, myth over practical investigation and rhythm over melody that transport their senses and belief from symbolic manifestation to spiritual realm of belief. African traditional religions, man finds no other possibility of existing without a religion as it is part of his nature.*

*Keyword: symbolism, Bantu religion, Chiwa tribe*

### Introduction

This paper looks at the core of traditional Bantu religion and taking some particular practices and phenomena as examples to explore how the symbol plays an irreplaceable role in traditional religious circles in *Chiwa*<sup>2</sup> tribe in Republic of Malawi and with the *Bemba*<sup>3</sup> tribe of Republic of Zambia. Cultures show that most traditional religions have no distinction between the sacred and the secular because religion is what occupies man from conception to death.

Most traditional religions have their own particular essences traced in their language, way of life, the tools they use and the expression of the sacred. Religion is not an easy word to explain although it is supposedly the most used by people in the world. To understand the word 'religion', its context and meaning, we need to look at the way it is used and how it is practiced according to different religions. Since religion is so much link with word (language) to invoke God, Fredric Wittgenstein's contribution who considers that, a word should be understood not only by looking for its meaning but also by looking for the use of the word especially in its context. It is therefore, that we should take into account the purpose of the language by looking the context as practiced by the people as we shall also see the religious language, just like any language, is a form of relational life.

In a certain way, the etymology speaks of a relationship, which has some laws that people are to abide

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<sup>1</sup>Bantu-speaking people inhabiting the northeastern plateau of Zambia and neighbouring areas of Congo (Kinshasa) and Zimbabwe. The Bantu language of the Bemba has become the lingua franca of Zambia.

<sup>2</sup>Chewa tribe are known as Achewa. The Chewa Tribe is an African culture that has believed existed since the beginning of the first millennium, A.D. Their local language is called Chichewa, Malawi national language. There are presently over 1.5 million Chewa throughout Malawi and Zambia, however the Chewa are not considered people of Malawi or Zambia; instead they are people from the Nyanja group of Bantu. In Malawi, the Chewa are predominantly concentrated within the central region, surrounding the capital city of Lilongwe.

<sup>3</sup> Bantu-speaking people inhabiting the northeastern plateau of Zambia and neighbouring areas of Congo (Kinshasa) and Zimbabwe. The Bantu language of the Bemba has become the lingua franca of Zambia.

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by in their daily living. Most of the people perceive religion in Bemba and Chiwa tradition as experiential. For example if one is going for a visit somewhere and then encounters a dead crocodile after crossing a river, it is something worth praising God for.<sup>4</sup> Nature is believed to communicate through symbolic means what we should expect in the near future and some symbols and rites are usually born out of such rare experiences.

In this research, I intend to show the nature of religions and their different views of religion and symbolism into three sections.

In the first section, I focus on the nature of traditional religion and on how religion is perceived, expressed, and experienced linked together.

In the second section, I present the notion of symbol as the main expression of religion as it is observed through different symbols, rituals and rites.

And lastly I end the link between beliefs and symbols.

These works, which are divided into three sections, and end with a conclusion that is a synthesis of all the main ideas as presented.

### **The Nature of Traditional Religions**

Defining a word 'religion' is a very hard and demanding activity because religion is an activity somehow intrinsic<sup>5</sup> which man undertakes or experiences as a way of life. However we don't forget that religion as a subject is prone to change and evolution, that is in terms of its understanding as this is a subject that we consider as complex person. Some people justify religion as a tangible reality. An explanation of the religious experience that springs out of personal experience may be of different quality in contrast with the one reached through mere academic deduction by someone not spiritually involved<sup>6</sup>. A.C Bouquet comments regarding the necessity of religious experience as being a cardinal element to knowing its root as he writes:

*"It is only our experience that can interpret what theologians have called revelation, and test its validity... Much as we may wish to, we can no more eliminate experience than we can jump out of our skins"*<sup>7</sup>

A quote from A.E Garvie book's *The Christian Belief in God*. Garvie, draws our attention to the fact that reality comes before thought, experience comes before expression and fact comes before theory. This step is very important when it comes to understanding the profoundness of what lies in religions, their origins and use of symbolism.<sup>8</sup> In the same light, I recognize the distinction between the experience of religion and its expression. Idowu states in his work 'African Traditional Religion' that something universal belonging to the nature of man is always assumed in the experience. However, its expression will depend on the contemporary conditions, conventional use of things (language and symbols), and social as well as moral influences.

<sup>4</sup> This belief comes from the Bemba myth of Republic of Zambia (oral relay) the beginning of the tribe.

<sup>5</sup> Religion is intrinsic in the sense that we do not experience religion in the same way as we can experience a football. Man, society and cosmic structures identify themselves with religion.

<sup>6</sup> Cf: Idowu .E, African Traditional Religion, A definition, London: SCM Press Ltd, 1974. p.70

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, Idowu quotes from A.C Bouquet, Man and Deity, 1933, p.29

<sup>8</sup> Cf: id, p.71, Idowu quotes from A.E Garvie, The Christian Belief in God. London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1933

Religion for Max Muller 'is a perception of the infinite'<sup>9</sup>. A religious experience cannot be limited to mere perception. His definition, according to Idowu, suggests some kind of subjectivism<sup>10</sup>. Immanuel Kant sees religion as recognition of our duties to the divine that is the belief which sets what is essential in all adoration to God. Human morality, religion, and law are obtain through the emphasis that everything is coming from the law giver and and it also the judge over us. It is a morality, directed to the recognition of God.<sup>11</sup>Idowu's interpretation is rather long; it tries to embrace many aspects of religion especially modern religion. However, it does not wholly accommodate the idea of religion. Idowu writes that:

*"Religion results from man's spontaneous awareness of, and spontaneous reaction to, his immediate awareness of a living power, 'wholly other' and infinitely greater than himself: a power mysterious because unseen, yet a present and urgent reality, seeking to bring man into communion with himself. This awareness includes that of something reaching out from the depths of man's being for close communion with, and vital relationship to, this as a source of real life.*

*Man thus realizes from the beginning that he has a dual nature: his commonplace life is here on earth: but there is a living Being to whom he is linked by reason of his essential personality. In short, man is so [constituted and] conditioned that he must be dependent upon God if his life is to be real, full, and harmonious. His life is really worthwhile only in accordance as it is controlled and sustained by God.'*

*Religion in its essence is the means by which God as spirit and man's essential self communicate. It is something resulting from the relationship which God established from the beginning of (human) life between Himself and man ..."*<sup>12</sup>

Idowu's definition excludes those religions whose belief is that the soul does not long for redemption or for a closer contact with God in the next world. In any case, some religions are closely involved and associated with the redemption of the human race from an evil that cannot be easily spoken of without getting a person involved.

Many traditional religions have no messianic hope because for them God and the spirit world in harmony with people is all that matters most, especially if they have good crop and no tragedies. In Zambia, the *Bisa* tribe and the *Bemba's* portrayed God as utilitarian as well as spiritual<sup>13</sup>. The *Bemba* believe that from God one doesn't ask for the meat that you will eat on that day, because there are more important needs of man that should concern God such as upholding life for people especially worriers and sending rains.<sup>14</sup>This is in line with the *Bemba* saying, "*Lesatalombwanamaalombwaumweo*" literally means from "God one does not ask for meat but life, that is, days to live a long life."<sup>15</sup> where this wisdom is manifested. In a certain aspect, God for the *Bemba* is not concerned with material things, but much more emphasized through spiritual matter and yet people expect God to give rain, which is material. Here it

<sup>9</sup>Grzelak, C 2013. "Anthropos" means Human. Cedara, Kwa Zulu Natal, South Africa: SJIT. (Unpublished lecture notes).

<sup>10</sup>A philosophical theory that all knowledge and moral values are subjective rather than grounded on truth that actually exists in the real world

<sup>11</sup>Cf: Idowu .E, African Traditional Religion... op.cit, p.71

<sup>12</sup>Idowu .E, African Traditional Religion, op.cit, p.75

<sup>13</sup>Bisa and the Bemba, are two tribes located in the northern part of Republic of Zambia, particularly located in the district of Kazama.

<sup>14</sup>Fr Justin Chomba cited this during an interview I had with him when conducting a research among the Chiwa in August 2010. Republic of Zambia

<sup>15</sup>literally: from God one does not ask for meat but life, that is, days to live a long life.

is important to note that water is associated with life, if not regarded as a spiritual entity. Water gives and propagates life and it is regarded as a form of life and a spiritual entity among many traditional beliefs. This is observable among the *Bemba* of chief Chikwanda who speak often of the legendary *Chinsonkolo*, the spirit snake of the waters of the *Lwitikila River*. *Chinsonkolo* had a high priest attending to his needs. Moreover, if *Chinsonkolo* is not pleased with the conduct of the people, he blocked the river and the people will be depriving for water.

### African Traditional Religions

Among the native people of Africa there seems to appear a common pattern observable in cultural practice, behaviour, language and religious practices. Idowu also expresses this as the common African essence about the total culture and religious beliefs and practices of Africa.<sup>16</sup> I therefore infer that in African traditional religion God is so important that everything is dependent on him. This gives Religion an important place in African society and to its people. The idea of God<sup>17</sup> is the most common denominator among African communities with regards to how it is expressed and understood. Van Breugel explains that God among the *Chewa* people<sup>18</sup> of Malawi is known to exist because of what God does. They attribute to God all the natural occurrences like rain, even death of old people.<sup>19</sup> J.S. Mbiti in his *African Religions and Philosophy* says that people in Africa are born into a religion and it becomes part of their being. Everything about a person becomes religious. Religion starts from conception and follows a person even after death. Mbiti believes that the world and almost all activities are seen and experienced through a religious understanding:

*"Religion permeates into all the departments of life so fully ... because traditional religions permeate all the departments of life, there is no formal distinction between the sacred and the secular ..."*<sup>20</sup> *"wherever the African is, there is his religion: he carries it to the fields ... he takes religion with him to the examination room at school ... the point here is that for Africans, the whole existence is a religious phenomenon ..."*<sup>21</sup>

For the African anthropologist like E. G. Parrinder urges scholars to appreciate African traditional religions without denying credit to their development while at the same time not considering African traditional religions as merely primitive. Parrinder also urges scholars to avoid over glorification of the unknown past i.e. by saying it could have become like any other modern religion.

### The Notion of a Symbol

Symbols are keys to understanding any way of life especially the religious thought and experience. They exist as embedded elements in language and the way of life. For example, the *Lozi* people of Zambia,

<sup>16</sup>Cf: Idowu .E, *African Traditional Religions...*, op.cit, p.103,

Idowu tries to give an insight as to how this common factor which he express as Africanness in African Traditional Religions. This either could be due to diffusion or because most Africans share common origins in regards to race, customs and religious practices.

<sup>17</sup>Traditional Religions vary in special patterns, organization, and forms in their religious beliefs and practices with varying cults and methods of worship. An inference can be that they have intrinsic unity as man practices them. They show the spiritual and God centered oriented man on a quest to approach the absolute.

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<sup>19</sup>Cf: J.W.M Van Breugel, *Chewa Traditional Religion*. Blantyre: CLAIM. 2001, p.29

<sup>20</sup>J.S Mbiti. *African Religions and Philosophy*, op.cit, pp.1-2

<sup>21</sup>id, p.15

among whom I lived during my pastoral exposure as part of my cultural orientation in 2008, I observed that Lozi people express their greeting in such a way that it is easy to know whether it is woman greeting or a man greeting, a woman just by the manner of the clapping of hands. In traditional religions, God and the spirit world are communicated to through symbols.

These range from very basic objects of daily use to somehow complex and sophisticated objects. For instance, the *Chewa* people of Malawi are well known for the *Nyau dance*, which is also called the great dance, or, as some people refer to it, the dance of the spirits<sup>22</sup>. However, cultural dancers are representatives of spirits and for their audience (members of their clan) they believed dancers itself are 'the spirits' of their ancestors. How can this be explained? It is all symbolic in the sense that the dance and the dancers are the physical symbols that transport their senses through the spiritual world of the ancestors. For E. Kanyike speaks of a symbol being able to acquire the function from material manifestation through dance and dancers that brought them to spiritual matter and it suggests more than it expresses<sup>23</sup>. It is in the same sense that the effects and strength of symbols depend on certain factors such as the ability to draw people's attention and to create imagination.

Ernst Cassirer speaks of the symbolic function and its forms<sup>24</sup>. Religious life is filled with symbols. However symbolic expression and representation seem to be different from the truth of things<sup>25</sup>. Therefore, the mind would stay fixed in this convention until the tension of its own thought broke through the distinction with the crucial questions. It is not all-symbolic representation, whether it is in language, myth, art, religion, history or science that seems to be different from the truth of things. Cassirer highlights that whereas Kant ruled out the possibility of an intuitive understanding, he also in a way limited man to discursive understanding when he said "concepts without intuitions are empty; intuitions without concepts are blind"<sup>26</sup>.

*"Instead of saying that the human intellect is an intellect which is in need of images [Kant had written ... "ein de bilderbedurftigerverstand"] we should rather say that it is in need of symbols."*<sup>27</sup>

In any case, Cassirer is not substituting images for symbols, he is rather saying that both are necessary and carry out symbolizing functions. Cassirer marks out the distinction between them as being that images are given while symbols are made.

*"The intellect takes images and makes them serve as symbols .... Words are sensuous images seen or heard but they are used with meaning and so they are employed as symbols"*<sup>28</sup>

*"And so we see that the very highest and purest spiritual activity ... is conditioned and mediated by certain modes of sensory activity"*<sup>29</sup>

Images can play an important role on types symbolism used in religious cycles especially in considering that religious language is symbolic in the same way as myth, art and science are.

<sup>22</sup>According to a Dancer who declined to give his Name. But he said "Zimenezindimizimusianthuayi" (these are spirits they are not men at all).

<sup>23</sup>Cf: Kanyike .E.M, *The Principle of Participation in African Cosmology and Anthropology*, Balaka: Montfort Media, 2003, p.109.

<sup>24</sup> Ernst Cassirer, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms. (Vol 1)*, Translated by Ralph Manheim, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1968, p.49

<sup>25</sup>Cf: *ibid*

<sup>26</sup>Cf: *id*, p.50

<sup>27</sup>Ernst Cassirer, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, *op.cit*, p.50

<sup>28</sup>*Id*, pp.50–51

<sup>29</sup>*Id*, p.51–52

### The Importance of the Symbol

The symbol brings about a unity of wills especially in religion as well as in political and social aspects of man. This explains why people offered humans to be sacrificed in case of burying a king/chief or any noble man in the village. They should have seen it as very symbolic because those people will be accompanying the chief to joining his ancestors. If people wish to serve the chief while he is still alive in his palace, one would not refuse to continue serving him as he joins his ancestors.

According to J.H Randall religious symbols have a fourfold function: first they arouse emotions and stir men to actions, they strengthen men's practical commitment to what they believe to be right; secondly, they stimulate cooperative action and bind communities through common response to symbols; thirdly they are able to communicate qualities of experience that cannot be expressed by ordinary literal use of language; and lastly, they evoke and serve to foster and clarify the experience of man as an aspect of the world that can be called the divine.<sup>30</sup>

Signs also serve as ways to recapitulate what has been given while they in themselves don't develop any meaning. Cassirer continues to describe symbols and mythical thinking as:

"Mythical thinking has its own distinctive symbolic forms of construction: they are modes both of expressing a theory of life and of portraying it in the manner of an art"<sup>31</sup>

Religious language is symbolic in the same way as myth, art and science are.

I want to bring to light the fact that religion (especially traditional religions) in some fashion and altruistic sense is an aspect of human life and culture whose function in society cannot be ignored and it remains in consciousness even without man's awareness. This is evident by the fact that some political regimes and other pressure groups have tried to suppress religions but as soon as these regimes and pressure groups die, religion continues as though nothing was done to distort it.<sup>32</sup>

### The Link between Beliefs and Symbols

Some cultures and traditional religions have gone as far as concretizing most spiritual elements with physical entities like trees, mountains, persons and even organs of the body. This does not mean that these traditional religions and cultures do not know how to distinguish what is spirit and immaterial from what is physical and material. They know the difference very well and most people are well informed about these things.

It is evident that people also know that God is not material but He is represented in material things. This is typical of *Bemba* thought and its world view. The *Bemba* chiefs are well adorned for this great use of symbolism which gives them more authority, legitimacy and efficiency in ruling their people. For the *Bemba*, great spirits (*Imipashilkalamba*) surround God and it is believed that God's installs these spirits (*Imipashilkalamba*) on the rulers of society who are the chiefs.

To show that he possesses this power legitimately, the chief's dressing and conduct is so symbolic as to manifest his authority. Among the many symbolic gestures and vestments the chief has is the *Icingala* or as some people call it *IngaalayaBufumu*. It is not clear which is the original word<sup>33</sup>. Nevertheless, both

<sup>30</sup>In His Book 'The Role of Knowledge in Western Religion' quoted by Hick John (Cf. John H. Hick, Philosophy of Religion... Op.cit, p.76)

<sup>31</sup>Ernst Cassirer: The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms.... op.cit, p.53

<sup>32</sup>Cf. John H. Hick, Philosophy of Religion... op.cit, pp.45-76

<sup>33</sup>The *Icingala/ IngaalayaBufumu* or *Lingalaisa* large plume, Insignia of the king's envoy. In line with it, an expression goes as follows: *Cingalacamwankole; twakupacingalacamwankole, wabaulicuni, wakulalelalelafye, I give you a crow's feather: from*

words are explained in the same light and possess the same meaning as far as I have discovered during my cultural exposure in their village. Other important symbolic items are the *Ikosa*, (Bracelet worn around the wrist)<sup>34</sup>, the *Inkonto* (special kind of walking stick)<sup>35</sup>, and the *Umupunga* (a hairy tail of an animal with some feathers of a bird)<sup>36</sup>. *Icingala*' is a symbol of the power of the chief which comes from God, bestowed on him to rule his people.

The '*Ikosa*' is meant to unite the people, i.e. each individual with another and the community and the people with God and the spirit world. Therefore, it is a great link between the people and God. The *Ikosa* is a symbolic link between the dead and the living. When we pray, this link is believed to enable us communicate with God and God receives our prayers. The '*Inkonto*' symbolizes the power of God to give "corrective justice" through the chief, as well the power to rule and punish. It literally means to beat those who do wrong and disobey the laws and customs of the land (which are called the *Intambisha Bantu*).

Similarly, in the *Bisa* traditions of Northern Zambia, it is believed that there is a tree called *NsofwaKabusweto* which people used to and still offer sacrifice when a tragedy befalls them and when asking for God's direct intervention in matters of life such as praying for rains. During the rite the chief priest (*ShimapepoMukalamba*) brings white powder, and fresh blood. A white chicken is said to be sacrificed. This rite is surrounded by a lot of symbolism. At some point during the ceremony, warriors begin to shoot the tree with arrows. This is to show that God could feel the pain, and then he would give them what they are longing for. God is believed to be high in the Heavens but his heart is with his people and thus he always answers their call. They may believe that the tree transmits these messages.

We also see another aspect of traditional African societies including other traditional religions, which may have the same views: society is a unity composed of the visible and invisible worlds. The traditional African man does not simply regard society as a grouping of people with deep common interests and values. Rather it will include the physical environment, spiritual beings, near and distant relations, the tombs of their dead and so on. Everything is relational and connecting to each other and each junction has always a connection or a similar junction in the past.

### Conclusion

At the heart of many traditional religions especially in Africa the supreme figure called God (*Lesá* for the *Bemba* and *Chauta*<sup>37</sup> for the *Chewa*) express a common essence about cultures and religious beliefs, rites and rituals through symbolic manifestation within the culture.

This kind of thought gives preference to emotion over reason, myth over practical investigation and rhythm over melody that transport their senses and belief from symbolic manifestation to spiritual realm of belief. African traditional religions, man finds no other possibility of existing without a religion as it is part of his nature. Symbolism and symbolic expression are organs of a philosophy that religion

now on, you are a bird, you will only soar. A sarcastic chief when banishing a man from his country says this.

As sign of their function, the messengers (busole/musole) of the chief wear a feather in their hair: "Cingalacabusole, bafumbikakabela," the messenger's feather; they hold it in readiness. This means that when on service, one must be ready.

<sup>34</sup> The *Ikosa*/cindele is a bracelet or anklet sometimes of plaited grass. Other different kinds of bracelets are cibondo, cikombe, cinkwingili and likongolo.

<sup>35</sup> The *Inkonto* is a walking stick, a knobkerrie: aleendelakunkonto, he walks with a stick. Abikakapekunkonto, alaya, he fixed a little bundle to his knobkerrie and went off. I am very convinced that the word 'nkonto' is strongly related to nkonta. Nkonta represents the main point in discussion: eya! Elyowafika pa nkontayakebo, at last! You have come to the main point.

<sup>36</sup> The *Umupunga* is a fly-switch made from the tail of an animal. It can also be the silvery panicles of maize, and reeds; nyanjenashipakulamipunga, the maize has borne its panicle.

<sup>37</sup> Cf: J.W.M Van Breugel, *Chewa Traditional Religion*, op.cit, p.30



appreciates relationship between different beings and man, nature and man and above all man and God.

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