Crossroads of Culture:
Religion, Therapy, and Personhood in Northern Malawi

By

Eric H. Lindland
B.A. Gordon College, 1990

Advisor: Bradd Shore, Ph.D.

A dissertation submitted to the
Faculty of the Graduate School of Emory University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

Department of Anthropology
2005
Abstract

At the end of the nineteenth century, Presbyterian missionaries from the Free Church of Scotland’s Livingstonia Mission began a project to spread Christianity, commerce, and “civilization” in the regions to the north and west of Lake Nyasa, in southeast Africa. In the process, the heterogenous residents of the region, including Tumbuka-speakers, Ngonis, and a mix of other peoples, were confronted with a powerful new player on the local scene, and the past century-plus has in part been a history of accommodation, innovation, and resistance to the Mission’s transformative agenda.

Within the broader purview of the Livingstonia Mission’s project was a focused effort to transform local religious and therapeutic practices. Most Livingstonia missionaries argued for a fundamental incompatibility between their own religion and medicine and those characteristic of the region. In constructing such an oppositional model, Livingstonia missionaries sought to replace local practices of ancestral spiritualism and therapeutic divination with the institutional forms of Christianity and biomedicine. This substitutive logic was promulgated in their teaching and preaching, as well as enforced through both disciplinary and employment mechanisms.

Combining history, ethnography, and theories derived from cultural psychology, this thesis explores the ways wherein Tumbuka-speaking residents in one locality in northwestern Malawi, Embangweni, have responded to this missionary substitutive logic. In particular, I elaborate some of the imaginative ways residents have resisted the missionary oppositional model and instead constructed new models that combine, synthesize, and correlate facets of Christianity and biomedicine with ancestral spiritualism and divination. En route, I also examine the syncretic process itself, and explore the use of analogic reasoning within theology, ethics, and ritual symbolism, to subvert and overcome the effort to construct a model of incommensurability between Western and vernacular religio-therapeutic systems.

In the process, I suggest that some of Embangweni’s residents have done more than simply resist the missionary oppositional model, but have also challenged a deeper, underlying dualism within the Western ontological framework itself.
Acknowledgments

The research for this dissertation was made possible by a generous Research Enablement Grant from the Overseas Ministries Study Center, with funding from the Pew Charitable Trusts. It was also furthered by grants from Emory University’s Fund for Internationalization, the Institute of African Studies, and the Department of Anthropology. I am grateful to all of these institutions for their support.

There are many who have accompanied me on my journey to complete this dissertation. Some have been only brief companions along the way, and yet have offered key insights that have been invaluable to me. Others have provided longer company, and have contributed their wisdom, inspiration, and council throughout the years of study, research, and writing. Most of the strengths of this document derive from their insights and generosity, while its failings are mine and mine alone.

I am particularly indebted to the residents of Embangweni in Malawi who made this dissertation possible. It was only because of their hospitality and kindness that I was able to accomplish it at all. In my writing, I have tried my best to honor the trust and generosity they showed me as they shared their experiences, opinions, hopes, and fears with me, and I dearly hope that effort is evident in what follows. Likewise, I want to especially thank Frank and Nancy Dimmock, and Jim and Jody McGill, for their generosity, counsel, encouragement, and friendship throughout the course of my fieldwork.

The importance of Msenga A. Mulungu’s contribution to this dissertation cannot be overstated. As my research assistant in the field, he was a remarkably able teacher, translator, and transcriber, as well as a skilled social ambassador and diplomat in my relations with others in the community. My fieldwork benefited dramatically from his efforts, wisdom, and resourcefulness, and I am grateful for both of his help and friendship.

I am furthermore indebted to the many members of Emory University’s academic community or their support and advice. Throughout my years at Emory, professors and fellow classmates alike have consistently challenged me to explore new ways of thinking about the world. In the process, they have both improved my scholarship and help me grow as a person. I am especially grateful for his unwavering support, consistently good counsel, and generosity of spirit throughout this process. As a mentor and friend, with both of good humor and wisdom, he has helped see me through this is often trying process from start to finish. I am also grateful to my committee members Ivan Karp and Peter J. Brown, each of whom provided key insights at critical junctures of this project and helped move it forward. Charles Nuckolls, Corine Kratz, and Mark Auslander were also of great help during the early formative stages of this project, and I am thankful for their efforts and service on my behalf.

I am also grateful to my family for their unfailing support throughout this process. My brothers Peter, Greg, and Ted understand, perhaps better than anyone else, the motivations that led me into this research, and their support and encouragement has been instrumental in my ability to complete it. Likewise, my parents, Ray and Sigrid, have been unwavering in their support for me throughout this project, as they have honored the journey of inquiry and examination that it has entailed. For their love, understanding, and encouragement, I am profoundly grateful.
# Table of Contents

**MAPS**

**INTRODUCTION**

**PART ONE – HISTORY AND THEORY**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 1</td>
<td>Themes and Theory in the Study of Christian Missions in Africa</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 2</td>
<td>A Historical Theology of Bodily Resurrection and the Emergence of a Dualist Paradigm in Modern Western Culture</td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 3</td>
<td>History, Religion, and Medicine in Northern Nyasaland</td>
<td>109</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 4</td>
<td>The Establishment, Growth, and Segmentation of the Livingstonia Mission</td>
<td>138</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 5</td>
<td>Missionary and Tumbuka Models of Personhood: Conjunctions and Disjunctions Between a Western Dualist Schema and an African Monistic Schema</td>
<td>169</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**PART TWO – ETHNOGRAPHY AND ANALYSIS**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 6</td>
<td>The Ethnographic Setting and Research Methods</td>
<td>195</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 7</td>
<td>Vimbuza: The History of a Spirit Possession Complex</td>
<td>224</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 8</td>
<td>God and the Ancestors: The Emergence of a Syncretic Vimbuza Form</td>
<td>251</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 9</td>
<td>Embodying Spirits: A Case Study in Transitional Syncretism</td>
<td>292</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 10</td>
<td>Contested Theologies of Baptism: Body, Mind, and Ritual Symbolism</td>
<td>348</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 11</td>
<td>Contested Theologies of Baptism: Cleansing, Salvation, and Ritual Efficacy</td>
<td>380</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 12</td>
<td>At the Crossroads: A Case Study in Narrating Life and Facing Death</td>
<td>426</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**CONCLUSION**

**BIBLIOGRAPHY**
He now called the Twelve together and gave them power and authority to overcome all the devils and cure diseases, and sent them to proclaim the kingdom of God and to heal. ‘Take nothing for the journey,’ he told them, ‘neither stick nor pack, neither bread nor money; nor are you each to have a second coat. When you are admitted to a house, stay there, and go on from there.


Everything that was being done in connection with religion was suddenly branded as superstition, paganism, and Satanism by most people who came from the West bringing in the gospel of Jesus Christ, simply because of the two different backgrounds of those who brought in the gospel and those to whom the gospel was preached; the participation in the totality of nature and the particularization of the totality of nature would not have compromised.

– Stephen Kauta Msiska, a Tumbuka minister in the Livingstonia Synod of the Church of Central Africa Presbyterian, in an article written in 1969 (emphasis added).
Map 1: Malawi - people and places

Map 1: Malawi - people and places (General and Approximate)

Reproduced with modification from McCracken 2000 (1977)
Map 2: The Livingstone Mission sphere of influence

Reproduced from McCracken 2000 (1977)
Map 3: Embangweni (Loudon) Station

Map by Jim Nussbaumer
24/07/97
(Revised by Lindland 06/11/06)
INTRODUCTION

The Research Context

In the late nineteenth century, Presbyterian missionaries from the Free Church of Scotland’s Livingstonia Mission began the process of establishing mission stations in the regions to the north and west of Lake Nyasa. These were regions populated by large numbers of Tumbukas, Tongas, and Ngonis, among others. Following the call of the recently deceased David Livingstone, the missionaries’ prime directive was to spread Christianity, commerce, and “civilization” throughout the region, and in so doing, to remake the native population of the area into the image of a modern Christian, and in the process bring an end to the commercial practice of slave-trading.

Their version of modern Christianity carried within it a set of assumptions derived from the Judeo-Christian religious tradition, the Age of Enlightenment, and the Victorian era. Their “Christianity” emphasized adherence to a body of doctrine, grounded in the sacred textual authority of the Bible, and consisting of a theological orthodoxy that proclaimed the inherence of human sin and the need for personal redemption through submission to the authority and grace of God. That submission was to be evident through willful participation in a European Christian moral code of conduct, including monogamy, abstinence from alcohol, and participation in church worship and stewardship. Their “commerce” was to be characterized by the free movement of non-human goods, the establishment of wage labor, the charging of fees for services, and, after the establishment of colonial rule by the British in 1907, the introduction of residential taxation. Their “civilization” was one characterized by particular notions of modesty, clothing, architecture, etiquette, and learning, as well as a scientific ethic committed to mastery over the natural world, and, in particular through medicine, mastery over natural sickness and disease among human populations.
Within their religious, philosophical, and scientific assumptions, the Livingstonia missionaries were bearers of a distinctively modern Western Protestant construction of the person, one that understood personhood and being as a tripartite composite of body, mind, and spirit. This tripartite model was an outgrowth of an earlier Christian theological tradition that had emphasized the dual qualities of body and soul as the core constituents of being. Among Protestants, this building of a tripartite framework over a more fundamental dualist tradition was the result of developments within both Renaissance philosophy and the Protestant Reformation. As will be discussed in Chapter Two, the influence of Cartesian philosophy, in particular, helped establish the rationale for setting off the mind as a distinctive facet of being, one that required definition in-and-of-itself. Likewise, Reformation theology emphasized the self-aware and knowing mind, along with the heart, as a key site of repentance and salvation. This trend was particularly emphasized within the Reformed Tradition, from which the Livingstonia Mission emerged, with its emphasis on right doctrinal knowledge as a key arbiter in defining what constitutes a sufficient faith. On the part of the Livingstonia missionaries who arrived in northern Malawi in the late nineteenth century, this Protestant tripartite model of being, as body, mind, and spirit, was a foundational assumption within their evangelical logic, and became institutionalized in a variety of forms within and through their missionary project.

The initial framework for this thesis was derived from a simple recognition on my part that patterns of architecture and institution building on many nineteenth and early twentieth century Protestant mission stations corresponded with the Protestant tripartite model of being. While establishing the early parameters for this thesis, I recognized a structural conjunction between a pattern of discourse familiar to me from my Protestant evangelical missionary upbringing, and the pattern of institution-building predominant on many of the Protestant mission stations I was exposed to as a youth growing up as the son of missionaries in the Democratic Republic of Congo,
known as Zaire from 1971 to 1997. Specifically, the Protestant discursive practice of referring to people in terms of “body, mind, and spirit” was mirrored in the common missionary practice of organizing their mission stations around three dominant institutions -- hospitals, schools, and churches. Hospitals were to heal bodies, schools were to educate minds, and churches were to transform spirits. While this tripartite institutional framework was not universal, it was very broadly distributed across the generalized Protestant missionary project. In recognizing this conjunction, it occurred to me that both the linguistic practice of differentiating among body, mind, and spirit as constituents of being, and the institutional and architectural practice of building separate structures to mediate events for the body, mind, and spirit, suggested a substantial degree of conceptual compartmentalization among the three facets of being.

This compartmentalization was further evidenced in the modern Western epistemological commitment to science, and in the teaching and practice of the emergent discipline of biomedicine. For those Western Protestant missionaries trained in the biomedical sciences, the body was increasingly modeled in part as an organic machine subject to pathology and breakdown, as well as cure and repair. In this biomedical model, science had brought such a level of mastery and knowledge of the natural and biological world, including the human body, that those trained in its methods could intervene efficaciously in cases of disease and injury. Within its specific professional language and tools, there was no acknowledgment of a spiritual component to illness, though many acknowledged potential emotional and psychological causes. The practice of this biomedical tradition, with its advocacy for an organic model of the human body, was companion to the evangelical and educational efforts of many of the Western Protestant missions that established stations in sub-Saharan Africa during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

The initial plan for my research project was to spend time living on or near a contemporary American Baptist mission station situated in the Democratic Republic of Congo, and to participate
in the institutional life of its schools, church, and hospital. I chose as my field site the American Baptist station at Vanga, in Bandundu Province of the DRC, with plans to realize my research in dialogue and conversation with the primarily BaHungana residents of the Vanga area. In particular, my goal was to understand how resident Hungana had and were responding to the tripartite missionary institutional framework, and whether and how they were integrating it into their own discourse, thinking, and practice. This question of local African response was derived from a perceived disjunction on my part between the Protestant tripartite schema and that of the Hungana, who, based on limited ethnographic accounts, comparative research among neighboring peoples, and my own preliminary research, seemed to have historically affirmed a more unified and embodied model of personal ontology.¹ This ontology has been one that emphasizes life as it experienced in whole, as a unified experience that encompasses each person’s body, heart, and spirit as they live in mutual participation with other human and non-human agencies in the world.² The question that emerged, then, was: How have the Hungana responded to the American Baptist missionary project at Vanga, and specifically at their effort to inculcate a tripartite ontology of knowledge, faith, and practice among them?

Over the course of the years that followed this initial formalization, my research agenda underwent substantial revisions. The most dramatic resulted from the outbreak of renewed civil war in Congo in 1998, a development that led me to relocate my research to the safer regions of northern Malawi, the field site from which this dissertation eventually emerged. This change of field site involved dramatic changes of context, as I shifted my focus to the peoples, languages, and

¹ In Chapter Five, I consider more closely the comparative literature about African models of spiritual embodiment, as I argue that the Tumbuka also affirmed a foundational model of mutual body-spirit participation.

² This is not to suggest that the Hungana did not differentiate among facets of physical and spiritual existence, but only that those different facets of body and spirit were understood as mutually constitutive.
pre-missionization history of northern Malawi, and to the history of Scottish Presbyterian missionary work in the region, specifically that of the Free Church of Scotland’s Livingstonia Mission, which began work in northern Nyasaland in the 1880’s. The details of this shift are discussed in greater detail later in this Introduction, and are reflected in Chapter Two, where my focus is on the Reformed tradition from which Presbyterianism derives, rather than the congregationalist roots of American Baptism.

After deciding to shift my research from Congo to Malawi, I visited Malawi in early 1999 and visited the three most prominent Presbyterian mission stations in the Northern Region of the country – Livingstonia, Ekwendeni, and Embangweni. After three months in the region, I chose to conduct research in Embangweni, located within the tribal domain of Inkosi (Chief) Mzukuzuku, and the site of the Loudon station, founded in 1902 by a prominent early Livingstonia missionary couple, Donald and Agnes Fraser. I later returned for two more research periods in Malawi, totaling sixteen months, thirteen months of which were spent directly in Embangweni.

In conjunction with the broader Protestant pattern, the early Livingstonia missionaries enacted and constructed a three-part institutional schema on the grounds of their stations, building academic schools to educate minds, medical clinics to heal bodies, and churches to save souls. Loudon station was one among many Livingstonia stations that architecturally modeled this tripartite model of mind, body, and soul in its design and construction. To this day, the station remains a standing example of the kind of tripartite assumptions Livingstonia missionaries took with them as they set off from Scotland with the goal of transforming the lives of the lake region’s residents in physical, intellectual, and spiritual terms.

The framing of my research agenda was also shaped by two subsequent recognitions. The first involved the acknowledgment that churches, hospitals, and academic schools were not the only widespread mission institutions built by Western Protestant missionaries, including the
Livingstonia missionaries. On their own stations in northern Nyasaland, the Livingstonia missionaries also built industrial schools wherein to train and discipline local residents in novel skills and crafts. Off station, they affiliated themselves with the missionary-minded commercial enterprise, the African Lakes Company, which brought exclusive consumer items to the region via its water link to the ocean via lake Nyasa and the Shire and Zambezi rivers. Their industrial and commercial ventures were fundamental parts of their missionary project from the start, and were central to their effort to create and establish a new kind of society in the region.

The writings of several early Livingstonia missionaries confirms this strategy and agenda. Writing specifically about the stations of the Mission, Donald Fraser, an early prominent Livingstonia missionary, wrote:

> Even in the most hurried tour of the stations, the traveller must notice that none of these is considered complete until it includes a church, a school, a hospital, a workshop, a book shop, and offices. These seem to be necessary for the missionary’s work, even though the staff consists of one man and his wife, and they are the symbols of the full-orbed Gospel we preach, and of the radiating facets of the influence which we seek to have in the land.¹

Likewise, writing in the Introduction to Livingstonia missionary Walter Elmslie’s *Among the Wild Ngoni* (1901), Lord Overtoun wrote of the Livingstonia Mission:

> The work has been carried on all these years by men and women, whose names as heroes in the Gospel story, on four great lines: -- 1) The direct proclamation of the Gospel. 2) Education of young and old. 3) Medical Mission work. 4) Industrial training.⁴

Writing of the hours of manual training to which students at the Livingstonia Mission’s Overtoun Institution were subjected, Robert Laws wrote that it was in order to instill “in the character of the pupil habits of thrifty, patient, diligent, and persevering industry.”⁵ Through their mission stations,

---
then, the Livingstonia missionaries were seeking to fundamentally transform the norms of self-discipline and industry among the new Christian residents of the northern Nyasaland region. While these topics have not become part of the core theoretical concerns of this thesis, they have and continue to provide a practical framework that provides the historical and contemporary context for the thesis that follows.

A second recognition also expanded my tripartite framework, and fundamentally shaped the form and content of this thesis. This was the recognition, already acknowledged, that the Protestant tripartite framework was built on a more foundational Christian schema that constituted body and soul as the key ontological duality. As a result, I focused my research attention mostly within churches and medical and therapeutic facilities, the centers of missionary efforts to reach souls and heal bodies, that were situated around the Livingstonia station at Embangweni. I did not systematically do research in station and local schools, the centers of education and literacy, though I did spend time in all three of the schools in Embangweni.

Throughout these shifts – geographically from Vanga in Congo to Embangweni in Malawi, culturally from Hungana to Tumbuka-Ngoni, denominationally from Baptist to Presbyterian, and theoretically from a simple tripartite framework to one interwoven with a more fundamental dualist pattern – I retained my sense that the encounter in question, now between Tumbukas and Ngonis in northern Nyasaland and Presbyterian missionaries from Scotland, was characterized by a core disjunction between their respective religious and ontological systems. The early missionary and ethnographic writings about both Tumbuka and Ngoni religions suggests that each, in their own way, held to a model of substantial participation between the physical and spiritual domains of

---

6 In Chapter Two of this thesis, I engage the works of two theologians, Caroline Walker Bynum and Colleen Griffith, in order to explore this more fundamental Christian dualism. Each has delved deeply into the history and literature of Christian theologizing about the body and about its constituent relationship to soul.
activity and agency, and that for some the human body was a particularly potent site of spiritual activity. I consider the specifics of these religious systems in greater detail in Chapter Three. As such, I went into my fieldwork in northwestern Malawi bearing a basic theoretical problematic to be subjected to ethnographic inquiry, one concerned to explore the patterns of religious conjunction and disjunction that characterized the Tumbuka-Ngoni encounter with Scottish Presbyterianism.

**Problematic and Thesis**

Like many other Christian missionaries of their era, the Livingstonia missionaries were bearers of a religious world-view that understood the natural world to be imbued with spiritual force, and the human body and soul subject to superhuman agencies. In this respect, their religion was comparable to local forms of African religiosity and spirituality in northern Nyasaland, though it differed dramatically in the specifics of its content and organization. Yet, as post-Enlightenment Protestants from the Reformed tradition, the Livingstonia missionaries were bearers of a distinctively different model of body and soul, one derived from Aquinian, Cartesian, and Reformed theological and philosophical assumptions. This was a dualist logic, one that separated body from soul, nature from spirit, and religion from science, and that had built on it a tripartite model that placed increasing emphasis on the mind as a distinctive yet constituent domain of personal and spiritual experience.

Within the Western scientific tradition, the mind had become a topic of study within the disciplines of psychology and psychiatry, while within the Christian theological tradition it became increasingly defined as a key locus of soulfulness. As will be seen in Chapter Two, Christian theology, especially Reformed Protestantism, has carried within it profound assumptions about the constituent relationship between the mind and the soul, and of the separation of each from the body. The Livingstonia Mission’s emphasis on education, especially literacy, as their primary
evangelical and “civilizing” tool also suggests a set of profound assumptions about the constituent relationship between mind and soul. Likewise, the Livingstonia missionaries were bearers of still emergent biomedical tradition, one that set the body off from the spirit as an organic entity that could be subjected to specific surgical and pharmaceutical interventions.

In contrast, both early missionary writings and later anthropological accounts suggest that the Tumbuka and Ngoni residents of the Embangweni area were historically participants to a spiritualist system that embraced a fundamental participation between the spirit world and the world of living bodies. The Livingstonia Mission’s religious and scientific compartmentalization of body from spirit would seem, as such, to present a substantial contrast with the more unified Tumbuka and Ngoni model of body-spirit participation. How then have the Tumbuka, Ngoni, and other residents of northwestern Malawi responded to this cultural and religious disjunction? How have they opposed, integrated, or otherwise related these two disparate systems within their individual and collective lives? To what extent were the Livingstonia missionaries and their descendants successful in institutionalizing their religious and scientific models of personhood and being in the customs, culture, and rituals of Malawi’s northwestern residents?

Having just asserted this problematic and associated questions, I should note that they can be overstated. The broader literature on African religions and cosmologies demonstrates that many of them include a recognition of the body as something in-and-of-itself, requiring sustenance and the site of a person’s individuality (Devisch 1990, Karp 1997). Among such religious cultures, the logic of body-spirit participation was framed within an acknowledgment that the bodily and spiritual dimensions of life can be distinguished. I suspect, though can not assert, that the religious

7 In the conflicted encounter between these two African peoples (see Chapter Three), one that preceded the arrival of the Scots by several decades, there remained a common affirmation that the spirit and material worlds interact, and that the human body, in particular, is a site where multiple spiritual agencies act, communicate, and motivate.
cultures of northwestern Nyasaland were similarly characterized. Likewise, the Christian tradition should not be too strongly characterized as dualist and tripartite, as there is an orthodox Christian acknowledgment that the omnipotent God can and does intervene in the affairs of the living, as does the Devil and his agents. The spirit world does participate in the world of the living. While the modern Western compartmentalization of body, mind, and soul has been profound, there is an underlying schema that affirms a fundamental participation among all three facets of being. In this respect, there was a core conjunction between it and the Bantu cosmology of the northern Nyasa region.

Nevertheless, despite these structural conjunctions, this thesis and its problematic derive from a perceived disjunction between the predominant religious ontology of the Tumbukas of northwestern Nyasaland and those of the Scottish Presbyterians who first introduced Christianity to the region. My theoretical problematic and its ethnographic context brings me to my second major motivation and goal for writing this dissertation, which is to provide some account of the power of the missionary project in initiating religious and therapeutic change in the northern regions of Malawi, and of the power of local Africans to both resist and integrate aspects of these novel schemas apart from and within their own thoughts and practices. Accounting for these powers requires a turn towards history.

A History of Encounters

The ethnic and tribal distribution among the populations of northern Nyasaland was highly varied by the time the Livingstonia missionaries arrived in the region in the late 1870's. Primarily Tongas lived along the lakeshore, in the areas around Chintheche and east of the Kandoli mountains. Inland, Tumbuka-speaking peoples, including Phoka, Henga, Nkhamanga, and Siska groups, among others, lived in the regions to the north and west of the Viphya mountains (Young
1933, Tew 1950). Among them lived the Ngoni and the peoples they had incorporated during a twenty-year migration north from the Transvaal and Cape provinces of South Africa, including large numbers of people of Thonga, Karanga, Senga, Bemba, and Chewa heritage (Phiri 1982, Thompson 1995). The Ngoni had only just settled in northern Nyasaland in the mid 1840’s, occupying the fertile areas around the Kasitu river valley basin, and their invasion was fresh in the memory of local Tumbukas and Tongas. In areas of Ngoni co-residence with Tumbukas, the Ngonis had imposed their tribal authority structure within local society, enforcing Ngoni bridewealth practices and patrilineality. Yet ChiTumbuka persisted as the lingua franca of the region, and became adopted by the Ngoni invaders and other peoples accompanying them.

The religious culture that emerged from this ethnic mix included much diversity and contestation, amidst broad patterns of shared knowledge and practice. The peoples of the region shared an affirmation of an encompassing divine spirit, referred to most commonly as Chiuta (the great bow) in ChiTumbuka (see Fraser 1914; Young 1950; Msiska 1969) and as Umkulumqango (the great original) in ChiNgoni (see Chibambo 1942; Read 1956; Thompson 1995). Both Tumbukas and Ngonis participated in forms of ancestral spiritualism that acknowledged the agency and authority of deceased ancestors, and the reality that they sometimes possess the living. Before the arrival of the Ngoni, local Tumbuka clans also had participated in a number of regional religious movements, including trans-linguistic territorial cults, witchcraft eradication movements, and area spirit possession movements (Schoffeleers 1975, 1978, 1997; Linden 1978; Vail 1978; Ranger 1975, 1993). Upon arrival, the Ngoni sought to destroy regional territorial cults, and sacked the Tumbuka ceremonial center of Chikhang’ombe in Nkhamenga in 1845 as part of that effort (Vail 1981). After the Ngoni invasion, patterns of spirit possession among area Tumbukas changed to include possession by many spirits of Ngoni, Bemba, Senga, and other foreign heritage,
as well as by the snake spirit *vipili*, a spirit of resistance that also possessed large numbers of Tongas (Vail 1979; Neozana 2002).

Throughout these changes, diviners of diverse ethnic backgrounds were active and widespread in the region. Among the Ngoni they were known as *izanusi*, and among the Tumbuka as *nchimi*, and today it is the latter term that holds prevalence in northern Malawi. As a therapeutic group, *nchimis* belong to a more general category “herbalist”, known as *ng’angas*. Like other *ng’angas*, *nchimis* claim knowledge of herbs and their medicinal properties, and attribute that knowledge to inspiration and communication by the ghostly spirits of deceased ancestors. Like *ng’angas*, they perform compelling acts of inspired diagnosis, prescription, and prognosis, rich in symbolic nuance, ritual elaboration, and spontaneity of form. *Nchimis* are a special category of *ng’anga*, however, because they actively perform their communication with the spirits in the presence of their patients and families. Through dance and other forms of spiritual embodiment, they testify to contact and conversation with the spirits of the deceased, and provide interpretations of spiritual authority and will. With the aid of the spirits, they also identify acts of bewitchment, often suggesting a likely guilty party, and take steps to counter that witchcraft. In cases of successful health interventions, they expect and accept gifts of thanks and compensation. In their roles as healers, social commentators, and prognosticators, *nchimis* are mediators of body-spirit relations *par excellence*, each embodying unified religious and therapeutic functions within a single profession and practice.

Reflecting its dual religious and scientific ethics, the Livingstonia Mission’s approach more than a century ago was quite different. On the ground, it established separate institutions to service the body and soul, building hospitals to heal bodies and churches to transform spirits, mirroring the rhetoric and thinking of the broader Western tradition of body/soul
compartmentalization. On the Loudon Station in Embangweni where I conducted my research, the church was built in the shape of a cross and located at the architectural center of the station. Medical facilities were built just a stone’s throw away, as was the first station school. By their proximity, church, school, and clinic were clearly represented as mutual facets of the missionary message and witness. Yet, by their separation, they indicated that a different set of ritual practices and meanings were to be invoked and subject to shared participation within each institutional setting.

For their part, the response of the early Livingstonia missionaries to the African religious and therapeutic traditions they encountered in the region was predominantly negative in tone. Most Livingstonia missionaries preached against people having engagements with ancestral and territorial spirits, and argued that such spiritualism was in disobedience to the one true Christian God, and perhaps inspired by the Devil himself. They argued that Christian life and knowledge was something apart from, and infinitely superior to, local African religiosity. They argued that most local African forms of traditional therapy were ineffective and premised in false assumptions about the human body and natural world. In particular, many of them strongly critiqued local divination practices as premised in the practitioner’s skillful use of fear and deception, and not in any benevolent manifestation of the Divine or his agents. Instead, missionaries encouraged, and to some extent enforced, local participation in their distinctive ecclesiastical, educational, and biomedical systems.

This does not mean that local Tumbukas and Ngonis understood this compartmentalization in the way the missionaries envisioned. Within a local religious framework that understood bodily, spiritual, and ecological events to be tied together in a system of mutual participation, it is unlikely that local people who participated within Mission churches and hospitals would, especially at first, understand their functions as radically distinct.
There were exceptions to this trend, most notably T. Cullen Young, a Livingstonia missionary in northern Nyasaland from 1904 to 1931. Young published extensively on Tumbuka religion and became a Fellow of the Royal Anthropological Institute in 1928. His writings provide the most detailed and systematic coverage of Tumbuka social and spiritual life from the early twentieth century. His respect for many facets of local religious life is clear from his writings, as he articulated the Tumbuka notion of the “good village” and defended the role of diviners as important agents of social continuity and health. I refer to his writings in greater detail in Chapter Three.

In the early years of the mission, many of northern Nyasaland’s residents responded to the Mission’s presence by pursuing education, training, and employment in its schools, seeking health care in its medical facilities, and joining in its church community (McCracken 1977; Thompson 1995). This occurred despite the missionaries’ predominantly negative characterization of local culture and custom. Local residents sought to participate in Mission institutions because of a variety of perceived benefits, including access to the means of literacy through participation in schools, to cash income and goods through Mission employment, and to impressive feats of curing through subjection to missionary anesthetic, surgical, and pharmaceutical interventions (see McCracken 1977; King and King 1992; Isichei 1995; Thompson 1995). The missionaries themselves claimed that their evident prosperity and technological prowess were products of a civilization built on Christian foundations, and they argued that only by embracing their Christian ethic and its accompaniments would local Africans have access to their particular forms of wealth and technical competence.

Many of the early students, converts, and church members in the Livingstonia Mission became among the most skilled laborers within the emerging colonial economy of southern Africa,

---

9 He was at Loudon station in Embangweni for eleven of those years (1910-1919, 1928-1931).
and were sought out and accepted for employment throughout the region, including in Rhodesia and South Africa. Early Livingstonia Christians also became among the most prominent social and political leaders within the colonial and post-colonial eras that followed (McCracken 1977, Thompson 1995). Today, Christianity is the predominant religious identity in the north of Malawi, and the Livingstonia Synod is the largest church body in the region. Many other Christian churches, however, are also active, including the Roman Catholic, Anglican, Seventh Day Adventist, and New Apostolic churches, as well as many African Instituted and Pentecostal churches. Most people in the north of Malawi affiliate themselves with a Christian church, and to varying degrees seek participation in church rituals and functions. At the same time, most people have contact with and utilize biomedical institutions at one or many points in their life, and a network of public and church clinics and hospitals are widely distributed throughout the region. The institutional impact of both Christianity and biomedicine are readily evident.

Despite this strong Christian and biomedical influence, however, customs, symbols, and beliefs with pre-mission antecedents continue to be acknowledged and practiced, and have a strong resonance, among many people living in northern Malawi. As will be seen in the chapters that follow, this thesis is in large part directed towards demonstrating that conclusion. Within this framework, both foreign and ancestral spirits continue to punish the living for acts of selfishness or violation of normative social taboos, while some spirits punish only for their own mischievous intentions as well. Spirits are thought to punish by withdrawing their protection from witchcraft or by bringing on affliction itself, even as they often also possess the bodies of those afflicted, and provide them instruction and guidance to find healing and learning. Some they call into continued

10 They often returned with novel religious and cultural influences from the regions they labored in, many of them also highly Christianized and modernized through participation in social and labor systems also transformed by European colonial and missionary projects. These returnees have powerfully shaped the religious and political landscape of Malawi.
service as *nchimis* and *ng’angas*. Ancestral spirits heal and protect their righteous living kin, and the living are still bound in memory and obedience to their deceased elders and to the moral legacy and tradition they embodied while themselves living, and continue to embody after death through possession of the living. This knowledge of witchcraft and spiritual agency remains strong and prevalent throughout northern Malawi, and continues despite coming under continued attack from the Presbyterian and other local churches, most notably Seventh Day Adventist and Pentecostal church leaderships. People continue to participate in village and local practices of divination and healing more frequently than they interact with any part of the broad network of nationally and internationally validated and supported biomedical institutions.

In summary, most people living in northern Malawi today participate in religious and therapeutic systems with antecedents in both pre-Mission and Mission culture and tradition. Christian identity is predominant and participation in Christian churches widespread. Biomedical institutions are prevalent and busy. At the same time, village and urban diviners and healers are widespread, and continue with often thriving therapeutic practices. What does this co-presence of churches, hospitals, and diviners suggest about local religious and therapeutic culture? What does it suggest about the way people are variously modeling the relationship between body and spirit? What does it suggest about the success of the missionaries’ religio-therapeutic project? Were they successful agents of religious and therapeutic hegemony? The ethnographic research for this thesis, conducted at Loudon station and the fast-growing town of Embangweni next to it, was directed at addressing these questions.

**Choosing a Field Site**

The research questions and priorities that I took to Embangweni had many years of development behind them, derived in part from my own biography, as well as my exposure to the
broader academic and church literature on Protestant missions in Africa. I spent eight years of my youth as the son of American Baptist missionaries working in Kinshasa, the capital city of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, known as Zaire between the years 1971 and 1997. My parents worked for the Board of International Ministries of the American Baptist Churches (ABC) in partnership with the Western Baptist Community of Zaire (CBZO). My parents had first served with the ABC Foreign Mission Society in Congo’s capital, Leopoldville in 1958, and a year later were stationed in the rural village of Boko, in the western Bandundu region. By 1969, when they returned for a third term of service, they had been through two tumultuous terms in Congo, the first interrupted by the violence surrounding independence in 1960, and the second by the tragedy of my elder sister’s death in 1966. In 1969, I accompanied them into their third term as a ten-month old baby, along with two older brothers, while my eldest brother started college in the U.S. This third term lasted until 1972, when my family returned to the United States and my father took up a pastorate in the First Baptist Church of Reading, Massachusetts. Four years later we moved to Norway, where my parents again worked with the ABC in their partnership relation with the Baptist churches of Norway, Sweden, Denmark, and Finland, and where we lived for three years. In 1981, we returned to Kinshasa, where I would spend the next five years, from ages twelve to seventeen, living on the CBZO church compound in Kintambu, a western Kinshasa neighborhood, and attending school at The American School of Kinshasa, across the street from the famed Camp Tshatshi military barracks.

My origins in this missionary background have clearly motivated me in the research and writing I have done for this dissertation. For years, I have wanted to better understand how the activities of Western missionaries have influenced and changed people’s lives in Congo, and more broadly in Africa. The flip side to this has been a desire to understand how this missionary mobilization has been experienced, understood, and responded to by local Africans. What have
Africans done within their own culture and society, and individually, in response to the missionary presence and message? Much of the reading I did during my graduate studies was directed at exploring these issues.

In my initial planning for the development of the dissertation, I developed the theoretical framework already mentioned at the beginning of this Introduction, which identified a correspondence between historical Christian discourse and mission institution-building. Just as the discourse of Christianity models the person as a tripartite composite of body, mind, and soul/spirit, their primary institution-building activities in the mission field consisted of three types: hospitals to heal bodies, schools to teach minds, and churches to save souls. Here was a direct analogy between an intellectual tradition coming out of Western Christendom and science, and the institutional intent to create a new kind of religious, intellectual, and therapeutic society.

After deciding to move my ethnographic research out of Congo, following the outbreak of renewed civil war there in 1998, I spent five months searching for a new field site, eventually making contact with missionaries from the Presbyterian Church/U.S.A. who were working in Malawi with the Church of Central Africa Presbyterian (CCAP). They were open to my research agenda, and thought there might be a station in northern Malawi within the Livingstonia Synod that would be a good fit for it. In consultation with them, with their generous assistance, and with the permission of the leadership of the Livingstonia Synod, I embarked on a three-month visit to northern Malawi in the spring of 1999, during which time I visited the Synod’s three major mission stations: Livingstonia, Ekwendeni, and Embangweni.

I started my search for a field site by spending three weeks at the former Mission headquarters of Livingstonia, located on the high Khondowe plateau overlooking Lake Malawi in

---

11 For myself, I know that accompanying these questions have been normative judgments about whether or not these cultural and experiential changes have been positive. This personal judgment process is always ongoing for me, though I have tried to limit its impact directly on this thesis.
the northeastern section of the country. Livingstonia had become headquarters for the Mission in 1894, after two previous sites, Cape Maclear and Bandawe, proved too malarial, and the cost in missionary lives too high. In the early twentieth century, Livingstonia had been one of the most prominent mission stations in all of south east Africa, known in particular for its Overtoun Institution, a center of western classical and industrial education. The second hydro-electric plant in central Africa started producing electricity there in 1905. The Mission’s founding father, Robert Laws, was a prominent figure in missionary circles in Scotland and western Europe, and was leader of the Mission from 1879 until his retirement in 1927. But Livingstonia’s fate changed dramatically in the late 1960’s, when then President Hastings Kamuzu Banda chose an alternate route for the main north-south artery in Malawi, the M1. It did not pass through Livingstonia, but instead ran to its east, 3000 feet down a steep escarpment, near to the lakeshore. Over the course of the next decades, Livingstonia changed from being a vibrant regional center of commerce, transport, and education to being a somewhat off-the-beaten track town whose grand buildings and institutions seemed increasingly at odds with its growing isolation. In 1978, in a contentious move, the Livingstonia Synod shifted their headquarters ninety-five kilometers south to Mzuzu, capital of the Northern Region and a small but growing urban center. Judged pragmatic by the broader leadership, but resented in Livingstonia itself, this move has only increased Livingstonia’s marginality. At the time of my visit, Livingstonia still had a large and nationally prominent secondary school, a post-secondary technical school, and a one-hundred bed hospital known throughout the region, but during my visit it was a place of little non-mission activity, clearly out of

\[12\] The Institution was named after John Campbell White (Lord Overtoun) who donated an estimated 50,000 pounds to the Mission during his lifetime. His family fortune derived from their ownership of a chemical manufacturing plant in Rutherglen, Scotland.
the commerce and transportation loop. It felt like a place of former grandeur, far past its prime.\textsuperscript{13}

During my visit, there were two expatriate missionaries residing there, an elderly Irish couple who both taught at the Livingstonia Secondary School.

As a potential field site, Livingstonia was a mixed proposition. The site’s long and prominent history was a mark in its favor. Its growing isolation and small missionary presence were also potential advantages, in that it could provide for a good study of rural Christianity as it developed after a period of intense missionization and church building. Another anthropologist, Arnold Wendroff, had been working in the area over a period of twenty-years, and his work would provide a wealth of supplementary and comparative data and analysis. I left Livingstonia after three weeks, however, feeling that I wanted to base my fieldwork near a growing, not shrinking, church station, one surrounded by a growing population, and more plugged into national and international networks of travel, communication, institution building, and commerce.\textsuperscript{14}

I followed my visit to Livingstonia with a two-week stay at the large Livingstonia Synod complex at Ekwendeni, located on Malawi’s main north-south artery, highway M1, just a twenty-minute drive north from Mzuzu, the major city of Northern Malawi. In many respects, Ekwendeni was the opposite of Livingstonia, with a steady flow of truck-drivers stopping in town, regular mini-bus service for the twenty-minute drive to and from Mzuzu, a busy trading center, and a growing residential population along the highway to the north of the station. Founded in 1889, Ekwendeni was the second major station established inland from the lake in the north among Tumbuka and Ngoni populations.\textsuperscript{15} It was established in the Ngoni Inkosi (Chief) Mtwalo’s

\textsuperscript{13} During one conversation with a local man, he suggested that Livingstonia resembled a ghost town.

\textsuperscript{14} Since my initial visit, Livingstonia Station has experienced a small renaissance, revitalized by the return of an elder Scottish missionary doctor who has thrown his energy and fund-raising into the hospital and station. Likewise, the Livingstonia Secondary School has now been joined by the University of Livingstonia, housed at the same campus complex.

\textsuperscript{15} The first station was at Njuyu.
village, at his invitation, a decision that reinforced the emerging cooperation between the Mission and ruling Ngoni leadership of the region at that time. Today, the station includes a primary school, a girl’s secondary school, a school for blind and sight-impaired children, a large hospital, a lay-training center, Synod offices, and a substantial, mostly Scottish Presbyterian, missionary presence. Electricity, telephones, and even satellite TV were available in town and on-station. This quasi-urban location with an increasingly dense population offered an extremely diversified and mobile population, and a town and station subject to the daily influences of transportation and urban cultures. I left Ekwendeni after two weeks thinking that it was a good potential field site, and began to make arrangements for possible housing in the area.

The third station I visited was Embangweni, and after only one week there, I chose it as my field site. As with any decision, there were of course multiple variables, but primary among them was Embangweni’s status as an active and growing, but still somewhat rural station and trading center. Located in south Mzimba District, about twenty miles by dirt roads off the M1 highway, and eleven miles east of the watershed border with neighboring Zambia, Embangweni’s modern history as a large scale settlement begins in 1902, after a joint agreement between the Ngoni chief Mzukuzuku and Livingstonia missionary Donald Fraser. In that year, they agreed to abandon an

---

16 To appeal to nursery rhyme poetics for a moment, if Livingstonia was too cold, and Ekwendeni too hot, Embangweni seemed just right.
17 Mzimba District borders Lundazi District in northeastern Zambia. Its population consists mostly of people from Ngoni and Tumbuka heritages, though Bemba, Karanga, and Chewa ancestry are also prevalent, for the latter mostly in the District’s southern areas. Mzimba has a District Commissioner, headquartered in Mzimba city, who is responsible for supervising a distributed body of Traditional Authorities (TA), who is each in turn responsible for administering legal matters at a local level.
18 Inkosi Mzukuzuku is a titular office, one of eight Ngoni chiefs who are all members of the Jere clan, the royal clan within Ngoni society. Today, each serves as an administrative TA within Mzimba District in Malawi’s Northern Region. Seven are known only as Inkosis, while one is the Inkosi ya Makosi, Chief of Chiefs. His administrative and chiefly headquarters were in Edingeni, located about fifteen miles northeast of Embangweni. In addition to these eight Ngoni chiefs, two Tumbukas were given TA authority within Mzimba District by the national government during the 1990’s.
existing village and station near Hora mountain, fifty six kilometers to the north of present day Embangweni, because of persistent drought conditions and recent locust invasions. Shortly after the decision was made to move south, a suitable sight was located on the northern banks of the Lwasozi river, a tributary of the south Rukuru river. As with the previous village at Hora, the new village was also named Embangweni. The new Mission station was named Loudon, in honor of Dr. James Loudon of Hamilton, Scotland, whose widow had given one thousand pounds, originally to build a hospital, which were used to build the station. Early on, however, the station was known as “Mzukuzuku’s station”, and eventually as Embangweni Station, as it is still known today.

**Embangweni Station**

After its initial establishment, Embangweni station quickly grew into the largest and most dynamic station in the Livingstonia Mission’s sphere of operations. By 1914, nearly thirty percent of the 9,200 communicants within the Livingstonia Mission were members of the Loudon congregation (Fraser 1915). Throughout the twentieth century, the station’s church community and student population remained large. Today the station includes a large institutional complex, including a church and church offices, a one-hundred-and-thirty-three bed reference hospital with tertiary care facilities, a primary school, secondary school, and school for hearing-impaired children, and staff housing for many station employees. The station has become a recognized

---

19 Loudon had been a medical colleague and friend to David Livingstone.

20 Quinn (1993, p.15) notes that in the buildup to independence, the local body of elders changed the official name of the station to Embangweni Station, even as the Livingstonia Synod continued to designate the local presbytery as the Loudon Presbytery. During my time in Embangweni, only the resident Presbyterian minister and a few local elders in the Presbyterian church referred to the station as “Loudon Station.” Resident American and Irish missionaries consistently referred to it as “Embangweni Station,” as did the majority of local Malawian residents. In an effort to change this convention, the Livingstonia Synod reasserted the name Loudon during the station’s centenary celebrations in 2002 and called on all station institutions to adopt that nomenclature.
medical, educational, and religious center in the region. It is currently one of three major church stations within the Livingstonia Synod, one of five member synods spread across three nations (Malawi, Zambia, and Zimbabwe) that comprise the Church of Central Africa Presbyterian (CCAP).²¹

At the time of my research in 1999 and 2000, Embangweni station remained the dominant institutional presence in the area, and was by far the area’s largest employer. A small number of American, Irish and Scottish missionaries (ranging from five to eight) lived on station during my research period, most of them working in some capacity with Embangweni Hospital, though in one case also with the on-station Robert Laws Secondary School. From the station’s inception, the presence of an employed mission staff had brought commercial interests to the borders of the station, and a trading center had emerged adjacent to the station on its southwest side. In recent years, the trading center and local population had mushroomed, fueled by a prosperous and rapidly developing mission station, and even more recently, by the introduction of electricity in 2001. At the time of my research in 1999 and 2000, the trading center included a government post office, a permanent market, restaurants, rest-houses, bars, agro-lending banks, NGO offices, a cattle market, and dozens of retail outlets and residential units. A public Community Day Secondary School is located just a few hundred meters up the main road, on the western side of the church station. Both the station and trading center are surrounded by villages ranging in population from dozens to hundreds.

Shortly after my arrival in Embangweni, I learned that another anthropologist, Anne-Lise Quinn, had done research in the Embangweni area in the late 1980's (1986, 1988-89), the results of which were presented in her 1993 doctoral dissertation from the University of Cambridge. Her

²¹ Of the five synods of the CCAP, three are in Malawi. They are the Livingstonia, Nkhoma, and Blantyre Synods. Of the other two, Lundazi Synod is in Zambia, and Harare Synod is in Zimbabwe.
research focused on the ways in which members of the Presbyterian church in Embangweni at times struggled to reconcile their ecclesiastical affiliation with other facets of their lives, including participation in local kinship, marriage, festival, and divination practices. In particular, she notes how some local CCAP members seemed to reconcile themselves to temporary periods of church suspension owing to participation in activities deemed out-of-bounds for “good” Christians by the church. Whether taking a second wife, joining in beer-drinking activities, or consulting with a diviner, there were times when CCAP members discretely chose such courses of action in full recognition that they might result in suspension. Quinn writes:

That people accept suspension for transgressing church laws and admit to their fault when they are restored, is evidence that they perceive them as the ideal forms of behavior which nevertheless, in practical life, are almost impossible for everyone to uphold at all times. For those who can avoid, for whatever reason, discipline from the church, a sense of moral superiority is theirs. Those who are reinstated once again join the ranks of those who manage to uphold the laws of God (or, at least, are not disciplined for breaking them), and reassert the legitimate authority of those who disciplined them.22

In formulating her argument, Quinn surveys patterns of domestic, kin, and social organization in-and-around Embangweni station, and explores the relationship between leadership patterns in local villages and that of the Presbyterian church at Loudon station. In the process, she defines what she calls “the CCAP ethic” and relates it to Weber’s broader characterization of the “Protestant ethic.” She titled her thesis “Working On the Protestant Ethic” as a way to represent the extent to which an achievement of that ethic has been elusive for most of Embangweni’s residents, as the persistence of economic hardship and patterns of loyalty to extra-ecclesiastical custom and culture, have meant that many found themselves outside the bounds – either in the short or long term – of an ideal-typical Presbyterian lifestyle. In the dissertation that follows, I frequently refer to Quinn’s work

for comparative purposes, noting both patterns of continuity and change between her descriptions of life in Embangweni and my own. I also reference some of the statistical data she gathered, specifically regarding the ethnic composition of Embangweni, as she conducted a more systematic quantitative survey of the local area.

Quinn’s research conclusions provide an important backdrop for the ethnography and analysis presented in this thesis. It is precisely in the disjunction between Presbyterian orthodoxy and vernacular custom and culture that many of the fissures in the Christian history of northern Malawi have emerged. While suspension represents a temporary fissure between an individual and their church, larger scale group fissures have also emerged from the Presbyterian church’s framed opposition between Christian and vernacular spirituality. The Embangweni area’s African Instituted Churches are congregational manifestations of this history of fissure.

The Embangweni Ecclesiastical Context

In addition to the on-station Presbyterian church, which is the oldest, largest, and most established church in the area, several other Christian churches were active, both in the trading center and around the station in general. Among them were three other first-wave mission churches -- the Roman Catholic, Seventh Day Adventist, and Anglican churches -- all of which were founded in Malawi during the first wave of Christian missions in the late nineteenth century, though all were more recent arrivals in Embangweni specifically. Four African Instituted Churches (AICs), the Last Church, Chipangano Church, Zion Christian Church, and Zion Prophecy Church, were also active in the area, as were two Pentecostal churches, the Assemblies of God and Full Gospel Church. The New Apostolic Church, the product of a late twentieth century missionary movement out of Europe, had a large and growing congregation, while the Church of Christ, the Restored Christian Community Church, the Bible Believers, and the Jehovah’s Witnesses also had
small congregations that met regularly in town. This ecclesiastical pluralism provided me with an important arena in which to explore the variety of ways Christianity has been interpreted and articulated within the broader religious culture of the area.

The Research Framework

I spent a total of sixteen months in Malawi conducting my research, stretching from early February 1999 to the end of October 2000. Thirteen months of this time were in residence in Embangweni. As indicated, my research interests going into fieldwork were broadly concerned with how Christian and biomedical models of body and spirit had become articulated within the broader religious and therapeutic cultures of the Embangweni area. From the start, I targeted congregation members from across the spectrum of local churches as informants, as well as people who were ill and participating in either village clinics or the station hospital. In all three settings, however, I was often directed by participants to first address my formal inquiries to members of the leadership body. As a result, many of my interviews and conversations in churches were held with members of the formal church leadership, including pastors, elders, and youth leaders.

Accordingly, I returned from fieldwork with a wealth of commentary and perspective from these church theological and ritual experts, alongside those of congregational members. In village-based therapeutic settings, especially those of divining *ncchimis*, I was also often directed to talk first with the presiding *ng’anga* or *nchimi*, and I likewise received a wealth of data from these resident cosmological and ritual experts, along with those of therapy-seekers. In the station’s Embangweni Hospital, I also consulted extensively with members of the hospital staff, including with doctors, medical officers, nurses, hospital assistants, lab personnel, and the hospital’s chaplain, in addition to with both in-patients and out-patients.
In the thesis that follows, I have framed many of my ethnographic and theoretical conclusions around the body of data I received from these various institutional experts. This “expert knowledge” is most evident in the specific articulations of theology, cosmology, and therapy that these sources gave me through conversations and interviews, alongside their expertise as agents of ritual performance. Some of my informants were more expert than others, depending on the duration, intensity, and positionality of each person’s institutional experience. That said, the conclusions I reach in this thesis are not limited only to a characterization of expert knowledge, as I also draw broader conclusions based on my own participant-observation and the accounts and testimonies of lay people and patients in both ecclesiastical and therapeutic settings.

**The broader research context: crisis and challenge**

Upon beginning my research in Embangweni, several broad patterns of religious, and specifically therapeutic behavior, became apparent. Among my church informants, especially members of three local AICs, were those who sought relief from some affliction and illness through participation in village-based spirit possession dances. Among others, particularly from Pentecostal churches, I encountered people who invoked the power of Christian faith, prayer, and the laying-on-of-hands as effective forms of spiritual intervention in cases of illness. Likewise, in the hospital, I also encountered many people who were taking religious and spiritual steps, both within churches and in the company of village diviners, to help restore and secure their health and well-being. These patterns of multi-institutional participation are important because they show people crossing institutional boundaries in their quest for therapy, as they variously invoke Christian, divinatory, and/or biomedical approaches to their personal crisis. In part because of this cross-referencing of institutions, among the sick in particular, my research came more and more to focus on individuals experiencing bodily crisis in their lives, many of whom were in circumstances
of severe or chronic illness. Many of them were experiencing mental and emotional crises as corollaries to their affliction.

As my research progressed, this concern with crisis became even more acute, as I came to realize more each day, through my relationships with people in Embangweni, the extent to which life in Malawi today is for most an ongoing confrontation with crises on many fronts, in economic, political, social, and health terms. This is not to suggest that people’s lives in Embangweni are only full of misery. Far from it. People also experience times of personal joy and fulfillment, family celebration and community festivity, good health, and for some, degrees of prosperity. People were generally gracious and hospitable to me, and generous with what limited resources they had. Happiness was manifest in the area.

Yet, in my daily and weekly encounters with people living in Embangweni, I met many who were suffering serious physical hardships, in terms of both illness and poverty. Considering recent history in Malawi, this is not surprising. By several major indicators, in particular along economic and health indices, the material conditions of life in northern Malawi, as elsewhere in the country, have deteriorated dramatically in recent years. Residents across the region have

---

23 The major transitional political event in recent Malawian history was the conclusion in 1994 of thirty-one years of national rule by Hastings Kamuzu Banda. A medical doctor, Banda had returned to Malawi in 1963, after spending most of his adult life living in the UK, to pick up the call to lead the new nation as it emerged out of more than a half-century of colonial rule by the British. Banda quickly consolidated his power, establish his Malawi Congress Party as the sole legal party in the nation, and in 1971, designating himself “President-for-Life”. Banda tolerated little political opposition, and outspoken critiques of his regime were either jailed or killed. Yet along side his autocratic ways, he also pursued a successful agrarian economic strategy that made Malawi among the more economically stable and prosperous sub-Saharan African nations. In March 1992, however, as the national economy was weakening and political autocracy hardening, a Pastoral Letter signed by all of the Catholic Bishops in Malawi was read in every Catholic church in the country. It called for far reaching economic and political changes, and fundamentally challenged Banda’s status quo. The Letter initiated a broadly supported movement to organize open and fair elections among multiple parties, and in 1994 Banda was voted out of power, and Bakili Muluzi of the United Democratic Front was voted in. The political climate has opened up dramatically since this period, though there has been some suppression and intimidation of the press in recent years, in particular following Muluzi’s contested reelection in 1999. Among the
experienced decreased purchasing power as prices for transportation and basic goods have gone up dramatically. Rural farmers have been hit hard, with inconsistent harvests because of poor rainfall, and higher input costs for seed and fertilizer. It has become increasingly difficult to secure cash to purchase basic commodities like flour, cooking oil, sugar, salt, tea, soap, and kerosene. Even for those employed in the formal economy and earning cash income, their wage increases have generally not matched increases in the cost of living, in particular as the local currency, the kwacha, has steadily devalued. During the course of my fieldwork between February 1999 and October 2000, the foreign exchange value of the kwacha was halved, as the rate rose from 42.35 to 80.99 kwachas to the U.S. dollar. Rates of inflation were correspondingly high during this time, averaging 44.8% in 1999 and 29.6% in 2000 nationwide. In Embangweni, prices on basic commodities increased dramatically, far outstripping rises in real wage terms.

In health terms, area populations continue to face high levels of both infant and adult morbidity and mortality as a result of chronically high rates of malaria infection, and growing rates of tuberculosis and HIV infection, among other diseases. Embangweni Hospital’s Annual Report for 2001 showed that malaria was the number one inpatient diagnosis for women, men, and children, and the number one cause of death among inpatient children. HIV/AIDS rates, in particular, have risen dramatically over the course of the past decade, and, at the time of my research, infection rates for Malawi as a whole were estimated at nearly fifteen percent of the total population. A recent United Nations Development Program (UNDP) report estimates that HIV prevalence rates nationwide are 25% in urban areas, 27% in semi-urban and 12% in rural areas,

positive changes for the people of the north has been the end to the state-enforced policy under Banda of forbidding publication of any non-religious literature in ChiTumbuka. As of 2004, Malawi had experienced a third election, won by Bingu wa Mutharika, also from the UDF party.

24 Malawi Fact Sheet: November, 2002. Market Information and Analysis Unit, Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade.

while another report suggests that up to one third of urban youth between the ages of fifteen and nineteen are HIV positive. One informed public health worker at Embangweni Hospital estimated that upwards of seventy-percent of all in-patients at the hospital are HIV infected, a number that correlates with statistics indicating comparable rates throughout the country. The Embangweni Hospital Annual Report for 2001 estimates that 49% of inpatient deaths among men were AIDS related, as were 32% of deaths among women, and 8% of deaths among children. In my thirteen months of residency in Embangweni, I heard of dozens upon dozens of area funerals, often for young and middle-aged people, and I ascertained a shared though often publicly unspoken assumption that many of the deaths were AIDS related. At the time of my research in northwestern Malawi, there was still much stigma associated with AIDS in the region, and in my experience, family members were often reluctant to acknowledge that their kin – parents, children, and siblings -- had died because of AIDS. Added to their potential shame, the living face the emotional challenges of caring for and losing loved ones, as well as the economic costs of increasing expenditures for medical care, drugs, and funeral expenses, and the social dilemma of how to accommodate and care for increasing numbers of orphaned children. The challenges are daunting, and their further characterization is far beyond my own competence to address in this thesis. More simply, I have built a framework of crisis around this dissertation in order to point to two of my own agendas for writing it. The first is to point to the ongoing reality of poverty and disease in many parts of Africa, including Malawi, and argue that they should be the focus of a systematic

28 Embangweni Hospital Annual Report for 2001, p. 3.
global relief and prevention effort led by Africans. The second is to point to the role that religion plays in people’s lives as they struggle through affliction and dis-ease, and to better understand that role and the way it shapes people’s understandings of their own physical and spiritual health.

Religion, Medicine, and Healing in Times of Crisis

Circumstances of personal and collective crisis, including chronic illness, are often key points of challenge to the assumptive frameworks and models that shape people’s thinking and action in life. Enduring bodily crises have a way of becoming existential, for those ill and their loved ones, as people confront their understandings of themselves and the world, and their strategies for realizing health and life. It is no surprise then that among the many ways people respond to chronic illnesses is through religious behaviors that invoke the healing intervention of spiritual agencies. This is certainly the case in Embangweni, where ritual and symbolic forms derived from both Christianity and ancestor spiritualism are commonly invoked in response to chronic illness, and where people turn to village, town, and station-based institutions for religious healing.29

Among these institutions is the Embangweni hospital, an institution that has since its inception been a religious place as well as a scientific one, a place for medical technologies as well as prayers for Divine intervention. Its doctors, ward-maids, nurses, and other members of staff are all proclaimed Christians, who gather for morning prayer and worship in the hospital chapel at the start of each work day. Each morning, prayers are also conducted among the patients in each ward, and the hospital chaplain visits patients who request his prayerful intervention. The chaplain is even known to perform exorcisms in his office, with his Bible opened and held high in his right

29 These invocations often precede a visit to the station hospital, though there are some chronic conditions, like persistent cough, which are increasingly referred or self-referred to the hospital.
hand, for those patients besieged by evil spirits. The mission hospital, as well as churches and divination events, also carries an aura of spiritual agency and authority.

This incorporation of religious practice into Livingstonia’s most “scientific” institution is not surprising. From the start, the Western missionary tradition embodied the notion of science as both distinct from, yet enveloped by, religious truth and Divine will. Within the religious tradition of the West, science itself is located within an encompassing model of ultimate divine agency, wherein natural law is God’s law. This model of the Divine envelopment of nature reaches back to many of the early Christian writers. Even today, for many Christians in the West, the growth of a human embryo is as much an act of Divine will as it is the outcome of biological processes. This view does not deny some level of functional automaticity to biological processes, but it reserves credit and power for the creation of those processes to God. For Christians who acknowledge science, the latter is both set apart from and encompassed by the omnipotent, omniscient, and omnipresent God. It is this “set-apartness” of science from religion that is the key intellectual, and institutional maneuver of the Western tradition, and is the source of the compartmentalization of body from soul.

**Conclusion**

In building their stations in northern Malawi, Livingstonia missionaries constructed, alongside their schools, separate institutions for scientific and religious functions, building churches for Christian instruction, worship, and prayer, and hospitals for biomedical practice and technique. Yet, as is clear from the historical record, and as I show in my ethnographic account, the Livingstonia missionaries to some extent contradicted that spatial and institutional compartmentalization in practice. Within their churches and medical clinics, many of the early Livingstonia missionaries embodied both religious and therapeutic functions within their person,
by virtue of their dual roles as evangelists and medical technicians. In addition to their claim to partial sacred authority as bearers of the gospel message, and to curative authority as bearers of biomedical knowledge and technique, missionaries also, at times, prayed to God to bid his healing intervention in people’s lives. Missionary medicine, from the start, was introduced with spiritual accompaniments. Its functions have always been subsumed within the ultimate healing agency of God, and its practice justified and realized as part of the sacred healing mandate proclaimed by Jesus.\(^{30}\) Missionaries taught, preached, and healed as a part of one mission.\(^{31}\)

This observation, of course, might seem to complicate my definition of the Livingstonia missionaries as bearers of a Western cultural tradition that compartmentalized science from religion, and to some extent I would agree that it does. The Scottish Presbyterian missionary tradition in northern Malawi cannot be characterized as only tripartite or dualist in its construction of personhood. While their theology, formalized in doctrine, and their biomedicine, formalized in practice, affirmed many dualist assumptions about the separation of body from mind and soul, their practice as both religious and therapeutic agents presented a more unified model of spiritual and physical interaction. As self-proclaimed agents of both God and science, the Livingstonia

\(^{30}\) In his introduction to a chapter written by Livingstonia missionary Dr. Agnes Fraser, J. H. Oldham wrote: “We have begun with the consideration of the bodily needs of the peoples of Africa, because the body is the physical basis of life. And for this emphasis on health of body we may claim the highest authority. In His brief ministry on earth our Lord himself devoted a large part of His time to the healing of men’s bodies. His ministry was directed to the redemption of the whole man.” (in *Friends of Africa*. 1928, p.79) In her 1992 book *Curing Their Ills*, Megan Vaughan noted this sanctification of missionary medical practice in Africa, which combined “a belief in the powers of biomedicine with a conviction that those ‘called’ to the medical profession were mere servants of the ‘Great Healer’ of souls.” (p. 56)

\(^{31}\) In these respects, medical missionaries were analogous to the person of the diviner as agents of both sacred and healing power, even though they compartmentalized their religious and therapeutic roles and performances to a far greater extent. It seems likely that local Tumbukas and Ngonis from the start recognized this analogy, even as they could see that the institutions and techniques of the Mission were dramatically different in many ways. It may even have helped some diviners in their own practice, as they could lay personal claim to both therapeutic and religious power.
missionaries were bearers of unitary, dualist, and tripartite assumptions, and it was to this multivalent message and presence that Tumbukas, Ngonis, and other locals in Embangweni have had to respond.

This question of response raises a series of questions:

- Over the course of the past century-plus, how have the residents of Embangweni responded to the fused yet separate evangelical and healing practices of the Livingstonia Mission?
- How have Christianity and biomedicine been articulated with (or within) pre-existing religio-therapeutic practice and knowledge?
- In the local view today, are reverends, diviners, and doctors all potentially religious healers?
- To what extent has the Mission’s compartmentalized model been integrated into local religious and therapeutic logic?
- Within churches and therapeutic settings, how do ritual experts characterize the relationship between body and spirit?
- In view of these preceding questions, can the Livingstonia missionaries be said to have institutionalized a new hegemony of religion and medicine in the Embangweni area?

The theoretical, historical, and ethnographic chapters that follow are addressed at these and other related questions. At various points in these chapters, I invoke Victor Turner’s (1968, 1969) distinction between the *exegetical*, *operational*, and *positional* dimensions of symbols and their significances. In Turner’s model, the *exegetical* of a symbol or symbolic cluster includes an account of the full spectrum of explanations and interpretations of a symbol’s meanings given my members of a given demographic population. The *operational* dimension of symbolic meaning is to be located in an analysis of the functions and affects to which a given symbol or symbolic cluster is put into use. The *positionality* of a symbol is derived from its relationship to other symbols and place within an associated symbolic cluster. In the analytic project of history and ethnography that follows, I use all three of these approaches to frame my analysis of religious symbols and the meaningful role they play in the diverse religious lives of Tumbukas, Ngonis, and others living in the Embangweni area. While I cannot claim to have done a full exegesis of local articulations of
symbolic meaning, I have done my best to indicate the scope and limitations of that exegesis in framing my analysis.

In Chapter One, I review the broader literature on Christian missions in Africa, and propose a theoretical framework that engages with a series of topics that have been relevant to that literature, including conversion, syncretism, and colonialism. In Chapter Two, I trace the development of a distinctive Western theological and philosophical tradition, one that increasingly framed reality and being in dualist terms, separating body from soul, and religion from science. I suggest that this theological and philosophical tradition profoundly shaped the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries’ Scottish Presbyterian missionary project in northern Nyasaland. In Chapter Three, I review what is known about the political, economic, and religious history of northern Nyasaland prior to the Livingstonia Mission’s arrival, including a description of Tumbuka religious and therapeutic forms and the relationship between the Tumbuka residents and Ngoni invaders of the region. In Chapter Four I consider the arrival, spread, and segmentation of the Mission itself, and point, as many others before me have done, to the emergence of the independency movement as a powerful pattern of indigenous response to the European missionaries’ presence. I conclude Part One by comparing Mission Christianity and biomedicine with Tumbuka and other vernacular forms of spirituality and therapy, in hopes of setting up a structural comparison between the two that allows for case-specific elaboration in my ethnographic chapters in Part Two. I specifically cite the writings of a Tumbuka Presbyterian minister, Stephen Kauta Msiska, who identified a deeper level of disjunction between the two religious systems than that suggested by the Livingstonia missionaries themselves.

In Part Two, I argue that contemporary articulations of Christianity, biomedicine, ancestor spiritualism, and divination in Embangweni are diverse and complex, but that several broadly defined patterns of response are evident. In Chapters Seven and Eight, I describe a contemporary
spirit possession complex known as *Vimbuza*, in which symbols and ritual forms derived from ancestor spiritualism and local divination practices have been combined with Christian and biomedical elements to create a compelling and evolving therapeutic form. While many local Christians (especially from African Instituted Churches) affirm Vimbuza as a valid therapeutic form, many others condemn it as anti-Christian because of its roots in pre-Christian religious assumptions and practices. I especially consider the expert opinions of active participants to the Vimbuza complex, among them several diviners, as I attempt to characterize the forms, functions, and meanings of the ritual complex.

In Chapters Ten and Eleven, I consider the Christian ritual of baptism, a topic that emerged, often without my initiative, during conversations with local church leaders while discussing contrasts and comparisons among local churches. Substantive differences emerged among these locally recognized theological experts in how they articulated the relationship between the embodied, intellectual, and spiritual facets of the ritual experience, including its function as a cleansing rite. From within a population of church leaders, I consider the exegetical, operational, and positional dimensions of the baptismal rite as a symbol of representation and transformation.

In Chapters Nine and Twelve, I consider two extended case studies, each revolving around a man confronted by chronic illness, and the varying ways he, his relatives, and other associates responded to and modeled the spiritual and bodily dimensions of his condition. Through their telling, each case suggests some of the important patterns, innovations, and even failures that have characterized peoples’ attempts to resolve the disjunctions and tensions that characterize their dualistic religio-therapeutic society and culture. In the process, I explore the meanings of both “conversion” and “syncretism” as applied to each man’s case, and as linguistic characterizations of
personal transformation for individuals living within a juxtaposition of two religious and therapeutic traditions.

In the conclusion, I return to the problematic and questions that framed this thesis at the outset – specifically the historical and ethnographic question of how resident Tumbukas and Ngonis have responded through time to the juxtaposition of a European Protestant Christian tradition with their own traditions of custom and cosmology. I asserted a probable historical disjunction between the theology and science of the late Victorian Scottish Presbyterian missionaries and the customs and cosmology of the Tumbuka and Ngoni residents of northwestern Nyasaland. How then have the Tumbuka, Ngoni, and other residents of northwestern Malawi responded to this cultural and religious disjunction? How have they opposed, integrated, or otherwise related these two disparate systems within their individual and collective lives? How might they also have located analogic conjunctions between the two systems? To what extent were the Livingstonia missionaries and their descendants successful in institutionalizing their religious and scientific models of personhood and being in the customs, culture, and rituals of Malawi’s northwestern residents?

In writing this thesis, I hope to provide some insight into the dramatic transformations of religious culture among the generations of residents of northwestern Malawi over the past century and a quarter of history. Towards that end, I point to both the power of the Mission as an agent of religious, therapeutic, and social change, and to the power of resident Tumbukas, Ngonis, and others to engage that power in and through their own customs and culture. Likewise, this dissertation is also directed at reaching some early and partial conclusions about the role and place of religion in people’s lives, in particular during times of embodied, mental, or spiritual crisis. In the process, I hope also to demonstrate how religion and spirituality continue to act as places of
mixed refuge for people, sometimes as places of comfort and therapy, and at other times, as places of constraint and distress.
PART ONE

HISTORY AND THEORY
CHAPTER ONE

Themes and Theory in the Study of Christian Missions in Africa

There is a large body of literature on the history and legacy of Christian missions in Africa, done from both missiological and anthropological perspectives. Each of these perspectives has contributed to the ongoing academic conversation about how best to understand the motivations and mechanisms for Christian missionization, as well as the responses to and consequences of its enactment.

The discipline of missiology emerged through the course of the twentieth century as a voice from within the Christian community that spoke to the intentions, implications, and consequences of mission work in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. These voices could be critical, yet their analysis generally assumed the validity of Christian evangelical work, and its aim to convert people and transform societies through individual and collective receptions of the Gospel message.32 In order to better understand these changes, early missiologists made central use of the emerging anthropological literature of the twentieth century, and missiologists today continue to engage with anthropological writings about missions. This is not surprising. Though much separates the two perspectives, there is also much that joins them as related disciplines concerned with matters of knowledge, belief, ritual practice, and social change within contexts of religious encounters occurring between one or more cultural populations.

With respect to the history of Western Christian missions, in particular, both missiology and anthropology have shared an attempt to describe patterns of religious change that have

---

32 The Catholic missiologist John F. Gorski (2004) defined missiology as “the specialized branch of theology that accompanies, analyzes, and gives direction to the missionary activity of the church, which involves the evangelization of human groups that do not yet know Christ or among whom a mature local church does not yet exist.”
emerged within and among indigenous and vernacular societies since the initiation of the missionary project. Two analytic terms, in particular, have engaged both missiologists and anthropologists in their studies of religious change: conversion and syncretism. In both literatures, the tendency has been for studies of conversion to be centered around questions of personal faith and practice, while studies of syncretism focused their analysis on group trends across a spectrum of individuals from the same cultural background.

Despite this conjunction of interests, there have been significant differences between the missiological and anthropological traditions, mostly coming out of the different intellectual and religious groundings of writers in the two scholarly communities. Most missiologists come to their writings from within the Christian tradition, as professing Christians. Many spent some or much of their lives working in the field as missionaries, or continue to do so even as they engage the scholarly community in their writings. Most anthropologists, by contrast, are members of the secular wing of the academy, who come to their writings with a commitment to the guidelines and theory of social science, and who do not share missiological commitments to the Christian evangelical agenda. This difference is important to understanding how and why each discipline has applied different analytic and normative lenses to their study of the history and legacy of Christian missions.

**Missiological Perspectives on Conversion and Syncretism**

Missiologists, particularly those concerned with Protestant missions, have tended to validate the veracity of local conversion experiences in missionized countries. This perspective assumes that some conversion experiences are *true*, characterized by emotional repentance to God, the request for his forgiveness, and the acceptance of his grace and authority in one’s life. In this model of conversion, if a person publically testifies to this experience, and present themselves as
willing to live by their new commitment, they can be judged as converted. At the same time, difficulties in identifying true conversion have been realized and analyzed since the earliest published missiological works. (Sangree 1959; Kraft 1963, 1979; Saler 1965; Salamone 1972; Spindler 1998-00)

These writers recognized that a variety of motivational factors and personal interpretations entered into public expressions of faith, raising the question of what is a true Christian faith in any given cultural context. Missiologists have recognized social, political, and economic reasons why people gravitated towards mission centers of influence, affiliated themselves with the mission church community, and testified to a Christian identity (Isichei 1995). Some have recognized that even with these more initial “secular” motivations behind them, some people eventually came into true Christian faith through their experiences of mission life.

In large part because of this totalizing use of the term “conversion” within Christianity, there has been some difficulty formulating an analytic usage for the term within religious theory. Some missiologists have used Nock’s (1933) distinction between conversion, defined as a “reorientation of the soul” and adhesion, the acceptance of elements from a new religion as a “useful supplement and not as a substitute”. More recently the Christian writer Gaventa (1986)

---

33 Within Christian theology, especially its Protestant version, conversion is understood as a radical transformation of one’s state of being and relationship to God. Christianity posits the existence of an external agent (the Holy Spirit) which inhabits a person at the moment of their conscious surrender to and reception of God’s grace. This “indwelling” of the Holy Spirit is understood to effect a fundamental (and perhaps non-reversible) change in the state of a person’s soul. As “all are sinners and fall short of the glory of God”, a person may continue to hold beliefs and practices which are contrary to God’s will (as found in the Bible) even after their conversion. But this should not be an act of conscious or intentional will. A sincere conversion is understood to mark a new path, directed towards God, which will eventually lead people further and further away from the errors of false belief and sin. At least within its most orthodox Protestant version (with which I am most familiar), a genuine personal conversion does not occur unless there is this intent to “turn away from the things of this world” and to seek ultimate inspiration in “the Word of God” and its explicit mandate for living. For many Christians, the prototypical religious conversion is that of the Apostle Paul (Saul) on the road to Damascus (see Acts 9: 1-22).
suggested a scaled distinction among three terms to account for varying degrees of subjective religious transformation, including differentiation among (1) *alternation*, a limited form of change which develops out of one’s own past, (2) *transformation*, a radical change of perspective and a re-cognition of the past, but which does not necessarily include a rejection or negation of all previously held values, and (3) *conversion*, a pendulum-like change in which there is a clear rupture between the past and present, with the former characterized in strongly negative terms. While this three-part scale provides a useful model for describing degrees of personal reorientation, it does not change the Christian distinction—defined in ontological and soteriological terms—between a true Christian conversion and something else only resembling it.34

Alongside the question of what constitutes *true* conversion, missiologists have also been concerned with the question of what is *true* Christian orthodoxy, asking what doctrines and theological truths are not subject to change by virtue of their being articulated within new socio-cultural contexts. As professing Christians steeped in the Western church history of Biblical exegesis and systematic theology, many Western missiologists, and their theologian counterparts, have argued that the introduction of too many local religious and cultural elements are seen to compromise the true Christian faith, to, in a sense, pollute it. Often, the term “syncretism” was applied to such “negative” cases, and was accompanied by a call to counter such compromises of true Christianity. Yet, at the same time, other theologians and missiologists have used the term more positively, arguing that the contextualization of Christianity within and through local cultural referents is a good, and to some extent necessary, process (see, for example, the works of Eugene Hillman, Lamin Sanneh, and Leonardo Boff).

34 I use the term *ontological* here in reference to a person’s experience of both existential and universal meaning, concerning both the nature of being in the world, and the nature of the broader cosmos. I use the term *soteriological* to refer to religious frameworks, like the Christian one of heaven and hell, that act to orient people’s understandings of death and the afterlife.
In a 1992 article, Peter Schineller, a Catholic theologian, describes the range of uses to which the term “syncretism” have been employed in describing Christian church history, and notes both its pejorative and positive denotations within missiological writings. Describing its pejorative uses, Schineller quotes from a range of condemnations of syncretism by both Western and non-Western theologians:

…when critical and basic elements of the Gospel are lost in the process of contextualization and are replaced by religious elements from the receiving culture.  

…the unjustifiable fusion of irreconcilable tenets and practices…

…the “fusion of incompatible elements” and the “mingling [of] authentic notions and realities of the revealed faith with realities of other spiritual worlds.”

Ultimately, syncretism is but another form of Christ-rejection.

Together these quotes suggest a contrast between a true Christianity that is “critical,” “basic,” and “authentic,” and a Christianity compromised by “unjustifiable,” “irreconcilable,” and “incompatible” elements derived from other religious traditions. Because of these negative uses of the term syncretism, Schineller argues against its continued analytic usage.

In my view, the word is too ambiguous, open, and subjective and has too many different connotations to be used fruitfully in discussing inculturation. Even though I incline toward those scholars who see syncretism as a positive, necessary, and helpful word to describe

---

38 An Indian theologian, quoted in J. P. Pinto’s *Inculturation Through Basic Communities* (Bangalore, India: Asian Trading Corporation, 1985), p.22.
development of a tradition in new cultures, I do not feel the term can be saved. One’s energies are too easily consumed in quarrels about the meaning of words.\textsuperscript{40}

Schineller instead argues for usage of the term \textit{inculturation}, a term that has developed broad usage within missiological circles to describe processes whereby local cultural and religious referents are incorporated into Christianity.\textsuperscript{41} He uses the term to define what he sees as the central issue embedded within the debate over syncretism, namely, the criteria by which to distinguish adequate and valid inculturation from inadequate and invalid attempts at inculturation.\textsuperscript{42}

In contrasting “valid inculturation” from “invalid inculturation”, Schineller retains the distinction between true Christianity and some bogus counterpart, a Christianity that becomes subsumed by culture rather than rooted in it. This distinction affirms the privileged value of Christianity as an orthodoxy that absorbs selected cultural forms into it.

While I agree with Schineller that the value of \textit{syncretism} as a descriptive term has been compromised by its negative usages, I cannot embrace his usage of “valid” and “invalid” inculturation as suitable descriptive substitute. As suggested by Schineller’s usage, the terms suggest that the one true religion, Christianity, can and should absorb cultural elements from other faith traditions, as long as they do not undermine the fundamental assumptions of the Christian faith. In this model, modern Christianity is the truth, while other religious traditions carry only partial truths. As I do not share in this belief, my goal is instead twofold: to reaffirm the value of

\textsuperscript{40} Schineller, p.52.
\textsuperscript{41} The term “inculturation” is the latest of a series of terms, including adaptation, accommodation, acculturation, and contextualization, that missiologists have employed to describe the extension and transformation of Christianity as a result of missionary activities. As noted by Gorski (2004), the term “inculturation” has roots in the history of Catholic missions over the past half-century, and its first recorded usage was in the Louvain Missiological Week of 1959. It is has since become broadly used within missiology.
\textsuperscript{42} Schineller, p.50.
syncretism as a term used to describe processes of cultural and religious interplay, without judging the moral qualities and ontological grounding of their juxtaposition; and to argue that the religious encounter between Africans and Christianity is better described as a process of dual enculturation.

Though the discipline of socio-cultural anthropology is far from being a value-neutral domain of inquiry, I now turn to it for other definitions of syncretism and conversion as situated within the histories of Christian missions in Africa and resultant processes of personal and social religious change.

**Anthropological Perspectives on Syncretism and Conversion**

The anthropological study of Christian missions in Africa has in large part been scaffolded by the early ethnographic and historical writings of missionaries and missiologists, as well as those of academic historians. The Swedish missionary Bengt Sundkler’s book *Bantu Prophets in South Africa* (1948) and the British historian Roland Oliver’s *The Missionary Factor in East Africa* (1952) were two early and influential accounts. Through the 1960's and 70's, a large body of scholarly literature developed, much more than can be surveyed here, addressing a wide range of topics, including the role of education and medical work in the missionary project, the place of missions within the larger colonial enterprise, the emergence of African Independent Churches during the colonial era, and a range of other religious, social, cultural, political, and economic facets of the encounters among missionaries and Africans.43

Within this literature, the terms conversion and syncretism have both emerged as important topics of definition and debate, as scholars have sought to account for and describe both personal and collective patterns of religious continuity and change resulting from the Western missionary movement. In general, the term conversion has been applied to descriptions of personal religious change, while syncretism has been used to describe group-level patterns of change. Beyond this pattern, however, theoretical consideration of both terms has been complicated by a diversity of usages and definitions (Droogers and Greenfield 2001). As with many theoretical debates, the question has had much to do with the range of phenomena which are to be classified (see Snow & Machalek, 1984). What is religion? What are its subjective and social dimensions? How does it intersect with other facets of lived experience? What, then, is religious conversion or religious syncretism?

While the anthropological debate over what constitutes religion has been and continues to be vigorous (see Saler 2000 for a review of the debate), I offer the following working definition of religion as a guidepost for my own usage of the term.

Religion is that facet of both subjective and collective life experiences that engages core existential and moral issues, pertaining to the nature of life, truth, right behavior, and the afterlife.44

44 In this definition, under the broad rubric of “life experiences”, I group a range of human experiences that include a religious dimension, including practices of meditation and prayer, and participation in discursive, textual, ritual, and other symbolic mediums of private and public religious experience. It assumes that people’s interaction with public religious institutions can include elements of both mimicry and innovation, and a range of experiences of belief and disbelief, knowledge and ignorance, bliss and fear, and agency and domination, among others.
My definition of religion is admittedly a very broad one, but such is, I would argue, the expanse of religious experience that a good definition can be nothing but broad. That said, I will not engage here in an effort to sort through the numerous complexities that emerge in defining religion, or in the strengths and deficiencies of my own definition. Instead, I return to the topics of conversion and syncretism, and to the anthropological effort to describe and define them, though in so doing, I hope also to point to some of the core existential and moral issues that I include in my definition.

**Anthropological Theories of Conversion: Rationalization, Cosmology, and Colonialism**

In the broader anthropological literature on religious conversion, three key issues have and continue to be debated:

1) What *kind* of change is involved?
2) What *degree* of change is involved?
3) What *factors* influence and motivate such change?

Much of the ambiguity surrounding analyses of conversion has revolved around the larger question of *kind*. The result has been different scholars focusing on different facets and kinds of subjective change, including of personal identity, affiliation, conviction, belief, knowledge, and practice, and entailing each or all of these changes under the rubric of “conversion”. As demonstrated in the summaries below, this trend has complicated academic theorizing about religious conversion, and has generated additional questions about degree and motivation.

On the second issue of degree, many models of conversion to world religions such as Christianity have focused on the extent to which the “conversion” experience is often only partial. As in the missiological literature, there are multiple accounts of the extent to which “converted” Christians continue to maintain adherence to knowledge and belief systems which, at least from the missionary point of view, are inimical to the Christian belief system and its exclusivist claims of
allegiance (see for example Beidelman 1974). Most contemporary anthropological theory about subjective religious change resulting from exposure to alternative cosmologies tends to frame that change in terms of, to use Gaventa’s terms, alternation or transformation, rather than conversion, because of a scepticism that world religions like Christianity have been able to fundamentally break people’s ties to locally derived systems of knowledge and practice (see Nelson 1992 for example).

On the third issue, of influences and motivations for conversion, Weber’s discussion of religious rationalization provided an early and ongoing model for explaining the successful expansion of missionary religions like Christianity and Islam, derived from the premise that these “world” religions were more rationalized than most “traditional” religions (Weber 1968). In this view, the degree of systematization of world religions, including their codification in text and church doctrine, enabled them to offer a more consistent and comprehensive accounting of life, and thus to succeed in displacing less totalizing versions of reality. Clifford Geertz (1973) challenged this interpretation by asking to what extent such a codification of religious assumptions necessarily implies that the system will have greater salience for people. What makes the jump from sociocultural systematization to personal meaning? Others have raised the question as to whether a knowledge system can become so formalized, and thus rigid, so as to work against its meaningful integration into a personal worldview (Bloch 1974). Nevertheless, theorists have continued to argue that the “rationalist” qualities of the world religions of Christianity and Islam have inspired conversion to their religious logics.

In a series of influential early articles about conversion in Africa (1971, 1975a, 1975b), Robin Horton developed an explanation for religious conversions that tied the missionary project to larger colonial and post-colonial forces of modernity. Horton’s thesis built on an earlier analysis made by J.S. Trimingham (1955, 1959), who argued that the incursion of Western “civilization”
upset the economic and tribal social structures of African societies, and thereby undermined the religious traditions that were bound up with them. While Christianity and Islam provided Africans with novel social roles and identities, the move towards these world religions was precipitated by the socially disruptive effects of colonialism and missionization. In his writings, Horton added an explicitly intellectual component to this social analysis.

Horton’s first and most influential article about conversion (1971) was a review and commentary on J.D.Y. Peel’s book *Aladura*, in which he agreed with Peel that the attraction of the separatist Aladura movement among the Yoruba of Nigeria was in part the way it combined both “traditional” and “modern” religious practices and assumptions, and the way in which this combination afforded a continuing conceptual orientation with which to predict, explain, and control events in the world. Horton furthermore argued that, during and since the colonial era, both the world religions of Christianity and Islam provided more encompassing ways to conceptualize the increasingly large-scale socioeconomic processes imposing themselves on Africans’ world of experience. As microcosmic political and economic boundaries dissolved, people were propelled towards more macrocosmic intellectual frameworks, which provided the logical means for people to identify themselves as actors in a larger social world. Horton called this an “intellectualist” explanation, and in it defended the “rationality” of African traditional cosmologies, viewing their systemic interplay of multiple spirits as a coherent and pragmatic whole when used within local lineage and cult domains. But, he argued, there has been a historical disjunction between the explanatory power of such local cosmologies and the increasingly local manifestations of global socioeconomic processes. In a thought-experiment, targeted against efforts to explain conversion

Interestingly, the Livingstonia missionary T. Cullen Young, the first Westerner to do substantive ethnographic research among the Tumbuka of northern Malawi, made this very same argument, and to some extent used it to defend the value of local conversion to Christianity (see Forster 1989).
in primarily religious terms, Horton takes his argument further, and suggests that even without Christian and Islamic mission movements, African peoples would have shifted towards increasingly monotheistic cults in the face of increasing involvement in global social, economic, and technological systems.

As summarized by Ikenga-Metuh (1987) in his review of conversion theory, Horton’s intellectualist thesis stimulated a lively debate about conversion within anthropology. Both Fisher (1973) and Ifeka-Moller (1974) challenged the presumption that, to quote Fisher, “adherents of African traditional faiths will behave as Horton’s thought experiment suggests – that they can only interpret changes in their society in a particular way, that they necessarily evolve a monotheistic moral code for the wider world.” Fisher instead argued for a dynamic historical understanding of religious conversion(s). Ikenga-Metuh summarizes:

Fisher wrote his article as a reaction to Horton’s intellectualist interpretation of Islam in Africa. He argues that the history of Islam in Africa, covering a period of almost a millennium, displays a pattern of religious change which suggests that other explanations are necessary. His pattern is roughly characterized by three stages: quarantine, mixing, and reform. In the quarantine stage, the faith is represented by newcomers. Orthodoxy is relatively secure because there are no converts. As increasing numbers of local people embrace the faith, bringing with them elements of their traditional beliefs, a mixing stage ensues. Finally, after a lapse of decades or even centuries, a wave of reform sweeps away the mixing and restores the orthodoxy of the quarantine stage. The cycle may repeat itself.

Ikenga-Metuh notes that while Fisher’s argument includes a historicity and dynamism lacking in Horton’s account, it does not fundamentally challenge Horton’s thesis, because it still doesn’t directly address the question of what precipitates a transference of religious identity in the first

---

place, the point of Horton’s argument. He then suggests that some part of the theoretical confusion about conversion derives from an unclear usage of the term, and, using Nock’s distinction between adhesion and conversion, offers a description of three types of subjective religious change:

1) Change of affiliation without change of conviction – Adhesion, e.g. a “mixed” Islam or Christianity.

2) Change of affiliation with change of conviction – Conversion I, e.g. from Traditional Religion to fervent Islam or Christianity.

3) Change of conviction without change of affiliation – Conversion II, e.g. from “mixed” Islam or Christianity to fervency.48

Ikenga-Metuh argues that both Trimmingham and Horton are writing about adhesion, as defined above, while Fisher writes about both types of conversion without directly addressing adhesion. He argues that part of what separates Fisher’s perspective from Horton is not only his more diachronic framework, but also his willingness to include religious factors in his accounting of conversions to Islam, including specific ritual, doctrinal, organizational, and charismatic forms. In agreement with other scholars also critical of Horton’s dismissal of religious factors in accounting for conversion (see Gray 1977 for example), Ikenga-Metuh argues with Fisher that religious, as well as socio-cultural, factors must be factored into analyses of conversion, and as an example cites Isichei’s (1977) argument that Christian eschatology has been a compelling and important part of that religion’s appeal to many Africans. To conclude, Ikenga-Metuh suggests that both adhesion (changes of affiliation) and conversion (changes of conviction) have characterized African responses to Christianity and Islam, and that religious and social, as well as economic, political, and technological factors have been involved in both processes.

48 Ibid., p.20.
Ikenga-Metuh’s summary of the debate over Horton’s theory and thought experiment provides a useful set of analytic criteria with which to consider questions about religious conversion. In particular, his distinction between adhesion and conversion, as per Nock, provides a framework whereby to distinguish between the social, perhaps political, transformation of personal identity through new patterns of ecclesiastical affiliation, and the sentimental and intellectual transformation of personal belief and conviction through what Nock called “a reorientation of the soul.” The former is a political and social act, the latter a spiritual one. As will be seen in the case studies that come in Part Two of this thesis, both the socio-political and subjectively spiritual facets of religious experience have and continue to shape patterns of religious affiliation and conviction in the Embangweni area.

In a different critique of Horton’s thesis, Ranger (1993) characterized Horton’s strong distinction between microcosmic and macrocosmic levels of social experience and intellectual orientation as a false dichotomy. Describing the Lake Nyasa regions in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, he argues that regional populations had extensive contact with larger social and commercial worlds, resulting in several wide-scale religious movements that included trans-linguistic territorial cults, witchcraft eradication movements, and spirit possession cults, all of which were increasingly adapted to a large, non-localized social and economic field of action. Ranger also argued that by concentrating their institutional work on isolated mission stations, early missionaries in the region, while certainly bearers of a universalist ethic, were in fact microcosmic in their scale of activities. Ranger does not fully discredit the microcosmic-macrocosmic framework, to which he sees some merit, but does try to demonstrate how the “local” and the “global” are not uniform categories which fit neatly onto “African” and “Christian” cosmologies respectively.

---

49 Isichei (1995) calls stations “missionary islands”.
In a separate critique, in a volume he edited about conversion to Christianity, Hefner (1993) borrows an expression from Peter Berger (1967:4) to describe religious conversion as a process of “world building” and argues against Horton’s dismissal of the role of Christianity and Islam in effecting conversions. The world religions are, Hefner argues, part and parcel of the larger macrocosm, as their religious messages advocate universal horizons and a global ethic, and provide rationales for entering into supraethnic social and political systems.

With these relevant critiques in mind, I would argue that the main thrust of Horton’s argument is valid. The introduction of a novel economic and political order throughout much of Africa during colonialism would have, religious factors aside, portended a shift towards an increasingly macro-scale of religious thought and practice. Ranger’s valid critique aside, the new colonial order was of a larger scale than previous regional religious movements, and would have called for a more encompassing religious framework with which to “predict, explain, and control” events in the world. As to whether it would have culminated in a monotheistic framework, as Horton suggested, that conjecture, however, seems speculative. In the case of northern Nyasaland, I see no reason to assume why the prevalent Tumbuka-Ngoni logic of the region -- one focusing on both individuals and groups as key agents of social action and as bearers of spiritual authority -- would have changed and given way to an absolutist notion of a singular divinity. That the tribes of northern Nyasaland had to take seriously the European God is, of course, obvious, but that recognition already removes us from Horton’s thought experiment of a non-religious colonialism.

It is of course for that reason that Horton’s thesis cannot be tested, as the introduction of colonialism was both preceded and accompanied by Christian missionization, and, as noted by Hefner, the new economic and institutional order being established was saturated with religious content. In the northern Nyasa example, even the local trading company, the African Lakes Company, was characterized in terms of the overarching sacred mission of evangelizing and
civilizing, as a commercial agent of God’s will for the region. Nevertheless, Horton’s thesis is useful in pointing to the intellectual and cosmological facet of the African response to colonial Christianity, and to the ways Africans in northern Nyasaland and elsewhere on the continent have since organized a religious framework that responds to the power and scale of Western institutions, and to their accompanying Christian God.

Theories of Conversion: Power, Pragmatism, and the Contradictions of Colonization

Even before Horton’s thesis, and increasingly in the years since, many missiologists, historians, and anthropologists have called for a closer examination of Christian conversions as situated within the practical and ideological processes that accompanied the expansion of Western political, economic, and technological forms during the colonial and post-colonial eras (Delavignette 1960; Hellberg 1965; Neill 1966; Beidelman 1982; Hefner 1993; Kipp 1995; van der Veer 1996). They have critiqued conventional analytic, including missiological, usages of the term as failing to account for the complexity of motivations, variability, and partiality of changes in an individual’s religious knowledge and experience (Beidelman 1974; Hefner 1993; Pærregaard 1994; Asad 1996). Several scholars have noted that it was often the politically and socially marginalized who were among the first to identify with and convert to mission Christianity (Comaroff 1985; Isichei 1995), and some have explained it as in part a pragmatic move into the resource rich and potentially empowering domain of mission influence (Peel 1978; Ranger 1993; Kipp 1995). Education, in particular, has been noted as a prime mission attraction, as both literacy and industrial training were seen as avenues to lucrative employment. (Ragsdale 1986; Isichei 1995). Missions also provided access to Western medicine, technology, trading networks, and protection. In light of these benefits, Talal Asad (1996) has argued that the Christian notion of conversion presented Africans with a novel form of political consciousness, in which an “internal” conversion
presented a new opportunity for constructing a political identity as a Christian. This is an important argument because it forefronts the political and economic realities of colonialism, raises the issue of power and authority as an important dimension of the missionary project, and points to the agency and resourcefulness of Africans in responding to the emergence of a new political order.

Van der Veer (1996) writes:

Christian conversion is a “technology of the self”...which, under modern conditions, produces a new subjecthood that is deeply enmeshed in economic globalization and the emergence of a system of nation-states. Not only does conversion to Modern Christianity (both Protestant and Catholic) seek to transform the Self by changing its relations to Others, it enables a new organization of society.\(^{50}\)

In a similar vein, and in what is arguably the most influential recent body of work on the topic of African encounters with Western missionaries, the Comaroffs (1991, 1997) argue that conversions to Christianity among the Tswana of southern Africa are best understood as a partial and contested (though still profound) adaptation to a hegemonic imposition of colonial Christianity, and that, with varying degrees of self-consciousness, it has both enabled and constrained Tswana in responding to an intrinsically alien way of life. As discussed at the end of the chapter, their perspective raises methodological and theoretical questions about how to identify and evaluate cultural hegemonies, and in the process, how to define processes of religious conversion.

**Syncretism as Structure and Meaning**

As within the discipline of missiology, many anthropologists have also made use of the term *syncretism* in accounting for patterns of cross-cultural religious integration and fusion. Particularly during the 1950’s and 60’s, the term had widespread usage, generally accompanying

\(^{50}\) Van der Veer, 1996, pp.19-20.
broader discussions of acculturation, innovation, and culture change. Yet the pejorative connotations that gained currency within Christian scholarly circles soon compromised the descriptive value of the term, and some anthropologists argued against its continued usage. Yet while usage did decrease, some anthropologists have continued to make use of the term, and have defended its descriptive value if used without moral qualifications. Nevertheless, the highly variable use of the term within anthropology has continued to complicate any effort to develop a coherent and agreed-upon definition that can serve to scaffold academic considerations of the syncretic process (Droogers and Greenfield 2001).

In a critique of Michael Pye’s contention that “to be human is to be a syncretist,” Wyatt MacGaffey (1994) argued that most uses of the idea of syncretism are based in an inadequate theory of meaning which assumes the need to overcome cognitive dissonance. Pye argued that syncretism emerges when individuals experience “an ambiguous clash of meanings [that] demands some resolution.” As summarized by MacGaffey, Pye identified three syncretic forms of resolution:

- assimilation, by which one meaning eliminates the other; fusion, in which a new religion emerges; and dissolution, a drifting apart of the two meanings. Such resolution, though effective for individuals, may not prevent other individuals from experiencing in turn the clash of meanings, so that ‘syncretistic situations may persist for a long time and even indefinitely, even though they are … intrinsically temporary.’

MacGaffey argues against this focus on meaning as the motivation for syncretic processes. Writing about the Kimbanguist Church in Congo/Zaire, MacGaffey argues that it is the plurality and

---

54 Ibid., p.244. See Pye 1971:92-93 for sub-quote.
disjunction of social structures (in the historical case of western Congo, between European-bureaucratic and Bakongo-customary) that is the real root of syncretic movements. MacGaffey agrees with Pye that some condition of dissonance drives the syncretic process, but disagrees with him as to the origin and functional resolution of that dissonance. While Pye locates the motivation for syncretism in the ambivalences of meaning, MacGaffey locates the core syncretic motivation in the world of conflicting social relationships and hierarchies. While Pye argues for syncretism understood as a conceptual effort to resolve cognitive dissonance, MacGaffey argues that syncretism is best understood as a political effort to mediate between and merge disjunctive social structures. In drawing these contrasts between himself and Pye, MacGaffey advocates a jump from an individual-cognitive to a social-structural level of analysis, and argues that the latter is the more fundamental organizing level.

While I value the substantive insight of MacGaffey’s critique -- that syncretism “is a matter of radically different cosmologies experienced not as theories of time, life, race, and the like but as the lived realities of contrasting institutional systems”\textsuperscript{55} -- I would disagree with his contention that Pye’s meaning-based account is thus only tangential. The experience of disjunction and conflict in social life does motivate political efforts towards syncretic mediation. Yet, in addition to the pragmatics and politics of social interaction, relationships among cultural actors are also meaningful. People carry memories and emotions about and within their relationships, ones that can themselves become conflicted, invoking efforts at resolution and coherence. It is precisely because social life is meaningful that it requires mediation from the hearts and minds of people – as individuals think and feel their way through social life, in communication, exchange, friendship, and conflict with others. In this view, the mind cannot remain as some sort of analytic black-box, under-theorized and vaguely referenced. Pye’s notion that “to be human is to be a syncretist”

\textsuperscript{55} Ibid., p.255.
argues for core syncretizing functions within human cognitive processing; mental mechanisms that enable individuals to respond, if only partially, to the stresses of ambivalence and conflict.

In the ethnographic analysis that follows in this thesis, I attempt to account for both the social and psychological facets of syncretic experience and meaning-making, as people struggle to organize their relationships and their own thinking in terms that enable them to live healthy and satisfying lives. I do so in terms of both the “the lived realities of contrasting institutional systems,” as MacGaffey argues for, as well as in terms of the core syncretic functions that Pye argues for, those that characterize people’s meaning-making abilities and motivations. In the process, I construct a framework for identifying and characterizing syncretism that goes beyond Pye’s three basic types – assimilation, fusion, and dissolution – in an effort to further elaborate the multiple and nuanced ways syncretism occurs as people oppose, interrelate, and fuse religious systems within their living and thinking. To do so, I take a turn towards cognitive schema and modeling theory, and towards an emergent trend in psychological anthropology that considers both the structural and idiosyncratic dimensions of cultural experience.

**Modeling and schematization: towards developing a cognitive anthropology of syncretism and conversion.**

In a 1991 article describing and analyzing a Southern California Powpow dance celebration he attended, Guillermo Bartelt argued for a “cognitive semantic framework” of syncretism, framing it as a practical and conceptual juxtaposition of cultural schemata from both Indian and Anglo-Saxon cultural traditions. Bartelt compares the term schemata to other terms used to indicate “knowledge structures”, including frame, script, or gestalt. Citing Wallace (1970), he defines cultural schemata as “a conceptual abstraction that mediates between stimuli received by the sense organs and behavioral responses.” He continues:
According to Rumelhart (1980), such abstractions serve as the basis for human information processing, including perception and comprehension, categorization and planning, recognition and recall, as well as problem-solving and decision-making. Regarding cultural systems, cognition plays an important role in identifying commonalities in knowledge structures built into language.\textsuperscript{56}

Bartelt argues that the contemporary Southern California Powwow is organized around an “honoring schema” that has its antecedence in honoring ceremonies for warriors performed within Plains Indian societies during the years of intertribal warfare. During such ceremonies, warriors would be bestowed with badges of honor, such as eagle feathers. The contemporary Powwow includes ceremonial events known as “give-aways”, when prize and cash are gifted to organizers and outstanding dancers in honor of their achievements. In addition, the Powwow also includes a coronation ceremony for a “powwow princess,” whose extended family hosts a give-away in acknowledgment of the honor bestowed upon their family. Bartelt argues that while the post-coronation give-away remains consistent with the Plains Indian honoring schema, the coronation itself suggests derivation from a “princess subschema” that Bartelt identifies with Anglo-Saxon “beauty-queen” pageants. In this view, the princess coronation and give-away exemplify a cognitive syncretism in which the Indian honoring schema and Anglo-Saxon princess sub-schema are juxtaposed and integrated. In the process, Bartelt argues, powwows are “attempts to achieve a symbolic resolution of a problematic identity in an urban setting, where people of many different tribes, whose only common feature is the status of ‘Indian,’ seek to regroup.”\textsuperscript{57} Bartelt notes that the princess coronation and accompanying give-away pose “a striking opposition to the individually-oriented Anglo-American beauty pageants.”\textsuperscript{58} Instead, through community ceremonies

\textsuperscript{57} Ibid., p.63.
\textsuperscript{58} Ibid., p.63.
of honoring and gifting, the coronation and powwow have become “a syncretistic expression of an ethnic identity defined along historic stereotypes of idealized Plains Indian traditions.”

Bartelt’s analysis provides a helpful, if in some respects unelaborated, model for how to think about processes of cultural syncretism. Though he does not provide individual interpretations of the powwow and coronation to bolster his claim that these events are syncretic cognitive events, or go into great detail as to the cognitive mechanisms of such a schematic syncretism, his account does suggest an approach for analyzing and understanding patterns of conjunction and disjunction, and of integration and opposition, among cultural schemas and subschemas derived from different cultural traditions.

Bartelt’s article is situated within an emergent literature in cognitive anthropology on the cultural dimensions of human cognition, what D’Andrade has called “the study of the relation between human society and human thought.” The subdiscipline of cognitive anthropology emerged during the 1960’s in the effort to describe kinship terminology and natural taxonomies among members of diverse cultural groupings. This work included a concern with meaning structures, category features, and the functions and constraints of human memory. More recently, cognitive anthropologists have developed the framework of cultural models in an effort to both reestablish the concept of “culture” as a viable analytic tool, and, at the same time, provide a framework to think and write about culture as a diverse, changing, and often contested field of knowledge and experience (Quinn and Holland 1987; D’Andrade and Strauss 1992).

Cultural Models and Analogic Schematization

---

59 Ibid., p.53 (In abstract).
In his 1996 book *Culture in Mind*, Bradd Shore uses an “ethnographic conception of mind” to build a dialectical theory of culture as an embodied dynamic between culture-in-the-world (instituted models) and culture-in-the-mind (cognitive models).\(^{62}\) *Instituted* models are products of human projection and expressiveness in the world of collective experience. They take form as symbols, speech, gesture, architecture, technology, music, – anything that becomes part of a social and cultural ecology and potentially subject to the experience of others. *Cognitive* models are personally held, subjectively experienced modes of feeling and thinking about life experiences, whether real or imagined, from the past, present, or future. These cognitive models may be more or less consistent across time, more or less subject to verbal articulation, more or less emotional in tone and resonance, and more or less idiosyncratic or conventional in their formation. In Shore’s view, culture is to be located in both cognition and institutional life, within embodied minds and within their encompassing social, symbolic, and ecological worlds. Through their variety of forms, cultural models serve the basic task of meaning-making.\(^{63}\)

Shore emphasizes that there is no one-to-one correspondence between instituted models and cognitive models. A speech event (instituted model) may, for example, be interpreted (cognitively modeled) very differently by its various listeners. Though participation in common cultures and societies does increase the likelihood that people will share concepts and ideas, each person experiences the world in their own body and through their own mind. Idiosyncrasies emerge through the subjective processes of schematization intrinsic to each person’s respective cognition, imagination, and their particular experience of the world.

In Shore’s view, human meaning construction occurs at varying degrees of generalization and specificity, and through different levels of modeling abstraction or concreteness.

---


\(^{63}\) Ibid., p.52.
For both mental and instituted models, we need to distinguish between abstract global models and more concrete and particular instantiations of those models. I call the more general and abstract forms foundational schemas, reserving the term “model” for the particular and more concrete instantiations of those schemas. Foundational schemas organize and link up a “family” of related models. In Shore's view, the human brain schematizes a collection of cognitive models in a way that is reflective of instituted models and foundational schemas that are socially patterned and culturally conventionalized, a Durkheimian theme. In addition, the mind can schematize new and creative responses to the institutions of social and cultural life, a view that echoes Weber's notion of charismatic renewal. This dynamic interplay between culture, society, and mind was identified by the early sociologist Georg Simmel, who argued that social systems are always contingent products of structured and innovative interactions among actors (1959). The child psychologist Jean Piaget described this dynamic as a paradox in his essay "Children Invent the Social Contract" (1962), in which he observes children creatively negotiating a set of rules to which they then hold themselves accountable.

Shore emphasizes that not all cultural models are grounded in foundational schemas, as some are very context-specific and special-purpose in their application. But, he argues,

[T]hose models linked through foundational schemas have a special status in any community, contributing to the sense that its members live in a world populated by culturally typical practices and a common worldview.

Shore gives the following example, among others, to demonstrate his distinction between models and schemas.

Take, for example, the general hub-and-spoke spatial plan we see in airports, school buildings, and shopping malls. As a general spatial organization, the hub-and-spoke layout could be considered a foundational schema in relation to any of its specific architectural

---

64 Ibid., p.53.
65 Ibid., p.53.
genres, which I would call models. On the other hand, the hub-and-spoke building plan might be treated as a model based on an even more general radial schema that informs a variety of related arrangements, such as route scheduling for airlines or trains or the relationship between home office and regional managers or between central administration and teaching staff.66

Foundational schemas are often derived from the embodied, sensory domains of experience as they provide the most concrete basis for conceptualizing and acting in the world (Johnson 1987; Lakoff 1987). Both the radial schema and its derivative hub-and-spoke schema described by Shore are examples of image schemas (Lakoff 1987; Johnson 1987). Other examples include up-down schemas, center-periphery schemas, container schemas, and movement schemas, all of which are grounded in human bodily experience. Shore argues that some image schemas are more grounded in bodily experience than others, and can usefully be distinguished from more general spatial schemas. He calls these kinesthetic schemas.

Kinesthetic schemas model an individual’s relationship to the immediate environment through conventions affecting posture, interpersonal space, and muscle tone. Bowing, sitting, walking, and even sleeping are often highly stylized through kinesthetic cultural models and convey important cultural information about status, mood, and relationship.67

In view of this embodied grounding of mind, Shore argues that foundational schemas serve as “templates” or “source domains” that help organize concept formation, and facilitate the recognition or invocation of particular models of experience or reality.68 Schemas become

66 Ibid., p.53.
67 Ibid., pp.59-60. Shore also suggests that emotional bodily states can be subject to cultural modeling, such that some kinesthetic schemas carry emotional content (p.60).
68 At their deepest levels, these schemas are grounded in the individual embodiment of visual, kinesthetic, and linguistic experience, which makes them both universal (by virtue of our common species), highly idiosyncratic (by virtue of individual embodiment), and intersubjective (participant to social relationships).
foundational when their structure begins to generate other models, serving as templates for a family of formally related models.

Shore suggests that while it is possible to abstract a single “global” cognitive model from the many instituted models associated with a schema, schemas are typically distributed over multiple models. Invoking insights by Rosch and her associates in their studies of category formation, Shore argues that category schemas often display prototype effects, as manifested through exemplars, best-cases, metonymy, typicality, and basic-level categories. Such schemas typically include a central model (i.e. “mother”) which come to motivate a number of less-central related models (i.e. “surrogate mother”) in what George Lakoff calls a “radial category” governed by “prototype effects.” Like foundational schemas, centralized models are grounded in the sensory domain of experience.

According to Shore, human cognition incorporates both categorical and analogical functions, modeling oppositions between and participation among symbols, sounds, sensations, spaces, and other facets of private and public experience. The brain achieves this through a wide-range of techniques and processes, including basic-level and cross-modal perception, pattern recognition and learning, distributed networking, analog processing, analogy formation, and symbol formation.

Shore’s distinction between the two forms of cultural models, cognitive and instituted; between general-purpose foundational schemas and special-purpose cultural models; and between central and peripheral models provides only a partial outline of his complex argument in Culture in

---

69 Until recently, at least in the Western “classical” view, a category was assumed to be defined by properties common to all its members. In his book Women, Fire, and Dangerous Things (1987), George Lakoff presented a synthesis of categorization theories which fundamentally overturned this classical view, replacing it with one which recognizes categories that are graded and radial, includes degrees of category membership and fuzzy boundaries, and exhibits prototype effects, in which some
Mind. Still, they provide a good grounding point for analyzing both the century long missionary effort to institutionalize Christianity and biomedicine in northwestern Malawi, and the religio-therapeutic cultures that have since emerged and that I encountered during fieldwork in the region. In particular, Shore’s distinction between cognitive and instituted models provide useful frameworks in the effort to define both syncretism and conversion, and to relate them as companion categories that describe processes of personal and collective religious transformation resultant from missionization. Because religion is something that is both personally experienced and publically participated in, it exists as something that is both part of subjective thought, feeling, and movement, as well as something that is experienced intersubjectively within public institutions. Religion is modeled both psycho-emotionally, including cognitively, as well as institutionally, through ritual, art, language, text, dance, architecture, and other expressive forms. For the anthropologist, this means that religion is something that can be both observed and participated in, in its institutional forms, as well as invoked, through conversations and interviews, in the responses of others, as they seek to articulate their own particular understandings and feelings about a given religious topic. During my fieldwork in Embangweni, I sought to gain an understanding both of people’s subjective experiences of and reflections upon religiosity and spirituality, as well as of the institutional world of religion, with its symbols and sayings, churches and village temples, holy texts and instruments of divination, and rituals, dances, and prayers.

Shore’s emphasis on analogy formation also provides a useful tool for considering patterns of religious change resulting from missionization, as it directs attention to potential patterns of conjunction between and among different religious traditions. For example, to the extent that both the Scottish missionaries of the Livingstonia Mission, and the Tumbuka, Ngoni, and other residents

---

70 He also describes and defines a range of model and schema genres; argues for the prevalence of a modularity schema within modern American culture, and engages with computational, connectionist, and analogic models of the mind.
of northern Malawi, all participated in religious cosmologies that acknowledged a supreme spiritual force in the world, to that extent there was a shared framework of meaning and understand that could provide for a way to relate the two religion traditions. These shared frameworks provided ready-made analogies that could be used to relate them in both practical and conceptual terms. I will argue in what follows that the creation of analogies between Christianity and ancestral spiritualism facilitated the process whereby northern Malawians found ways to integrate the two religious traditions. In doing so, I come to argue that analogy formation is a critical factor in shaping patterns of both religious syncretism and conversion in northern Malawi today, both as a part of people’s understandings and experiences of religion, as well as through their participation in religious institutions of symbol, ritual, dance, and other forms.

This focus on analogic relationships between Christianity and ancestral spiritualism requires some form of structural characterization of each religious tradition, in order to better define the terms of the analogy. The analogic relationship, for example, between the use white maize flower (ufu) in traditional Tumbuka spirit dances, and the use of white vestments in Christian baptism, cannot be fully articulated unless framed within the broader symbolism and assumptions of ancestral spiritualism and Christianity respectively. This form of structuralist analysis, of course, has a well-established history within anthropology, even as it has also come under attack for often being too static and uniform in its definitions. Many early structuralist accounts did, in fact, lack a dynamic sense of history and culture change, and often did not represent the perspectives of minority voices within a given social sphere. Yet, in my view, the structuralist approach need not be dismissed because of these early shortcomings, but rather should be augmented and strengthened by counterframing it with more personalized and experience-near accounts of life and cultural experience. As will be seen throughout this thesis, I maintain a comparative structural framework, between Christianity and ancestral spiritualism, even as I also
work to represent more subjective and experience-near experiences of religion and spirituality. Within my structural analysis, specifically, I seek to develop a framework that provides a way to compare Christianity and ancestral spiritualism as cosmological and ritual systems, and to explore the divergent ways people in northwestern Malawi have developed patterns of integration or opposition between them. A structuralist framework developed by Marshall Sahlins, one steeped in historical process, suggests one set of analytic tools for doing this.

**Structures of Conjunction and Disjunction**

In his 1985 book *Islands of History*, among other writings, Marshall Sahlins describes what he terms the “structures of conjuncture” that characterized the meeting and communication between members of two very different cultural systems. In the process, he provides a useful model for analyzing patterns of correspondence between cultural systems, and for considering the way such correspondences become utilized by individuals and groups as they respond to the juxtaposition of different cultural systems and the novel circumstances of life they engender. Sahlins’ notion of conjuncture also implies its opposite, disjuncture. Social encounters among people from different cultural systems inevitably include a recognition of some contrast among those systems, in how they articulate the conditions of life, the forms of ideal and delinquent social intersubjectivity, and the symbolic and ritual systems that inform both. There are “structures of disjuncture” as well as “conjuncture.”

Sahlins’ language of structure suggests a relatively static definition of cultural forms, even as he was skilled in demonstrating how their forms emerged and played out in diachronic processes of engagement among social actors. Sahlins engages directly with historical process in his analysis, as it is through his analysis of the flow of history that he identifies a structural dimension to cultural forms, one embedded in customary patterns of social and political relationships.
In this thesis, I employ this notion of structural conjunction and disjunction to argue for a systems-level analysis of cultural encounter between missionaries and Africans co-resident in northern Malawi in the late nineteenth century. Shore’s foundational-schema theory provides a helpful framework for doing this, suggesting that human concept formation (the cognitive side of culture) is shaped by exposure to and experience of prevailing cultural schemas that are given institutional form. They become cultural “systems” or “structures” – not necessarily fully closed or static, but of some enduring consistency and organization. At the same time, Shore’s cultural-models theory also subverts the structural integrity of these “systems” by acknowledging the dynamic roles of history, personal biography, and the human schematic imagination in introducing and advocating cultural change. This dual framework offers a way to consider culture as a powerful factor in shaping human thought and experience, even as hegemonic, while also recognizing the contingency and complexity of cultural dynamics as they are played out in daily life.

Likewise, Shore’s description of the analogic character of much human cognition also suggests an ethnographic and theoretical approach to considering questions of religious change resultant from the encounter between Africans and missionaries. If Shore is correct about the way people use analogic schematization, among other cognitive techniques, to develop a sense of coherence and understanding about their experience of the world, then analogies will be evident in the language, symbols, customs, rituals, and other expressive mediums that northern Malawians have developed in the years since ancestral spiritualism was first challenged by mission Christianity. With the goal of identifying such structural analogies, my ethnographic analysis in Part Two of this dissertation focuses on identifying and describing a range of discursive, symbolic, and ritual analogies that are evident in the religious culture of the Embangweni area. While exploring the structural qualities of such analogies, my analysis also strives to maintain an emphasis on the dynamic and contingent side of analogy-formation as it is realized through highly
personalized processes of enactment, imagination, and schematization. The case studies I explore in Chapters Nine and Twelve are directed at this effort.

**Of Christianity and Colonialism, Concepts and Consciousness**

To the extent that early Livingstonia missionaries, and other missionaries since, have embedded cultural schemas within their church and mission institutions, those schemas may or may not have become foundational to the way social and religious life in northern Malawi is now organized. In one respect, this is one of the key questions framing this thesis. Has missionary culture, specifically their religious culture, generated substantial, even foundational, changes within the religious practices and assumptions of the residents of northwestern Malawi? If so, what changes, and how have they been accomplished? Framed in ideological and theological terms, the question becomes whether and how new symbols, concepts, and meanings have been integrated into people’s religious worldviews and cosmologies. Framed in practical terms, it is a question of whether and how new forms of ritual, custom, music, dance, and other participatory institutions have become part of religious life in the region. Still further, framed in cognitive terms, the question becomes whether and how processes of categorical and analogic schematization have been employed to redefine people’s conceptual orientation towards both religious cosmologies. In each of these framings, the central question remains the same: How has the religious culture of northwestern Malawi changed in the years since missionization began as local residents responded and adapted themselves to the missionary presence and message?

In recent years, this question has been re-framed by others to include a direct concern with power relationships among different cultural actors. In particular, attention has been directed at defining whether and how Western missionaries were agents of hegemony, successful in establishing their assumptions and practices as the predominant normative framework for
organizing both personal and collective lives. This concern with the power dynamics of the missionary-vernacular encounter has led scholars to focus their attention on the missionaries themselves as agents, alongside indigenous and vernacular agents, in an effort to define the power relationships among them and their effect on the religious cultures that emerged from that encounter. In the process, identifying, defining, and describing hegemony in global social history has become a central issue in ongoing debates about the forms, functions, and legacies of Christian missions in the non-Western world.

Arguably the most influential recent writings about the hegemonic intent and impact of Christian missionary activity in the non-Western world are those of Jean and John Comaroff. In two volumes so far (1991, 1997), they describe and deconstruct the work of two Nonconformist evangelical missions, the London Missionary Society (LMS) and the Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society (WMMS), which began sustained mission work among Tswana peoples in southern Africa in 1816 and 1822 respectively.

In *Of Revelation and Revolution: Volume One* (1991), the Comaroffs describe the LMS and WMMS missionary projects as efforts to transform the everyday practical worlds of the local Africans among whom they worked, and in the process, to change their culture and consciousness. Reminding the reader “that the primary processes involved in the production of the everyday world are inseparably material and meaningful” (p.8), they describe the encounter between missionaries and the Southern Tswana as “a long conversation”, one that shaped the past and present of the Southern Tswana, and which involved “the colonization of their consciousness and their consciousness of colonization” (p.4). Of the colonizing side of the conversation, they write of the missionaries that their
prime object was to engage the Africans in a web of symbolic and material transactions that would bind them ever more securely to the colonizing culture. Only that way would the savage finally be drawn into the purview of a global, rationalized civilization.\textsuperscript{71}

The Comaroffs leave little doubt how they judge the missionaries as agents, characterizing their missionary work as an “evangelical onslaught” against the Tswana (p.11), and describing them as “the most active cultural agents of empire” (p.6). They write:

The object was to lay the ground for a new moral economy based on the clear separation of church and state, of sacred authority and secular power – to establish, in short, a state of colonialism in anticipation of the colonial state.\textsuperscript{72}

They describe a missionary attempt to promote both sacred and secular facets of the European civilizing mission, a colonization justified and accompanied by Divine mandate. By their account, the forms of colonization inhere

less in political overrule than in seizing and transforming “others” by the very act of conceptualizing, inscribing, and interacting with them on terms not of their choosing; in making them into pliant objects and silenced subjects of our scripts and scenarios; in assuming the capacity to “represent” them, the active verb itself conflating politics and poetics.\textsuperscript{73}

As these citations suggest, the Comaroffs attribute a highly self-conscious role to the missionaries and their supporters as to the consequences of their evangelical project, implying that they understood their work was laying the groundwork for the even larger scale colonial project. This is an account of an informed and directed missionary effort to incorporate local Africans into the

\textsuperscript{71} Of Revelation and Revolution, p.310. The Comaroffs use the term “savage” here only in critical mimicry of a generalized missionary voice.
\textsuperscript{72} Ibid., p.11.
\textsuperscript{73} Ibid., p.15.
symbolic and material forms of modern European culture, and in the process, to subject them to its social, political, economic, and ideological organizational forms.\textsuperscript{74}

The Comaroffs explore the dialectics of the missionary-Tswana colonial encounter through the analytic categories of culture, hegemony, and ideology, and characterize each as pointing to a relationship between consciousness and social power.\textsuperscript{75} They articulate a model of mind as a “chain of consciousness”, one stretching from the conscious and seen to the unconscious and unseen, with a domain of partial recognition and inchoate awareness between them. Regarding the unconscious and conscious poles of mind, they write:

It hardly needs pointing out that the one extreme corresponds to the hegemonic pole of culture, the other to the ideological. And just as hegemonies and ideologies shift over time and space, so the contents of consciousness are not fixed. On the one hand, the submerged, the unseen, the unrecognized may under certain conditions be called to awareness; on the other, things once perceived and explicitly marked may slip below the level of discourse into the unremarked recesses of the collective unconscious. The latter is emphatically not some form of group mind. It is the implicit structure of shared meaning that human beings absorb as they learn to be members of particular social worlds.\textsuperscript{76}

They bridge their definition of “the collective unconscious” to their judgments as to the hegemonic and ideological effects of the Evangelical missionary project among the Tswana. They write:

the making of hegemony involves the assertion of control over various modes of symbolic production: over such things as educational and ritual processes, patterns of socialization, political and legal procedures, canons of style and self-representation, public communication, health and bodily discipline, and so on.\textsuperscript{77}

\textsuperscript{74} The Comaroffs note the irony that, though coming out of the nonconformist tradition, LMS and WMMS missionaries sought to enforce conformity to the forms and functions of mainstream Christian European society.
\textsuperscript{75} Ibid., pp.20-24.
\textsuperscript{76} Ibid., p.29, original emphasis.
\textsuperscript{77} Ibid., p.25.
From the start of their account, the Comaroffs describe how missionary hegemony was challenged by Tswana, even as elements of it became manifest in local Tswana practices of symbolic and material production. The Tswana recognized the missionaries as bearers of new forms of potency and possibility, and sought to harness those forms for their own interests and ends. They also contested many of the cultural and material forms of the emerging colonial system. This power of resistance by Tswana points to a more general point the Comaroffs make, that the hegemonic is inevitably never complete, but rather unstable and changing, and often subject to local awareness and articulation. Nevertheless, by their account, the missionary introduction of new modes of everyday symbolic and material production did generate novel hegemonies among the Tswana, ones which endure through to the present. In Volume II, the Comaroffs turn to detailing the specific institutional forms by which the missionaries sought to inculcate their hegemonic forms among the Tswana.

The scope and depth of the Comaroff’s analysis in Of Revelation and Revolution is substantial, and theirs is a seminal contribution to the ongoing scholarly conversation about Christian missionization in Africa, and in the rest of the world. In describing the assumptions that underlay Nonconformist missionization in southern Africa, and the practical and symbolic patterns by which missionary culture and society was institutionalized among the Tswana, they succeed in locating the missionaries as agents of colonialism, who largely shared the guiding colonial assumptions that theirs was a superior culture and more civilized society, whether defined in terms of dress, etiquette, marriage practices, medicine, law, or definitions of God. Along with Jean Comaroff’s earlier book, Body of Power, Spirit of Resistance, they also demonstrate patterns of response and resistance among the Tswana, and thereby affirm the responsive power of the Tswana’s own cultural traditions. Nevertheless, their conclusions affirm that the missionaries were
successful agents of hegemony, having dramatically transformed the Tswana way of life, and succeeded in establishing a range of modern Western institutional forms.

**Durable Schemas and Challenging Hegemonies**

This claim that new hegemonies have been established among the Tswana is akin, I would argue, to suggesting that new foundational schemas have been both instituted and cognized within their cultural population. Shore himself suggests this analytic linkage between foundational schemas and hegemony.\(^78\) Except for their image-graphic of a scale of consciousness between the seen and unseen, the Comaroffs do not, however, focus their account on cognition and concept formation. Their focus is on the practical, material, and symbolic imposition of modern Western forms on Tswana worlds of experience; on the pervasiveness of that imposition and on its disciplinary and coercive forms. They seek to explain the social, political, and economic means through which colonial evangelists (to use Beidelman’s phrase\(^79\)) created new hegemonies of consciousness. In not focusing on the conceptual and cognitive dimensions of cultural response, however, they do not provide a means of addressing the ideological or cosmological facets of the African-missionary encounter, nor of judging the presumed hegemonic effect of missionization within the consciousness and imaginations of Tswana.\(^80\) Their claim, then, that there has been a “colonization of consciousness” among the Tswana seems to rest on an assumption that the transformation of their material, practical, and symbolic worlds implies a transformation of consciousness. While I would agree with them that consciousness is intimately tied to people’s

---

\(^78\) See Shore, *Culture in Mind*, pp. 46-50.

\(^79\) See Beidelman, *Colonial Evangelism*.

\(^80\) I should note here that my usage of the term “hegemonic” implies a two-sided process, involving factors of intent and agency on both sides of a cultural, social, and political encounter. While missionaries may have wielded hegemonic intents within their institutional work, their mission cannot be judged effectively hegemonic unless it resulted in a fundamental reorientation of thinking and assumption among the missionized.
material, practical, and symbolic world’s of experience, I would argue that accounting for a
transformation of consciousness requires further forms of analysis, including those that engage
with people’s own accounts of their thinking, belief, knowledge, and perspective. While the kinds
of statements and descriptions invoked by an anthropologist through interviews and conversations
do not provide a conclusive link to the full depth and scope of a person’s consciousness, they do
provide an indication of the kinds of models, scripts, schemas, philosophies, theologies, and other
explanatory frameworks that people employ to model an understanding of the world.

Likewise, I would argue that the multiplexity of cultural consciousness requires a more
specific inquiry into the varied experiential domains of consciousness – at varying levels of
inchoateness or awareness, yes, but also as choreographed cognitively among varying source
locations for cultural knowledge and belief. In the case of Embangweni’s Christian residents (and
they are Christian, which affirms the Comaroff’s overall point), their religious knowledge and
awareness find roots in two historically distinct cosmological systems, even while their embodied
experience of those systems has in many respects been unitary (in one enduring body).

My agenda in this thesis, then, parallels many facets of that pursued by the Comaroff’s in
their volumes. In particular, I too am concerned to address the potentially hegemonic effects of
Western missionary work in southern Africa. My scope of inquiry, however, is not as broad as
theirs, as I have chosen to focus my inquiry on the theological and cosmological facets of people’s
lives, and to consider the specifically religious domain of people’s lives as they confront
circumstances of affliction and personal crisis. This more limited scope of study does not allow for
broad conclusions about the overall transformation of consciousness among the Tumbuka, Ngoni,
and other residents of the Embangweni area since the era missionization began over a century ago.
But it does allow me to address the transformation of religious consciousness among the residents
of the region, and to query as to whether the missionary agenda to radically change local patterns of religious thought and assumption was successful.

To do this I return to the cultural models framework outlined by Shore in *Culture in Mind*, and more specifically to his assertion that cultural systems are to some extent organized by foundational schemas -- conceptual and cognitive frameworks that provide an organizing logic to people’s lives and reasoning. This framework begs the question: Did the missionaries of the Livingstonia Mission succeed in establishing new foundational schemas within the religious lives of the Tumbuka, Ngoni, and other residents of northwestern Malawi? If so, what became of the foundational schemas that organized pre-Mission religious life in the region?

As suggested in my Introduction, and described in detail in Chapter Two, the Livingstonia missionaries inherited a Western Christian theological and philosophical tradition that modeled the individual in dualist terms, as individual bearers of both body and soul. In this model, body and soul were framed as qualitatively separate and different. As per Descarte’s famous phrase, the intellect was the seat of the soul, and it was within intellect that a person discovers their sense both of self and salvation. The body was something apart from this, a material substrate that provided the means of subsistence, and potentially worse, was a source of temptation and corruption. This compartmentalization of body from soul reached its fullest articulation in the separation established between the body as an organic, biological form, and the soul as the seat of spiritual and intellectual activity, subject to the intervening agencies and influences of both God and devil. In this, what I will call a foundational schema of post-Enlightenment Western Protestantism, diseases and healing were understood principally as biological events, while sin and salvation were framed as spiritual events pertaining to the status of the human soul/psyche. Did this dualist foundational schema become the predominant ontological schema among the residents of northwestern Malawi in the years after the Livingstonia Mission began its work there? The historical and ethnographic
chapters that follow seek to address these questions, and in so doing, to address both questions of power and hegemony, as well as those of conversion and syncretism.
CHAPTER TWO

Historical Theologies of Bodily Resurrection and the Emergence of a Dualist Paradigm in Modern Western Culture

Introduction

In the effort to account for patterns of religious conversion and syncretism resultant from the encounter between Western missionaries and the Tumbuka, Ngoni, and other African residents of northwestern Malawi, it is first necessary to provide some description of the religious schemas that characterized the cultural and cosmological outlooks of members of both sides of the encounter. In the next chapter, I review what is known and conjectured about the pre-Mission religious culture of the Tumbuka and Ngoni, based on limited textual accounts and comparative data from neighboring Bantu peoples. In this chapter, I review broad trends in the emergence of the Western Christian theological tradition, in particular its framing of the relationship between body and soul. To do so, I review two contemporary scholar’s writings about the emergence of a predominant theology of bodily resurrection within Western Christianity, and about the way body and soul have come to be defined within that theological framework. While the theme of bodily resurrection was neither the overall focus of my field research, it is a highly relevant topic for my broader consideration of the cultural modeling of body as related to spirit and soul. To that effect, a closer look at the Christian theology of bodily resurrection is warranted. I use it as a window into a core (de)ontological debate about the nature of body and its relationship to soul.

I also summarize the Cartesian philosophical system that emerged in the seventeenth century, specifically its articulation of the human soul with the psyche and intellectual power. Specifically, my goal is to identify the emergence of a dualist paradigm within the modern Western Christian tradition, in order to explore in later chapters whether and how this foundational Western dualism has been integrated into the religious cosmologies of northwestern Malawians.
At the end of the chapter, I also briefly describe the emergence of a robust scientific paradigm within post-Renaissance Europe, and relate it to the newly emergent theological and philosophical dualism of post-Aquinas, post-Descartes European religion and culture. Just as trends within Christian theology and philosophy led to increasing separation of soul from body, so too the emergent biomedical tradition constructed the body as an organic entity that can be examined and worked on apart from the spiritual domain. But first, a look at Christian theology and philosophy.

**A Christian Creed of Death and Resurrection**

The early Scottish Presbyterian missionaries of the Livingstonia Mission subscribed to The Apostle’s creed, which reads:

I believe in God, the Father Almighty,
the Creator of heaven and earth,
and in Jesus Christ, His only Son, our Lord:
Who was conceived of the Holy Spirit,
born of the Virgin Mary,
suffered under Pontius Pilate,
was crucified, died, and was buried.
He descended into hell.
The third day He arose again from the dead.
He ascended into heaven
and sits at the right hand of God the Father Almighty,
whence He shall come to judge the living and the dead.
I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy catholic church,
the communion of saints,
the forgiveness of sins,
the resurrection of the body,
and life everlasting.
Amen.

Several things are to be noted from this creed. It affirms the Divine Trinity, in which the Son is conceived by the Spirit of His Father, and all are co-present as Divine attributes. In the person of
the Son, Jesus Christ, God is said to have participated in a fleshly existence of man. Conceived by the Spirit and born of a virgin, Jesus shared with other living things the experience of both bodily suffering and death. Yet following burial and a descent into hell, he transcended death through a resurrection of that body and its ascension into heaven. His embodied form now sits co-present with His Father in heaven, and shall return to earth to judge both the living and dead. The creed affirms that living believers should participate in an ethos of forgiveness within and through the community of the church. For the bodily dead, it affirms the eventual resurrection of their bodies, which will join their spirits in a life that is everlasting. In this framework, the spirits of the Christian dead have already joined the communion of saints in heaven, but their bodies remain here on earth until the final judgment of Christ’s return. Upon that return, their bodies, and those of the living, will at last be subjected to the miracle of physical resurrection and to an eternal life in heaven with God.

Metaphors of decay and fertility within an emergent Christian theology of bodily resurrection

As declared within the Apostle’s Creed, the assertion of a bodily resurrection goes to the core of Christian doctrine, and is grounded in the assumed authority of the Bible on the matter. In a fascinating book on the contested development of various Christian theologies of bodily resurrection, Caroline Walker Bynum (1995) describes how a predominant pattern of interpretation emerged within the Christian theological tradition. Her text is rich in describing the range of

---


variation among individual writers from a given Christian era, and in demonstrating the often vague or disjointed explanations or analogies found within the writings of individual authors. My summary will not do justice to the nuances of her argument and analysis. Instead, I will outline broad trends in her analytic narrative that describe an emergent Christian theology of the body. In the process, I will argue, Bynum provides a vivid account of what emerged as an enduring central orthodoxy of Christianity, what I call a Christian foundational schema. This was a schema that initially asserted a fundamental fusion of body and soul as dimensions of personhood and being, but which later, particularly through the transformative era of the Reformation and Renaissance, came to articulate an increasingly intellectualized separation of soul from body, emphasizing the mind as the seat of the soul, and defining mind as qualitatively different from body. In the process, she describes how theologians wrestled in their attempts to understand and describe the physics of the body, and to answer the question of how fundamental body is to soul. Bynum begins her account with a summary of the apostle Paul’s description of bodily resurrection in the fifteenth chapter of Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians. Paul writes:

But, you may ask, how are the dead raised? In what kind of body? How foolish! The seed you sow does not come to life unless it has first died; and what you sow does not come to life unless it has first died; and what you sow is not the body that shall be, but a naked grain, perhaps of wheat, or of some other kind; and God clothes it with the body of his choice, each seed with its own particular body. All flesh is not the same flesh: there is flesh of men, flesh of beasts, of birds, and of fishes – all are different. There are heavenly bodies and earthly bodies; and the splendour of the heavenly bodies is one thing, the splendour of the earthly, another. The sun has a splendour of its own, the moon another splendour, and the stars another, for star differs from star in brightness. So it is with the resurrection of the dead. What is sown on the earth as a perishable thing is raised imperishable. Sown in humiliation; it is raised in glory; sown in weakness, it is raised in power; sown as an animal body, it is raised as a spiritual body. \[83\]

Some mid third-century writers, led by the early third-century theologian Origen of Alexandria (ca. 185-254), embraced this Pauline metaphor of the resurrection of the body as a sprouting seed, a model of bodily resurrection as fertility. Origen argued that even as the body changes through life, it remains the same body in form. His framework argued for the existence of an essential body ‘eidos’ that organizes the bodily form throughout life. Origen likened the body to a river, which at every moment is both the same river, and through the flow of its water, a different one. He writes:

Because each body is held together by [virtue of] a nature that assimilates into itself from without certain things for nourishment and, corresponding to the things added, excretes other things…, the material substratum is never the same. For this reason, river is not a bad name for the body since, strictly speaking, the initial substratum in our bodies is perhaps not the same for even two days. Yet the real Paul or Peter, so to speak, is always the same – [and] not merely in [the] soul, whose substance neither flows through us nor has anything ever added [to it] – even if the nature of the body is in a state of flux, because the form (eidos) characterizing the body is the same, just as the features constituting the corporeal quality of Peter and Paul remain the same. According to this quality, not only scars from childhood remain on the bodies but also certain other peculiarities, [like] sin blemishes and similar things.

This was a model of the body transformed through resurrection into a recognizable but new form. Origen also employed the Pauline metaphor of the seed to argue that change will accompany resurrection (people will bear their scars) even as, like a seed that contains the form of a sprouting plant within it, an underlying body eidos will endure (for example, people will resurrect without definitions of sex or age).

---

84 Bynum characterizes Origen’s framework as a combination of Platonic form and Stoic process. It is interesting to note that Origen’s notion of a consistent body eidos that endures through changes of bodily form – an “initial substratum in our bodies” – anticipates the modern scientific understanding of DNA as a genetic code that guides phenotypic development.

85 Origen, Fragment on Psalm 1.5, in Methodius, De resurrectione, bk. I, chaps. 22-23, in Methodius, ed. Nathaneal. (See p.64 in Bynum).
Origen’s metaphor of the body as river, one that springs into a new form through the resurrection, did not, however, come to dominate Christian theological writing during the third century. Neither did Paul’s metaphor of bodily resurrection as the growth of a new sheaf of wheat from what was once a seed. This model of physical transformation (from something small, round, and hard into something large, long, and fibrous) seemed too radical an alteration of form. Instead, most third-century theologians, like Tertullian of Carthage (ca. 160-220), asked how each person could be that same person, in both personality and rank, in the afterlife, if not through some replication of their embodied form, a form that includes eyes, heads, arms, legs, organs, and other body parts. In the process, these writers of the Patristic era articulated a notion of body that made it fundamental to the continuity of personal identity into the afterlife. This was a more organic understanding of how personhood and being are embodied, and it led to a fascination with trying to understand how the body, subject to decomposition at death, would transition into heavenly form after the final judgment.

This concern with the composition and recomposition of the material body was driven, Bynum argues, by a fixation on the reality of bodily decay, during life, but even more so after death. This elementary observation of the physicality of death and its aftermath presented a conundrum. If the material body dissipates into the earth, how shall it be reconstituted in its journey to heaven? How could a body that becomes worms, then turns to dust, be raised into heaven? Many of the metaphors employed to answer these questions suggested a process of reassembly: broken shards of a pot mended back into its original form; the stones of the temple gathered and rebuilt. These metaphors argued that the body, down to the tiniest particle, would be reconstituted into its living form through the resurrection. Though consistent in attributing a transformation from bodily corruptibility to incorruptibility through the resurrection, this was a
model of an unchanging bodily substance, of a continuity of material parts reassembled and
reforged.

Like Tertullian, the early fifth century theologian Augustine of Hippo (354-430)
emphasized processes of bodily decay among the living, and bodily reintegration through the
process of resurrection. Augustine wrote of bodily decay as inherent to the human condition
because of the original sin of Adam and Eve in the garden, and described resurrection as an escape
from that condition. As for the form of the resurrected body relative to that of the living person,
Augustine affirmed its material continuity from life to everlasting life through the resurrection
process, a return to the integrity and wholeness of the same living body.

Bynum notes a consistent concern by early Christian writers, including Augustine, to
address the matter of human cannibalism, as it presented a fundamental problem for understanding
the essential composition of the human body. Could the bodily essence of one person be absorbed
into the essence of another through consumption and digestion? The prospect posed a fundamental
challenge to any notion of fundamental identity through bodily integrity, upon which their hopes
for resurrection rested. As such, their general answer was no, even as they wrestled to give
substantial account of what exactly happens during digestion, and the related question of what
accounts for the bodily growth and maturation of each person.

Regarding the consumption of flesh and blood, Bynum observes that third century
Christians often participated in the Eucharist at burials. By her account, this was an act of
consuming the unconsumable, a partaking in the unchanging eternity of Christ through the drinking
of his blood and eating of his flesh. Through this ritual action, the fabric of His material essence,
blood and flesh, could feed the same fabric in the living body of each Christian, and with it, the
prospect of their salvation and resurrection. Through consumption, the body could be made

86 Bynum, p. 96.
partially sacred and, in the process, everlasting through this incorporation of an eternal Divine spirit.

This concern with the possibility of sanctification while here on earth was further articulated in theological writings about the righteous asceticism of the saints and martyrs while living, and the sacred power of their relic remains after death. Though they differed in their modeling of bodily resurrection, Gregory of Nyssa (ca. 330-395) and Jerome (348-420) both argued that the transcendence of decay can begin in this life. Writing of his deceased sister Macrina, Gregory argued that the body of an ascetic, while still living, begins to transcend the human need for nutrition and impetus for procreation, and as such begins to resemble the incorrupt bodies of the resurrected. This was a model of relics as sites of “immortality and grace,” places where miracles of healing occur, and where the spiritual power of a saint while living endures after death through the presence of all or part of their bodily remains. Framed in more modest terms by Jerome, relic sites were noble places where the living come to honor virtuous martyrs and saints, and commit themselves to embodying that virtue in their own lives. Later writers, including Augustine, were influenced by accounts of miracles at relic sites. For them, relics, though only partial physical remains, were yet each full embodiments of the sacred saints and martyrs who were their bearers through life. In a step of metonymic logic, an arm was equivalent to the full embodiment of the saint, and carried within it the undiminishing sanctity of that saint now in heaven.

The affirmation of the sacred power of body fragments as relics was consistent with the notion that body parts would be reconstituted through resurrection. Both asserted that each body

---

87 Regarding resurrection, Gregory affirmed an Origenist sense of the body as changing and changed between earth and heaven, a metaphor of a sprouting seed, while Jerome emphasized the unchanged reassembly of both flesh (caro) and body (corpus). See Bynum, pp.81-90.

part carried something essential to the person and personality of the living body. In the case of resurrection, that common affiliation between body parts (later language would describe it as desire) would bring them together as a whole unit again. In the case of the veneration of relics, body parts maintained the spirit of the whole body as it was embodied through the conviction and life practices of saints and martyrs.89

As Bynum summarizes, the practices of the relic cults, as well as those of asceticism and the Eucharist, all pointed to an emergent theology of partial sanctification among the living devout, one tied to a theology of the resurrection. She writes:

The dominant images would be metaphors of reassembling or hardening. Such images implied that decay was not really decay; parts were merely dispersed; even if swallowed, digested, and made into alien flesh, excreted, or rotted, they did not finally become anything else. Increasingly, the hope of Christians lay in the promise that scattered bones and dust, marked in some way for their own bodies, would be reunited. It also lay in the conviction that every part, like every morsel of Christ’s body eaten at the altar, was a whole. If a martyr was present in very minute bit of his dust, if he cured the sick and raised the dead, then both decay and partition could be overcome. The final change to stasis would come only at the end of time, but the jewellike hardness of the relic (whether it was to the eye of the beholder a part or a whole) could move the tired bodies of ordinary believers a little way toward the resurrection while still on earth.90

This was an increasingly dynamic model of the body, as idealized in the partial transcendence of bodily need, function, and decay. As Bynum writes of Jerome, his was a model of dead bodies that were less dead (the Saints) and living bodies that were less living (ascetics).91 Nevertheless, a more fundamentally static model of the body continued to underlie this increasing dynamism, one that asserted that the body is inexorably tied to its organic material substratum, and that the body is

89 Bynum notes that it became common practice for the bodies of Christian ascetics and church leaders to be disassembled after death and their body parts distributed for veneration. Remarkable (and gruesome) as this practice may seem today, such was the confidence in the body’s eventual reconstitution and the wholeness of each body part. (See Bynum, p.213.)
90 Bynum, pp.107-08.
91 Ibid., p.94.
a core facet of identity and being. By the twelfth century, Bynum argues, Christian scholars -- building off of the early writings of Christian scholars in the Patristic era -- had arrived at some degree of consensus on six points affirming this static construction of the human body and its relation to soul and salvation:\footnote{Ibid., pp.135-37.}

- That body is necessary for personhood – a self is not a soul using a body but a psychosomatic entity, to which body is integral. The challenge here was to explain why body is essential to being.
- The body is flesh. It rises with all its matter and members.
- The body is fundamental to identity. A resurrected body must be the same body that once lived in order for an assured continuity of identity.
- Resurrection is reassemblage. Through the resurrection, a person’s body parts return to the same body structure of their life. In the process, resurrection embodies a continuity of identity.
- Organic processes of consumption and decay were mysterious and threatening. Through reassemblage, the resurrected body transcended these processes, victorious not only over fragmentation, but over biological change itself.
- The resurrected body was identical in both substance and status to that of its living predecessor. Gender and hierarchy, as well as the scars and glory of individual life experiences, would all be manifest in the resurrected body.

This conventional twelfth century model of resurrected body was fundamentally materialist and static in its articulation. While it did acknowledge the dynamic potentials of saintly devotion during life, a transformative process of sanctification, it continued to affirm the essential continuity of the physical body into heavenly form. Though there were exceptions, the Pauline seed metaphor was generally rejected in favor of metaphors of the hardening and beauty of saintly bodies (in defiance of their fleshiness) and, after death, the victorious reassembly of bodies through the resurrection.

\textbf{Developments in thirteenth and fourteenth century theology: soul’s desire for the resurrected body}
Throughout the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, there emerged an increasing concern with soul in scholarly writings about the resurrection. Specifically, theologians addressed the relationship of soul to body, and began to describe, to use Bynum’s term, a body-soul nexus. In the process, she notes, they embraced new metaphors of the body, ones pointing to the body as a perduing structure. Body was compared to a fire that endures even as it consumes the logs that feed it, or a city that endures even as it is populated by generation after generation. Body was also compared to a waterskin that maintains its form even as old water is replaced by new volumes. These are analogies of the body reminiscent of Origen’s metaphor of the body as a river. Through these analogies and the theologizing that surrounded them, there emerged a notion of each soul desiring its body, of soul requiring embodiment in order to be fulfilled.

Influenced by the writings of Aristotle, Thomas Aquinas (ca. 1225-74), through the pen of his pupil Reginald of Piperno, reinterpreted Paul’s writings in 1 Corinthians to argue that his seed metaphor – bodily resurrection as the sprouting of new growth from a seed – suggested a radical, supernatural transformation from one type of form to another, not a naturally occurring evolution of form. In the process he argued that resurrection is not a natural process in which species reproduces species through the changeover from individual species member to the next. Instead, resurrection entails the return of the identical individual body, though now risen with new qualities of glory. Aquinas described verses 42-44 in the fifteenth chapter of 1 Corinthians as referring to the glorified qualities of the individual risen body -- claritas, agilitas, subtilitas, and impassibilitas – given to the body as dotes (dowries or gifts) from the abundance of soul. As such, there is a

---

93 "So it is with the resurrection of the dead. What is sown in the earth as a perishable thing is raised imperishable. Sown in humiliation, it is raised in glory; sown in weakness, it is raised in power; sown as an animal body, it is raised as a spiritual body. If there is such a thing as an animal body, there is also a spiritual body.” (1 Corinthians 15: 42-44, The New English Bible)
qualitative contrast between the earthly body and the heavenly body, even as it is the same body that rises.

In this view, the individual soul gives structure to the individual body, and it is that individual structure of the body – not the actual material substance – that is resurrected into reunion with soul. This is reminiscent of Origen’s notion of an underlying body *eidos*, but differs in that Aquinas attributes that *eidos* to soul, not body. This is a supernatural, not natural, process, through which identity is maintained. For this reason, Aquinas and other thirteenth century writers rejected an earlier accepted analogy for resurrection, a reforged statue, because a statue materially embodies no soul, and it is soul that organizes body. Aquinas wrote:

> Whatever appears in the parts of the body is all contained originally and, in a way, implicitly in the soul … so neither could man be perfect unless the whole that is contained enfolded in the soul be outwardly unfolded in the body.\(^\text{94}\)

In this view, soul expresses itself most perfectly through body. A soul without a body is not a person, and because of this, each soul desires a reunion with its body.\(^\text{95}\) This is part of the promise of resurrection – a fulfillment of self that is both fundamentally embodied and soulful. Bynum summarizes the implications of this perspective.

A full spelling out of the consequences of such a position – known technically as formal identity (that is, the idea that a thing’s form or “whatness” accounts for its being the same thing) – obviates the materialist questions of risen fingernails and foreskins popular since Tertullian. If the nature of the body is carried by soul and can be expressed in any matter that soul activates (matter being pure potency), then one cannot hold that a person’s body

\(^94\) Cited in Bynum (pp.242-43) from Aquinas’ *Supplementum* to the *Summa theologica* [or *theologiae*], in *Sancti Thomae Aquinatis doctoris angelici opera omnia iussu impensaque Leonis XIII p.m. edita*, vol. 12 (Rome: S. C. de Propaganda Fide, 1906); translated by Fathers of the Dominican Province, *Thomas Aquinas: Summa theologica*, vol. 3 (New York: Benzinger, 1948).

\(^95\) Bynum suggests that thirteenth century writers were more ambivalent about attributing to body an essential desire for soul. Bonaventure (1221-74) wrote of the soul’s inclination for the body, and the body’s orientation to soul, but wavered in articulating how much the body desires soul. Part of this ambivalence came from his recognition that desire is both positive and negative. While body may yearn for soul as one person loves another, a positive emotion, the body’s desire for soul also acts as an impediment to soul in its quest for glory.
or matter waits to be reassembled after death. Once the \textit{unica forma} has departed, the person’s body or matter will not exist at all… Therefore, when the human being rises the body that is matter to its form will by definition be \textit{its} body.\footnote{Bynum, p.259.}

For Aquinas and others, the human soul was incomplete without body, and individuality and personhood were found in the relation between body and soul. Bynum writes:

> The blueprint of all we are – our shape and size, our gender and intellectual capacity, our status and merit – may be carried in soul, but it is realized in body. Without bodily expression, there is no human being (\textit{homo}), no person, no self. Aquinas can be read both as eclipsing and as guaranteeing the ontological significance of body. Exactly through this contradiction, Aquinas solved – as Origen had done centuries before – the problem of identity: resurrection of body was necessary because soul (form) must inform something, and possible because a substantial soul accounts for identity through its subsistence. Moreover, by packing body into soul – that is, into a form that defined and stabilized, rather than a seminal reason that unfolded – Aquinas retained the particularity of self without threat to heavenly hierarchy and differentiated awards.\footnote{Ibid., p.269-70. Throughout her account, Bynum notes how Christian writers throughout the period of her study, from the third to the fourteenth centuries, asserted the existence of hierarchy in heaven, one that would reflect the gendered, ecclesiastical, and other hierarchies institutionalized in society. Dante, of course, brilliantly mirrored this heavenly hierarchy with his tale of a descent through the levels of hell.}

This notion of soul giving formal identity to body had become the prevalent model of body-soul relations in Christian theology by the early fourteenth century, having endured throughout the debates about Visio Dei in the 1330’s.\footnote{After debate in the early 1330’s about the \textit{Visio Dei}, the beatific vision, it was determined in the Benedictus Deus (1336) that the soul could achieve a full and complete vision and communion with God even before the resurrection of the body. This would seem to suggest that Christian theologians had by this time embraced a Greek (Platonic) definition of being as soul, of soul as the full and complete guarantor of selfhood. In this view, the body becomes an ontological afterthought – a secondary characteristic that derives from the form and structure of soul, but which is not essential to personhood. Yet, in practice, Bynum argues, this separation of soul from body was not realized. Instead, members of both the clergy and laity sought to preserve and embalm bodies of the deceased, to preserve their shape and identity. Saintly bodies were partitioned after death and their parts – each part embodying the full sanctity of the saintly person – were distributed for veneration; corpses were opened for inspection in efforts to locate the special marks of sanctity that could be found in holy persons; the cadavers of criminals and heretics were dismembered to}
receives its form from soul. Because of this, personal identity will endure into the afterlife and through the resurrection, as each person’s soul once again gives form to its paired body.

As Bynum notes, the paradigm of bodily resurrection that emerges in Western Christianity by the fourteenth century is dramatically different from that of the early Patristic Christian church. Specifically, the location of personal identity – just who is it that is resurrected? – shifts. No longer is it the body that establishes identity, but rather, it is the enduring soul that gives form, breath, and personality to the transient body. This emphasis on soul would continue to grow throughout the Reformation, Renaissance, and Enlightenment eras that followed.

Body/Soul Hierarchies and the Emergence of a Dualist Paradigm

In her 1993 doctoral study arguing for a renewed Christian theology of the body, Colleen Griffith argues that the body has been under-theorized within modern Christian theology, despite the fact that Christianity is grounded in accounts of the creation, incarnation, and resurrection of the body. She suggests that this dismissal of body is in part related to the emphasis on humans as made in the image of God – with an attendant emphasis on cognition, will, and morality as distinctively human qualities. This effort to distinguish humans from the rest of the animal (and natural) world has resulted in a framework that separated people from their bodies. She also argues that an entrenched patriarchy within Christianity (which associated bodiliness with femininity and disparaged both) and a reliance on the authority of theological tradition has also served to stifle creative thinking about human embodiment as a facet of Christian experience.

signify their political or demonic treachery. The body remained integral to personhood.


100 See Genesis 1:26-27.
By contrast, early Christian theologians did wrestle with the body as a facet of human experience and Christian life, and Griffith suggests that much of their writing is characterized by ambiguity and inconsistency. Nevertheless, as Bynum described, a fairly conventional theology of the body did emerge within Christianity, one that was profoundly shaped by the early fifth century writings of Augustine and later thirteenth century writings of Thomas Aquinas. By Griffith’s account, Augustine articulated a fundamental distrust of the body as a locus of destructive lustfulness that, like its inherent propensity towards decay, is traceable to the Fall. Though he argues that body is inherent to human nature, and coexists in fundamental unity with soul, it is the lowest part of that nature, the site of forces and drives that are to be resisted and denied. By contrast, the soul is the highest and best part of humankind – that which provides vitality to the person and enables communication with God. Though Augustine insists that humans are composites of both body and soul, a unity of the two, it is soul that rules and moves body, not vice-versa.

Eight centuries later, Aquinas would echo this notion of body and soul as unified yet hierarchized. Adopting the Aristotelian notion of “soul” as the “substantial form” of “body,” Aquinas again affirmed a fundamental body-soul unity, arguing that the two are mutually dependent, like matter and form. This unity is most apparent in the human search for

---

In the resurrection, for Augustine, the body would become a spiritual body, incorruptible, and not slave to the bodily functions of sustenance, sexual desire, and regeneration.

Griffith (p.63) provides a useful summary of Aristotle’s view of the body-soul relationship: In his treatise On the Soul (De Anima), Aristotle (384-322 BC) presented a doctrine of soul in which soul and body stood correlative to each other in the relation of form to matter and constituted a single substance. Defining matter as “potentiality” and form as “realization or actuality”, Aristotle looked upon every existing entity as matter (hyle, materia) organized in accord with a determinate principle of structure, or form (eidos, forma). The determinate principle or structure of something was always peculiar to and dependent upon the particular kind of “stuff” that it was. For Aristotle, then, matter and form were conjoined, and the two coexisted in all things.
knowledge, where the soul depends on body’s senses for knowledge construction. As Aquinas writes:

…it belongs to the human soul to be united to a body because it is imperfect and exists potentially in the genus of intellectual substances, not having the fullness of knowledge in its own nature, but acquiring it from sensible things through the bodily senses…

Yet despite affirming this underlying unity of body and soul, Aquinas also drew a clear line between them. While body is an active participant in the knowing process, it is the soul that is the true seat of intellectual power. Intelligence and will belong to it alone, and it is through this rational soul that humanity carries within it a partial image of the Divine. As such, while body is fully infused with the form of soul, the soul is not fully enveloped by the material of body. Aquinas argued that the angels are higher and more perfect than humans because they require no body in order for them to have intelligence, will, and personality. Unlike the body, the immaterial soul and its intellectual powers will outlast death and become immortal.

Griffith suggests that it was Aquinas’ emphasis on hierarchy – an underlying differentiation, not unity, of body and soul – that became most influential within the subsequent Christian theological tradition. This hierarchy between body and soul was extended into the social sphere and served to perpetuate the long-standing ranking of women (associated with body) as below men (associated with rational soul) within Christian patriarchy. It also set the theological

104 For Aquinas, the human soul is the conduit of God’s grace because the soul (imperfectly) reflects Divine Being. In this understanding, soul is a core psychic principle that is the distinguishing mark of humanity as apart from the rest of the animal kingdom.
105 Aquinas subscribed to a cosmic framework that asserted a fixed order of creation and progressive degrees of perfection within that creation. He separated purely spiritual agencies, like angels, from material creatures, like plants and animals. As both spiritual and material creatures, humans are a composite form of higher and lower natures. As supposedly more “bodily” beings, women are of a lower nature than men. See Griffith, p.71-2.
106 Griffith argues that this hierarchical modeling of body-mind relations is both conceptually and morally deficient as a framework for contemporary life. She argues that it fails to fully consider
stage for a psychological theory of body and soul that would further separate the two, and lead to a
body/soul dualism that would profoundly shape the emergent religious and scientific traditions of
modern Western culture.

**Cartesian dualism and the further intellectualization of soul**

The seventeenth century Christian philosopher and scientist René Descartes (1596-1650)
provided the fullest and most influential articulation of a body/soul dualism, though he grounded
his rationale in the logic of mathematics rather than theological assumption and method.\(^{107}\) Like
his theologian predecessors, his understanding of soul also emerged in relation to the Greek notion
of *psuche*, and he associated the function and essence of soul with psychic and intellectual
processes. Descartes affirmed the value of both intuition and deduction as sources of knowledge,
and argued that neither the senses, nor conventional wisdom, nor dreams can be relied upon as
windows into truth. In particular, Descartes affirmed the intuition of self-awareness as the basis for
an indubitable ontology of self, as stated in his famous dictum known as the “Cogito” – “I think,
therefore I am.”\(^{108}\) For Descartes, mind was essential to identity and being in a way that body was
not. As Griffith suggests, his dictum affirms not only *that* he is, but also *what* he is. He is mind.
In the process, Descartes unhinged mind from body, and suggested that mind is something
essentially distinct from body. Pure intellect need not be embodied. He used the analogy of body

---

the dialectics of body-mind relations (as suggested by current psychophysiological theory and
research) and simplistically takes-for-granted the mind as a self-evident object of introspection. She
also argues that it serves to perpetuate systems of social (especially gendered) domination, and
inhibits a full celebration of human sexuality (because the body is “fallen”). It also facilitates an
attitude of arrogance among humans (supposedly “above” nature) in their relationship to the rest of
the material world, with resultant ecological devastation. These are all, I would agree with Griffith,
profound and valid critiques of the dualist model.

\(^{107}\) See Griffith, pp.104-5.

\(^{108}\) Griffith suggests it is better phrased as “I am thinking, therefore I exist.” As Griffith notes
(p.106), it first appeared in French in his *Discourse on Method* (1637) as “Je pense, donc je suis,”
and later in Latin in the *Principles of Philosophy* (1644) as “Cogito ergo sum.”
as machine, subject to being broken down into its composite parts, and contrasted it with the mind – the seat of knowledge and understanding – which he argued is indivisible and whole.\textsuperscript{109} As such, the mind is the human faculty that most clearly manifests soul, the essential location of personhood and being.

Though theologians before him had already associated the soul with intellectual power and facility, Descartes made even more explicit an assumption that mind was the locus of soul, and even more, that mind existed as soul beyond the body. In the process, he took further than his predecessors the notion of a separated body and soul. In the process, Descartes argued that personal identity comes from mind, not body. Mind, in his view, is personhood.

Descartes does not deny some fusion of body and soul in his proofs, and suggests that while true knowledge is of the mind alone, imagination is the product of the mind’s turn towards the body and its sensory experience. He even suggests a likely meeting ground for soul and body, suggesting that the human pineal gland may be the organic ground where they meet. But the goal of his argument is to assert the radical distinctiveness of mind, and like Augustine and Aquinas before him, to assert the essential ontological superiority of soul/psyche over body. Descartes’ seventeenth century glorification of mind over body came to profoundly shape the modern Western culture that emerged, including its Christian theological tradition, in particular the still emerging Protestant branch, a product of the previous century’s Reformation movement. By isolating mind/soul from body, Descartes provided a schema of individual ontology that correlated well with an increasing Protestant emphasis on the role of subjective faith in God (constructed in intellectual and emotional terms) as the ultimate ontological act.

\textsuperscript{109} As Griffith notes (pp.123-25), Descartes provides no compelling rationale for why mind is indivisible, other than that he understands it to be the complete mind that is subject to introspection. He asserts indivisibility even as he recognizes the existence of multiple mental functions (will, thought, emotion, etc.).
Protestantism and the Reformed Tradition

The Protestant Reformation was a movement of reform that emerged within the Christian church tradition between the fourteenth and seventeenth centuries. It accompanied dramatic changes in the politics of Europe, in which old connections between church and state were breaking down, and new nationalisms were emerging throughout the continent.\(^\text{110}\) It also accompanied dramatic cultural changes, as Renaissance movements in philosophy, science and technology, and the arts produced new ways of thinking and being in the world.\(^\text{111}\) Within theology, it represents what is arguably the most substantial alteration of theological emphasis and dictum within Christianity since Paul’s early organization of the teachings and message of Jesus of Nazareth into a rationalized theological system. By arguing that faith, not works, is the essential link to salvation, the fathers of the Reformation located the mindful soul, not the moving body, as the centerpiece of the Christian narrative about human life, death, and the possibility for eternal salvation.

The history of the Reformation is long and complex and space does not permit a detailed description of its development. It includes the early reform efforts of the Englishman John Wycliff (ca. 1330-84) and Bohemian John Hus (ca.1372-1415), who advocated a total rejection of the

\(^{110}\) These political trends were accompanied by increasing urbanization and regional economic centralization, a shift in political philosophy towards state functions of security and control, a transformation of military technologies through the incorporation of gunpowder, and the creation of standing armies for defense and war. The emergence of regional economies of print capitalism – which broke free from Latin but also homogenized dialectic vernaculars – also contributed to the emergence of national identities (see Anderson 1983).

\(^{111}\) The Renaissance, which also extended from the fourteenth to seventeenth centuries, was characterized by the emergence of humanism as a philosophy of being, one that looked to classical Greek and Roman sources for an understanding of history, and for constructing ideal models of society and personhood. In art, the invention of the linear perspective allowed for a new realism in three-dimensional portrayals of the world and people within it, while in geography and astronomy, the application of mathematical logic allowed for new mappings of the earth and galaxy.
existing Roman Catholic Church, which they deemed irreparably corrupt, and an alternative reliance on Biblical authority and right behavior in living the Christian life. The two epicenters of the Reformation movement, however, lie in the actions and writings of the German monk Martin Luther (1483-1546) and the Swiss reformer Huldrych Zwingli (1484-1531), each of whom initiated movements that eventually challenged the authority and validity of the Roman Catholic Church itself. Their reform movements would lead to a fundamental reorganization of institutional Christianity in Europe.

The Catholic Church of the sixteenth century taught that one was saved through a faith that was realized through certain prescribed good works, including pilgrimages to holy sites, specific prayers and devotions, and acts of social service. The Church awarded indulgences to those who performed such good works, and argued that these good works, certified by churchly indulgence, could serve to lessen the demands of penance during purgatory, the place where punishment for sins could be worked off after death. Eventually, in need of money to finance a variety of projects, the Church began to sell indulgences to those who could afford to pay.

Martin Luther specifically attacked this practice in his writings. In Luther’s view, indulgences corrupted the initial tie made between faith, action, repentance, and salvation by transforming sanctity and salvation into commodities that could be bought, thereby reducing faith and repentance to mere bystanders of what had become an invalid commercial transaction. In arguing against it, Luther’s writings grew to challenge the validity of the church’s entire teaching tradition and its claim to a unique authority of scriptural interpretation and doctrine. He argued that the Bible, not the church, has the final word on doctrine, and that each individual must be set free from the salvific control of the church, an earthly institution corrupted by power.¹¹² Instead, Luther

¹¹² For Luther, the Bible replaced the Church as the definitive encapsulation of Divine authority on earth. He therefore argued that the Catholic Church’s monopoly on Biblical translation, reading, and interpretation was wrong, and promoted the translation of the Bible into local vernaculars so
emphasized the unique role and value of individual faith and repentance (defined as absolute trust in the mercy and grace of God, a trust gifted by God) in assuring individual salvation. God “justifies” each person through their faithful reception of his gift of grace. In this view, the church, while invaluable as a fellowship of believers who worship God together, is not integral to personal salvation, and to the fundamental relationship between personal faith and Divine grace that constitutes individual communion with God. Rather, each individual believer is guaranteed their salvation by God through the strength and truth of their Christian conviction.

Like Luther, the Swiss reformer Huldrych Zwingli (1484-1531) also argued against the Catholic church’s practice of selling indulgences, and against the church’s exclusive claim to doctrinal authority based on its history of scriptural interpretation. Like Luther, he argued that the Bible, not the church, was the basis for a true salvific faith. Zwingli emphasized that the Bible contained within it a complete model for human life, and that Christians must bind themselves to its mandates as expressions of the will of God.

Despite their many areas of theological agreement, Zwingli and Luther differed in their theology in several respects, perhaps most substantially regarding the presence of Christ in the Eucharist. Though he disagreed with the Catholic church’s specific metaphysical explanation for transubstantiation, Luther affirmed the church’s assertion that the blood and body of Christ were

---

102

113 The verse often cited to summarize Luther’s perspective is Paul’s Letter to the Romans, chapter one, verses 16-17: “It is the saving power of God for everyone who has faith – the Jew first, but the Greek also – because here is revealed God’s way of righting wrong, a way that starts from faith and ends in faith; as Scripture says, ‘he shall gain life who is justified through faith’.” (The New English Bible, 1970)

114 To this end, Zwingli encouraged the city council of Zurich to separate the churches under its control from the Roman Catholic Church and to reorganize local ecclesiastical and priestly life according to the model of the early church. The Zurich council acted in 1523, and the Reformed church tradition within Protestantism was begun.
really present in the wine and bread received during the Eucharist. Zwingli, on the other hand, said that Christ was present in the hearts of the believers during this Holy Communion, but not in the elements of bread and wine.\textsuperscript{115}

Zwingli’s successor as the dominant voice within the Protestant Reformed tradition was John Calvin (1509-1564), a French theologian, who’s \textit{Institutes of the Christian Religion}, which he wrote and rewrote several times between 1536 and 1559, became a core text within Protestant theology, and the core text within the Reformed tradition.\textsuperscript{116} Calvin’s theology emphasized the absolute power and authority of God\textsuperscript{117}, and his complete control over all that happens. It also emphasized the complete depravity of humanity in their bondage to sin, and their resultant separation from God. Most notably, within his doctrine of predestination, Calvin argued that God has already elected some portion of humanity – those who have or will accept His gift of grace and commit themselves in faith to Him -- to share in an eternal life of communion with Him.\textsuperscript{118}

Whereas Luther had emphasized the agency of each individual’s emotive act of repentance, Calvin emphasized the power and agency of God in electing a chosen number of people whom, because of God’s eternal knowledge and wisdom, had already been predestined for salvific faith.

\textsuperscript{115} John Calvin agreed with Zwingli on this point.

\textsuperscript{116} At the invitation of the city council of Geneva, Calvin established an autocratic Christian government in Geneva, one that sought to regulate people’s private and public life through the establishment and enforcement of laws based on Biblical mandate and example. Geneva became a haven for religious refugees, and its experiment with theocratic rule endured from 1541 until Calvin’s death in 1564.

\textsuperscript{117} In his classic text \textit{History of the Christian Church} (1894), George P. Fisher writes of Calvin: “There was in Calvin’s piety a large infusion of the Old Testament spirit. It was an absorbing aim with him to exalt the law of God, and to bring his own life and the lives of others, to bring Church and State, into subjection to it.”

\textsuperscript{118} In his \textit{Institutes}, Calvin laid out his doctrine of God’s “Eternal Decree,” whereby “God from all eternity did by the most wise and holy counsel of His own will freely and unchangeably ordain whatever comes to pass – and hath appointed the Elect unto glory – who are redeemed by Christ – and are effectually called unto faith by Christ by His Spirit working in due season.” Unlike both Augustine and Luther, Calvin held that, by virtue of election, the true believer can never fall away from their true faith as members of the Elect.
In addition to his emphasis on predestination, Calvin affirmed Luther and Zwingli’s basic assertion that a person is justified by faith alone, and that earthly good works do not guarantee salvation. One cannot, as it were, earn one’s way into heaven. For Calvin, as for other Protestants, only the gift of God’s grace and the faith it engenders is sufficient recompense for the eternally damning wages of human sin.

Even more than Lutherans and other Protestants, Calvin asserted the necessity of right doctrinal knowledge for each Christian, and as evidenced in his own laborious writing and rewriting of his *Institutes*, he affirmed an intellectual and moral facet to faith, each of which provided evidence of a person’s likely election by God. The Presbyterian denomination that emerged in Scotland in the 16th century through the teachings of the Reformed John Knox shared this emphasis on salvation through repentance and on a faith characterized by right doctrine and a mature knowledge of the Christian faith.

**Presbyterianism**

Among the largest Protestant denominations in the world, Presbyterianism, more than most other denominations, emphasizes the intellectual facet of the Christian faith experience. In defining what he called “the Presbyterian way”, the prominent Presbyterian theologian John A. Mackay wrote:

Presbyterianism, more perhaps than any other Protestant confession, has emphasized the importance of loving God with the mind. The Reformed tradition to which Presbyterianism belongs has manifested throughout its history a passion for objectivity, a striving to grasp and to express in intellectual terms the meaning and implications of its faith. A passionate concern about Truth has been and continues to be a characteristic aspect of the “Presbyterian Way.”

---

119 Mackay, p.37. Mackay (1889-1983) was a noted Presbyterian clergyman. He was born in Scotland and as a young man studied philosophy at the University of Aberdeen. He studied theology at Princeton Theological Seminary, and later became its President (from 1936 to 1959). He founded and edited the journal *Theology Today.*
In his own theologizing, Mackay wrote:

Man is a sinner…Man needs wholeness, health, salvation; his whole nature needs renewal, rebirth. First however there must break into his mind a light that comes from God. Before man’s situation can change and he enter upon a new state of being, he must in the light of God come to know the truth about himself as he is, as he should be, and as he may become. In God’s light, and in God’s light alone, can man understand himself and the possibilities of his existence.  

In this model of redemption, the mind is the entry to the soul. As Mackay writes, for each person, “there must break into his mind a light that comes from God.” It is through the knowledge of truth, not only in the heart, but also in the mind, that each person finds salvation and redemption. Such expressions of confidence in the intellectual facet of Christian faith were also echoed in the writings of early Livingstonia missionaries. Walter Elmslie writes in *Among the Wild Ngoni* that their mission and educational work was aimed at fostering “the intelligent acceptance of the Gospel” among local residents.  

In his book *Livingstonia: The Story of Our Mission*, Donald Fraser emphasized the importance of literate knowledge within the Mission’s work:

> There were no books, no written language. So we opened schools, and gave them reading and writing, thus putting into their hands the key of all knowledge, and giving to them the Bible to speak daily as the Word of God, so that they might have a light for their path and food for their souls.

---

120 Mackay, pp.78-79. Yet, even as Mackay argued that God reaches out to humanity through the mind, the seat of the soul, he was aware of the potential for intellectualism to suffocate the life of the church. To that effect, he quotes (p.70) another Presbyterian theologian, George H. Hendry: “If it be true that the Holy Spirit points to the creativity, the freedom, the inwardness of the work of God, it could be said that the Westminster Confession of Faith reflects a type of theology which tends to stabilize the relations between God and man within the framework of a rigid system, in which the freedom of God Himself is circumscribed and which makes it difficult to distinguish the inwardness of faith from intellectual acceptance of a doctrinal system.”

121 Walter Elmslie. 1899. *Among the Wild Ngoni*, p. 137.

In his later book, *African Idylls*, Fraser tells the story of one recent young convert, who has assumed a teaching role in his home village.

For indeed Daudi is the interpreter of God to the village, and although he has not yet learned deeply himself he has in his house the key to all mystery, a Bible, which is a speaking book to him; and his daily conduct, led and moulded by higher thoughts than are known to any in his village, is a guide for others towards the new life that Christianity creates.\(^{123}\)

The establishment of village and station schools at the very beginning the Mission’s institutional project is testament to the emphasis placed on educating new converts into a literate knowledge of their Christian faith. The creation of catechumen classes and establishment of doctrinal exams before baptism likewise point to this emphasis on an intellectual and rationalized faith.

This emphasis on a rationalized faith was a product not only of the Protestant Reformation and the theological leadership that guided the early Reformed churches. It was also tied to a larger scale transformation in the public consciousness of Europe, changes that emerged out of Renaissance and Enlightenment developments in scientific inquiry and logic. A new faith in science emerged and grew as a correlate path of inquiry into truth, alongside sacred text. Among its central practices was the quickly changing discipline of medicine.

**The Emergence of Biomedicine: dualism and the scientific ethic of the body**

All of the early Livingstonia missionaries had been educated during their upbringing in Scotland to confide in the veracity of science and its findings. Many of them, the medical people among them, had been trained in its ways, means, and applications through the emerging discipline of biomedicine. I cannot engage here in a substantive history that traces the emergence of the

---

\(^{123}\) Donald Fraser. 1923. *African Idylls: Portraits and Impressions of Life on a Central African Mission Station*, p.36.
scientific paradigm and its subdiscipline biomedicine, as that is a thesis in-and-of-itself. Instead, a brief summary of developments is presented, in order to show the way in which the paradigm of body/soul dualism was also emergent in the growing distinction between science and religion.

During the eighteenth century, western European medicine understood illness (dis-ease) to be the result of imbalances of body humours, imbalances which differed from person to person, and which carried both psychological and physiological content to it. Illness was a matter of experiencing imbalance in both body and mind. Within this naive but holistic model of illness, physicians relied heavily on talking to patients and hearing their reports illness experiences.

This model of body and disease changed in the early nineteenth century. Kriel (1997) writes:

[T]he fundamental shift in thinking… took place… soon after the French Revolution. French physicians (amongst others Laennec who introduced the stethoscope into clinical practice) introduced a simple change in clinical practice. They examined patients in the wards, and then, if they died, attended post mortems in order to correlate clinical findings with the pathology found in organs. From this practice the whole complex nosology (classification of disease) of twentieth-century medicine was developed, and on this pathology-based nomenclature and classification, all other diagnostic and therapeutic developments depended.\(^\text{124}\)

According to Kriel and others, this move towards describing and classifying organ pathology was motivated by an adoption of Newtonian physics, and the model of natural reality as the mechanistic interaction of physical forces. Within this mechanical model of medicine, several key assumptions emerged about the body and illness: that the body is a mechanistic and biological organism, subject to physical laws and chemistry; that there is a natural, material, organic basis to illness; that contact of human bodies with the physical world, including each other, entails the transfer of material substances, including germ-borne diseases, and can result in the body becoming a container for

diseases; and that knowledgeable intervention by practitioners trained in anatomy and physiology, and bearing the latest scientific treatments, can help repair and treat pathologies and mechanical breakdowns of the body.

This physical and mechanical model of the body is notable for the extent to which it does not reference spiritual causation and experience in its definitions of disease and organic breakdown. In this model, the body organic is something separate unto itself, apart from matters of the soul. Just as soul became increasingly separated from body within the Christian theological and philosophical tradition, so too now the body was being separated from the soul through an emergent scientific tradition. While theologians were intellectualizing the soul and attributing personal identity to it, scientists were increasingly de-spiritualizing the body by objectifying it as a biological organism. This dialectic between science and religion is in many respects reminiscent of Gregory Bateson’s notion of schismogenesis, wherein two organizational systems (be they emotional, intellectual, or otherwise) gradually polarize through a pattern of response and counter-response. In the case of the relationship between religion and science in the Western world, the schismogenesis has been between a framework that explains the nature of reality primarily through spiritual terms, and one that seeks to explain the nature of things through material and organic terms. In the process, both the theological and scientific traditions became characterized by an emergent dualism within their respective disciplinary logics, as theologians separated soul from body, and as scientists separated body from soul. The early Livingstonia missionaries who took their “civilizing” mission to southeastern Africa were confident bearers of this dualist cosmology, sure of their God and His gospel, and sure of their medicine and its healing powers.
Chapter Three
History, Religion, and Medicine in Northern Nyasaland

A Series of Migrations

By the time Scottish Presbyterian missionaries arrived in the areas to the west of Lake Nyasa in the late nineteenth century, a dramatic political history had been playing out for almost a millennium in the region. During the first millennium A.D., the area was inhabited by autochthonous populations of Akafula, also known as Abatwa, Mwandionerakuti, Ajere, and Azimba, hunter-gatherers, whose progenitors had likely been resident in the region for millennia (Pachai 1973). Somewhere around the ninth century A.D., proto-Bantu peoples from the Katanga and Lake Tanganyika regions migrated into the area, most likely moving down the geographical corridor of the Lake Tanganyika valley from the eastern Congo River basin region to the north. Pachai (1973) describes these peoples as the Pule, Lenda, Katanga, and Karanga, and suggests they were pastoralists and agriculturalists, who also hunted elephant and worked with iron. Their encounter with the native Akafula was marked by violence, in which over time many Akafula were killed, displaced, or absorbed into the invading Bantu society.

Between the thirteenth and fifteenth centuries, a second wave of Bantu Maravi peoples migrated into the central and southern areas of Nyasaland from regions to the north and west (Tew 1950; Pachai 1973). Pachai speculates that their “most recent point of nuclear dispersion” was northern Katanga, in present day Congo. While individual families moved out under family heads, related families often built alliances under powerful men who were leaders of their clan. Two clans in particular, the Phiri and the Mwali clans, were prominent, and the former assumed a leadership

---

125 Pachai (1973) notes that the earliest human and artifact remains in northern Nyasaland date to about 8000 BC. Skeletal remains from this era suggest the Akafula were of generally small physical stature, though somewhat larger than Khoikhoin, Nama, or San populations resident in other parts of southern Africa.
role in the region, and its leader took on the honorific title of Karonga (Pachai 1973). By the sixteenth century, a centralized state under Karonga made its presence felt throughout the central and southern lake regions (McCracken 1977). In subsequent years, because of processes of geographic dispersion and decentralization, Maravi peoples, sharing a common linguistic and cultural heritage of matrilineality and uxorilocality, would be variously named and distinguished as Chewa, Mang’anja, Nyanja, Chipeta, Nsenga, Chikunda, Mbo, Ntumba, and Zimba groups (Pachai 1973). The Phiri state collapsed in the late 1600's, and two kingdoms established themselves in the area: the Undi kingdom in the central regions of both sides of the lake, and the Lundu kingdom to the south and southeast of the lake (McCracken 1977). By the mid 1800's, the power of both of these kingdoms had declined, and village level communities again emerged as the primary political units. Descendants of those who lived under the Undi kingdom came to be identified as Mang’anja, while those of the Lundu kingdom were called Chewa (Pachai 1973). On their northern side, this Chewa population was bordered by groups of Tumbuka-speakers, with whom they shared a common Maravi idiom of matrilineality and uxorilocality, and with whom they intermarried and traded.

Though the history of migration and settlement of Tumbuka-speaking peoples is far from clear (see Vail 1972), it seems they were also among the groups that migrated south into the lake regions in or about the fifteenth century. They settled in the northern regions of Nyasaland, in the areas to the east and south of the Nyika plateau, where they established sparsely populated, decentralized, agricultural and pastoral communities. These initial migrants, it seems, also

---

126 Tumbuka-speakers can also be considered as off-shoots of this Maravi migration, perhaps having segmented off from the movement of people at an earlier stage of the migration, while still in northern Nyasaland.

127 Within this matrilineal system, by custom a male guardian (nkhoswe) guided all matters concerning his female matrikin, and guaranteed their marriages.
practiced uxorilocality and matrilineal descent and inheritance patterns (Vail 1979). Wilson (1972) suggests that Tumbuka-speakers, including Wenya, Fungwe, and Yombe clans, were resident in the areas around Mbande Hill (near the current city of Karonga) near the northern lake shore by the early sixteenth century, and that some had by that time also been incorporated into the neighboring Ngonde kingdom to the north. Among other populations living to the north of these Tumbuka-speakers were Sukwa, Ndali, Lambya, and Nyiha peoples, who lived in broad east-west plains along the north Rukuru and Songwe rivers (Vail 1989). Further still to the north were Nyakyusa, Kinga, Nyamwanga, and Iwa populations. All of these groups were patrilineal and virilocal. In the early and mid-eighteenth century, small groups of people from these areas to the north, as well as from the northeast and west, migrated in among the northern populations of Tumbuka-speakers and adopted their language, even as they also gained political pre-eminence in some areas. Among these groups were the Phoka, who came from the north and settled in the areas to the east of the Nyika plateau, and the Mkandawire and Luhanga clans, who came from the west and settled in the Nkhamanga plain area. Members of the Munthali and Harawa clans also moved south from what is today southern Tanzania and settled in Henga valley region of the northern sections of the Kasitu river (Vail 1979). These and other clans, including the Kayira, Gondwe, Mughogho, and Nyirenda clans, came to comprise what Vail calls the northern Tumbuka, though he is keen to emphasize that each clan maintained its own authority system, and there was no single “Tumbuka” tribal model of identity. Vail suggests that the clans who moved into Tumbuka-speaking areas

---

128 Monica Wilson, 1972, p.140.
129 Monica Wilson suggests that the Ngonde, Nyakusa, and Kinga share a common geographical origin in the BuKinga region of what are today known as the Livingstone Mountains, near the northeastern shoreline of the lake in present-day Tanzania. (See Wilson 1972, p. 138)
130 According to the Malawi Certificate of Education study guide for secondary students, published by the Ministry of Education and Culture (1999), these groups included the Kachali, Nyanjagha, Mwahweni, Luhanga, Sowoya, and Mkandawire clans, the latter being the oldest among them.
from the north were also patrilineal and virilocal, practices which became established among the hybrid Tumbuka-speaking societies that emerged.

In the late eighteenth century (1770-80), Balowoka (possible Yao) traders, led by Mlowoka, crossed the lake from its eastern side and established peaceful trade relations among these northern Tumbuka populations (Young 1932; Tew 1950; Vail 1973; Pachai 1973; McCracken 1977). According to T. C. Young, a Livingstonia missionary in the region from 1904-1931, these traders “came as Arabs”, and were in active commercial relations with Arab and Swahili populations from the coast. With these Balowoka as middle-merchants, ivory and salt were the primary commodity exports, while cloth, firearms, beads, and other such manufactured items were the primary imports. In order to consolidate his position locally, Mlowoka married into prominent local clans, including the Luhanga and Mkandawire clans.131 Through them and subsequent marriages, and through tactful distributions of gifts (especially hoes) to local leaders, Mlowoka came to establish an important commercial sphere of influence for himself in the region. He became known as “Chikuwa majembe”132 (KiSwahili for “carrier of hoes”) within the region, and at this death, his son Gonapamuhanya claimed (in an irregular succession) the same title for himself. The Balowoka were patrilineal, and through their economic and political influence, they further transformed Tumbuka matrilineal marriage and inheritance practices, a process that would later be completed by the patrilineal Ngoni when they assumed administrative authority in the region (see below).

The range and force of this Chikulamayembe sphere of influence in the late nineteenth century is subject to some debate within the historical literature on the region. Young was a vocal advocate for giving the Chikulamayembe dynasty a powerful and centrally constituting position in

---

132 Eventually this title became formalized as Chikulamayembe.
the history of the region. In the early twentieth century, this claim of dynastic authority was used as the basis for establishing a strong Tumbuka tribal identity, one rewarded when, in 1907, the British recognized a Chikulamayembe chieftaincy in the northern region of Rhumpi. Vail (1972; 1989), however, has argued that while Mlowoka did establish a far-reaching economic trading infra-structure, neither he nor his offspring ever established a territorial state or a dominant political sphere of authority. By the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, even the Chikulamayembe’s dominance of local trade came to end, as Swahili traders from the coast entered in large numbers and initiated a large-scale trade in human slaves and ivory. These traders often played local leaders off each other in order to secure the best deals possible, and in the process undermined what little political centralization had emerged (Vail 1972). By Vail’s estimate, augmentations of Chikulamayembe importance by Young and others have less to do with historical facts and more to do with a desire among a dispersed and subjugated Tumbuka-speaking population to constitute for themselves a united and powerful heritage.133

133 It should be noted that the British reestablished the Chikulamayembe chieftainship in 1907. Vail (1972) argues that by this time, the myth of the Chikulamayembe dynasty had already started to take hold among Tumbukas, and the decision by the British was welcomed as a partial redress for their recent domination by the Ngonis. Vail has also argued that one of the consequences of the missionary educational program (see Chapter Four) was a transformation of local categories of ethnic identity. Vail argues that the Livingstonia mission encouraged, through its missionaries and its intellectual offspring, the promotion of a “taxonomic unit” of identity based on the tribal model. He notes that T.C. Young, the Scottish Livingstonia missionary who worked in northern Nyasaland from 1904 to 1931, wrote extensively about “Tumbuka culture.” Through his and other influences, many non-Ngoni Tumbuka-speakers began to formulate a collective identity as a “tribe” by the 1930’s. Vail argues that much of this effort centered on an attempt to re-establish the Chikulamayembe chiefdom in opposition to Ngoni authority, and to exaggerate its earlier prominence and power in the region. Partly in response to this, Ngoni began to refer back to their own pre-colonial history of migration and military dominance to affirm their own sense of collective identity. Aware of the increasing scale of political events surrounding them, mission-trained intellectuals in both communities supported these tribal-scale ideologies of identification. Vail also argues that the widespread labor migrancy by both Tumbuka and Ngoni men contributed to this trend. Many migrants, in order to guarantee that their local interests in land, cattle, women, and children were protected, sought to reaffirm the authority of local chiefs and sub-chiefs (a reverse of the previous generational conflict), often presenting gifts to chiefs upon their return home. These newly empowered chiefs sought to delineate their respective spheres of influence and
This dispersion and subjugation of the Tumbuka resulted most directly from an invasion by an Ngoni population who migrated into the northern lake region in the 1850's, after a thirty-five year migration from kwaZulu-Natal, and established a political sphere of influence in northern Nyasaland through economic and military raiding. These Ngoni newcomers, led by M’mbelwa, settled primarily along the Kasitu river valley, but their influence and military dominance was felt throughout the whole region. M’mbelwa was a successor to Zwangendaba, whom had led an earlier migration of the Ngoni away from the conflicts of the mfecane within the Zulu empire in the early 1800's (Pachai 1973; McCracken 1977; Phiri 1982; Thompson 1995). This migration north from South Africa is characterized as a central, foundational event in many Ngoni accounts of their history. The immediate cause of Zwagendaba’s migration was the Ndwandwe defeat by Shaka at the battle of the Mhlatuze river in 1819. Zwagendaba and his group clashed with other groups fleeing the conflict, and a series of defeats eventually pushed Zwagendaba to move further north, eventually across the Zambezi (Thompson 1995). This group was composed of an original Nguni-speaking core, whom Thompson calls the Zansi-Ngoni, but had also incorporated many communities of interest, and the idiom of ‘tribes’ served their interests to that effect. Ncozana (2002) argues that despite absorbing challenges and rule from many other tribes, the Tumbuka came into the twentieth century with a Tumbuka identity intact.

134 T. Jack Thompson’s detailed summary of Ngoni history and their encounter with the Livingstonia missionaries (Christianity in Northern Malawi: Donald Fraser’s Missionary Methods and Ngoni Culture. 1995. Leiden: New York) provides the basis for much of the historical review that follows.

135 The Kasitu River flows northerly from the central to the northern sections of the lake=s west-central side. In subsequent years, the Ngoni would also spread south and west into the Rukuru River valley. Embangweni is located near the headwaters of the Lwasozi and Kakoma Rivers, both early tributaries of the Rukuru at its southern end.

136 There were, however, Tonga and Tumbuka rebellions against Ngoni rule. (See Thompson, 1995, pp. 25-26)

137 M’mbelwa was probably born around 1840 at Mabiri, just six miles from Embangweni, during the migration north. When he came of age, he was giving the plumes of the paradise flycatcher, one of the Ngoni symbols of chieftaincy, which only the paramount chief may wear (Thompson 1995).

138 Most modern historians see Ngoni as Swazi or Ndwandwe in origin, not Zulu (Thompson 1995).
Qwabe, Ntungwa, Swazi, and others in the time leading up to the migration. After the crossing, the Ngoni accumulated many Thonga, Karanga, Chewa, Tumbuka, Bemba, and Senga captives, before moving further north into the Ufipa area of southern Tanganyika, in search (according to tradition) for the superior breed of red cattle found there (Thompson 1995). Here, at Mapupo, Zwagendaba died, somewhere around 1845-48. Fragmentation followed, partly out of dispute over succession, and partly because of a tendency for fissure in Ngoni society. With the schism, M’mbelwa assumed leadership of one faction, and led them into the Kasitu River region of northern Nyasaland, while other Ngoni populations moved to other areas around Lake Nyasa, including in other parts of Malawi, and in present-day Zambia and Mozambique. By 1900, large sections of M’mbelwa’s Ngonis were moving further south and west into the valley region of the South Rukuru river, an area today known as Mzimba.

Tumbuka-speaking clans also populated these southern areas of north Nyasaland, though less has been written about their history than their fellow Tumbuka-speakers to the north. Originally matrilineal and uxorilocal, these southern Tumbuka-speakers were bordered on their south by Chewa populations, with whom they often intermarried and shared common inheritance and residential practices.

Because of the ethnic heterogeneity of the Ngoni, which only increased as the Ngoni incorporated other people’s throughout their migration, Thompson (1995, p.7) describes Ngoni culture as not so much an inherited and unified system of behavior, but rather as an evolved and pragmatic response to the conflicts of the mfecane and the changing circumstances of migration. Regarding the Ngoni, Thompson quotes Omer-Cooper to the effect that “more than any other group in this period they perfected a system of uniting people of different cultures in enduring units.” (p.28)

The migration took on mythic qualities within the collective history of the Ngoni. Ncozana (in press) recounts a story of Zwagendaba striking the Zambezi River with his staff so the Ngoni could cross, and suggests obvious Biblical influences on the myth.

The historical record on who Zwagendaba chose as his successor is unclear, among several different claims to succession.
Ngoni conquest of northern Nyasaland, including the killing of the sixth Chikulamayembe, resulted in the incorporation of many northern and southern Tumbukas (and Tongas) into large Ngoni dominated villages.\(^{142}\) The Ngoni practices of patrilineality and the acceptance of cattle for bridewealth (loloba) gradually replaced local matrilineal inheritance and uxorilocal brideservice practices, as were still practiced by the southern Tumbuka. (Tew 1950; Vail 1972, 1979). Still, ChiTumbuka remained the dominant lingua franca in the region, and became the language of the Ngoni invaders as well.\(^{143}\) According to Thompson, by the time of Ngoni settlement in Mzimba, many Ngoni traditions were gone or dying, including the lorujo, a test for innocence or guilt (see Young, Notes, p.148), which was replaced by the Tumbuka and Tonga mwabvi ordeal.\(^{144}\) Yet despite this cultural loss in the midst of larger established Tumbuka populations, the Ngoni state apparatus was strong, having been strengthened by the migration and its accompanying practice of political and military domination. The heterogenous group that had started the migration now regarded themselves as the aristocracy of the state, the abaZansi.\(^{145}\) A ruling family, the Jere, controlled the chieftainship, and its senior member, M’belwa, was Inkosi ya makosi, Chief of Chiefs, overseeing over six other chiefs: Mtwalo, Mpherembe, Chinde, Mzikuola, Mzukuzuku, and Mabulao.

\(^{142}\) In addition, several Tumbuka and Tonga groups escaped Ngoni rule by migrating out of the region, among them the Henga who settled among the Ngonde to the north. According to Michael and Elspeth King (1992), however, early Livingstonia missionaries in the lakeshore Bandawe area found local Tongas and Tumbukas paying food taxes to their Ngoni rulers.

\(^{143}\) A multitude of other languages were also in use in this northern region by the late 1870’s, including Nyiha, Ndali, Lambya, Sukwa, Ngonde, Ngoni, Bisa, Bemba, Swahili, Senga, Nsenga, Sukuma, and Nyanja (Vail 1989).

\(^{144}\) Vail (1979) notes that the Ngonis were impressed by the frequency of the mwabvi ordeal and the skill with which the Tumbuka used it. Mwabvi is a poison extracted from the *Erythrophloem guiniense* tree, known in ChiTumbuka as the chinchocho tree. In the ordeal, the accused would be forced to consume the poison. If they survived, they were deemed innocent. If they expired, it was taken as proof of their guilt.

Regional Religious Cults and Movements:

As just seen, individuals and groups living within the various populations of the Lake Nyasa region were players within a complex and changing field of social, political, and economic relations. Many were also, however, participants within a range of spiritual and religious movements, which likewise shaped peoples’ sense of identification with their own and other peoples in the region. Several scholars (Schoffeleers 1975, 1978, 1997; Linden 1978; Vail 1978, Ranger 1975, 1993) have shown that large scale religious societies, including trans-linguistic territorial cults, witchcraft eradication movements (like the Mwana Lesa movement of the 1920's in neighboring Rhodesia; see Ranger 1975), and spirit possession cults,\(^{146}\) were increasingly prevalent within the nineteenth century and early twentieth century history of the central-east Africa region. These religious movements were anything but static, as they were recreated and adapted to ever-shifting political and social circumstances.

Schoffeleers (1978) has argued that territorial cults, such as the M’Bona cult among the Mang’anja of the lower Shire river region in southern Nyasaland, provided a common schema of residential affiliation which allowed for non-lineage and clan based regulation of area ecologies. These cults could be organized in very local residential terms, or could extend across a broad range of clan and political groupings. In either case, they provided an alternate model of identity and community to that of tribe.

Leroy Vail (1979) has shown the extent to which northern Chewa-speaking populations and southern Tumbuka-speaking populations shared a common set of cosmological assumptions, revolving around a common recognition of Chiuta as a supreme Spiritual force, and a devotion to similar territorial spirits. Vail demonstrates these similarities in part to argue that linguistic

\(^{146}\) See Janzen (1992) on Ngoma.
difference alone should not be used as tools of ethnic categorization in the region. Both Tumbuka and Chewa speakers gave devotion to a prominent territorial rain spirit, called Chikang’ombe in chiTumbuka and Thunga in chiChewa. Among both populations, the rain spirit was represented as a snake that travels on the wind to different hill tops, where he has sexual and rain-producing union with various human wives. Vail argues that this commonality of religious belief indicates an important non-linguistic basis for mutual association and identity in the region. Add to that a history of micro-migrations and inter-marriage between the groups, and in pre-Ngoni times a common matrilineal/uxoriloclal kinship idiom, and there has been a considerable intermixture of southern Tumbuka and Chewa populations. As a point of contrast, Vail compares the southern Tumbuka-speakers to their northern Tumbuka-speaking neighbors. Because of the latter’s long history of interaction with patrilineal and virilocal peoples to their north, and with the Balowoka Chikulamayembes, these northern Tumbuka-speakers gradually downplayed the importance of Chikang’ombe as a religious site, and instead devoted themselves to a different set of territorial spirits. Vail writes:

[T]he belief in the far-travelling spirit Chikang’ombe was replaced by belief in rather vague and ill-defined snake spirits, vipili, each one of which was connected with its own restricted local area. The belief in these vipili was, I suggest, the symbolic residue of the earlier belief in the spirit Chikang’ombe that had prevailed throughout the matrilineal/uxorilocal Tumbuka zone. The change to patrilineality and the emergence of small chiefdoms with defined borders rendered the older beliefs obsolete.

Tumbuka religion: missionary, Malawian, and anthropological accounts.

Despite the differences just identified, broad patterns in both southern and northern Tumbuka religion (in the years before missionization) can be described, many of which are

147 The northern Chewa acknowledged Chikang’ombe as a rain spirit, and the southern Tumbuka recognized one of Thunga’s wives, Mangadzi, as a female spirit of the south wind. (see Vail 1979, p.219)
148 Vail, 1979, p.222.
analogous to religions found among other Bantu peoples. The earliest systematic written accounts of Tumbuka religion are provided by the Livingstonia missionaries, the first Europeans to live among the Tumbuka for long periods of time and document their religious customs and knowledge.\(^{149}\) These writings are of significant value in attempting to reconstruct a sense of Tumbuka religion in the years preceding both the Ngoni and missionary arrivals in the region, though the reader must remain aware of how the missionaries’ religious and cultural assumptions shaped their writing. Most often, descriptive accounts of Tumbuka culture were framed within a judgmental tone that argued for supplanting the local culture with that of the European Christian culture of the missionaries themselves. Yet, there were also efforts by missionaries to write non-judgmentally, even sympathetically, regarding Tumbuka culture and religion, and to provide a detailed and comprehensive descriptive account of their forms.

Two Livingstonia missionaries, in particular, provide the most detailed accounts of Tumbuka religion as they encountered it in the early twentieth century. The first was Donald Fraser, an early Livingstonia missionary who founded Loudon station at its current site in Embangweni in 1902, and who worked as a missionary in Nyasaland from 1896 to 1925. Over the course of his career as missionary in Tumbuka-Ngoni land, and after he had returned to Scotland, Fraser published books and articles regarding his experiences and perspectives as a missionary. While much of his writing takes the form of storytelling about events and happenings during his terms of service, he also wrote descriptive accounts of local custom and knowledge, often framed

\(^{149}\) The earliest written reference to the Tumbuka are those of a A.C.P. Gamitto, a young officer who was Second-in-Command of an 1831-1832 Portuguese expedition that hoped to initiate trade contacts with the Lunda chief Kazembe, whose domain was just south of Lake Mweru on the modern Congo/Zambian border. In their journey north from the Zambezi River, the expedition passed through the great Luangwa river valley and came into contact with Tumbuka-speaking peoples there. Gamitto’s journal, however, mostly concerns the “manners and customs” of the Marave people, whom he distinguishes from the Cheva, and, regarding the Tumbuka, he had only brief comments.
within his own moral, cultural, and religious parameters. While their value is compromised by his consistently denigrating tone, Fraser’s descriptive writings are still of some usefulness the scholar as they are among the earliest written accounts of Tumbuka religious practice.

In *Livingstonia: The Story of Our Mission*, first published in 1915, Fraser writes regarding the Tumbuka and in defense of his Mission’s agenda and work:

Nor can I say they had no religion. They named God, and worshipped the spirits, recognizing that spiritual forces were all about them. But there was no comfort in their religion. God was unknown, and the future life was dark and threatening. So we came to them with our Gospel, which told of a holy and loving Father, of the great message of forgiveness of the Cross, of the communion of God with men, and of the glory of life everlasting.150

While Fraser almost begrudgingly acknowledges that Tumbukas were religious people, he is consistent in arguing that their religion was an inferior form. Note that he says the Tumbuka “named” God, but not that they “know” God in the way that presumably he and his fellow European Christians do. In *Winning a Primitive People*, first published in 1913, Fraser writes of the Tumbuka understanding of God:

Chiwuta is known as the creator, and the master of life and death. By Him the world was made, and everything that has life. It is He who sends the great diseases, like rinderpest, and smallpox, and He too is the sender of death. The only characteristic of God that the raw native is sure of is this, “He is cruel, for it is He who takes away the children,” but where He lives, and what He thinks they do not know. To the general imagination, He has withdrawn from the world, and has nothing to do with it, beyond sending death or disease.151


151 Donald Fraser. 1913. *Winning a Primitive People*, p.120. Note: ChiTumbuka subject pronouns are generally gender neutral unless otherwise elaborated. As such, it is likely that the Tumbuka did not masculinize their references to Chiwuta, but that this is a product of Fraser’s own western religious bias. At the same it is possible that a gender designation was made in local speech references to God, though the broader ethnographic literature on Bantu nomenclatures for Divinity would suggest otherwise.
While other writers agree with Fraser that the Tumbuka characterized God as in part a distant creator (see Vail 1979), this overly negative representation of God as withdrawn, cruel, and an agent of death and disease is a likely overstatement, though one that provided Fraser and other Livingstonia missionaries with a rationale and mandate for introducing the personalized and loving God of their Christian tradition. As a pat definition of local perspectives of the Divine Spirit, however, it is overly simplistic and negative, as will be demonstrated below in the writings of Malawian Christian authors on the topic.

In addition to his interpretation of the Tumbuka God, Fraser also recognized the existence of the regional territorial cults that revolved around what he calls “sub-gods who dwell on mist-crowned hills, and have special control of the rains and other natural forces.” Fraser gives special mention to Chikang’ombe, mentioned above, and describes him as a tribal god of the rains who was thought to protect and sustain his people. By Fraser’s account, Chikang’ombe was said to have the body of a snake and the mane of a lion, and rushing wind was an indication of his journeys from hilltop to hilltop, where he would conjoin with human wives, girls and women previously offered to the god by the tribe. According to Fraser, Chikang’ombe was no longer worshiped by the Tumbuka after the Ngoni invasion because he had offered them no protection.\footnote{In \textit{African Idylls} (p. 163-173), Fraser writes about a woman who was married to the great hill-god, who in times of growing misfortune had to be approached and appeased. He quotes the woman’s description of the hill-god coming “like a great snake with a fierce red head”, but makes no reference to the obvious sexual connotations of this description. During times of trouble, offerings of beer, beads, and an ox were left for the god in hope that he would divert misfortune. Fraser asserts that the hill-god did not protect the people from the Ngoni, however, and so was forgotten. His wife eventually returned to her village where she was soon converted after hearing a missionary preach. He writes, “The God of Heaven and Earth had come to visit her, and she had swept her house and offered it to Him. Now indeed was she the wife of a God, and she called Him her Husband and Lord.”}
Fraser also writes that the Tumbuka revered impressive natural objects, like large hills, wild waterfalls, great trees, and deep pools, as animate and divine. One tree in particular, the *msoro* tree, was judged sacred, as it was thought to be a place where the ancestors gathered.\(^{153}\) People built small shrines at its base in their honor where offerings could be placed and requests to the higher spirits submitted. Of the ancestors, he writes:

> The most active spiritual agents are the ancestral spirits. They are everywhere and continuously intervening for good or evil, though their influence is limited to the affairs of their relatives.\(^{154}\) The spirit of a man is supposed to manifest itself in his shadow, and when a man is dying the shadow grows less, until at death it entirely disappears. The spirit is quite distinct from the body, and frequently goes on excursions on its own behalf. When a man lies asleep and dreams, his spirit has gone upon a journey, and the dreams are the events that meet it, perhaps it goes and has converse with the dead, or with those who are far away, and should it not return in time the man will be found dead.\(^{155}\)

According to Fraser, the Tumbuka believed that after the body died the spirit lived on, living somewhere “below,” in a great valley where everything is good, and where no hunger or sorrow touches them. When men who lived selfish and cruel lives die, their spirits get a poor welcome in this nether world. Instead, Fraser wrote, the dead “wander over the world, wherever their relatives go, helping or hindering them.”\(^{156}\)

This emphasis on the ancestors was also echoed in the writings of T. Cullen Young, the second Livingstonia missionary to write extensively about Tumbuka religion. Young worked in northern Nyasaland from 1904 to 1925, and 1928 to 1931, and was station at Loudon in

---

\(^{153}\) Botanically the *msoro* tree is *Pseudolachnostylis maprouneifolia*.

\(^{154}\) This point would seem to be contradicted by suggestions that possession by foreign spirits had become prevalent among the Tumbuka in the years since the Ngoni invasion. Yet, even here, with lineages mixing across “tribal” lines through marriages among Ngonis, Tumbukas, and others, and with the juxtaposition of Ngoni patrilineal and Tumbuka (Maravi) matrilineal descent idioms, it seems likely that distinctions between spirits that were either ancestral or foreign would have become blurred. Fraser may not have been fully aware of this spiritual complexity.

\(^{155}\) *Winning a Primitive People*, p.124.

\(^{156}\) Ibid., p.126.
Embangweni from 1910 to 1919\textsuperscript{157} and again from 1928 to 1931. He published extensively on Tumbuka religion and became a Fellow of the Royal Anthropological Institute in 1928, and his writings provide the most detailed and systematic coverage of Tumbuka social and spiritual life from the early twentieth century. In addition, Young was far more open to seeing the value of Tumbuka religious practice and his writings are both less judgmental and less ethnocentric than those of Fraser. In summarizing Young’s writings about Tumbuka religion and society, I am indebted to Peter G. Forster’s excellent summary of Young’s career and writings in his book, \textit{T. Cullen Young: Missionary and Anthropologist}. In it, Forster notes Young’s identification of the “good village” as the key notion within Tumbuka values.\textsuperscript{158} A good village was characterized by relationships of reciprocity and a steady increase of size. The well-being of a village was safeguarded both by ng’angas, who invoked magical powers against witchcraft and danger, and by members of the village, who were responsible for maintaining the integrity of their community through observing numerous taboos. Forster writes:

\begin{quote}
The taboos recorded by Young accompanied situations such as pregnancy, childbirth and the handling of children; procedures regarding maturity, betrothal and the early stages of marriage; and matters concerning sitting-places, posture and the use of domestic utensils. In some cases there were taboos relating to food...Summarizing his findings, Young maintains that taboo was a combination of common sense and ‘sympathetic magic’, though he is not totally uncritical on the subject. He suggests that obedience to taboos would produce confidence, but that disregard for them would produce depression. He indicates that the sanction for disregard for taboos would be the wrath of the ancestors. He sees the ideal of the ‘good village’ as again at work in the development of this kind of belief and practice.\textsuperscript{159}
\end{quote}

Forster also describes what Young thought to be the core negative values of Tumbuka society, those which destroy the good village. They were quarrelsomeness, falsehood, laziness, and theft,

\begin{enumerate}
\item With a furlough in UK and brief service in war (see Forster p.16-21)
\item Forster, 1989, p. 46. See also Monica Wilson, \textit{Good Company}, 1963.
\item Ibid., p.150.
\end{enumerate}
including adultery. Young noted that within a community ideal of sharing and reciprocity, the use of religious medicine for private use was a great wrong, and someone who consistently did so might be described as a *mfwiti*, a ‘death-dealer’. The ultimate sanction was to be burned to death, and in the process, to be forced to build one’s own funeral pyre. Young described Tumbuka society as a moral society, well-equipped to build a good society within a small-scale clan based society. He felt it was less prepared to meet the changes resultant from its ongoing engagement with outside powers.\(^{160}\)

In agreement with Fraser’s account, Young reports that the Tumbuka rarely approached God directly, but instead relied on the ancestors as their mediators.\(^{161}\) The exception to this would be during exceptionally disorderly times, as during a disease epidemic or prolonged drought, when the whole community would be brought together at the grave of their greatest ancestor to approach God. In routine times, however, the “cult of the vibanda”\(^{162}\) was the center-stone of Tumbuka religion. When a person died, their spirit maintained a character and position equivalent to what they had while living; some friendly, others malevolent. These spirits were approached during times of danger, in anticipation of a journey, and in circumstances of illness. In the latter case, illness was often thought to be the result of ancestors punishing the wrongdoing of the living. Invocations and sacrifices to the spirits were made to acknowledge and appease them, and part of the sacrifice put aside for their consumption. In his later writings (contribution to Smith’s *African Ideas of God*) Young uses the term “conclave” to describe the group dynamic created between the ancestors and their living kin through their symbolic sharing in a common meal. Forster notes that Young was forceful and consistent in challenging the notion that the Tumbuka, or Africans in

\(^{160}\) This is reminiscent of Horton’s explanation for people’s conversions to world religions within previously micro-cosmic societies. See Chapter Two.

\(^{161}\) See Young, *African Ideas of God*.

\(^{162}\) Forster is mirroring Young’s usage here of *vibanda* as meaning the spirits of the ancestors.
general, engaged in “ancestor worship.” He saw it rather as a communion between the living and the dead.

**Tumbuka religion: Malawian Christian accounts**

An important extension, and in some cases corrective, to early Scottish missionary writings about Tumbuka religion came through the writings of Livingstonia Mission educated converts who achieved the status and office of Minister within the church. These men were perhaps the fullest embodiments of the missionary strategy of evangelization through education, and their writings provide the most rationalized articulations for how to integrate aspects of local religion into the Christian tradition. As ordained Ministers of the church, they always defended the supreme validity of Christian doctrine and theology, even as they often sought to counter the overly negative characterizations of local pre-Christian religion found in much missionary writing. Among the earliest such efforts to articulate the forms and rationale of local traditional religion was Levi Mumba’s article “The Religion of my Fathers” (*International Review of Missions*, 1930) in which, as Forster writes:

> He showed that appeal to the spirits went through the family head; and that the ancestral spirits were able to mediate with God. God, however, showed himself only in general manifestations of disapproval, such as pestilence. The spirits were concerned more directly with guardianship of the living, but this concern could be suspended if relations among the living were not kept in accordance with tradition. But with repentance and sacrifice, guardianship would be resumed.\(^{163}\)

Stephen Kauta Msiska was a later Livingstonia pastor who also published work about Tumbuka religion.\(^{164}\) Msiska was ordained as a Livingstonia Synod pastor in 1945, and served as Principal

\(^{163}\) Forster, 1989, p.43.

\(^{164}\) Recently, Kachere Press (the publication arm of the Department of Theology and Religious Studies at University of Malawi) has collected two previously published articles by Msiska and published them as *Golden Buttons: Christianity and Traditional Religion among the Tumbuka*
of the CCAP Theological College at Nkhoma, where he taught from 1962 to 1974. In a 1969 article, Msiska argued that it is good that Africans have departed from their old religion, but added that “the African has rightly thrown out his dirty, torn old shirt, but he has at the same time lost his golden buttons with it” (p.19). He argued that much of African Christianity is shallow because the previous African religious framework was discredited, leaving little foundation upon which to build a new faith. Furthermore, he noted that people often revert back to traditional forms during times of crisis, and described a case from Bishop Lesslie Newbigin’s visit to the area in 1958 to make this point.

At a Bible study group one young man burst out during a silence and said: “We must go back to our ancestor’s worship where our God heard us and answered our prayers. We are now in trouble because we worship with Western God.”

Msiska wrote that such a sentiment is in vain, as the Tumbuka can no longer return to their traditions because so much of the old knowledge and practice have been lost. While he regretted some of this loss, he also argued that there was much in traditional practice (like burning sinners) that was wrong. Still, throughout his writing, Msiska is keen to affirm aspects of the Tumbuka religious tradition, as in this description of various regional names for God which point to a monotheistic notion of the Divine.

[All] cults or religions in Malawi were based on the belief in one God. In the north of the country he was Chiuta, Kyala, Mbanda, or Mbeponwikemo (God-spirit-wind) among the Tumbuka and Nkonde people. He is Chauta, Mulungu, Chisumphi, Mphambi, Leza, Nduna, among the mixed tribes of the Achewa and Ngoni in the central region........He is Leza, Mulungu, Mulengi, Chauta in the southern regions. All three regions in the country agree in calling God Mulungu or Mulangi, (creator); [and] Chiuta or Chauta, which probably meant the greatest power above all powers, unseen, almighty, omnipresent and highly personified; the King of kings.166

(1997).

166 Ibid., p.23.
As had Young and Mumba before him, Msiska emphasized that the Tumbuka prayed through the ancestors, not to them. “Each tribe, each clan, each household could worship God through a well-known relative who understood their needs.”

He outlines the traditional spiritual hierarchy within Tumbuka society as:

1. The high God (Chauta, Chiuta, Mulungu or Mulengi, Leza)
2. Higher spirits and the spirits of former good leaders and priests (vipiri, agogo)
3. Ancestors’ spirits (mizimu)
4. Living priests or leaders (basofi)
5. People on earth (bantu)
6. Under the earth, the dwelling place of the dead (malo gha bakufwa)

In explaining the relationships of authority, obedience, and appeal pertaining between each level, Msiska is keen to demonstrate the organization and logic of this spiritual hierarchy as a means of group communication with and obedience to God. He argued that the missionary introduction of the Christian God was terribly mishandled, because when they said they had brought the “true God”, they presumed and implied that the Tumbuka God was somehow “other”, confusing locals who had always thought of God as one.

A more recent study of Tumbuka religion and spirituality has been provided by another Presbyterian Minister in Malawi, Silas Ncozana, who wrote his 1985 doctoral thesis “Spirit

---

167 Ibid., p.24.
168 Vail disputes this identification of vipili with the spirits of chiefly ancestors. He writes “All oral traditions that I have gathered explicitly state that the vipili are in the form of snakes and are associated with eerie pools, forests, and maintains.” (See Vail 1979 (1999), p. 233, footnote 74)
169 Outline provided in Golden Buttons, p.25. Note that all levels of the spiritual system are personified, except the last, which is identified as the place of the dead, where the spirits of bad and evil people go.
170 More of Msiska’s perspectives on the encounter between Tumbuka religion and Christianity will be reviewed in Chapter Five.
Possession and Tumbuka Christians: 1875-1950" from the University of Aberdeen as a call to action to the CCAP to acknowledge and incorporate elements of traditional spirit possession among the Tumbuka. In an updated version of the thesis, published by Kachere Press (2002), Neozana characterizes pre-Christian Tumbuka religion as conforming to broader trends found around the continent. Like Fraser, Young, and Msiska before him, he outlines a Tumbuka spirit world that is manifested across a hierarchy of three categorical types: (1) God (Chiuta) as ultimate spirit, (2) territorial spirits, derived from dead chiefs or heroes and embodied by current chiefs, and (3) ancestral spirits. He writes that the Tumbuka also believed in spirits of the earth, “fumu zapasi”, which have no genealogy, but that it was the ancestral/lineage spirits that most shaped daily life. The Tumbuka believed that the spirit left the body and continued to live separately from matter, and so were buried with belongings to use in the next stage of their journey. Citing Young, Neozana also notes that except among the very old and the immature, death is usually seen as an attack from an outside agency. The question asked is “who” not “what” caused a death. The dead continue to exist, in spirit, affecting their kin and offspring, and take on even greater power than when they were living. Their memory and meaning among locals depended on the affection they inspired, the strength of their personality and office, and their gender. Upon dying, the spirit of a witch or evil person does not become an ancestor, but instead roams forests, caves, graveyards, and other dark places. They can also possess, and when they do, it is in order to afflict.

Invoking an insight by Fortes in his research among the Tallensi (see Fortes 1970), Neozana argues that for Tumbukas, the ancestral spirit is not directly analogous to the individual


172 This was realized in part through the continuity of names, wherein a grandson uses the name of his deceased grandfather, and becomes the vital embodiment of his grandfather’s power.

173 Neozana (2002) notes that the spirits of men were considered to have more influence on the living than those of women. (c.p.82)
person before their death, but rather is conceived as a generalized personality or image of the authority of the role of the father.\textsuperscript{174} When ancestors live on in descendants, they exert this fatherly authority to remind family members of roles and obligations, and thereby affirm family unity.

“Death”, he writes, “was a transition from one form of life to another. This shift did not entail any change in the structure of human society.” (p.22) As Schoffeleers found in his study among the Mang’anja (1997), Ncozana argues that possession by ancestral spirits or spirits of the household is understood to be for the well-being of the individual and his lineage.\textsuperscript{175} Ncozana writes:

\begin{quote}
[P]ossession among the Tumbuka provides collective opportunities for purification. Impurities such as grudges and jealousies harboured in everyday life and guarded by rules and restrictions are suspended during possession.
\end{quote}

In this Durkheimian view, possession experiences and the ritual interventions surrounding them provided the family and community an opportunity to come together, and through their collective focus on the possessed, to experience a common goal, and to some extent, a common future as participants within the extended family of the living and deceased. At the same time, possession provided the community with an opportunity to commune with the divine.

According to Ncozana, for the Tumbuka the world was unending (\textit{muyira-yira}).\textsuperscript{176} The personality of God was characterized by power, a power both immanent and transcendent to the Tumbuka, both far removed and very close.\textsuperscript{177} God as ultimate power was understood as a unified force, and there were three Tumbuka names for this single God: Leza, Chiuta, and Mulungu.\textsuperscript{178}

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{174} Friedson (1996) makes the point that, with a few exceptions, Vimbuza are not the spirits of individual persons but rather the spiritual energy of entire peoples.

\textsuperscript{175} Because of this family-based emphasis, a decentralized model of religious authority prevailed in Tumbukaland, as even during the later ascendancy of the Chikulamayembe, Tumbuka worship was centered around individual families.

\textsuperscript{176} As will be seen in Chapter Five, this term now features prominently in Christian prayers across the spectrum of churches, often used at the conclusion of prayers.

\textsuperscript{177} This contrasts with Fraser’s emphasis on the alienation of God within Tumbuka religion.

\textsuperscript{178} Ncozana suggests the the etymology for “Leza” comes from the word “lesa”, which means “to
\end{footnotesize}
Ncozana writes that there is no evidence that Tumbukas ever worshiped Chiuta as a great ancestor, unlike among the Nkhonde to the north. Rather, their “knowledge of God was primal and ecologically linked with the earth and its fertility.” One indication of this ecological tie were the cults of Chikangombe (mentioned above) and Mangazi, holy hills where the Tumbuka communicated to God.179 Ncozana argues, however, that the survival of these shrines seemed dependent on periodic droughts and the desperation they created, not on devotion to communal rituals or the like.

Like previous writers on the Tumbuka, Ncozana also emphasizes religious cross-currents among the Tumbuka and their southern Chewa and other neighbors, and he cites Vail to note the similarities between the Tumbuka Chikhang’ombe cult in Nkhamanga and the Chisumphi cult among the Chewa. Tumbuka also interacted with the Yao, who were present in the area by virtue of their trading and slaving activities centered at Nkhotakhota, and shared certain religious habits with them. Both, for example, gathered at the msoro tree for communion with the ancestors. The conversion to Islam by many Yaos during the eighteenth century could have meant significant inroads for that faith into Tumbukaland, but the effect was limited by the regional dominance of the Ngoni, and the alliance of Mwase, a Chewa chief in the Kasungu area, with them. The Ngoni had already introduced significant religious change into the region, even as their own forms became subsumed within the larger Tumbuka cosmology and village practice.

**Ngoni Religion**

care for”, or from “lera”, which means “to nurse,” a maternal model of God. Chiuta is thought to derive from the word “uta” and the amplifying prefix “chi-” to mean “the great bow”, a reference to a rainbow in the sky, a sign of the blessings of rain.

179 Vail (1972) also mentions other religious shrines among northern Tumbuka-speakers living in the Nkhamanga area, including at Buma, Mang’weng’we, and Nkonjera.
As has been suggested, Tumbuka religion was already experiencing dramatic changes in the years preceding the arrival of the Livingstonia missionaries. In particular, the arrival of the Ngoni in the 1840's and 50's dramatically affected local religious forms, as Tumbuka and Ngoni spirits and spiritualities were juxtaposed, and hybrid forms of spiritual possession and practice emerged. There is a substantial body of ethnographic writings about Ngoni society and religious culture, as well as about Swazi and Zulu cosmologies, which are their antecedents (see Chibambo 1942, Read 1956, Berglund 1976). Most of the early writings date to the early twentieth century, years after the division of the Ngoni into several groups following the death of their leader Zwagendaba, and their subsequent migrations to various regions in central southeast Africa. In each case, the Ngoni used their military strength to dominate local peoples and to impose their own administrative and customary systems over local populations. In part because of their domination and the highly structured and conservative tone of their social ethos, one can presume substantive consistencies in many Ngoni cultural forms (Thompson 1995). At the same time, throughout their migration through Zimbabwe, Zambia, Tanzania, and Malawi, the small group of abaZansi, the original migrants from South African and their descendants, soon became a minority among the various peoples they incorporated into their ranks, including large numbers of Thongas, Karangas, Bembas, Chewas, Sengas, and Tumbukas (Thompson 1995). These incorporated peoples undoubtedly had a profound influence on Ngoni religious forms, and this brief account will not do justice to the full scale and complexity of this religious evolution. Instead I offer only a brief summary of Ngoni religion and its antecedents, and then consider the impact of its encounter with Tumbuka religion in the mid-nineteenth century, including what elements within it are still evident within the larger Tumbuka religion that absorbed it.

Like the Tumbuka, the Ngoni also had concept of a great but distant God, described as “the timeless one” and “the first point of time.” Of this, Thompson writes:
The religious beliefs of the Zansi-Ngoni may be defined in Idowu’s phrase as ‘implicit monotheism’. That they had a distinct idea of a supreme being is admitted even by those missionaries who were generally unsympathetic to their religious beliefs. This belief can be seen in the survival amongst the Ngoni of several quite distinct names for God. Of those outlined by Chibambo for Margaret Read (Umkulumqango, Ululuanga, Umkulu Kakulu, Umnikasi we Zinto Zonke), by far the most common surviving today is Umkulumqango -- translated by Margaret Read as ‘the great devisor’ but perhaps being nearer in meaning to ‘the great original’ or ‘the great source’.¹⁸⁰

This supreme source of all could not be approached directly by humans, but required the intervening agency of the ancestral spirits (amadlozi), mediators with God on behalf of their living kin.¹⁸¹ Neozana (2002) suggests that the Ngoni’s strong dependence on and reverence for their military leaders led to decreased focus on God, and to increased attention to the ancestors and their interest in the activities of their descendants. Like the Tumbuka, the Ngoni also modeled the human body as a possible repository for the possessive spirit of a deceased ancestor, and like the Tumbuka, the body was known to be subject to illness and suffering if the will and authority of those ancestors were violated among the living. The ancestors could reveal themselves to people during dreaming, and would call some of those they possessed to become diviners (isthanusi), to serve as living mediums of their revelation. Ancestors could also take animal form, most commonly in the form of a snake.¹⁸²

Most ritual invocations of ancestral mediation to God involved the participation of cattle (Read 1956). The exchange of cattle was also central to the ritual formation of a marriage contract between two families. This practice of lobola was strictly enforced by the Ngoni upon their arrival

¹⁸⁰ Thompson, 1995, p.35.
¹⁸¹ Thompson notes that many Ngoni Christians justified this traditional role of ancestors as paralleling the role of saints within the Catholic and other Christian traditions. (1995, p.35)
¹⁸² A motif which is still common on men’s walking sticks.
in northern Nyasaland, and became customary law among the local Tumbuka populations in their midst. Thompson writes:

It is probably true to say, as Monica Wilson does for most small societies in Africa, that Ngoni religious rituals were closely integrated with the economic and political activity of the people in general. One of the major functions of such rituals was the well-being of society as a whole. They were, therefore, often connected with important events and cycles in the life of the nation, and were carried out, for example, in times of drought, before hoeing, before harvest, and before going into battle.\(^{183}\)

In particular, the first-fruits ceremony, *incwala*, was hoped for as a joyous celebration among the Ngoni. If the weather had been kind and the rains abundant, it marked an end to the hungry season of limited food resources, and the beginning of a harvest of plenty, when people could grow fat with the abundance of food. Thompson notes that by the Livingstonia missionary record, it seems *incwala* was almost unpracticed by Ngoni living in northern Nyasaland at the time of their arrival in the late nineteenth century.\(^{184}\)

**The Tumbuka-Ngoni Religious Encounter**

The invasion of the Ngoni led to significant religious changes for the Tumbuka. In 1845, the Ngoni assaulted and sacked the religious center of Chikhang’ombe in Nkhamenga, disrupting the foundation of the territorial Tumbuka religious authority (Vail 1981). With the old religious order undermined, and the introduction of new Ngoni and other foreign spiritual agencies, northern Nyasaland experienced a partial transformation of religious categories, within continuous forms of religious practice. Ncozana (2002) writes that the offspring of Ngoni-Tumbuka marriages were often possessed by either the ancestral spirits of their Ngoni fathers or those of their Tumbuka

---

\(^{183}\) Thompson, 1995, pp.35-36.

\(^{184}\) As will be seen in Chapter Five, the ceremony experienced a bit of a revival through its association with the missionary practice of Easter, timed near the local harvest season on the Gregorian calendar.
mothers. The spirits of people of Karanga, Bemba, and Senga and other heritage were also introduced into the mix, and led to the rise of novel forms of spirit possession among the Tumbuka, including by foreign *virombo*, *vyanusi*, and *vimbuza* spirits.\(^{185}\) Ncozana suggests that these foreign spirits are generally attributed with the malevolent intention of bringing misfortune to the possessed and their families. Because these spirits are outside of a person’s lineage, they are more difficult to control, as traditional practices of appeasement centered around invocations to the family line are less effective. Ncozana suggests that the growth of foreign spirit possession among Tumbuka populations in the latter half of the nineteenth century indicated a pattern of resistance among Tumbukas to their recent subjugation by the Ngoni.\(^{186}\)

Further in the same vain, both Tumbukas and Tongas reacted to Ngoni overlordship with the formation of a new religious movement characterized by possession by *vipili* spirit snakes (Vail 1979, Ncozana 2002). An *mpili* is an adder, a gentle snake when unprovoked, but deadly when it strikes. Likewise, Ncozana argues that the Tumbuka and Tonga saw themselves as a nonviolent people who had allowed the Ngoni conquerors to settle in the region without great levels of violence, but who were now ready to strike back. This new form of *vipili* spirit possession spread rapidly throughout both Tonga and Tumbuka territories through the second half of the nineteenth century. Local priests and priestesses, possessed by *vipili* spirit snakes, first inspired the Tonga to rebel against their Ngoni masters in 1877 (Thompson 1995). Their subsequent defeat of the Ngoni war party (*impi*) sent down to discipline them inspired the Tumbuka to try the same. A few years later, several Tumbuka groups also rebelled, including various Henga and Kamanga groups who broke away from Ngoni settlements and resettled in areas of the Henga valley. Another group of

\(^{185}\) As will be seen in Chapter Six, this complex of possessions, which I refer to as the Vimbuza complex, are still salient categories of possession in northern Malawi today.

\(^{186}\) Ncozana does not specify what he means by “resistance”, whether framed in emotional, cultural, or practical terms.
Tumbuka, under the leadership of Baza Dokowe, revolted near Hora mountain. They were eventually surrounded on the mountain, where most either starved to death or were killed trying to escape (Thompson 1995). During this unsettled time, witchcraft accusations and the use of the *mwabvi* poison ordeal were widespread throughout the region.

**Arrival of Livingstonia Mission**

The early nineteenth century was thus a time characterized by significant religious change and contestation, mostly caused by the recent juxtaposition of Ngoni authority over the region, and the introduction of Ngoni, Bemba, Senga, and Karanga religious influences, among others. Into this religious and spiritual mix, Scottish Presbyterian missionaries in the late nineteenth century introduced a new religious system, Christianity. It was characterized by a gospel message preaching a new revelation of God, a God of power, authority, and grace, and an idealized social ethos grounded in practices of love, forgiveness, and self-discipline. It was premised in a material source, the Bible, a textual authority said to be inspired by God, the best and truest testament of God’s will for humankind. It introduced a new spiritual actor, the Holy Spirit, into the local pantheon of spirits, and argued for His supremacy over all of spiritual and natural reality. It called on all people to recognize and repent their sins, submit themselves to the grace and authority of God, and begin to live new lives in accordance with His sacred instructions. This act of conversion was to be accompanied by obedience to a sanctified code of conduct, including monogamous marriage, abstinence from alcohol, and withdrawal from local practices of divination and magic. Through their own study of the Bible and from the instructions of other more mature Christians, converts were to commit themselves to better understanding the Christian faith and of Divine will in their lives. If judged doctrinally competent, each person could then qualify for participation in the Christian rituals of baptism, communion, marriage and burial.
Christianity, as cosmology, conduct, and competence, was introduced in companion with a range of other Western cultural accompaniments, including manners of architecture, dress, etiquette, labor, schooling, cuisine, technical competence, bureaucratic organization, and a host of other cultural accouterments, among them biomedicine. The missionaries who brought these biblical, biomedical, and cultural models of personhood to northern Nyasaland were products of and supported by a European society sure of itself, of its Enlightenment and Victorian values, and of the superiority of its ‘civilized’ way of life. Like other Protestant missionaries of their day in Africa (see Strayer 1978 and Beidelman 1982), not all Livingstonia missionaries were equally enamored with Western civilization and some ended up in Africa precisely because of their own discomfort at modern trends at home. But there remained a confidence in their mission, and in the civilizing influence of their Christianity, culture, and commerce. The establishment of the Mission through the late nineteenth century was followed by the introduction of British colonial rule in 1907. Yet even before the administrative colonization of the British, the Mission had introduced dramatic changes in local life through the expansion of its network of schools, the building of congregations and churches, the establishment of novel commercial networks, and the advertisement and practice of its biomedicine. Many of the planned outcomes of the missionary project were realized, including the expansion of literacy, the growth of a class of educated Christian men and women, and the growth of the Christian church itself. Yet there were also unforeseen consequences, as local agents used their newfound religious and cultural knowledge, and many of the values associated with it, to challenge missionary authority, and to initiate novel religious movements outside of the Mission’s sphere of influence and control. From the start, Christianity and its accompaniments were being changed in the translation into local terms, and they took on new forms of relevance and pragmatics in the process.

187 More specifically, a late nineteenth century version of biomedicine.
Other results were generally unforeseen by the missionaries, including important economic ones. Many of the skilled Livingstonia graduates took their industrial, literate, and bureaucratic skills to seek wage employment in the commercial centers of the coast, Southern Rhodesia, and South Africa (McCracken 1970, 1977; Mbunge 1980; Vail 1989; Sindima 1992). The result of this labor migration was a labor and brain drain that left the region, despite its reputation for educational excellence, as one of the most underdeveloped and poor regions of central-east Africa. Many of these labor migrants returned to northern Malawi after many years abroad, and brought with them new cultural and religious influences. As will be seen in more detail in the next chapter, many of Malawi’s African Instituted Churches were founded by northern Malawians who had spent time abroad, a pattern of religious innovation that had profound consequences for the religious history of the region.

\[137\]

This line of argumentation can be overemphasized, however, as noted by John McCracken (1994). While mission-derived educational skills did contribute to the labor migration, so too did physical isolation, high transport costs, the absence of profitable cash crops, and the punitive impact of colonial ‘hut’ taxes. In 1893 the British introduced a hut tax of three shillings in Nyasaland. In 1901 it became 12 shillings, the result of complaints in 1900 by Europeans of a labor shortage. This high tax posed a difficult burden on most families, and many men migrated to colonial commercial and industrial centers in order to raise monies. In 1921 it was fixed at 3 shillings per male (Source: Malawi Certificate of Education, Ministry of Education and Culture, 1999).
Chapter Four
The Establishment, Growth, and Segmentation of the Livingstonia Mission

The Livingstonia Mission was founded by the Free Church of Scotland in 1874, and was inspired by the call of David Livingstone to bring Christianity, commerce, and civilization to the regions of southeast Africa. Livingstone had made four successive journeys into southeast Africa, before dying there in 1873 in Illala in what is now eastern Zambia. During his third trip, the Zambezi Expedition (1858-1854), he encountered both the Shire River and Lake Nyasa, and returned to Britain pronouncing the area particularly well-suited to and in need of Christian missions. He justified his call to missionary agency in the region as a means to spread the Gospel message, but also as an effort to break the local slave trade, to which he expressed a deep sense of personal outrage. Just a month after Livingstone’s 1874 funeral at Westminster Abbey, after the dramatic journey of his body from what is now Zambia, Dr. James Stewart made a proposal to the

---

189 The institutional lineage of the Free Church of Scotland traces back to 1560, when the Reformed tradition was first introduced into Scotland by John Knox, who had studied with Calvin in Geneva for years. In that year, the Roman Catholic Church was disestablished and the Scottish Parliament recognized “the reformed Church of Scotland [as] the only true and holy kirk of Jesus Christ within this realm.” In the same year, the Scottish Confession of Faith was issued, and it served to guide the Presbyterian church in Scotland for almost a century, until the Westminster Confession of Faith was adopted in 1646. It was not until 1689 that the Church in Scotland emerged clearly in its Presbyterian and Episcopal forms. In that year, the Presbyterian Church of Scotland (COS) was established by law, though Roman Catholic and Episcopal churches continued to be active in Scotland. During the next century, the COS would be undermined by two secessions, and would in subsequent years continue to experience divisions and reunions. In 1843, in an event known as “The Disruption,” over four-hundred clergy seceded and formed the Free Church of Scotland. Four years later, two other splinter groups came together to form the United Presbyterian Church. The Free Church itself was divided in 1893 when a group broke off to form the Free Presbyterian Church. In 1900, the majority of the Free Church congregations joined with the United Presbyterian Church to form the United Free Church of Scotland, though a significant minority did not participate in this union and retained the name of the Free Church of Scotland. The new church, the United Free Church, united with the Church of Scotland in 1929 under the latter’s name, and yet again a minority remained outside and continued as the United Free Church of Scotland.
Free Church of Scotland’s General Assembly in Edinburgh advocating the founding of a mission to Nyasaland, which would be called “Livingstonia” (McCracken 1977). A committee of Glasgow merchants soon raised sufficient funds to finance such a mission for five years, and within a year of the proposal the first party of missionaries departed for Nyasaland. This group was led by E.D. Young, a young Lieutenant in the Royal Navy, and included among its members Robert Laws, MD, who would in a few years become the leader of the Livingstonia Mission and its most dominant personality. Its five other members were skilled artisans. This first expedition reached the southern tip of Lake Nyasa on October 12, 1875. Tents were erected at Cape Maclear on a peninsula on the southwestern edge of the lake on October 18th. Despite the mission’s mandate to fight slavery, the rules of the Livingstonia Mission forbade active interference in the slave trade or the forcible freeing of captives. It was understood that mission stations would serve as slave-free zones, and as such provide a countering geographic presence to the institution. In addition, the missionaries also understood that part of their mission was to facilitate the establishment of alternate commercial ventures.¹⁹⁰

“Tribal” responses to missionary activity

¹⁹⁰ In his 1915 book, *Livingstonia: The Story of Our Mission*, Donald Fraser writes: “From the first it was the ambition of the Mission to tempt others into this land who might co-operate with them in the holy work of lifting the people into freedom and prosperity...It was...evident that the presence of legitimate commerce was necessary, not only for the Europeans, but also for breaking the back of the slave trade, and for rousing the ambitions of the people” (p.12). As such, the Livingstonia Mission supported the establishment of the “Livingstonia Central Africa Company Limited”, later to become the African Lakes Corporation, the dominant commercial venture in the region up until and through independence. Its two founding brothers, John and Fred Moir, sons of an Edinburgh doctor, were close associates of the Mission, and the latter accompanied Robert Laws on his first visit to Inkosi ya makosi M’mbelwa in 1879. In this manner, a corporate commercial venture was integral to the establishment of the Mission, and to its growth as its main foreign products supplier. Locals in north Nyasaland certainly recognized this corporation as an arm of the Mission, and it undoubtedly shaped their understanding and response to the missionary message and presence.
By 1878, after several missionary deaths from malaria and other tropical ailments, the decision was made to move station headquarters north along the western edge of the lake. In that same year, Stewart received permission from the Tonga chief Marenga to settle in his district, and an experimental station was opened at Bandawe, just south of Chintheche, a bit more than halfway up the lake’s western shore (McCracken 1977). Three years later, mission headquarters were moved there. The Livingstonia missionaries immediately found themselves amidst a complicated and highly contested political environment, situated in the midst of a large Tonga society that, in face of continued Ngoni raiding, had become increasingly concentrated in fortified villages along the lakeshore. The Mission committed itself to defending the villages in its immediate to the Marenga area, but not to intervene further afield. In the early years of the 1880’s, increasing numbers of area Tongas began to settle around Marenga’s village and the station in search of protection (McCracken 1977). It is no surprise then that Tongas were among the earliest mission associates and converts.

In 1878, the same year that Bandawe was established as an experimental station, the Mission also established a station inland at Kaning’ina, on the borders of Tumbuka-Ngoni country. In that same year, though only after some initial confusion, the missionaries identified the local Ngoni paramount chief, Inkosi ya makosi M’mbelwa, and contact was made with him. In the years following the shift of headquarters to Bandawe in 1881, the Mission expanded its institutional presence dramatically among Tumbuka-Ngoni populations, opening stations at Njuyu (1885), Ekwendeni (1889), and Hora (1893). Members of the Ngoni establishment engaged the Mission from the start of their co-presence in northern Nyasaland. Initially, fearing a compromise of their traditional cosmology and ethos, Ngoni rulers were reluctant to send their children to mission schools.\footnote{The Livingstonia Mission opened a station at Njuyu, deep in Ngoni territory, in 1882. Despite} Elders rightly perceived that mission education would give young men an independent
power base that would undermine their own power, which derived from control over cattle and their status as bearers of the sacred lineage authority. In his book *Among the Wild Ngoni*, Walter Elmslie, a Livingstonia missionary who arrived in the region in 1884, quotes an Ngoni elder’s defense of Ngoni reluctance to allow schools to open in their villages:

> If we give you our children to teach, your words will steal their hearts; they will grow up cowards, and refuse to fight for us when we are old; and knowing more than we do, they will despise us.

Yet despite their hesitation, Ngoni leaders felt compelled to engage with the missionaries, as they were clearly powerful new actors on the local scene, and sought to build a political alliance with them. The missionary establishment that was growing among the Tonga populations at the lakeshore station of Bandawe was of particular concern to the Ngoni leadership, and they asked the Mission to abandon its work among the Tonga and come settle in Ngoni territory. For their part, the missionaries wanted to establish educational work among the Ngoni and Tumbuka populations of the inland regions, but did not want to relinquish their sites among the Tonga at the lake. In the years that followed, relations between the missionaries and local Ngoni rulers would be characterized by mutual and divided policy agendas on both sides of the encounter.

Throughout early 1879, less than a year after the Mission opened a station at Mount Kaning’iná, representatives from several Ngoni chiefs, including M’mbelwa, visited the station, while the missionaries made sporadic visits to various chiefly headquarters. These initial contacts

---

192 Fraser notes M’mbelwa’s resistance to missionary schools in his region, and the providential prayer that changed the attitude. p.14-15.
194 Ngoni society was in a state of transition by 1880. Rebellions by Tongas and Tumbukas during the 1870’s had shown the limitations of military strength alone, and within the state, various groups were vying for influence. All these factors shaped the Ngoni response to the missionaries, and made it less hostile than it otherwise might have been. (Thompson, 1995, p.29)
culminated in a June 1879 meeting in M’mbelwa’s village of Echigodhweni in which the chiefs collectively welcomed the missionaries with a gift of eleven cattle.\footnote{195} Thompson suggests that the Ngoni

...regarded the gift as a pledge of friendship—not in any ordinary sense, but in a mystical and more binding way. In many respects the gift bore strong resemblances to the transfer of \textit{lobola} cattle on the arrangement of an Ngoni marriage, and the Ngoni certainly spoke of the relationship between M’mbelwa and the mission in these terms.\footnote{196}

Because of its isolation and complications in provisioning, Kaning’ina was abandoned in 1879, much to the dismay of the Ngoni leadership. Aware that Ngoni leaders were concerned to maintain a close relationship with the Mission, another station was soon established, in 1882, at Njuyu, even deeper within Ngoni territory. By 1885 a smaller outstation at Chinyera, five miles west of Njuyu, had also been started, and included a small church and school buildings. A second outstation at Mlima followed shortly thereafter. Tensions between the Ngoni and Tongas living along the lakeshore, however, soon led to a crisis in relations between the Mission and the Ngoni.\footnote{197} In 1887 M’mbelwa summoned Laws to a meeting with the gathered Inkosis at Njuyu and demanded that the Mission abandon its lakeshore station at Bandawe among the Tonga and establish a new one within Ngoni territory. Inkosi Mtwalo, in particular, wanted a station established within his territory. Eventually a compromise was reached wherein the Mission retained a presence at the Bandawe station, but committed themselves to starting a new station at Mtwalo’s village of Ekwendeni.\footnote{198} That station, including a school, was opened in 1889 with Peter McCallum, a

\footnote{195} Both M’mbelwa and Mtwalo had given a cow to the mission the previous year, and Mzukuzuku gave one earlier in 1879 (Thompson 1995). The collective gift came in spite of serious divisions among the chiefs, themselves competing for influence in the region.

\footnote{196} Thompson, 1995, p.38.

\footnote{197} In March 1887 a group of Ngoni youths attacked a group of Tonga carriers, and the following month Tongas from the Chinteche area attacked several Ngoni villages in Inkosi Mtwalo’s area, killing and capturing several people (Thompson, 1995, pp. 53-54).

\footnote{198} Thompson, 1995, p.57.
carpenter, acting as head-of-station. It soon superceded Njuyu in importance as the main Livingstonia Mission station within Ngoni territory. In 1895, another station was opened at Elangeni, in Inkosi Mabulaêo’s area, and Makara Tembo was put in charge.  

The previous year, Mission headquarters had once again been moved. As had Cape Maclear before it, Bandawe proved a site prone to malaria, fever, and death for many of the Livingstonia missionaries, and the decision was made to move headquarters further north, but also west into high country. After scouting a range of options, a site was chosen on the Khondowe plateau, just east of the larger and higher Nyika plateau. A new station called Livingstonia was founded there in 1894.

Many of the Livingstonia Mission’s first associates and converts were socially marginalized people, individuals and small families who left their local village lives and came to start new ones within the orbit of a Mission station. This parallels a broader trend in the early history of Christianity in Africa. Eventually, the Mission moved away from this strategy of uprooting people, as it went against the stated aim of encouraging “self-governing, self-propagating, and self-supporting” local churches (McCracken 1977, Thompson 1995). Instead, it spread further its institutional presence into already existing villages, establishing “bush schools” which were visited periodically by itinerating missionaries who moved around by foot, bicycle, and motorcycle, on what were often trips of many weeks.

Groups of Tumbuka-speakers, including some living within Ngoni rule and others who had migrated out, responded to the growing Mission presence by migrating into the Mission’s institutional domain, where certain forms of training and economic opportunities were emerging.

---

199 Makara Tembo was the first Ngoni man put in charge of a station, but others soon followed. After Steele’s death in 1895, his brother Mawelera was left in charge at Njuyu. In 1876, first David Malawantu and then Johathan Chirwa were put in charge of Hora station. (Thompson 1995)

200 It would serve as Mission headquarters until 1978, when they were moved to the city of Mzuzu.

for locals via Mission education and employment. Tumbuka-speaking Henga and Kamanga, in particular, were among the earliest to seek out and embrace mission schooling at Livingstonia station.

In addition to economic and educational opportunities, Vail suggests that Tumbuka migration was in some respect political in tone, encouraged by the fact that Khondowe was a sparsely populated area between Ngoni and Ngonde dominated regions. As such, this region was perhaps viewed as a promising site on which to build an increasingly autonomous political identity (see Vail 1972, 1989).

The missionaries’ presence and activities at Khondowe presented local Tumbukas and Tongas with a novel schema of potential empowerment within the emerging political and economic infrastructure of Mission and colony. From among their numbers would emerge many of the missions’ earliest students and converts, and later, the colonial and post-colonial eras’ most influential political and religious leaders.

Starting in 1889, the Livingstonia missionary Dr. David Cross began teaching several hundred pupils in a makeshift school situated further north along the lakeshore at Karonga. This school was among Ngonde, Henga, and Kamanga refugees who had fled an escalating war to the north involving the Ngonde and agents of the African Lakes Company (ALC) in conflict with Swahili traders and their hired Henga soldiers. In 1891, a school was completed in Karonga, next to the ALC’s stockade, and by the end of 1894, one-hundred and fifty students were in regular attendance. Henga students in particular sought out education at Mission schools, and soon came

---

202 When the missionaries arrived, many Henga and Kamanga had already fled Ngoni rule in the headwater areas of the South Rukuru river, and had migrated to live in the Henga valley, a narrow corridor along the northern sections of the South Rukuru river, as well as among Ngonde populations further to the north (McCracken 2000; Thompson 1995).

203 In 1965, one year after independence, two-thirds of the students admitted into the University of Malawi were from the Northern Province, the home of only one fifth of Malawi’s population (McCracken 1994).
to dominate both the student and church populations of this northern region of the Mission’s work.\textsuperscript{204}

While many of the early Mission adherents were Tongas, Tumbukas, and Hengas, some of the Mission’s most prominent early converts were also members of the Ngoni establishment, though as will be seen, not members of the ruling Jere clan.\textsuperscript{205} The Livingstonia Mission’s first two converts were of Senga heritage, sons of Kalengo Tembo, a prominent diviner who practiced near Njuyu, just across the Kasitu river from M’mbelwa’s main village.\textsuperscript{206} These men were in some respects part of the Ngoni establishment,\textsuperscript{207} even as they were of different ethnic heritage, and (as sons of a diviner) members of the local religious, rather than political, authority.

Through both the expansion of the Mission’s institutional infrastructure and these diverse patterns of group migration into Mission areas, members from many of the diverse tribes of the northern Nyasa region came into contact, communication, and, for some, cohabitation with these new missionary agents. Political relations among these tribes, among other factors, profoundly shaped their responses to the mission presence, as groups and individuals looked to the mission as a potentially empowering or threatening presence, or most likely, both. The give-and-take of

\textsuperscript{204} McCracken 1977 (2000), p.141.
\textsuperscript{205} The \textit{abaZansi} were now small minority, and individuals of other tribes often took prominent positions within society.
\textsuperscript{206} The two brothers were baptized by Dr. Laws at Njuyu in April 1890, after having first approached Elsmie eight months earlier with their request to participate in the rite. By then, they had been attending night classes at Njuyu with Elsmie for several years, and since 1886 Mawelera had been teaching at the mission’s day school on station. A third brother who had also attended classes with them was never baptized, as by 1890 he had taken a second wife, thus violating the Mission’s strictures against polygamy. (see Thompson 1995, pp. 53-63)
\textsuperscript{207} Thompson goes so far as to call them “Ngoni converts” (1995, p. 63).
diplomacy between missionaries, Ngonis, Tumbukas, and Tongas, would dramatically shape the religious and political history of the region in the years to come.\footnote{208}{In addition to the Ngoni, Fraser identifies the Chewa, Tumbuka, and Bemba as the three dominant tribes within the Livingstonia Mission’s inland sphere of work. Of them he writes “They all belong to the great Bantu family, and the Chewa and Tumbuka are very closely allied. Any attempt to trace the history of each clan lands us in the intricacies of invasions and migrations from the north and from the south, of short-lived dynasties, of revolts, absorptions, and alliances” \textit{(Livingstonia: The Story of Our Mission}, p.53).}

**From Hora to Lwasozi: A history of Embangweni**

In 1893, a Livingstonia Mission station was started near Hora mountain, fifteen miles southwest of Njuyu, in Inkosi (Chief) Mzukuzuku’s territory and near his village of Embangweni. Peter McCallum was again placed in charge here, and the next year was joined by David Malawantu, an Ngoni convert, who had received several years of education at Lovedale College in South Africa. Malawantu took full charge of the station when the McCallum’s were transferred to another station in 1896, but was soon replaced by Jonathan Chirwa.\footnote{209}{Thompson (1995) identifies Chirwa as an Ngoni (see p.150), though the Chirwa name is of Tonga heritage.} Donald and Agnes Fraser were appointed to Hora in 1901, after their return from furlough in Scotland.\footnote{210}{The Frasers first arrived in northern Nyasaland in 1897, where they were stationed at Ekwendeni. In 1900 they returned to Scotland for a furlough of many months, returning to Nyasaland in 1901.} In the following year, however, Inkosi Mzukuzuku approached the Donald Fraser about the need to move his village further to the south, into more sustainable agricultural terrain.\footnote{211}{Thompson (1995, p.131) notes that this migration of Mzukuzuku’s population was consistent with a larger trend of Ngoni migration south in the years around the turn of the century, also a response to dry ecological conditions. In particular, the tributary river valleys that made up the headwaters of the South Rukuru River became a preferred destination. Inkosi Mzikuola had also relocated to this area at about the same time.} In that year, and not for the first time, a swarm of locusts had devastated what limited crop there was, resulting in
widespread hunger and ill health. Mzukuzuku asked Fraser to consider moving the Hora station with them. Fraser had witnessed this deprivation and suffering during his itineration in the region during his first term, and with the backing of the Mission council, agreed with the decision to seek out a more suitable, wetter ecological site. Fraser and the council’s decision was motivated in large part by a keen interest to maintain a central Mission presence within the Tumbuka-Ngoni populations under Mzukuzuku’s leadership and control. As Agnes Fraser wrote in *Donald Fraser of Livingstonia*:

> For some time there had been growing a strong desire to move away from the denuded soil and the exhausted maize-plots of that district. Now, with no harvest to reap, they were keener than ever to open new patches for cultivation in the wooded land that lay to the south. Hora was the main difficulty. Naturally we were both loth to leave it, and the people were equally unwilling to move away from the missionary for whom they had so long been asking. They could see our objection to abandoning buildings so recently occupied; but they promised not only that they would give free labour to erect others, but that the Mission should have the first choice of a site in the new territory... There was in reality no alternative but to accompany them if the work was to be efficiently done.

Within a few months of the agreement to move, Fraser began exploratory expeditions south of Hora to scope out a possible new site. A new site for a station was located near the headwaters of the Lwasozi River, on a hillside overlooking the river, about fifty-six kilometers south and slightly west of Hora. Semi-permanent structures were erected here, but the site was abandoned.

212 Hora had been the site of a revolt by Tumbukas, led by Baza Dokowe, in 1880, which had resulted in the rebellious Tumbukas retreating up Hora Mountain in the face of attacking Ngoni forces. Surrounded, many Tumbukas starved to death or were killed trying to escape. The brutality of these events and their freshness in local memories, both Tumbuka and Ngoni, may have played a role in the subsequent decision to move the population away from Hora. One also has to wonder what local associations were made between the massacre and the subsequent drought and locust invasion.

213 Thompson 1995, p.132. The move was further warranted by the fact that Inkosi ya Makosi Chimitunga, successor to his father M’mbelwa, made a move to neighboring Edingeni, just fifteen kilometers northwest of Embangweni, at around the same time Mzukuzuku made his move.

214 Fraser, Agnes. 1934. *Donald Fraser of Livingstonia*. London: Hodder and Stoughton., p.95.

215 Lwasozi means “the river of tears” in ChiTumbuka.
within the year because of the poor quality of the river water. A new site was chosen a few kilometers northeast, near the headwaters of the Kakoma\textsuperscript{216} river, a tributary of the Lwasozi, and Mzukuzuku gave Fraser a square mile of land on which to build. Mzukuzuku established his village on the other side of the Kapalankhwali stream, another tributary of the Lwasozi river. The new station was named Loudon, in honor of Dr. James Loudon of Hamilton, Scotland, whose widow had given one thousand Pounds, originally to build a hospital, which were used to build the station. Locals, however, referred to it as “Mzukuzuku’s station,”\textsuperscript{217} and during my research time, it was known by most as Embangweni station.\textsuperscript{218} Donald and Agnes Fraser were the first missionaries-in-charge of the station, and supervised the construction of large brick church which was completed in 1904, and which still stands today, though it has undergone a number of modifications, including a reduction in size because of structural concerns regarding the building itself. Over the course of the next decade, Loudon quickly grew into the largest and most dynamic station within the Livingstonia Mission’s network of stations, with a substantial medical and educational presence. This size and strength made it a key station for the Livingstonia Mission in the years following, as ecclesiastical competition arrived in the forms of the Watch Tower movement, and the African Instituted Churches that emerged out of the independency movement.

**Embangweni and the Mission Biomedical Project**

Within her first year of residency, Agnes Fraser, a doctor, had begun a small medical and health education practice at Embangweni station. In doing so, she became the first person to systematically introduce biomedical models of the body to the local population and argue for their

\textsuperscript{216}Kakoma translates as “the pretty little stream” from ChiTumbuka.
\textsuperscript{217}Thompson 1995, p.132-33.
\textsuperscript{218}Until recently, most maps of Malawi or southeast African marked the spot as “Loudon” not “Embangweni,” and some maps (e.g. Michelin’s Southern Africa Map) continue to do so even now.
validity and efficacy in treating disease. In that effort, Fraser was party to the larger attempt by medical agents of the Livingstonia Mission to transform local categories of illness etiology and establish new standards of therapeutic practice throughout northern Nyasaland.

The literature on the medical work of the early Livingstonia missionaries is somewhat limited, much of it confined to the personal memoirs of the missionaries themselves, recounted in personal anecdotes and narratives, and in the laudatory accounts written by later supporters of the Mission.219 Among the more scholarly works on the history of the Mission’s medical work are Michael Gelfand’s Lakeside Pioneers: Socio-medical study of Nyasaland (1875 - 1920) (1964) and Michael and Elspeth King’s The Story of Medicine and Disease in Malawi: The 130 Years Since Livingstone (1992).220

The medical missionaries of the Livingstonia Mission were not the first biomedical agents to visit the regions of northern Nyasaland. Livingstone, himself a medical doctor, was accompanied by two other doctors during the Zambezi Expedition of 1858 to 1863, during which he and his party traveled through the Lake Nyasa region. The surgeon and botanist Sir John Kirk, a member of the Zambesi Expedition, wrote the first clinical description of Blackwater Fever, which had previously been confused with Yellow Fever. The surgeon and naturalist Dr. Charles Meller, ship’s doctor on the Pioneer, Livingstone’s boat for the Zambezi Expedition, did the first disease survey on malaria in Central Africa, which was published in the British Medical Journal and

---


220 The latter is the most detailed account to date of medical missions in Malawi, including that of the Livingstonia Mission’s work in the north, though its academic value suffers from a lack of citations throughout the book.
This was a time when important medical discoveries were being made in Europe.

Anaesthesia was only a few years old, and antiseptic surgery had just been described.

The Livingstonia medical missionaries who came to Nyasaland less than two decades later were trained in these new medical methods and tools. In March 1876, while still headquartered at Cape Maclear, Robert Laws, M.D. did the first documented surgery using chloroform in Central Africa, removing a cystic tumor from above a patient’s left eye (Livingstone 1921). In October 1881 when Laws and others settled at Bandawe, a red cross flag was hoisted over the clinic constructed there, and by 1882, Laws had seen 3,104 patients, of which 2,304 were treated at Bandawe (King and King 1992). Laws came to be called “sing’anga wankuru” – the great doctor – by locals. By 1897, three years after Mission headquarters had been moved to Kondowe, Laws had treated 9,917 patients, of whom 7,392 were surgical. Between 1903 and 1905, thirteen Livingstonia hospitals and sixteen dispensaries were built as local “self-help” projects, including at Ekwendeni and Loudon, and 83,043 patients were treated in Livingstonia Mission facilities (Gelfand 1964). In 1911, the David Gordon Memorial Hospital was built at the Livingstonia Station in Kondowe, and was soon among the most important biomedical treatment centers in southeast Africa.

---

221 Dr. David Kerr Cross, who served with the Livingstonia Mission from 1884 to 1902, wrote in the first medical report for the Karonga area that “the cases are extremely interesting and offer a splendid field for original work.” According to his account, illnesses that were common to the region included leprosy, syphilis, malaria, smallpox, epilepsy, meningitis, elephantiasis, and filariasis (King and King, 1992, p. 54).

222 In addition to Laws, who arrived in Nyasaland in 1875, they included William Black (1875), James Stewart (1876), Jane Waterston (1878), R. Hannington (1881), William Scott (1883), Walter Elmslie (1884), David Kerr Cross (1885), George Henry (1887), George Steel (1890), D. Fotheringham (1890), and Agnes Fraser (1896).

223 Conditions treated included the just noted cystic tumor above an eye, as well as mastoiditis (ear infections), a perforated gastric ulcer, other types of ulcers, cataracts, and an obstructed hernia. (King and King, 1992)
The medical missionaries of the Livingstonia Mission conceived of their work as not only curative, but also as evangelical and educational. They justified it as a means to relieve physical suffering among members of local populations, but also as a witness to the love of God, and as a demonstration of the superiority of Western Christian society, culture, and science. In all respects, they saw it as furthering the work of the Mission. Writing of the early years of the mission, Gelfand suggests that this medico-evangelical strategy was largely successful.

From the start the Livingstonia missionaries were able to establish contact through Dr. Laws and Dr. Black with the African population more easily because of the medical help provided by these men. At first, very wisely, in order to win their confidence in the white man’s ‘magic’, Laws confined his surgery to minor procedures which were likely to be successful. The Africans were particularly impressed with chloroform.\textsuperscript{224}

In \textit{Among the Wild Ngoni}, Walter Elmslie describes his own invitation to visit Inkosi Mtwalo at his village in Ekwendeni, some time after having paid a previous visit to the village to treat one of Mtwalo’s children. Describing their reception upon arrival, Elmslie writes:

\begin{quote}
We received a hearty welcome, and when the boy who had been sick was brought out and proudly shown as now in good health through the white man’s medicine, it was evident that the effects of the medical work were wider than in the good recovery of the lad.\textsuperscript{225}
\end{quote}

Elmslie also argued that the Mission’s medical work was not only changing local patterns of health-seeking behavior, but also shaping local religious sentiments. It was the power and seeming efficacy of their medical techniques, he suggests, which brought people to them. He notes:

\begin{quote}
At first people came in crowds. Those who were sick expected to be healed immediately, and those who were not sick expected medicine to keep them well. Many cases of a very trivial nature were treated, but there was a value in the work apart from the relief given to the individual .... A poor woman, left to die as an evil-doer if she failed in her “hour of nature’s sorrow,” when saved, together with her infant, by treatment of the proper kind, would thenceforth be well disposed towards us and our work. A wife represented so many cattle, and her husband would appreciate the benefit of our work and be our friend... In such ways, up and down the country, the work was quietly and surely influencing the
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{224} \textit{Lakeside Pioneers}, 1962, p.40.  
\textsuperscript{225} Elmslie, \textit{Among the Wild Ngoni}, 1899, p.248.
people, and while there was yet nothing to tabulate for reports, the future harvest was being insured.\textsuperscript{226}

At Loudon station in Embangweni, Dr. Agnes Fraser opened a small medical clinic shortly after the station was founded, and the medical work at the station remained under her supervision until her retirement from the field in 1925.\textsuperscript{227} Regarding the limited scope of this early clinic, she wrote:

After vain endeavors to approximate the real to the ideal, one came to realize that the hospital began historically as a hospitium, and that essentially it was God’s guest house for the needy and neglected, the old and sick and injured, in which to fit them to face life’s duties again, and that was all that really mattered, except to the prejudiced white woman in charge. Shelter, sleeping mats, a blanket, simple facilities for cooking and for storing water and firewood were all that were required to make it popular with patients and their attendant friends. Even this primitive type was a thing absolutely unknown to Africa, till it arose in one Mission Station after another, a witness in brick and mud to the truth of the message of the love of God.\textsuperscript{228}

Dr. Fraser’s claim to exclusivity as a center of care are likely overstated, though the hospital’s therapeutic practices and the religious ethos surrounding them were in many respects distinctive. Early on, Fraser’s efforts were concentrated on preventative health education, specifically targeted at local women, with whom she met in small adobe and thatch structure with a central fire pit built for the purpose. By her own account, she concentrated her efforts on training women in “mothercraft,” including lessons in hygiene, nutrition, and disease transmission. Among the central tools in her efforts was:

Tobias .... being a life-size celluloid doll who had returned with me to Africa after my first furlough. She (despite the name) proved an invaluable assistant for many years, attracting pupils and visitors and teaching them through practicing with her, how to manage and treat their own babies. Never was a doll gazed at with such mingled awe and admiration; even familiarity bred fondness rather than contempt, and to touch her for the first time required an effort of moral courage of which few women were capable without the incentive of the mingled contempt and encouragement of the initiated. Tobias went through the whole

\textsuperscript{226} \textit{Among the Wild Ngoni}, 1899, pp. 151-152.
\textsuperscript{227} Quinn, 1993, p.67.
\textsuperscript{228} See Agnes Fraser’s writings in “The Friend as Doctor” in \textit{Friends of Africa}, 1928, p. 92.
gamut of human suffering, being treated for one ailment one week, only to be found suffering from something else the next.²²⁹

I will not for the moment speculate what local women thought of this gendered but lifeless plastic body of a human baby, though as a model of the body as substance rather than spirit, it is hard to imagine a more fitting representation.²³⁰ Fraser suggests that many of her early lessons on health and disease were understood and embraced by the women with whom she worked. She writes that they accepted several of her demonstrations as efficacious, including boiling clothes and bandages to sterilize them for use with the sick. Fraser describes how, at least by her account, she convinced many local women of the efficacy of boiling to kill “germs.” Having already described her conversation with a group of local women about the existence of tiny insects that crawl from clothes and into skin, where they lay eggs, she quotes herself first in a brief conversation with an elderly local woman:

“Granny, would you like some of the big beautiful maize you admired in my garden for seed to plant? Very well, I have some boiled that I can let you have. It’s no good boiled? Why not? It wouldn’t germinate! Is that so? I wonder if boiled eggs would hatch out chickens?” The old lady assures me patiently that they wouldn’t. “But why not?” I wonder. The whole class combine to insist on its impossibility. Seeing that they are not going to arrive at it themselves, I suddenly brighten up. “Can it be that boiling destroys life?” This theory discussed and agreed to, we follow up the practical value of what we’ve discovered. The clothing is popped into the pot and while it boils, we pursue the logical outcome of our discovery -- perhaps thus the seeds and eggs of disease can be destroyed. This must be why white people boil water and boil the bandages and dressings in hospital and we arrange that when next we have a sewing class we must all make a little bag in which we can put scraps of cloth and by boiling both have something free from germs to put scratches and cuts when they occur. Many of my pupils knew but two words of English. One was ‘Yes-a-mam’ answering the roll call. It had been introduced into their language before my day. The other was ‘germ,’ and to them it represented the modern

²²⁹ Ibid., p. 95.
²³⁰ Such dolls are in continued use in biomedical instruction in the West and elsewhere, most broadly as tools for instruction in CPR and other emergency interventions. It is interesting to note that even within this instruction, some “spirit” is imaginatively attributed to the doll as a model of a living human being, a “life” that may slip away unless a specific repertoire of appropriate intervention is accomplished.
scientific equivalent for witchcraft spells, sympathetic magic, malignant spirits and other disease-causing agencies of the past.  

Fraser suggests that both she and the local women shared a common recognition of “life” as an animating force. She also suggests that the women comprehended her effort to broaden the scale of living organisms to include those too small to be seen with the eye, and that the women recognized and used the word “germ” to describe these tiny disease-bearing organisms. Her analogy can be diagramed as follows:

Boiling an egg in water.

Boiling a maize kernel in water.

Boiling a “germ” in water.

This analogy includes several components. First, it assumes an equivalence between different categories of “life,” differentiated by scale and type as egg (big, animal), kernel (medium, plant), and germ (small, animal). Secondly, it assumes a contrast between organic/bodily life and death. Thirdly, it suggests that a single physical process, boiling, is what transforms life into death. Fraser argued that through this analogy and others like it, she was successful in convincing local women of the sterilizing value of boiling. In the process, she suggests that she was largely successful in conveying what she calls a “modern scientific” model of disease as the consequence of infection by germs. She argues that “germs” became a new category of disease etiology within local diagnostic

---

231 Friends of Africa, p. 96. It should be noted that Fraser does not make reference to the fact that within local magico-therapeutic logic, little bags were often used to carry herbs that were thought to carry either constructive or destructive energy and potency. Could she not have been aware of this, or did she recognize and hope to use the analogy of the practice?
culture, alongside those of spells, magic, and the spirits. Fraser does not, and maybe could not, however, elaborate what this “modern scientific equivalent” amounted to in terms of local women’s specific understanding of germ theory within the broader theoretical and cultural framework of illness causality. Training in mother-craft continues in Embangweni hospital today, alongside with other preventative health care education efforts, with both in-patients and out-patients, and through the hospital’s Primary Health Care (PHC) activities, within the broader community area.

During the mid-1920's, under the direction of Dr. W. Turner, the medical facility at Embangweni expanded to become a rural hospital. Larger buildings were built, more sophisticated technologies acquired, and nurses, dispensers, and medical assistants began being trained in the hospital itself (Fraser 1928, Embangweni Hospital Report 2001). This focus on training local medical technicians during the 1920's mirrored a larger effort initiated within the Mission, one centered at the Overtoun Institution in Livingstonia under the supervision of Dr. John Todd. At Livingstonia, the first cohort of hospital assistants were extensively trained by Todd for four years before they were sent to Zomba to write government examinations. In addition to their theoretical training, their practical training included working as nurses in the hospital wards, assisting doctors during operations, and participating in vaccination campaigns against smallpox. The Institution also trained medical dispensers, hospital orderlies, and nurses. Livingstonia became a regional center of training for a class of medical technicians who could serve in the hospitals and clinics of the expanding Mission, and within those of the emerging colonial and commercial infrastructure of southern and eastern Africa.

---

232 Gelfand (1964) cites a letter by Todd in which he describes training sessions of four or five hours a day, for nine months each year, for each of the four years.

233 Gelfand notes that on one occasion Todd received a request from the Tanganyika colonial government for two-hundred trained hospital assistants.
The effort to train locals in biomedical technique had accompanied the missionary project in northern Nyasaland from the start, alongside the Mission’s broader educational and evangelical efforts. Early medical missionary writings make reference to young and adult “native assistants” who helped them during procedures, or in some cases, took full responsibility for treating patients. This practical training for some was accompanied by a more widespread education in Western science within Mission schools, which accompanied literacy and Christian doctrinal training from the start of the Mission’s educational efforts in the region.

In many respects, the Mission’s educational push was the vanguard of the Livingstonia Mission’s work, both in its evangelical and scientific missions. Theirs was a mission to change local systems of thought and categories of knowledge, about sacred personhood, the Divine and the nature of spiritual reality, but also about the material and organic substrates of nature and life. In the minds of the missionaries, their “civilizing” mission would introduce both the light of the gospel message, and the light of an emergent scientific paradigm that allowed for new levels of medical mastery. Towards that end, the missionaries focused much of their energies on building and staffing schools, and the establishment of station schools and surrounding “bush schools” often preceded the establishment of other Mission institutions. The writings of the early Livingstonia missionaries are full of accounts of their efforts to establish schools and attract scholars, and of their own emphasis on education as the central strategy of their evangelical and cultural mission.

The Mission’s Educational expansion

In 1890, the Livingstonia Mission operated four schools within Tumbuka-Ngoni areas, at Njuyu, Chinyera, Mlima and Ekwendeni. Total enrollment was around three hundred students.

---

234 For example, see *Friends of Africa*, p.110.
235 In *African Idylls* (p.30), Donald Fraser writes of a Mission school: “A few yards outside the untidy village, if you follow a roughly hoed road, you will come to a large rectangular house of poles and mud, roofed with grass. This is the village school. It is a fairly new building, much
By 1895 there were twenty schools with a total enrollment of 1,241 students, and by 1899, forty-four schools and almost eight thousand students (Thompson 1995). The work of Dr. George Steele, stationed at Njuyu from 1890 until his early death in 1895, contributed significantly to this educational expansion. Steele was a medical doctor who had attended night school for four years, while working, in order to get into Glasgow University, graduating in 1889 with degrees in medicine and surgery. In his mission work, he was a tireless itinerater, engaging on many evangelistic tours into surrounding villages intended to create interest in the Mission’s educational work. In a 1892 letter Steele wrote to Laws he writes, “I think now, more than ever, that our school system is, far above all else, the best evangelistic method.”236

Robert Laws, who became leader of the Livingstonia Mission in 1879, described education as the Mission’s greatest evangelizing tool, and argued that schools were first to be instruments of conversion, and second institutions of secular education. Giving local believers “direct” access to the Bible and its “sacred” truths was understood as the single most important missionary undertaking, and the Livingstonia Mission’s initial educational emphasis, as among other Protestant missions on the continent, was on literacy. Defending this emphasis, Fraser writes:

There were no books, no written language. So we opened schools, and gave them reading and writing, thus putting into their hands the key of all knowledge, and giving to them the Bible to speak daily as the Word of God, so that they might have a light for their path and food for their souls.237

__________________________

While mission education quickly grew to include far more than just literacy training, including training in industry, arts, sciences, mathematics, theology, “classical” philosophy, and Western-style critical thinking, this early focus on literate competency remained a prominent goal of and attraction to the mission educational program (McCracken 1977; Sindima 1992). Newly literate students required texts to read in their mother tongue, and so much of the early missionary emphasis was on translating selected books of the Bible. Initial efforts were started in ChiNgoni, but quickly changed to ChiTumbuka as the missionaries recognized the prevalence of the latter. By 1929 a whole New Testament in ChiTumbuka had been sent to the Christian Literature Society in Durban for printing, and by the next year over 5,000 New Testaments were circulating among Tumbuka-Ngoni populations.  

Mission educational efforts were, not surprisingly, focused on young people, though accounts also abound in missionary writings of “white haired grannies” and “bearded men” also participating in lessons. Writing of the Mission’s influence among the young, Ncozana notes:

Being schooled was prerequisite to becoming a Christian. Most of these children at school would eventually become Christians in spite of their parents. This trend of missionary influence upon the young continued into the twentieth century…While steps were taken to bring adults into the church, the school continued to be the strongest instrument for influencing the youth who became an ever growing force challenging the existing order, and breaking away from traditional life and spirit beliefs.

---

239 See for example Donald Fraser, 1915, p. 67.
240 Ncozana, 2002, p.128. Ncozana prefaced these comments by noting that “By 1890, after only nine years of work among the Tumbuka, Tonga, and Ngoni, the Livingstonia Mission had over 1,300 school boys and girls against 268 full communicant members” (p.128). These numbers differ significantly from those of Thompson, based on his readings of the Ngoniland report for 1895 (Livingstonia reports 1893-1903). Thompson (1995) describes a student population of three hundred by 1890, and one of 1,241 by 1895 when Steele died (p.67).
Thompson (1995) also notes this close relationship between Mission schooling and church participation, as well as between Mission schooling and the likelihood of receiving subsequent employment by the Mission. He writes:

Of the seventy-one teachers employed by the mission in uNgoni in 1895, forty-two were baptised, out of a total church membership of around sixty. At this point in the church’s development, in other words, 70% of all baptised adults were employed as teachers. This was a state of affairs which could not long survive as the church began to expand, but it does illustrate three points very clearly: first, the very close connection at this stage, between education and evangelism; secondly the link between education, baptism, and wage employment; and thirdly, the almost complete failure of Christianity, up to this point, to make any significant impact on the older members of the [Ngoni] tribe. 241

In addition to establishing a region-wide network of primary schools, the mission also created the Overtoun Institution (in Kondowe) in 1894, which provided secondary school, teaching, and theological training to a small but academically promising cohort of northern students. There were strong differences of opinion among the Livingstonia missionaries as to the best use of educational resources. Some, like Robert Laws, wanted to focus on rigorous, upper level, academic training for small groups of promising (mostly male) students at the Institution. Others, like Donald Fraser, wanted to focus on a more distributed policy of craft and industrial training, with an emphasis on basic literacy and math skills (Thompson 1995). The visiting Phelps-Stokes Commission in 1924 criticized the mission for an overly top-heavy emphasis in its curriculum, focusing on higher education for the few rather than more basic instruction for the many. Nevertheless, the size and distribution of Mission village schools grew dramatically over the course of the Mission’s first half-century, and indicate a broad public role for the Mission’s educational program.

This expansion of the Mission educational network fueled rapid growth in the rates of baptism and church membership throughout the Mission’s field of operations. While the first two converts for the mission had been baptized only in 1890, after eight years of work,\textsuperscript{243} by 1895 there were about sixty.\textsuperscript{244}

While the growth of the church was widespread throughout the Livingstonia sphere of influence, it was particularly concentrated in Embangweni at Loudon Station. By as early as 1903, the church at Loudon had become the biggest within the Mission, with over one thousand members, and a church building that could hold 2500 worshipers. By 1914, nearly twenty-nine percent of the 9,213 communicants within the Livingstonia Mission were members of the Loudon

\textsuperscript{242}This chart was taken from King and King’s book \textit{The Story of Medicine and Disease in Malawi} (1992, p.37), though they do not give their source. The student numbers for the first eight dates (1881-1900) are mirrored in James W. Jack’s book \textit{Daybreak at Livingstonia} (1969, p.317). I am not sure of the Kings’ source for the latter dates. The number of schools estimated for 1905 differ from those of Thompson (1995, p.134).

\textsuperscript{243}They were the brothers Mawelera and Makara Tembo, whom had for some years been attending classes with Elmslie at Njuyu. They were of Senga heritage, and their father, Kalengo Tembo, had a prominent position of authority within the Ngoni political hierarchy. He had also been a practicing \textit{ng’anga} (Thompson 1995). As such, the brothers shared both a privileged social status and a knowledge of the pragmatics of spiritual action, having witnessed their father’s therapeutic practice while growing up.

\textsuperscript{244}Thompson 1995, p. 67.
As Thompson has noted, Fraser’s particular approach to education, evangelism, and baptism were likely contributors to Loudon’s rapid growth. Thompson writes:

The number of candidates for baptism was closely tied up with Fraser’s view of the schools as essentially evangelistic agencies. This had led him to abolish school fees for a time at Hora, as he couldn’t reconcile the charging of fees with the preaching of the gospel. Though Fraser was soon forced to re-introduce fees, this did not change the way in which he saw the schools. One result was that he was much more willing to open village schools with teachers of limited training than were many of his colleagues. By 1905 B only three years after Loudon was opened B he had already opened 142 schools, as against 66 at Ekwendeni and 122 at Bandawe. Four years later the equivalent figures were Loudon 150, Ekwendeni 88 and Bandawe 138. These schools provided the basis for the hearers’ and catechumens’ classes, though the number of catechumens in itself is not necessarily indicative of missionary policies, since a large class might be indicative of a reluctance to baptise B rather than the opposite. The number of baptisms each year as a percentage of those examined is a much better guide to the missiona’s views, though even this varies greatly from year to year, and figures are not always available. Nevertheless it can safely be said that Fraser baptised candidates at a significantly faster rate than most of his colleagues. Where figures are available they show Fraser baptised between 50% and 75% of those he examined during these years. This was significantly higher than Elsmie whose average was between 27% and 35%, though Stuart, on the occasions when he was in charge at Ekwendeni, seems to have baptised at approximately the same rate as Fraser. Nor can it be claimed that Fraser’s examination of candidates was cursory. Each candidate was seen first by an elder before being submitted to Fraser, who asked him/her between twenty and thirty questions on doctrine and Christian life. If satisfied, he then passed the candidate back to the congregation and elders for final approval.246

While the baptismal rate was particularly high under Fraser in Embangweni, it also began to increase steadily throughout the Mission’s arena of operations, the result of the Mission’s wide-scale and rapid expansion of its educational network. By 1908, however, a dramatic new development pushed Mission baptism rates even higher, and swelled the membership of the church, as the thirty-year monopoly that the Livingstonia Mission had enjoyed as the only Christian organization in the region came to an end.

245 Fraser 1915, p.85.
246 Thompson, 1995, p.134.
Religious competition and independency

Many scholars have pointed to the importance of Elliot Kamwana Chirwa’s Watch Tower movement, which lasted from 1908-1909 in northern Nyasaland, in shaping the religious and political history of the region (Shepperson and Price 1956, McCracken 1977, Fields 1977, Isichei 1995, Langworthy 1996). Kamwana was a Tonga from Chifira, a village within the sphere of influence of the Livingstonia Mission’s station at Bandawe. He had attended Livingstonia Mission schools as a boy, and had been considered among its most promising students.247 In 1901, however, he left Overtoun and broke with the Mission. Fields (1977) suggests the break was because of frustration at the Mission’s recent introduction of school fees, a measure that followed directly on the imposition of a hut tax in the area earlier in the year. Langsworthy (1996) suggests that Kamwana may have come up against a quota limiting further educational advancement of some Tongas, as they had dominated the early ranks of the Mission’s student body.

In either case, by 1902, Kamwana had met Joseph Booth and begun work as a teacher at Booth’s Nyasaland Industrial Mission station of Thyolo, in southern Nyasaland. In 1904 he moved to South Africa in search of employment, and found work as a hospital assistant at a mine near Johannesburg, also finding time to preach to fellow Nyasa migrants.248 By early 1908, Kamwana had once again met up with Booth, who at this point was teaching and preaching Watch Tower doctrines. Kamwana became his pupil, and by the middle of the same year had returned to Nyasaland to begin preaching and baptizing.

Kamwana baptized thousands into Watch Tower in the latter half of 1908 and into 1909, mostly among Tongas living along the lakeshore, many of them former Livingstonia adherents. In contrast to the Livingstonia Mission, conversion in the Watch Tower was instantaneous and

247 In 1901 he passed Standard III at Overtoun, where he was listed on the honor roll (Fields 1977, p.175; Langworthy 1996, p.201).
248 Langworthy 1996, p.204.
followed immediately by total immersion baptism. In response, the Livingstonia Mission increased its baptism rates by 128% between 1908 and 1909, a more than four-fold rate increase over that of the previous three years.\textsuperscript{249} After Kamwana, Ncozana writes:

First, Livingstonia Mission was never again to be the only evangelizing church in northern Malawi, and its authority would not go unchallenged. Second, as a religious innovator, Kamwana had demonstrated, beyond any doubt, a possible religious independence hitherto unknown among the first generation Christians.\textsuperscript{250}

In the wake of the Kamwana’s Watch Tower movement, a wave of religious independency and ecclesiastical segmentation swept over northern Nyasaland. This was largely the result of dissatisfaction and alienation by ministers and teachers who had been trained in the early mission churches but who became frustrated at delays in their ecclesiastical advancement, and at being restricted to institutionally submissive positions within the church hierarchy. Either because of suspension or by breaking away by their own initiative, or both, these leaders established alternative church institutions apart from the missions.

Within the broader history and anthropology of Christianity in Africa, such break-away churches have become identified as African Independent Churches (AICs), and by more recent nomenclature, as African Instituted Churches (Anderson 2001). AICs generally advocated doctrines and enforce ethics that were partially counterpoised to the mission churches and their prevailing values and ethics, often asserting the validity of local cultural and religious practices that early Western missionaries had denigrated. Many AICs, for example, embraced the local cultural practice of polygamy as acceptable in contrast to European missions’ insistence on monogamy. At the same time, many AICs were organizationally continuous with the mission churches, and advocated for doctrinal, ethical, and theological standards of thought and practice that were partly

\textsuperscript{249} Thompson 1995, p.135.
\textsuperscript{250} Ncozana, 2002, p.131.
analogous with the religious culture and society of the European missionaries whose education they had absorbed and processed. As such, the formation and history of AICs indicates patterns of conjunction and disjunction within local religious inheritances, as local ministers, church elders, and lay members affirmed, revised, and rejected elements of local religious thinking in adopting elements of European Christianity, and rejected facets of that Christian tradition in favor of preserving local social and religious practices. The historical result has been a group of churches that preach, teach, and enforce theological, ritual, and social assumptions and practices that both conjoin and contrast with the established mission churches.

In the years following Kamwana’s Watch Tower movement, northern Nyasaland experienced a surge of independent church movements that broke away from the Livingstonia Mission. The African National Church, established in 1928, was the first significant breakaway. Its main leadership, including Paddy Nyasulu and Isaac Mkondowe, had all been educated at the Overtoun Institution in Livingstonia and most of its early leaders and members were people excommunicated from Livingstonia congregations because they were polygamous. By 1940 it had over 3000 members in northern Malawi.²⁵¹ In 1932, the Rev. Yafet Mkandawire, an ordained Livingstonia Mission minister who had recently been disciplined and deposed, built a prayer house in his home village of Mwandove (in the Karonga district) and founded The African Reformed Presbyterian Church. A year later a second senior African minister from the Livingstonia Mission, Yesaya Zerenji Mwasi, also seceded. A Tonga educated at the Livingstonia Mission’s Overtoun Institution, Mwasi had been ordained (after much delay) in 1902, and in 1918, had become the first African Moderator of the Livingstonia Presbytery. In 1933 he broke away with several hundred members of his congregation and formed the Blackman’s Church of God Which is in Tongaland.

²⁵¹ It is not a major church presence in northern Malawi today, and did not have an active congregation in the Embangweni area.
In 1934, yet another Livingstonia Mission minister, the Rev. Charles C. Chinula, recently defrocked for taking a second wife, filed an application with the District Commissioner in Mzimba to form The Christianity of Freedom church. An Ngoni man, he had served for several years with the Loudon congregation in Embangweni. In 1935, Mkandawire, Mwasi, and Chinula agreed to merge their three churches to form the *Mpingo Wa Afipa Wa Africa*, the Church of the Blackmen of Africa, with a combined membership of 3400 people (MacDonald 1973).  

Of the three men who founded the Church of the Blackmen of Africa, MacDonald writes:  

> It should be recognized that all three of these gentlemen had been ordained as ministers by the Livingstonia Mission and had subsequently left that mission’s Church, for the most part voluntarily but under considerable pressures. As far as may be ascertained at this date, the nominal points of difference lay in disputes over the legitimacy of strictures against polygyny, traditional dancing, the ceremonial ingestion of locally brewed beer, etc. However, it seems apparent that the more significant differences stemmed from the perceived inequalities of opportunity for advancement *within the context of an essentially European-dominated society*...  

Before his break from the Mission, Mwasi explained his reasons for leaving in a document entitled, *My Essential and Paramount Reasons for Working Independently.* Most of his reasons had to do with violations of Mission rules by the missionaries (when their interests were challenged), with their participation in denominationalism (which split God’s church), and their unwillingness to let the Nyasa church grow into its own as a genuinely African church. Mwasi wrote:  

> Such being the situation when I see that the idea of the pure native Church is being pushed far from its destined realization but is being gradually sunk into oblivion. *I strongly protest, dissent and cease to be a member of that an organization. It is not the divinely ordained orders I cease from -- orders of Church Government by “Presbers” or “elders,” but I cease from the abuses of denaturalization and denationalization of the native Church. I claim for a purely indigenous Church to be wholly independent from exotic*  

---

252 Today it is a small but steady presence throughout pockets of northern Malawi, in particular along the lakeshore districts.  
253 MacDonald, 1973, pp.109-10, original emphasis.  
predominance and traditions. My Paramount reason or Purpose, therefore, is To have the merit Of having Introduced Measures of purely Native Church in or out of this Presbytery.\footnote{My Essential and Paramount Reasons for Working Independently (1999, p.24, emphasis in original).}

In his introduction to the recently published Kachere Press version of the essay, Kenneth Ross describes a range of factors which likely contributed to Mwasi’s departure from the Livingstonia Mission. He writes:

McCranken and Parratt have indicated factors which may have contributed to the secession: the direct access to the Bible fostered by Livingstonia; the independent spirit promoted by exposure to Scottish history and Reformation thought; the fact that Livingstonia itself was a product of the Disruption of the Church of Scotland in 1843; the proliferation of independent churches in southern Malawi to which Mwasi was exposed during a visit to Blantyre in the late 1920’s; his meetings with Dr. James Aggrey at Livingstonia and Mwera in 1924 which contributed greatly to Mwasi’s independence of mind; the more episcopal role adopted by a later generation of missionaries which caused them to lose touch with the feelings and aspirations of the people; the increasing self-sufficiency of congregations and their ministers from the time Mwasi settled at Sanga in 1916; the growing conviction that Mission Christianity had been unsuccessful in addressing fundamental moral problems in African society and that a more effectively inculturated expression of the faith was required.\footnote{Ross, in the Introduction to My Essential and Paramount Reasons for Working Independently (1999, pp.12-13, emphasis added). See also Shepperson & Price (1958), McCracken (1977), Parratt (1978), Brown (1982), Ross (1988), Chakanza (1988), and Mphande (1998).}

Mwasi’s argument was framed from the perspective of someone who came to embrace Christianity, while recognizing that the religion is subject to different cultural articulations, based on patterns of difference among cultures. His emphasis on the Mission’s effort to “denaturalize” the Church suggests that he saw a difference between the “pure” (his term) Christianity articulated in the Bible, and the specific Western version of the faith introduced, promoted, and enforced by the Mission. Mwasi argued that the missionaries’ efforts to impose their variety of Christian
experience was a violation of the kind of grounded Christianity that would emerge naturally out of the local African culture and way of life. As he wrote in his *Essential and Paramount Reasons*:

An exotic Christianity will never take vital root in the life of the natives.

In the parlance of contemporary missiology, Mwasi was calling for an inculturated Christianity, a Christianity rooted in African culture and practice. Implied within this call was an assertion that religion cannot be cut off from culture and social practice, but rather can only be grounded in them. European Christianity should not be imposed upon Africans. Instead, the core principles of Christianity must be allowed to weave their way into the fabric of local African life.

The movement to Africanize Christianity, led by Africans such as Nyasulu, Mkondowe, Mkandawire, Chinula, and Mwasi, profoundly changed the religious landscape of northern Nyasaland, as it represented a very different articulation of Christian life and faith. Though often bureaucratically modeled after the Livingstonia Mission, these churches permitted polygamy and the consumption of beer, and respected the authority of the ancestors as mediators with the divine. In doing so, they embodied in their collective leadership and membership a rejection of key elements of the missionary oppositional model, one that asserted a profound incommensurability between Christianity and the forms of local African culture and spirituality. With the emergence of African Instituted Churches, the Livingstonia Mission was no longer the only institutional model of Christianity in the region. Other Christian communities now competed for congregants in a sacred task of teaching righteousness and offering a pathway to absolution.

Mwasi’s calling to help build an African Christianity, rather than European one, raises the question of just what is meant by “European” and “African” in this religious and cultural equation. How are these two systems to be characterized? How did the two systems compare and contrast, in broad terms, at the time of their late nineteenth century encounter? Just what was the cultural gap between the missionaries and the missionized?
In the following chapter, and in order to address these questions, I review the historical literature about the encounter among the peoples of the northern Nyasa region and the Livingstonia missionaries, and consider patterns of both structural correspondence and difference between their respective religious and cosmological systems. Accounting for these patterns of cultural conjunction and disjunction sets the stage for the story of the expansion and pluralization of Christianity in northwestern Nyasaland, and provides the context for the ethnographic chapters that follow.
CHAPTER FIVE

Missionary and Tumbuka Models of Personhood and Being:
Conjunctions and Disjunctions Between a Western Dualist Schema
and an African Monistic Schema

Introduction

In this chapter, I explore patterns of both conjunction and disjunction that characterized the cultural and religious encounter between the Tumbuka and Ngoni residents of northern Nyasaland and the Livingstonia missionaries who entered the region in the late nineteenth century. I do so by first characterizing the missionary theological and philosophical schema itself, which posited an essential dualism of being, one that located the essence of each person within an intellectualized soul, and modeled salvation as a matter of individual faith and knowledge. I then review what is known and thought about the pre-Mission Tumbuka and Ngoni religious schemas, one that articulated a more dynamic, embodied, and participatory model of life, experience, and personhood. Based on early missionary writings, I then explore some of the models, assumptions, and perspectives that guided the missionaries in their response to the African, specifically Tumbuka, religious practices they encountered within the region. Specifically, I address the extent to which the Livingstonia missionaries constructed an oppositional model between their religion and medicine and that of local Tumbukas and other Africans, and sought to engender a substitutive scenario in which the former would replace the latter. After this exegesis of Livingstonia missionary perspectives, I then turn to a missiological account written by a Malawian minister, Stephen Msiska, in the middle twentieth century. In it, he challenged the missionary oppositional model, and argued that the missionaries had miscalculated in proclaiming an overarching disjunction between Christianity and African cultures as cosmological systems. The disjunction, he argued, is rather between a Western framework that compartmentalizes the spiritual from the physical, and a broadly African one that recognizes lines of participation between them. By noting
the contrast between a Western compartmentalized schema and an African participatory one, Msiska points towards a corresponding set of contrasts that have defined the religious encounter, between an essentialist, individualist, and intellectualized model of being, and one that constructs people in more dynamic, collectivist, and embodied terms. I conclude by arguing that Msiska’s critique provides a key insight in accounting for the patterns of religious change resultant from the encounter between Tumbuka spirituality and mission Christianity.

Missionary Models of Personhood and Being: Essentialism, Intellectualism, and Individualism

As described in Chapter Two, Livingstonia missionaries, as early modern Western Christians, were inheritors of a religious tradition that had undergone a gradual but profound transformation with respect to its modeling of body-spirit relations. Initially grounded in the assertion that body and soul were inexorably fused, the Western tradition had increasingly isolated body from soul, associating the former with a crude material reality, and defining the latter in terms of a mind capable of knowing God and his will for humanity, and experiencing God through a true Christian faith and knowledge. The Livingstonia missionaries sustained emphasis on education as their primary evangelical tool is in part indicative of this increasingly intellectual definition of one’s spiritual status, as was their focus on right doctrine as a key arbiter of true Christian faith. This emphasis on an intellectual faith corresponded to the general Protestant emphasis on individual salvation – the idea that each person must come to a true knowledge of their sinful nature, repent, and establish a personal relationship with God.

Throughout the change from a unitary to a dualist schematization of body/soul relations, the soul was consistently defined as essentially unchanging. More specifically, the tradition emphasized the essential moral depravity of the human soul through the doctrine of original sin. In this model, though humanity is made in God’s image and thus shares in his nature, the
disobedience of Adam and Eve in the garden marked all humanity with the sin of arrogance and rebelliousness to God. No one is immune from its condition. This was a consistently essentialist model of being and soul, an essentialism defined in fundamentally negative terms as depraved and condemned.

Yet, the Christian tradition has also affirmed the possibility of a transformative union of that depraved soul with the spiritual person of God through possession by the Holy Spirit. This is a more dynamic model of spiritual possibility – of the spiritual embodiment of soul – though one that emphasizes the agency and potency of God to effect that change in human lives. Yet within this model, God’s redemption and salvation of human souls does not fundamentally alter the original depravity of each human soul. The core Christian model of the human condition remains one of essential continuity and depravity.

In their medical tradition, the Livingstonia missionaries were bearers of another kind of essentialist modeling of the individual, one that understood each person to be a biological organism that is susceptible to disease and breakdown, as well as healing and repair. In this model, the human body is something akin to the life-like Tobias doll introduced by Dr. Agnes Fraser in Embangweni, an organic machine susceptible to germs, injury, and medical intervention. This kind of organic essentialism, framed in scientific and medical terms, was introduced separate from but alongside the evangelical mission to save the hearts, minds, and souls of so-called native peoples.

In summary, the early Livingstonia missionaries were participants to a modern Western Protestant cultural schema, one derived from longstanding theological and scientific traditions, that contained within it several predominant models of personhood and being. In this model, the soul was closely associated with the powers of the mind, and with the intellectual basis for both self-knowledge and a knowledge of an authoritative and redeeming God. This was an essentialist, intellectualist, and individualist framing of the person. Likewise, the Livingstonia missionaries
were bearers of a biological schema that understood each person as an organic body subject to health and disease. Like its theological counterpart in Western culture, this schema argued for a sharp distinction of type between the body as an organic machine subject to breakdown and repair, and the soul as a facet of being subject to non-physical universal forces.

**Tumbuka Models of Personhood and Becoming: Dynamism, Embodiment, and Participation**

As reviewed in Chapter Three, current scholarship suggests that within Tumbuka religious traditions, each person possessed an animating spirit, and the moral status and authority of each person’s spirit was product of both their faithfulness to the will of the ancestors, and their wise and proper use of power (see Young 1931, 1950; Ncozana 2002). In contrast to the Western model, which essentializes each human being as both sinful and made in God’s image (soulful), the emphasis within Tumbuka cosmology was on *becoming* and *spiritual dynamism*. It emphasized each person’s experiences and actions in life as the core determinant of their ontological and eschatological status. This is not to say that Tumbukas shared no generalizations about the human condition. Within their oral tradition, previous to the missionary evangelical effort, they would have likely noted how certain human capacities and follies have consistently made the passage from one generation to the next. I suspect that Tumbukas, like other African peoples, would have been keenly aware of the predictability and propensity for certain kinds of behaviors to emerge in various human lives. They would have also been keenly aware of how both age and gender shaped human development and conduct in general, non-individualized terms, and have included definitions of maturity, behavioral propriety, dress, divisions of labor, and social and kinship roles of males and females, young and old.

Yet, in their understanding of personal development, the Tumbuka maintained a core assumption that people grew into personhood through the course of their life trajectory, from birth, through initiation, marriage, parenthood, old age, and death (Young 1931, 1950; Ncozana 2002).
The spiritual personhood of each person would change as they grew through life and matured into an adult, someone bearing both kinship and social roles and responsibilities. In this dynamic model of human emergence, a person’s behavior within life and through the passage of time becomes fundamental to who they are, how they should be related to, and what will be their destiny in the next life.

Models of Embodiment

In his broader outline of African concepts of personhood, Karp (1997) identifies several differences between a broadly atomistic European model of the person and the more relational model practiced by many sub-Saharan African peoples, including the Iteso people of Kenya and Uganda among whom Karp lived and researched.

Each European person is customarily defined as separate from other persons. Hence, the powers and functions of the person are restricted to the single person. Relationships between persons tend to be defined more in terms of the effect one person has on another rather than in terms of relationships among person. In contrast among the Iteso people, and many other peoples throughout Africa and the world, the body is not simply a container of powers and attributes set in a world with other bodies containing their own attributes and powers. For the Iteso the body is at most separated from other persons as the end points of relationships.

In the broader outline of his summary, Karp points to how both essentialist (mechanical) and individualist (separated) logics continue to hold sway within European societies in their general construction of personhood. In contrast, he describes how Itesos model personhood in both relational and embodied terms. People have bodies that are the locus of agency, grounded in the dynamics of intersubjective relationships.

Other scholars have noted how many African peoples’ emphasize the person-as-embodied (Turner 1968; Beidelman 1993), and have written about how many African groups model the dynamic qualities of lived experience, including accounts of shape-shifting among the Kuranko of
Sierra Leone (Jackson 1990), cultural notions of intersubjective and spiritual causality (Nyasani 1989), and the social mediation of a person’s social vitality and moral condition (Nthanburi 1989). All suggest a dynamic conception of the person viewed as a member of a community. The vast literature on African initiation rites, etiological systems, and possession cults all attest to this variant but broadly distributed model of the bodily ground of personhood throughout the sub-Saharan. Possession experiences, in particular, as much as they can affirm the power of the ancestors, are also episodes of opportunity for people to transform their self-understandings and social personalities (see Nyasani 1989). They are often moments when individuals can assert their own agency in the face of predominant social ideologies, systems of power and authority that attempt, sometimes coercively, to conform people’s behavior according to defined values, norms, scripts, and rules (Karp 1990). Among many African societies, possession is often a medium of challenge to society.

Among the Tumbuka, as among many other African peoples, their dynamic notion of human emergence was closely tied to their understanding of the fundamentally embodied nature of human experience within two fundamental spheres of human life. First, they affirmed the bodily ground of becoming an adult as one gained strength, matured, reproduced, managed one’s affairs, and gradually aged. Secondly, they affirmed the bodily ground of spiritual agency and living through experiences of both possession and illness.

---

257 The claim to dynamism in human life becomes even more magnified when described in self-referencing terms. In her 1990 study, Anita Jacobson-Widding noted how people in the lower Congo often presented the cultural ideal for a person in ‘objective’ terms (like a text), while articulating their own experience of personhood with greater ambiguity, often in dynamic terms of emotion, interaction, and will, and contextualized in concrete, embodied and hierarchically mediated events in the world. The human shadow, with its ever changing shape and intensity, was a common metaphor used to describe the uncertainty of personal experience (Jacobson-Widding 1990).
Within the broader Africanist literature, there are many other examples of societies and cultures that have emphasized the embodied nature of human experience. In her discussion of the neighboring Chewa, Deborah Kaspin (1996) describes how rainmakers and midwives have used agricultural symbols and metaphors to formalize a cosmology of the body, one that many rural Chewa use to conceptualize the body and its functions. Further afield, Devisch (1985, 1990) has noted how among the Yaka of Congo the ‘body-self’ is understood as the basis of individuality, as a symbolic link with others through its physiological, kinesic, and sensory uses, and as the site of affects and emotions which serve to mediate people’s experience of themself, others, and the world.

Likewise, the broader literature also provides many examples of societies and cultures that affirm models of spiritual embodiment and the use of the body as a symbolic vehicle for spiritual transformation. Among the Kongo of the Bas-Congo region, Jacobson-Widding (1990, 1991) has likewise identified a thoroughly embodied ontology of being, as Bakongo model a triadic embodiment of spirit and soul as breath, shadow, and vital life essence. For the Bakongo, the body becomes the focus of symbolic action when an individual’s subjective experience is dominated by emotion and inchoate senses, and when an individual desires to reformulate their relationship to the predominant social order and cultural cosmology.

Paarup-Laursen (1991) describes how among the Koma of contemporary Cameroon and Nigeria, a person’s physical body contains within it both ancestral spirit and divine spirit, the latter often framed in strongly ecological terms. In this model, the physical body is associated with the firmness of ground, the earth. The divine life spirit is embodied in blood and breath, while ancestral wisdom and custom is embodied in the mind as represented by the skull.

In his discussion of the Dinka of southern Sudan, Godfrey Lienhardt (1985) described the way in which metaphors, particularly those relating the heart and mind, were used to describe the
subjective experience of personhood in terms of sensation, emotion, and thought. He also noted that the Dinkas use the word for ‘body’ in contexts where most Western English-speakers would use the word ‘self’.

In his analysis of the Bwiti ceremony among the Fang of Gabon, Fernandez (1982, 1991) notes that the Bwiti chapel, the main ritual site, is constructed on a model of the physical human body, and is divided into ritual spaces defined by symbols of birth, sexuality, emotion, thought, and transcendence. Likewise, the body, from head to toe, is also invoked in the initial ceremonial act of genuflecting the sign of the cross, wherein the head, heart, stomach, and ground are all touched by the right forefinger before then being turned to the sky and the spiritual domain of God and the ancestors. Bwiti participants understand these forms of ritual embodiment to bring relief from bodily afflictions through the potency of the symbolic movement and experience. Ideally, movement through Bwiti’s ritually embodied forms will culminate in a state of disembodiment, and an experience of wholeness, wherein the living draw closer to the spiritual existence of ancestral agency and well-being.

Fernandez provides an important model for exploring the religious cosmology of the body, as he explores the analogic relationships that pertain between the ritual, symbolic, architectural, and discursive forms of Bwiti, as they are constructed in both metaphoric and metonymic terms. Fernandez’s finely attuned analysis suggests that it is precisely in the potency of such a multiplex ritual experience – in physical, spacial, mental, linguistic, and aesthetic terms – that Bwiti achieves for its participants a subjective experience of return to the whole, and with it, a healing effect. This focus on the multiplex analogic qualities of ritual experience is one that can be effectively applied to other rituals of symbolic healing in which the boundary relationships of body and spirit are reformulated. In Part Two of this thesis, I explore, with less skill than Fernandez, some of the analogies made between the spiritual and physical domains of experience in the healing forms of
the Vimbuza possession ceremony. In the process, I explore another level of symbolic analogy formation, as my Vimbuza-possessed informants used analogies to articulate a conjunctive and complementary relationship between the ancestral spirits and the Christian God.

**Models of Collective Participation**

In conjunction with these models of dynamism and embodiment, and based on our limited literature on pre-mission Tumbuka culture, it can be argued that Tumbukas, in common with many other African cultures, would have emphasized the kinship and social grounding of personhood. T. Cullen Young noted this in his favorable description of the Tumbuka “conclave,” in which the ancestors and the living share a common sacrificial meal, and in so doing strengthen the ties of kinship and authority across the generations. Writing of the Tumbuka “cult of the ancestors,” Young writes:

> The African community is a single, continuing unit, conscious of no distinction, in quality, between its members still here on earth and its members now there, wherever it may be that the ancestors are living. Perhaps since I have to guard against the slightest looseness of phrase, I should say ‘no radical distinction in quality’, since some element of enhanced power is attributed to the ancestors.258

While the view that most African cultures constitute the person in “collectivist” terms has been over-simplified in much writing (see Lienhardt 1985; Gyekye 1989), most African cultures have emphasized the individual’s multiplex social and spiritual relationships in a variety of contexts, (Taylor 1963; Reisman 1986, 1990; Nthamburi 1988; Karp 1990), including disease etiology (Chilivumbo 1976). This emphasis on the individual in meaningful relationship with other social actors (i.e. Reisman 1986; Taylor 1963), in particular that of the extended family, is in contrast to the highly conventional Western foregrounding of the individual as ‘autonomous agent’ (Dumont 1965).

---

258 Young, 1966, p.39, original emphasis.
In summary, Tumbukas, like many other African peoples, recognized that our embodiment of experience and action is fundamental to our sense of being. They also acknowledged that each person changes as they move through life, and as they live as members of a community. This modeling of *embodiment, dynamism, and membership* as key attributes of any person’s life composed a cultural schema of personhood that differed substantially from that introduced by the Livingstonia missionaries.

**Missionary Models of God and the Ancestors**

In large part because of the differences between their ontological system and that of the Tumbuka-Ngoni society they encountered in northern Nyasaland, and also derived from their ethnocentric sense of cultural and religious superiority, the early Livingstonia missionaries were highly critical of the religious and cultural practices they encountered in the region. Yet, within their persistent critiques of Tumbuka-Ngoni religious culture, early Livingstonia missionaries also acknowledged that there were elements of that culture that bore resemblance to their own religious worldview, resemblances that would facilitate the communication and reception of the missionary’s gospel message. Of the residents of northern Nyasaland, Elmslie wrote:

> In beginning mission work among them, one is not met by anything in their mental or spiritual life which is an insurmountable barrier in communicating to them spiritual truths. However erroneously at first they may conceive the truths and facts put before them, they have no difficulty in finding a place for them in their thoughts. To talk of spiritual things is not to them an absurdity, much less it is impossible for them to conceive that such things may be. The native lives continually in an atmosphere of spiritual things. Almost all his customs are connected with a belief in a world of spirits. He is, consciously or unconsciously, always under the power and influence of a spiritual world. In preaching, we have not first to prove the existence of God. He never dreams of questioning that. We have in our instruction merely to unfold His character as Creator, Preserver, Governor, and Father of us all.²⁵⁹

---

²⁵⁹ Elmslie, *Among the Wild Ngoni*, p.69.
The passage exhibits Elsmlie’s assumption – one he presumes shared by most of his readers – that local African spirituality is both incorrect and inferior to his own, and that locals are thus in dire need of the gospel message and life. In addition to this moral judgement, one premised in a supreme confidence of Christian mission, the passage also suggests a grateful pragmatism on Elsmlie’s part, as he acknowledges the value to the missionary effort of the fact that locals know that God is real. In the process, he provides his own succinct description of God as creator, preserver, governor, and father.

Beyond merely recognizing that local spirituality would facilitate a reception of the gospel message, some missionaries suggested that there was value and partial truth within native religious thought. A quote from the missionary Hetherwick of the Blantyre Mission in southern Nyasaland states this missionary view succinctly:

We are thus able now to realize in some small measure how much there is in native belief and thought already cherished by him, to which the Gospel can at once make an appeal. The cardinal truths of belief in spirit, in a spirit world, in a Supreme Spirit in some form or another, in communion with the spirit world through prayer and sacrifice, these the messenger of the Gospel finds ready to his hand — to make the path of the preacher easier to the heart and conscience of the African tribesman.260

In affirming that Tumbukas and Ngonis were already bearers of certain “cardinal truths,” Hetherwick affirms a degree of validity to local spirituality that was uncommon among his fellow missionaries during these early years of missionary work. Yet there were others who shared his view, and who took it even further. Among the Livingstone missionaries, it was the missionary-anthropologist T. C. Young who saw the parallels between his faith and that of local Tumbukas most clearly. By Young’s account, Tumbukas made invocations and sacrifices to the spirits in order to acknowledge and appease them, with part of each sacrifice put aside for their consumption. In his later writings, Young uses the term ‘conclave’ to describe the group dynamic created

---

between the ancestors and their living kin through their symbolic sharing in a common meal. He saw the parallels between this practice and the Christian sacrament of communion.  

Nevertheless, despite these acknowledges of commonality, Livingstonia missionaries in general placed far greater emphasis on perceived inconsistencies and incompatibilities between their gospel and local religious knowledge and practice. While most recognized a religious sensibility and appreciation for the concept of an authoritative God within local religious culture, they nevertheless insisted on the need for a fundamental reorientation of local religious sentiment and devotion. A quote from Robert Laws, the long-standing early leader of the Mission, demonstrates this oppositional logic succinctly:

[T]hat the separation of the people from their tribal chiefs is, humanly the only conceivable way in which they can be laid open to the reception of Christianity. For as long as they owe allegiance to the hereditary Chief of their tribe, they must use the tribal tattoo mark and be subjected to this will in all public ordeals, involving their nominal belief in witchcraft and a host of inferior spirits or demigods which cannot coexist with a belief in the Divine revelation.

In congruence with the missionary emphasis on the contrast between Christianity and ancestral spiritualism, Ncozana notes that the first generation of converts made a clear break between their old world-view and the new world-view introduced by the missionaries. In practice, this involved people taking on a whole host of new religious, cultural, and practical accouterments, and in the process, breaking from their customary habits and traditions. Among these were new modes of dress, consumption, education, occupation, religious practice, and other facets of life and lifestyle. Paralleling a broader trend in the early history of Christianity in Africa (see Isichei 1986), many of the mission’s first converts were socially marginal people (Ncozana 2002). These were people

---

261 See Young’s chapter in *African Ideas of God*. Forster (1986) notes that Young was forceful and consistent in challenging the notion that the Tumbuka, or Africans in general, engaged in “ancestor worship.” He saw it rather as a communion between the living and the dead.

who already, in some way, stood outside of the customary standards and norms of village life; people who therefore sought to change their status and reorient their lives within the orbit of the mission station.\textsuperscript{263} In the beginning, the Mission encouraged these disaffected migrants into their sphere of influence, though eventually, it moved away from this strategy of uprooting people because it was seen to violate the Mission’s stated aim of encouraging “self-governing, self-propagating, and self-supporting” local churches.\textsuperscript{264} What remained within the missionary view however, even after this change of strategy, was a conviction that local Africans needed to make a radical break, in both spiritual and practical terms, with the world view and customary habits of their traditional religious and social way of life. This included, in addition to religious life, practices of consumption, marriage, employment, and therapy-seeking behavior. On the latter topic, Livingstonia missionaries sought to inculcate an entirely new paradigm for understanding and treating disease and illness.

\textbf{Missionary Models of Disease and Possession}

As with their project to transform local religious life, Livingstonia missionaries insisted that Tumbuka and Ngoni medical practices and local standards of medical knowledge had to

\textsuperscript{263} Echoing Horton (1971a, 1971b, 1972), McCracken suggests that the dramatic social, political, and economic changes that accompanied missionization and colonization were the core determinants of religious change – specifically mass conversion – that took place at the time. He writes: “Pondering the weak impact of Christianity on Africa up to the late nineteenth century, Robert Laws reached the conclusion “that God could not trust Christendom with the knowledge of it until the Christian conscience was awake .... to the iniquity of slavery.” An alternative approach would be to turn Law’s argument on its head. Most Central Africans, most of the time, found satisfactory answers to the moral problems which confronted them in the extraordinary variety of religious institutions which they possessed. If from the late nineteenth century, Christianity offered some people more satisfactory solutions, the restructuring of local economics and the emergence of new social groups may well have influenced their decision.” (1977, pp. 44-45)

\textsuperscript{264} In 1926, a year after his retirement from the mission field, Donald Fraser wrote, “I fear the evangel which de-nationalizes, which refuses to recognize the power of the Gospel to purify what is not essentially wrong, and which preaches first through prohibitions, rather than by the attraction of what is positive.” (Donald Fraser. 1926. The Evangelistic Approach to the African. In \textit{International Review of Missions}, Vol.15, p. 438. Cited by Neozana 2002.)
change and give way to a superior Western medical system. For the most part, they were hard
pressed to find any degree of praise for local medical practice and its methods of response to bodily
illness and disease. Instead, they were often very vocal about the qualitative inferiority of local
medicinal practices, and the dangerous and damaging effects of their invocation and usage.

By Donald Fraser’s reckoning, there were five local explanations for sickness and pain:
(1) natural causes, (2) sorcery, including magic or poison, (3) retributive effects of the sins of
others, (4) unfriendly spirits, and (5) demon possession.265 Regarding the latter two, he writes:

When sickness is persistent, and no natural cause is known, and no magic suspected, a
doctor is called in to discover what spirits have been offended, and have caused the
disease. By means of his divining-stones and shells he is soon able to name the angry
shade, and the friends immediately proceed to propitiate him with prayer and offerings of
beer and foodstuffs. If all the worship of the spirits has not brought back strength to the
sufferer, a doctor of demons (virombo, wild creatures) is called to try to exorcise those that
have taken possession of the invalid. Now there are several different kinds of demons,
which are named after certain tribes, and each type of demon only responded to his own
particular dances and dress.”266

Fraser notes furthermore that personal good luck would often bring comments like “I have a
beneficent spirit”, while bad luck evoked statements like “I have an unfriendly spirit” and steps
towards appeasement. He describes local accounts of visitation by the spirits, when “in the
nighttime, ghostly visitants slap poor sleepers on the face, and they rise and cry, ‘I have sinned. A
chibanda has punished me for my sin’, and they make sacrifices.”267

While these citations suggest a relatively descriptive effort and tone, much of the rest of
Fraser’s writings regarding Tumbuka spirituality and therapy, and local medical standards of
knowledge and practice, are negative in judgment and tone. While he acknowledged the presence

265 Fraser, Winning a Primitive People, p. 142-3.
266 Ibid., pp.146-7.
267 Ibid., p.128.
of a local professional medical class, he expressed skepticism and criticism for their techniques, and posited the need for introducing both biomedicine and the gospel message. He wrote:

Nor can I say there were no medicines for the sick, and no one who could give professional advice. They had at least the “medicine men,” who represented all the learned professions. They were the clergymen, for they had special knowledge of demons and spirits; they were the doctors, for they knew effective herbs, and had a wonderful power of dancing and magic which could cast out disease; they were the lawyers, for they could “smell out” culprits, and reveal social enemies. But the innocent were punished, and the sick were tortured, and lives were lost. So the medical side was started to relieve suffering and save life, to explode superstition and reveal the love of God to man.  

For Fraser, then, the Mission’s biomedical work was the result of the Divine hand at work in the world; ordained by God in order to “relieve suffering and save life.” As a holy endeavor, it came in stark contrast to the ineffective and deceptive medical practices, and the lack of medical knowledge, that Fraser thought to be around him in the mission field. In Winning a Primitive People, he writes:

Their careless habits of eating and drinking make them peculiarly subject to intestinal and parasitic diseases, and when one examines the history of families the infant mortality is found to be very great. I once made a census of a number of families in several villages, and found it no uncommon history for a woman to have borne as many as seven children, only two of whom attained to manhood or womanhood. The lack of knowledge of the simplest laws of hygiene, and of care of children, led to this serious infant mortality.  

Throughout his writings, Fraser consistently justified the Mission’s medical work as an effort to remedy this “lack of knowledge of the simplest laws of hygiene”. He was consistently critical and derogatory towards most local healing practices, particularly those associated with spiritual causation or remedy. In his 1923 book, African Idylls, Fraser wrote in mock advice to an English person desiring to become a “witch-doctor”:

---

268 Livingstonia: The Story of Our Mission, p.62. (See further comments on medicine on p. 66) It is interesting to note how, in this quote, Fraser recognizes that ng’angas play three professional roles within their local communities, as spiritual, therapeutic, and legal agents of intervention.  

269 Fraser, Winning a Primitive People, 1899, p.139-40.
To ambitious beginners I would suggest these hints. Lay aside your pride and propriety, forget the British Medical Association and its etiquette, and open a real magic cave, with curtains, and skeletons, and curious lights, and blood-curdling sounds. Wrap yourself in a long coat, covered with cabalistic signs. Put a mighty pair of spectacles on your nose, and waving ostrich feathers in your hair. Dance a little, keep a vigorous jazz band behind the curtain, then dose the vilest and stickiest mixtures you have, and I shall guarantee you record attendances and marvellous cures. Become a psychotherapeutist, and play on the nerves and emotions of your trusting patients.”

Fraser contrasts this macabre scene with the propriety and etiquette of the British Medical Association, the formal biomedical establishment in which he trained, where:

[...]he professional doctors depend for their success on mental influences as well as the power of their medicines... Fraser did acknowledge that some local herbal remedies might have value, and noted a particular appreciation for the skills of some local bone-setters. These allowances to local practice are not surprising, however, in light of the fact that both herbal remedies and bone-setting are physical interventions (the first, chemical; the second mechanical) that could be empirically tested and subjected to scientific study. Both were thus consistent with Fraser’s scientific training.

Not all Livingstonia missionaries were equally critical of Tumbuka therapeutic modalities and the logic that guided them. In contrast to Fraser’s markedly negative representations of local traditional medical practice, T. Cullen Young defended the work of most ng’angas, and argued that they both served a beneficial function within society and were often medically effective. In his later writings, Young described ng’angas as:

---

270 Donald Fraser, 1923. *African Idylls*, p. 189. Fraser, of course, makes no mention of the fact that biomedicine includes curtains, skeletons, curious lights, strange sounds, long coats, unusual instruments, esoteric symbolic systems, and bitter pills within its own symbolic and practical repertoire of intervention.

271 Fraser, 1899, p. 142.

272 See Young’s 1932 article in *Man* for description of ng’angas therapeutic tools.
the liaison officer in this sphere of ancestral dominance...touching as it were, with one shoulder the section of his community here and with the other shoulder the section of the community no longer here.273

Of Young, Forster writes:

Most Livingstonia missionaries (though not Livingstone himself) had been particularly hostile to this functionary, who offended religious susceptibilities by being a pagan, and scientific susceptibilities by being a quack – and who could also be a competitor with the mission hospital. Young showed rather that the ng’anga’s activities were concerned with safety, such as preserving a new village from evils.274

Young came to refer to ng’angas as “safety doctors” rather than the more common nomenclature of “medicine men” as was the literary custom of his day. Young’s perspective was, however, in the minority. More common was the kind of view expressed by Walter A. Elmslie in his book Among the Wild Ngoni (1899), in which he condemned local beliefs in witchcraft and targeted the work of ng’angas and nchimis as counter-productive to the spreading of the Gospel message and Christian life. He wrote:

One of the greatest effects of the medical mission work was that, by it, the empiricism of the native doctors was overthrown, and the common people, ignorant and superstitious, were rescued from the bondage of their shrewd but deceitful incantations. Native doctors fail in diagnosis more than in power to heal. Yet in the presence of the majority of diseases they are helpless, and in that case they fall back on the professed will of the spirits that the patient is to die.275

Missionary criticisms and denigrations of Tumbuka and Ngoni religious culture were a consistent theme and sub-theme within their published missionary writings. Most held a clear conviction in

274 Forster, 1989, p.31.
275 Among the Wild Ngoni, 1899, p. 153. Elmslie went to the field as a medical doctor in 1885 and was ordained as a minister in 1897. In characterizing Elmslie’s writings, Forster (1989) writes: “Elmslie’s work is informative in places, but is marred by sensationalism. He clearly experienced a culture-shock as a consequence of the contrast between Ngoni values and those of Victorian Scotland; but it was exaggerated for the benefit of the likely readership, who if shocked about what they read would hopefully be more likely to give support to the work of the mission.”
the superiority of both their religion and their culture, and were consistent in asserting moral contrasts between their own cultural and religious practices and those of the resident Africans they encountered. In subsequent years, the missionary emphasis on the incommensurable contrasts between European Christianity and African paganism became the subject of writings by later generations of Tumbuka, Tonga, and Ngoni pastors who were trained and educated within Mission schools, and who were subsequently initiated into and given responsibilities and powers within the Mission.276

A Malawian minister’s response: a different kind of disjunction

In a 1969 article, Stephen Kauta Msiska, the Tumbuka minister quoted at the beginning of the Introduction and again in Chapter Three, criticized the early missionaries for their overly negative view of local traditional religion and medicine, and linked their judgmentalism to the contrast between their Western compartmentalization of nature and the unity of nature recognized within local religious cosmology.

Everything that was being done in connection with religion was suddenly branded as superstition, paganism, and Satanism by most people who came from the West bringing in the gospel of Jesus Christ, simply because of the two different backgrounds of those who brought in the gospel and those to whom the gospel was preached; the participation in the totality of nature and the particularization of the totality of nature would not have compromised.277

I began my introductory chapter with this citation because in it, Msiska gets to the heart of a key cultural disjunction that characterized the encounter between late nineteenth century Tumbuka spirituality and the Western Protestant system introduced by the Livingstonia missionaries: the

276 As seen in Chapter Four, the Mission was unwilling to grant full pastoral status to its first generation of qualified converts for many years, a delay that caused great consternation and subsequent secessions by several of its most prominent converts.

277 “Traditional Religion among the Tumbuka and Other Tribes”. Republished in Golden Buttons, p.19, emphasis added.
contrast between a Western dualist schema that demarcates a supernatural domain as separate from the natural world (and in the process, separates body from soul), and a more unified Tumbuka schema that recognized an interrelatedness (one might say inter-being) between all that is in the world, and all that is within each person. While many early missionaries acknowledged, to some extent at least, the contrast Msiska points to in their writings, they generally accompanied it with judgements of, as Msiska writes, “superstition, paganism, and Satanism”. In his writing, Msiska critiques this judgmental view as a misguided cultural construction, and in the process implies that the Western dualist logic should not be assumed superior to African notions of a more participatory world of experience and reality. In making this critique, Msiska presents a direct challenge to one of the foundational schemas of the Western cultural tradition, compartmentalization. In the process, he also challenges the kind of presumption, judgment, and arrogance that accompanied the introduction of Christianity into the region. Whereas the early Livingstonia missionaries were willing, at a core ontological and eschatological level, to construct a categorical distinction between Christianity and local spiritualism, Msiska is unwilling to do this. Even while affirming the core gospel message of modern Christianity -- that the Trinitarian God has exclusive claim to the essential nature and destiny of each person -- Msiska is unwilling to then construct an opposed category of “pagan” in which an entire cultural and spiritual tradition is denigrated as depraved and without merit. Rather, as was seen in Chapter Three, Msiska, and other Malawian pastors and priests, have taken efforts to assert a line of continuum between the partial, and at times profound, truths of African spirituality, and the core orthodoxy of Western Christianity, which asserts an ultimate revelation by God through the person, ministry, and resurrection of his divine son, Jesus Christ.

That a professing Christian Tumbuka pastor such as Msiska, someone educated and indoctrinated within the Western Protestant Reformed tradition, is willing to make this critique of
Western Christendom suggests the degree to which, at a very profound level, some cultural models of personhood long prevalent within local Tumbuka cosmology have, at least for some, not been supplanted through their encounter with the Western religious schema and tradition.

In addition to critiquing the early missionaries’ religious presumptuousness, Msiska also argued against the early Livingstonia missionaries’ malpractice of making a categorical distinction between their Western medical tradition and those they encountered in northern Nyasaland. In an essay section entitled “Christianity and Diseases”, he wrote:

I do not accept the idea that there are Christian medicines and heathen medicines. I know of many so called African doctors (herbalists) who heal complicated and dangerous diseases. I know their names and their faces well. I feel that God gave these herbalists special gifts of healing. I do not accept the idea of European and African medicines at all. But I know that there are medicines to heal diseases. People die in the hospitals as well as in the hands of herbalists.278

As in his critique of the missionaries for their radical distinction between Christianity and Tumbuka spiritualism, Msiska also rejects the fixed categorical distinction between their respective healing traditions. Again, he identifies the opposition less in the cultural content of each respective cosmology, but rather in the difference between two cultural schemas, a European one that bifurcates the world into opposites, and an African one, specifically Tumbuka, that recognizes patterns of correspondence and common participation, and that carries within it a different set of assumptions about the participatory nature of being and personhood. As Msiska suggests, there was a key difference between Tumbuka and Scottish ontological systems at the time of their encounter in the late nineteenth century, a difference that set the stage for the cultural and religious changes that would emerge in the decades that followed.

Conclusion

278 This citation comes from Msiska’s essay “The Certainty of Christianity among the People in the Villages” (Golden Buttons: Christianity and Traditional Religion among the Tumbuka, p.42.)
The arrival of the Livingstonia missionaries in northern Nyasaland in the late nineteenth century initiated an encounter between two very different cultural and social systems. At an ideological level, the Livingstonia missionaries were bearers of a religious schema that constructed each person in primarily dualist terms, essentializing each individual as the possessor of a distinct soul, the ground of their being, which was apart from and superior to their organic, material form. Likewise, the Livingstonia missionaries were bearers of a biological schema that understood each person as an organic body subject to health and disease. Like its theological counterpart in Western culture, this schema argued for a sharp distinction of type between the body as an organic machine subject to breakdown and repair, and the soul as a facet of being subject to non-physical universal forces. Upon their arrival in northern Malawi, the missionaries sought to institutionalize both of these schemas through their schools, churches, hospitals, and other mission institutions, and in the process, to dramatically transform the ethical, religious, educational, and therapeutic culture of the region.

Within the interchange of their collective life in northwestern Malawi, Tumbukas, along with recently arrived Ngonis and others, were bearers of a different kind of cultural schema and cosmology, one that viewed the natural and spiritual worlds as inexorably fused, as part of one system of agencies and happenings. The bodily and spiritual facets of personal and collective experience were understood in dynamic, embodied, and participatory terms. It was from such a cosmological grounding that resident African populations in northern Malawi responded to missionary culture, as they variously resisted and engaged with this powerful new exogenous presence.

In their writings, the Livingstonia missionaries recognized some basic conjunctions between their religious and medical frameworks and those of the Tumbuka, such as their mutual acknowledgment of the existence of God, and their common appreciation for good health. Overall,
however, they emphasized the core differences between their two systems, and presented both their religious faith and medical practice as incommensurable with their African counterparts. In so doing, they defined a central disjunction between what they saw as their true knowledge of God and true method of scientific inquiry, and a false and incomplete knowledge of God and belief in magical causality. This was a model of opposition between truth and falsehood.

In his essays, the Presbyterian Reverend Msiska both accepted and rejected this missionary oppositional model. As a professing Christian, he accepted the notion that God’s revelation through Jesus Christ was distinct and complete, and that all other religious frameworks fall short of its encompassing revelation. Nevertheless, he was clear in stating that the missionaries were mistaken in then assuming that their compartmentalized, dualist schema was the only suitable framework for the Christian narrative of history and salvation. Msiska recognized that the early Livingstonia missionaries had wrapped their own philosophical and ontological frameworks within the sacred bindings of their Christianity, and in so doing had presented their culture as itself sacred and binding. Msiska’s critique is important, because it points to a deeper pattern of disjunction between Tumbuka and missionary culture than that identified by the missionaries themselves. While they were focused on the opposition between the content of the two religio-therapeutic systems (God vs. the ancestors; biomedicine vs. magic), Msiska pointed to deeper contradiction between the two systems, between a world view that splits the world up into religion/science, spiritual/organic, and soul/body, and one that acknowledges the wholeness of experience and event in the world.

In Part Two of this thesis, I explore a range of ethnographic data from my field site in Embangweni, in an effort to account for the religio-therapeutic culture that has emerged in the region as a result of the meeting of these two disparate spiritual schemas. This data suggests that the oppositional model proposed by the Livingstonia missionaries has been fully or partially
adopted by some residents of the region, while others have rejected its broader outlines in favor of redefining the relationship between Christianity and biomedicine and ancestral spiritualism and divinatory healing in more commensurable terms. The data also suggests that the central disjunction identified by Msiska, between a Western dualist schema and an African unitary schema, has profoundly shaped these patterns of religious adaptation and change, as locals have strived to integrate, oppose, and otherwise relate the two religious systems. While my informants varied significantly in the extent to which they embraced or rejected the missionary oppositional model, beneath these differences lay a common underlying skepticism of the Western dualist schema, and an unwillingness by most to fully embrace its logic. In particular, members of African Instituted Churches, especially women who were experiencing spirit possession, articulated this scepticism of Western dualism. Many of their voices feature prominently in Chapter Eight, where I outline the contemporary forms of the Vimbuza spirit possession complex and the ways in which Christian elements have been incorporated into it.

From a very different theological stance, leaders from local Pentecostal churches also argued against disembodying spirituality, and led worship services where members could experience the charismatic embodiment of the Holy Spirit in worship and prayer. Their perspectives are presented mostly in Chapters Ten and Eleven, where they explain the spiritual importance of full-bodied immersion by creating an analogy between baptism and the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. This second wave of Western-initiated Pentecostal missionary churches presents a powerful combination of Western Protestant orthodoxy and an embodied modeling of spiritual and religious experience and affect. While they affirm the Protestant orthodoxy of locating salvation in the unique act of repentance to God through Jesus, they also affirm a more embodied model of sacred personhood through the forms of their rhythmic drumming, dancing, swaying, and praying during church worship services. This focus on the body
as a locus of affective spiritual experience is in contrast to the dualist model that was taught and preached by most Livingstonia missionaries.

I use the ethnographic chapters that follow to explore some of the key arenas of religious activity among the Tumbuka, Ngoni, and other residents of Embangweni that focus their attention directly on the relationship between body and spirit. In Chapters Seven and Eight, I explore the ritual and dance complex known as Vimbuza, a therapeutic complex that is often invoked when individuals are judged to be afflicted by spirit possession. Members of AICs, in particular women experiencing spirit possession, feature prominently in these chapters, and their voices portray a religious practice, one with roots in pre-Mission African cultures, that remains vital and salient in their lives. At the same time, their voices, alongside my own observations of the ritual complex, show Vimbuza to be heavily infused with Christian symbols, symbols that are variously iconic, ritualized, textual, and verbal. In outlining the broader ways in which assumptions from both ancestral spiritualism and Christianity scaffold the Vimbuza complex, I present their fusion as an example of what I call \textit{analogic structural syncretism}, a fusion of the basic structures of (in this case) two religious systems through processes of analogic reasoning and practice, done in a way that undermines neither.

In Chapter Nine, I consider one man’s journey through a period of severe mental anxiety and physical stress as he struggled to reconcile his Presbyterian and biomedical professions with an emergent and powerful profession as a spirit-possessed diviner. In a case of what I call \textit{transitional syncretism}, this man found ways to incorporate symbols and meanings from Livingstonia institutions into his emergent identity as an ancestrally-inspired mediator of health, morality, and spiritual authority.

In Chapters Ten and Eleven, I examine the ritual of baptism as a topic of theological debate among the diverse Christian church leaders in Embangweni. In analyzing the debate, I present both
emic and etic perspectives on the differences and similarities that characterize the various church traditions on the topic of baptism. Many of the comments of the various church leaders speak for themselves, as they construct both analogies and distinctions between the rationales for and practices of baptism within varying church traditions. At the same time, the chapters also present my own etic argument that the emic perspectives articulated give voice to an underlying disagreement among church leaders as to the role of the body as a mediator of spiritual experience and transformation. Within the context of this disagreement, I focus special attention on the position outlined by AIC leaders, one that rejects the more compartmentalized Livingstonia model of body-soul dualism and affirms a vernacular model of body-spirit participation.

In Chapter Twelve, I consider a dying man’s crisis of faith in the face of his failing health and impending mortality. In it, I explore whether and how a crisis of knowledge in one dimension of his life, a life-threatening illness of his body, may have contributed to an irresolution and crisis of faith in another dimension, his vision and fears for the afterlife. In the process, I suggest that he was a man caught between Western and African schemas of body and soul, unable to find a syncretic mediation between them, and troubled in both heart and mind by result.

In each of these chapters, I attempt to represent and analyze how people articulate, through speech and action, their particular understandings of the relationship between body and spirit/soul. In the process, I reflect upon the question of whether Western missionaries were successful in their attempt to institutionalize a fundamentally new religious schema of personhood and being among the Tumbukas and other African peoples with whom they interacted. Framed in the modern parlance of power, the question becomes whether and how missionaries succeeded in establishing a new hegemonic model of sacred personhood within their spheres of operation and influence; and whether and how local African peoples adopted and integrated this missionary model within their own cosmologies of thought and practice.
PART TWO

ETHNOGRAPHY

AND

ANALYSIS
Chapter Six

The Ethnographic Setting and Research Methods

As described in Chapter One, the Loudon church station of the Livingstonia Synod has become a recognized medical, educational, and religious center in northern Malawi. At the time of my research, the station was referred to by most as “Embangweni station”, and included within its institutional complex a church and church offices, a 134-bed hospital, a secondary school, primary school, and school for hearing impaired children, and staff housing for many station employees. The station is bordered on its southwestern side by a large and growing trading center, and at the time of my research included a government post office, a permanent market, restaurants, resthouses, bars, and dozens of retail outlets. Both the station and trading center are surrounded by villages that range in population from dozens to hundreds. As a residential and trading center, Embangweni has experienced substantial growth throughout the nineteen-nineties and going into the new century, in particular as the Embangweni Hospital has been revitalized as a major medical center in the north. The area is becoming ever more densely populated, and more diverse, as people move in from other neighboring areas and from further afield in Malawi. Electricity was introduced to the town and station in early 2001, and this has also served to draw in more immigrants and traders.

The majority of local residents in Embangweni today self-identify as Tumbuka, with significant minorities of Ngoni, Tonga, Chewa, and Senga, among others.279 The vast majority of locals identify with Christian churches and family backgrounds, except for the small population of Yao businessmen who have immigrated from the south of the country, and who are generally of

279 Based on her 1989 survey of ethnic identity in the Embangweni area, Quinn (1993) estimated that about 54% of local residents in Embangweni identified themselves as Tumbukas, followed by Ngoni (11%), Chewa (7%), Tonga (7%), Senga (4%), and a range of other ethnicities, including Khalanga, Poka, Swazi, Henga, Kamanga, Nkonde, Musukwa, and Yao.
Muslim background and identity. Some of their young, mostly Tumbuka, wives also now identify as Muslims and participate in the religious life of the local mosque. The missionary presence in Embangweni has also been diverse. The early missionaries in the area were all from the Livingstonia Mission of the Free Church of Scotland. In the years since, Irish and American Presbyterian missionaries have also been present. Among those, some come from other church traditions (e.g. Roman Catholic), even while formally working for the Presbyterian Church during their mission work. During the time of my research a small number of American, Irish, and Scottish missionaries (ranging from five to eight) lived on station, affiliated with the Presbyterian Church/USA, the Presbyterian Church of Ireland, and the Presbyterian Church of Scotland.

A major complication in writing about the intersection of vernacular and Christian cultures in Embangweni is determining what constitutes the “vernacular.” When Livingstonia missionaries first arrived in northern Malawi, Tumbuka and Ngoni populations were only about twenty years into their cultural encounter. At that time, it is likely that many cultural models were clearly identifiable with one cultural tradition or the other. For purposes of this research, I alternate between a linguistic reference to the “Tumbuka-speaking” residents of the Embangweni area, and a broader cultural reference to “Tumbuka-Ngoni,” using the latter term as a general gloss for the vernacular culture of Embangweni as it was encountered by Western missionaries arriving in the region in the late nineteenth century. I also use the latter term as a general gloss for the culture encountered there today, even as it is also possible to identify cultural models that are specifically Ngoni or Tumbuka in origin, as well as others derived from minority cultural traditions in the area. I will at times distinguish some cultural models as specifically Tumbuka or Ngoni, where there is a clear local consensus as to tribal origin. Otherwise I will frame local cultural models within the combined Tumbuka-Ngoni cultural milieu that has existed for the past century and a half.
The Mission Station

As a town and trading center, Embangweni grew up around the Loudon mission station, which was founded in 1902 on a rectangular, square-mile piece of land gifted to the Mission by Inkosi Mzukuzuku. During the early years of the station, it became the most prominent area center of wage employment, as the mission paid workers to build and maintain the station, and to staff its emergent church, school, and medical facilities. In the years since, and still today, this steady presence of monthly wage earners has attracted commercial and agricultural vendors to the outskirts of the station, resulting in what is today a thriving trading station on the southeastern corner of the station.

The station itself is laid out in a manner consistent with its historical development, with its three core institutions laid out at the center of the institutional and residential section of the station. At the geographic and symbolic center of the station is the Loudon church building itself, first built in 1904, and constructed in the archetypal shape of the Christian cross, with its lower vertical section substantially longer than the top. As is typical of cruciform churches, one enters the building at the base of the cross, and walks into the congregational section of the building, its largest. At the far end of the building, where the horizontal and vertical lines of the cross conjoin, one finds the alter and pulpit. Each is raised on a platform, the pulpit highest of all, and is oriented back to face the congregation itself. This arena is the site of the church’s most sacred ritual acts, including baptism and marriage, and the preparation of the holy communion.\textsuperscript{280} It is also where the church’s doctrine’s and pastoral theology are articulated each Sunday morning during worship.

\textsuperscript{280} Holy Communion, of course, breaks free from this spatial confinement to the alter area, and becomes distributed among the congregants themselves, among members of the “church body” as it is often called within Christian discourse. As a core ritual of Christianity, holy communion (Eucharist within the Roman Catholic Church) is the time when the fellowship of believers is celebrated through joint reflection, and joint participation in the redemptive consumption of Jesus Christ’s living sacrifice.
services. At the very top of the architectural cross, located behind the pulpit and alter, and separated by a wall and door, is the symbolic head of the cruciform church. Here the presiding reverend has a desk, and he and the church elders meet to conduct the kirk sessions that govern and discipline the church congregation. Either wing of the church cross is occupied by supplemental seating as well as storage area.

The church is surrounded by a large quad, that includes paths running to and from the church building like spokes on a wheel. To the east of the quad is the Embangweni Primary School complex, which today includes buildings for offices, classrooms, and teacher residency, as well as a large playing field. The main building, right off the quad, was the first school building constructed on the station, and, having been modified and expanded through the years, it was the early center of the Mission’s educational effort, alongside the construction of numerous schools in surrounding village communities. To the north of the cruciform church, again just off the church quad, is Embangweni Hospital, which was described earlier in this chapter. To the best of my understanding, a small round adobe building with a conical roof, built to the northeast of the church building and just a stone’s-throw away from today’s hospital complex, was the first medical center established on the station. It was here that Dr. Agnes Fraser held her “mother-craft” educational sessions with local women (see Chapter Four).

From this institutional core at its center, the station spreads out into a range of residential groupings, generally organized by institution. The two exceptions to this residential pattern are the Robert Laws Embangweni Secondary School and the Embangweni School for the Hard of Hearing. The former is located several hundred yards to the east northeast of the center quad, and had previously been the Robert Laws Teacher Training College. Today it is a co-educational boarding school that attracts students from all over the nation and from a variety of Christian denominational backgrounds. The latter school, known colloquially as the School for Deaf Children, is one of only
a few schools for the hearing impaired in the entire country. It is located several hundred yards to the southeast of the church, on the border with the adjoining trading center. Its infrastructure has been and continues to be built through substantial donations coordinated through the Marion Medical Mission, a U.S.-based independent missionary organization that also has a major shallow wells and piped water project that extends throughout the northern regions of Malawi and beyond.

The church’s manse (parsonage) lies in a straight line northeast from the church building, beyond the hospital complex, and towards the northeastern border of the station. Expatriot missionaries who work in the hospital reside, alongside with Malawian medical and administrative personnel, in a residential area just west of the manse and to the north of the hospital complex. Other hospital employees live around the hospital, just as each school is bordered by residential areas occupied by its teachers and administrators, and some non-mission personnel who rent houses from the schools.

**Social relationships, chiefly authority, and custom**

Social relationships, of course, transcend the borders of the station, trading-center, and surrounding villages. Several of the station employees are from neighboring villages, and among them are some who live on station, and others who live in their village. Likewise, some of the station residents are not station employees, but instead work for government agencies or NGOs that rent their houses from station institutions. Likewise, through networks of marriage and kinship, many people are tied to broader social networks in the Embangweni area. In order to demonstrate the cross-cutting networks of social relationships, Quinn (1993) gives the example of one local Ngoni man who came from a local village but who also “lives in the station, teaches at the primary
An Ngoni chief, from the ruling Jere clan, is both the customary and legal authority in the Embangweni area. He is known by his titular office as Inkosi Mzukuzuku, and during my fieldwork, the elder Jere man who held the office was respected as the most authentic and authoritative of the Ngoni chiefs because of his extensive knowledge of Ngoni custom and tradition, and his outspoken defense of “African” culture and morality in the face of growing Westernization. Inkosi Mzukuzuku’s seat of power was in Ephangweni, a small town just a few kilometers east of Embangweni, and on the opposite bank of the Lwasozi River. He is recognized as a Traditional Authority by the national government, and is one of eight Ngoni chiefs who serve as TA’s within Malawi’s northern Mzimba District. Among the eight, one, the Inkosi ya Makosi (Chief of Chiefs) is the Paramount Chief to whom other chiefs look for leadership. His administrative and chiefly headquarters are in Edingeni, a town located about fifteen miles northwest of Embangweni.

Though I never witnessed a direct challenge to the chiefly authority of Inkosi Mzukuzuku, several Tumbuka and Tonga men with whom I spoke did express dissatisfaction with the political status quo. Once, while observing a ceremonial performance of the Ngoni war dance, known as Ingoma, a prominent local Tonga man turned to me in disgust, and commented that the Ngoni had only come to be the local rulers because they attacked resident Tumbuka and Tonga populations

---

281 Anne-Lise Quinn, 1993, p.78.
282 Inkosi Mzukuzuku used virtually any public gathering as an opportunity to teach, scold, or otherwise instruct those gathered on the need to reflect carefully about how to critically engage with modern Western culture and practices. For example, he encouraged people to use the CCAP’s hospital facilities, but argued fervently against adopting the national government’s pro-condom message for preventing HIV transmission. The latter practice would, he argued, encourage promiscuity. In this stance, he was aligned with the policies of the CCAP, though there were members of the Embangweni Hospital staff who rejected this stance and quietly encouraged condom use.
and terrorized them into submission. Likewise, another local Tumbuka elder showed me documents from an organization known as the Committee for the Cultural Survival of the Tumbuka People, which was lobbying the national government to reinstate a Tumbuka as the Traditional Authority of Mzimba District, based on the hereditary title of Chikulamayembe which anteceded the Ngoni arrival. Though this kind of dissatisfaction seemed mostly to brew below the surface of public encounters, it was nevertheless evident from time to time in my conversations with both Tumbukas and Tongas.

In the Embangweni area, Inkosi Mzukuzuku was assisted in his duties by a council of close advisors known as *indunas*, who were agents of the Inkosi’s authority in the area, and whom wielded authority as headmen in their own respective villages. Other villages also had headmen, some of whom were also Ngoni, but many of whom were Tumbuka.283 Among five of the largest villages around Embangweni station, Quinn (1993) notes that four were led by a Tumbuka headman, who acted in council with a group of senior agnatic kinsmen who are considered the owners of the village. Based on a widespread survey completed in those villages, Quinn found that sixty-six percent of household heads among the villages were related to their village headman, whether Tumbuka or Ngoni, through agnatic ties, and that a further twenty percent of households were headed by female affines who continue to live virilocally among their deceased or migrant husband’s kin.284 Based in part on these residence patterns, Quinn suggests that exogenous patrilineages are the primary form of kinship organization in the area, and my fieldwork experience would suggest the same.

---

283 Quinn, 1993, p.98. Quinn also notes that “M’mbelwa’s Ngoni, unlike the Gomani Ngoni in the Central Region, allowed subject villagers to remain under their own headmen. These headmen became subsumed, however, within the wider Ngoni political hierarchy and there is little doubt that they played a major part in establishing the Ngoni ideology of patrilineality within the community.” (p.93)

284 Ibid., pp.92-96.
The Ngoni lineage and kinship system has also come to dominate local marriage practices, as the customs of *lobola* (bridewealth), polygyny and levirate marriage are all practiced in the area, though the latter is found almost exclusively among Ngoni and is known as “*nthengwa ya Chingoni*” (marriage of the Ngoni). *Lobola*, in particular, has become the only widely accepted way to formally sanction and formalize a relationship as marriage. Early on in the missionary and colonial era, both the state and church recognized as valid marriages only those that had been established through the Ngoni practice of *lobola*, and the early Livingstonia missionaries would only hold marriage ceremonies for couples already joined through their families’ exchange of bridewealth. The churches of the CCAP, including the Lwasozi congregation of Embangweni Station, continue to follow this practice. In her survey work in the Embangweni area, Quinn found that ninety-four percent of village households included marriages that were transacted with *lobola*, and I also found it be an assumed requisite if one wanted public validation for one’s union.

**Economic Conditions and Classes**

The primary subsistence crop in the Embangweni area is maize, supplemented by potato, cassava, and soybean cultivation. The cultivation of maize is highly dependent on the use of fertilizers, and many locals go into debt at the beginning of each agricultural cycle in order to purchase the requisite amounts, in hopes of selling off part of a subsequent surplus crop. Repayment of debts often posed a difficulty for people, however, especially when yields were low or prices for maize dropped in the months directly following harvest time. Beans, onions, tomatoes, sweet potatoes, peanuts, and leafy green vegetables are additional staples, and chickens,

---

285 See Forster 1991:45.
286 Quinn also found that 42% of the marriages involving *lobola* were set up as households before bridewealth transactions were agreed to or completed. Elopement was a common trend, and was not seen as necessarily problematic, as long as *lobola* could be negotiated soon thereafter.
goats, pidgins, and cattle are the primary sources of meat, and are for some weekly additions to everyday diet.

Described in cursory and highly generalized terms, there are three primary economic classes in Embangweni. The first economic class consists of those bureaucratic, administrative, and professional employees of the government, mission, NGOs, and commercial outlets who have access to monthly wage income. Mission employees make up the largest group. Whether nurses, teachers, ministers, agricultural extension officers, or office managers, these people are among those who can rely on a monthly infusion of cash to go towards the purchase of desired commodities like tea, sugar, milk, salt, cooking oil, soap, flour, clothing, and a handful of other basics. These wages obviously vary, and can range from thirty, to forty, to fifty or more dollars per month -- small amounts, but often enough to buy many household basics as long as cultivation has provided for household subsistence. Other mission employees, like gardeners, maintenance workers, and part-time or piece-meal laborers, make less each month, but at least share in the security of regular income. Most of the full-time mission employees are also distinguished by their access to on-station housing. Some mission employees have used their cash income to initiate small side business ventures.

A second class of people are the business men and women whom own shops or other commercial ventures in the trading center, and whom also derive a cash income from their work. As with their professional and bureaucratic counterparts, levels of wage income run a broad gamut.

---

287 These three generalized economic classes are, I would suggest, useful parameters for describing how people’s availability to cash flows varies according to occupation.

288 Members of this group of wage earners, like almost everyone else in the area, cultivate crops each year for subsistence. Even the Head-of-Station at Embangweni, the senior reverend and church administrator, cultivated maize and vegetables for his family.

289 Quinn (1993, p.112) notes that in the five villages surrounding Embangweni that she surveyed, the vast majority (96%) of the nicer brick houses with tin or tile roofs were owned by CCAP members.
here, but they are nevertheless distinguished by their fairly regular access to cash with which to purchase household foods and other products. These include small shop owners and artisans, as well as the women who brew beer in *Sanje Muleke*, the residential neighborhood that adjoins the southwestern corner of the trading center.²⁹⁰

The majority of Embangweni’s residents, however, belong to a third class of people, farmers, who generally have an inconsistent and limited access to cash. For this majority of farmers, buying basic commodities to help feed, clean, and clothe their families is an ongoing struggle, though most families do get some cash though occasional piece-meal work and some sale of agricultural produce. Nevertheless, these farmers remain highly dependent on good harvests for the welfare and health of their families and dependents.

Patterns of Health, Illness, and Therapy

The delicate balance between health and illnnes is a major concern for most of Embangweni’s residents, as they face numerous challenges to their personal and family well-being. These challenges come in the forms of both poverty and disease, as low incomes and poor nutrition, along with high exposures to endemic diseases like malaria, tuberculosis, pneumonia, and HIV/AIDS, have resulted in high levels of both morbidity and mortality. An Embangweni Hospital survey of its patients showed that half of them have a cash income of less than $50 per year. Malnutrition levels are high, as are infant and child mortality rates. Rates of life expectancy at birth have also fallen, in large part the result of the HIV/AIDS epidemic, which is claiming

²⁹⁰ *Sanje Muleke* translates as “Don’t Be Jealous”. The community is known by insiders and outsiders alike as a place where copious amounts of alcohol are consumed, and where tempers often run high. The community’s name suggests a moral mandate that is, I presume, directed at keeping the peace.
growing numbers of youth and adults. The following charts, taken from the Embangweni Hospital Annual Report 2000 show some of these critical trends.\(^{291}\)

### Top Five Inpatient Diagnosis by Ward

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Children’s</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Malaria</td>
<td>Malaria</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Malnutrition</td>
<td>Pulmonary Tuberculosis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Pneumonia</td>
<td>AIDS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Anaemia</td>
<td>Surgical Cases</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Tuberculosis</td>
<td>Pneumonia</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Top Five Inpatient Causes of Death by Ward

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Children’s (% of total deaths)</th>
<th>Male (% of total deaths)</th>
<th>Female (% of total deaths)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 Malnutrition - 26%</td>
<td>AIDS - 22%</td>
<td>AIDS - 22%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Malaria - 13%</td>
<td>Pneumonia - 7%</td>
<td>Tuberculosis - 7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Pneumonia - 12%</td>
<td>Congestive Cardiac Failure - 7%</td>
<td>Cirrhosis / ascites - 7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Anaemia - 10%</td>
<td>Cirrhosis / ascites - 7%</td>
<td>Pneumonia - 4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 Meningitis - 8%</td>
<td>Tuberculosis - 4%</td>
<td>Congestive Cardiac Failure - 4%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^{291}\) Embangweni Hospital Annual Report 2000. (Livingstonia Synod, Church of Central Africa Presbyterian), p.3.
These charts show high rates of nutritional deficiency, especially among children and women, as well as high rates of bacterial and viral infection by such pernicious diseases as malaria, TB, pneumonia, meningitis, and HIV/AIDS. There is in Embangweni, as elsewhere in Malawi, Africa, and the world, a public health crisis, one that provides regular challenge to families and parents as they struggle to provide and care for themselves and those they care for. This everyday crisis of health marks a stark setting for the ethnographic analysis that accompanies this thesis, as it plays a critical and powerful role in people’s everyday lives.

In the face of illness and affliction, the residents of Embangweni have three primary institutions to which they can turn for therapy:

- village ng’angas (herbalists) and nchimis (diviners)
- Embangweni Hospital
- churches

Each of these institutional types offers its patients a different kind of therapeutic logic and practice, ranging from the highly spiritual healing offered in churches, to the mostly biomedical therapy offered in the hospital, to the mixed herbal/spiritual therapy offered by many village practitioners.

For those who seek therapy in village chipatalas (hospitals) with “African Doctors”, as ng’angas and nchimis are called by locals, they are likely to encounter one of two types of diagnosis from the presiding physician. Often, they will be told either that they have a known disease like malaria or TB, and should promptly visit the hospital, or that they might be subject to some kind of magical or spiritual intervention. Many of the ng’angas and nchimis with whom I

---

292 I say “mostly” because the hospital is not exclusively a biomedical institution. As an adjunct of the church, with an in-residence Hospital Chaplain, the hospital is also a place of daily morning worship, and of daily prayers to God among ward patients for healing and mercy.
spoke were keen to tell me that they could recognize diseases like TB and malaria, and often referred patients to the hospital for treatment. At the same time, they insisted that some afflictions could not be treated in the hospital, because they were spiritual and magical in origin. Among my many informants who spoke about their own illness experiences, many told me that the *ng’anga* had been their first therapeutic option when they became ill. Factors of distance and cost were often suggested to explain this pattern of first resort, though people also emphasized that many afflictions could only be treated by village practitioners.

Embangweni Hospital was the other major therapeutic option in the area, and, as a single institution, was by far the largest care-giver in the area, and with the greatest geographical reach. In addition to its main facility in Embangweni, the hospital also maintains small clinics in three area villages, Kalikumbi, Mab’iri, and Mpasazi, and conducts weekly Mobile Clinics to other villages in the area. The catchment area of the hospital is estimated to include over 100,000 people, and the hospital attracts many patients from further afield, in Malawi and neighboring Zambia, just thirty kilometers away. In addition to its inpatient care (including tertiary, maternity, and neonatal care), the hospital provides a range of services and projects, including sale of discounted or at-cost pharmaceuticals, a rehabilitation center for children suffering from malnutrition, a dental clinic, vaccination and ante-natal clinics in local villages, a mosquito net promotion plan run through a village-based volunteer program, a drug revolving fund, and, alongside the Indiana-based Marian Medical Mission, a large-scale shallow wells and piped water program. The hospital also runs an HIV/AIDS counseling and education program, and in 2000, was chosen as pilot site for a UNICEF project aimed at reducing mother-to-child transmission of HIV through counseling, testing, and the optional usage of nevirapine, an anti-retroviral that can reduce by 75% the chances of transmission during delivery.\(^{293}\)

\(^{293}\) Embangweni Hospital Annual Report 2000, p. 8.
Among local residents, the hospital was known to provide effective treatments for a range of diseases, including malaria and TB, and was often either the first or second therapeutic option sought out by patients or their care-givers. My informants generally told me that there were some symptoms that sent them and others straight to the hospital, such as high fevers (malaria) or blood in one’s saliva (TB), while in other less clear cases they would often first consult a local ng’anga.

The third local therapeutic option in Embangweni is found among local Pentecostal and Zionist churches, where church members and leaders put faith in the power of God, through prayer and the laying on of hands, to bring healing to the afflicted. Participation in this form of spiritual therapy often accompanies seeking out treatment at the hospital, in both Pentecostal and AIC churches. The main difference between the two churches is that Pentecostal churches forbid participation in spiritual divination sessions with nchimis, while AIC churches generally permit such consultations. Both churches agree that their leaderships can act as medium of God’s healing power through their laying on of hands and supportive prayers by congregants.

As has already been noted, these three therapeutic modalities are not exclusive in people’s practice, as many people combine some or all of them in their pursuit of healing and well-being. The spirit possessed man who is the subject of my Chapter Seven case study has employed all three therapeutic modalities in his quest for therapy, though as will be seen, he increasingly came to focus on spirit therapy as his primary modality.

The diversity of therapeutic practices in Embangweni is evidence of a complex intersection of vernacular and Western medical traditions, one that has historically accompanied the intersection of Christianity and ancestral spiritualism. As such, in the contemporary religio-therapeutic culture of Embangweni, cultural models from ancestral spiritualism, magic, Christianity, and biomedicine all coexist within a complex cultural field of local thought, discourse, and practice, and are implicated in people’s sense of themselves, others, and the moral standards by
which relationships are governed. An important theme that was anticipated and confirmed in this research was the extent to which many models of spirit are understood as embodied, and correspondingly how often the body is modeled as a spiritual vessel. This modeling of spirits that are embodied and of bodies that are inspired is part-and-parcel of the way many locals conceptualize the spiritual, therapeutic, and moral dimensions of personal existence. Nevertheless, as will be seen in Chapters Ten and Eleven, which explore local theologies of baptism, there are substantial differences between local churches regarding the amount of attention given to the body as a site of spiritual transformation. Among the Protestant first-wave mission churches, in particular, there was a tendency, fitting their respective orthodoxies, to emphasize the intellectual rather than the bodily dimension of ritual activity.

Patterns of religious discourse and identity

The predominant publically articulated religious identity in Embangweni is as a Christian, though there are also many who are public about their status as people experiencing possession by spirits, ancestral and otherwise. There is also a small Muslim community of mostly ethnic Yaos and their wives, as well as others who participate little in any religious community. Likewise, religious practices with roots in pre-Christian indigenous culture are widespread and persuasive in local culture, in particular the Vimbuza spirit possession dance. But even Vimbuza rituals are now loaded with Christian symbolism, which has become integrated in complex but fundamental ways with the ancestor spiritualism of the event. The culture of Embangweni is, in some important way, a Christian culture.

At the same time, it is a plural Christian culture, in which a diversity of ideas, judgements, and practices, some very unconventional, are accepted by individuals who identify themselves publically as Christian. This diversity of views is articulated by individuals from within the same
210
church communities, and even more commonly by members of different church communities, as people come to their Christian faith and identity with different biographical, institutional, and ecclesiastical experiences.294

Related to this diversity is a fairly common pattern of migration between and among churches. Many of my church informants could list membership in one or more other churches that preceded their current membership. People accounted for changes in their church affiliations based on a range of factors, including family history, social status, employment and educational opportunities, embitterment with some churches, geographic location and accessability, and doctrinal and ethical conviction. Meanwhile, the myriad of different churches in Embangweni each articulate different teachings and ethics about being a Christian, and their members hold each other accountable to various behavioral standards.

The language of spirituality is widely used by people in Embangweni. Many invoke models of spiritual agency and embodiment to account for a variety of experiences and behaviors, and spiritual discourse is widely accepted and validated. There is both continuity and diversity running through these discourses on spirituality. Many people, for example, invoke the agency of ancestral spirits as an explanatory model in circumstances of illness. Yet, while some people express respect and deference for the spirit’s authoritative reach into human affairs, others reject that intervention into healthy human life and condemn it as evil. Likewise, many people contend that a person must be possessed by the Holy Spirit in order to live a true Christian life. Yet people differ significantly in what they validate as evidence of possession by the Holy Spirit. In this respect, there is no single discourse of the spirit in Embangweni, but rather many discourses, with

294 It is important to note that not all members of any given church will necessarily adhere to the religious schema associated with that church. People often have experiences with multiple churches, and various reasons for membership in a given church. People also differ in the degree to which they develop their religious thinking independently from their church traditions. As such, there is not a one-to-one correlation between church, schema, and individual member.
roots in both indigenous and Christian traditions. Most local residents are familiar with the range of discourses of spirit that are in public circulation, and of the specific models of spirit that characterize them, and there is a profound level of mutual intelligibility when people talk about spiritual matters, even as people differ in their particular understandings.

Participation in the spirit possession complex known as Vimbuza is also prevalent and widespread in Embangweni, and is a major feature of the spiritual and religious culture of the area. Vimbuza is a local variety of that larger therapeutic complex known as ngoma, which has been identified throughout much of central and southern Africa. In Embangweni, many people, especially those belonging to churches that do not discipline Vimbuza participants, are public about their possession status, and participate frequently in open village performances of its dance and ritual forms. There are many others who also claim possession, but who are less public and active in their possession for fear of church disciplinary action. Based on her research in the area in the mid to late 1980's, Quinn suggests that the ancestral cults of the Tumbuka and Ngoni seem to have mostly disappeared because of the influence of Christianity. Nevertheless, she acknowledges that there are many locals, including CCAP members, who continue to consult with diviners (nchimis) and who continue to participate in Vimbuza dances and ceremonies. Based on my research a decade later, I would argue that Quinn overstated the demise of the ancestral spiritualist system, as I found it to be a potent and relevant facet of local religious life, alongside Christian forms. What is true, as Quinn herself noted, is that many who participate in the rituals and forms of ancestral spiritualism now do so covertly, in order to avoid negative social or economic repercussions within the dominant Presbyterian society and church organization of the area.

295 Based on diaries kept by local nchimis on her behalf, Quinn (1993) found that almost half (49%) of those who consulted with them were CCAP members (p.132).
The Ecclesiastical Context – First-wave Mission Churches

There were fifteen church institutions active in the immediate Embangweni locality during my research time. Of these, four can be considered ‘first-wave mission churches’, all of which arrived in Malawi in the late nineteenth century. They are the Church of Central Africa Presbyterian (CCAP), and the Roman Catholic, Seventh Day Adventist, and Anglican churches.

The earliest European mission in Nyasaland was the Anglican Universities’ Mission to Central Africa (UMCA), which first arrived in 1861 under the leadership of Bishop Charles Mackenzie and established a mission at Magomero in the southern district of Chiradzulu, in modern-day southern Malawi. With the failure of that mission after only two years, there was a nineteen-year hiatus before it established a renewed Anglican presence in 1882 on Likoma Island, in the east-central section of the lake, near the present day Mozambican shore. It did not come to Embangweni as a formal church institution until very recently, in 1995, but has since succeeded in building a large, permanent church building and has attracted a relatively large congregation, many of whom have individual or family histories in Likoma. In at least one prominent case, it became the church of resort for a long-standing CCAP member who became disenchanted with the stewardship policies of his church.

As described in detail in Chapter Four, the Livingstonia missionaries of the Free Church of Scotland first arrived in southern Nyasaland in 1875, and by 1878 had established a presence in the north of the western lakeshore region, on the borders of Tumbuka-Ngoni land. They established a permanent presence in the Embangweni area in 1902 and the resultant Presbyterian church there today is by far the largest in the area. In 1960 the Livingstonia Mission became the Livingstonia

---

296 See Fiedler (1995a, 1995b) for a more thorough account of this first wave of Christian missions in Africa.
297 In her survey of the area, Quinn (1993) found that seventy-nine percent of local residents claimed affiliation with the CCAP (p.145). I suspect this number had decreased in the intervening decade between her research and mine, as Embangweni has grown as a population center largely
Synod, and merged into the larger Church of Central Africa Presbyterian (CCAP), the largest and most established church organization in northern Malawi generally and Embangweni specifically. The CCAP of today is a union of five Synods, three in Malawi, and one in Zimbabwe and Zambia respectively.

The Roman Catholic church, through the activities of the White Fathers, arrived in southern Malawi in 1889. They eventually headquartered themselves in Mua, in south-central Malawi, and first established a mission presence in northern Malawi in 1934 at the Katete Mission, approximately forty kilometers due east of Embangweni. The local Roman Catholic church just outside of Embangweni was built in late 1960's and is the second largest local congregation, with an active church membership of between two and three hundred congregants.

The Seventh Day Adventist presence in Nyasaland began in 1902 when the church purchased the mission holdings from a departing Seventh Day Baptist church, and, under the leadership of Joseph Booth, began an evangelical and educational mission centered around the station at Plainsfield (now Malamulo) in the southern region of Nyasaland. According to local informants, it reached the Embangweni area in the late 1960's and has had a small congregation ever since. In the mid 1990's a permanent concrete church building was built, and the congregation has now grown to a membership of around fifty members.

These four first-wave mission churches share many characteristics in common, including an emphasis on doctrinal training for new converts before they participate in baptism, and a highly formalized authority structure. Likewise, each of the four local churches is tied to a much larger church body, one that has ecclesiastical, educational and medical facilities in other regions of the

through in-migration, and as both local Pentecostal churches and the town’s New Apostolic Church have experienced substantial growth. Likewise, the Seventh Day Adventist, Anglican, and Roman Catholic churches in the area seem to have managed slow but steady growth in recent years, owing in part perhaps to their large, permanent brick church buildings.

country, and is tied into a larger international church organization. Of the four, the SDA is the most different from the other three, owing to its unique history of development apart from the other so-called “mainstream” churches. As will be seen in Chapter Nine, SDA leaders in Embangweni articulated a somewhat different theological framework on specific topics like baptism, a framework that resembled in many respects those of both the Pentecostal and AIC traditions.

Among the churches in Embangweni, CCAP members tended to put greater emphasis on doctrinal orthodoxy, abidance to ecclesiastical codes of conduct, and mechanisms of institution building. In general, there was an emphasis on a sober and rational understanding of Biblical teachings and a knowledgeable faith, on continuity with former church policy and doctrine, on orderly worship, on intra-church hierarchy and organization, and on tithing. There were generational and gender differences, however, in which women and youth tended to encourage a more open and inspired worship experience, while most men affirmed the established order. Among the leadership in particular, though also among many congregants, there was a publically articulated distrust of ecstatic experiences, of both traditional and Christian charismatic forms, and a fairly strong rejection of most forms of indigenous spirituality, in particular Vimbuza dancing. In this model, individuals are deemed responsible for the spirits that possess them, and possession by Vimbuza spirits is seen as a sign of a lack of faith. Instead, the person is to put their faith in God, and seek treatment in the mission hospital.

**African Instituted Churches (AICs)**

As described in Chapter Four, in the years following the institutionalization of these first-wave churches, a process of ecclesiastical segmentation occurred as a result of dissatisfaction and alienation by ministers and teachers who had been trained in the early mission churches but whom had become frustrated at delays in their ecclesiastical advancement, and at being restricted to
institutionally submissive positions within the church hierarchy. Either because of suspension or by breaking away by their own initiative, or both, these leaders (usually men) established alternative church institutions apart from the missions. Within the broader history and anthropology of Christianity in Africa, such break-away churches have become identified as African Independent Churches (AIC), and by more recent nomenclature, as African Instituted Churches.299 Through these name-changes, Turner’s classic definition of an AIC as “a church which has been founded in Africa, by Africans, and primarily for Africans” has endured.300 AICs generally advocate doctrines and enforced ethics that are partially counterpoised to the mission churches and their prevailing values and ethics, often asserting the validity of local cultural and religious practices that the early missionaries had denigrated. During my research in Embangweni, there were four African Instituted Churches present in the area. Two of these, the Last Church of God and His Christ and the Chipangano Church, have their origins in Malawi, while the two others, Zion Prophecy Church and Zion Christian Church trace their origins through South Africa.

It is generally agreed that the Last Church was founded in 1925 by a Livingstonia-educated Tonga, Jordan Msumba, after he returned to his home of Chinteche on the northern lakeshore after several years of employment in South Africa. From there, Msumba moved north to Karonga, where its membership was mostly Nyakusa and Ngonde. The church then moved into Tanzania.301 According to one of my elder Last Church informants, the church came to Mzimba District in the 1950's and shortly after to the Embangweni area. Today, it has a substantial presence in rural areas in the northern region.

The Chipangano cha Abraham (Abrahamic Covenant Church) was founded in the lakeshore town of Chinteche in 1927 by a Tonga, Isaac Kaunda, shortly after his return from a time of laboring in South Africa. Kaunda had initially worked with Msumba in the formation of the Last Church, but after the two argued over the naming of the church, Kaunda split off and formed the Chipangano church. Under the ministry of Manasseh Hara, an Ngoni, the church grew rapidly throughout Mzimba district during the 1930's. By 1940 it claimed over 11,000 adherents in northern Malawi, eighty-five percent of whom were in the Mzimba branch. Today, the Chipangano church has a widespread presence in the northern region, though though I am unsure of its total membership.

Both Last Church and Chipangano can be classified as African/Ethiopian churches, one of three general types of AICs using Anderson’s (2001) typology.

African/Ethiopian churches typically originated in secessions from mission-founded churches on racial and political grounds. Formed in the context of the white mission’s conquest of African peoples, they arose primarily as political and administrative reactions to European mission-founded churches. Nevertheless, as Sundkler points out, the “church organization and Bible interpretation are largely copied from the patterns of the Protestant Mission Churches from which they have seceded.” They usually practice infant baptism, read set liturgies, sing translated European hymns, wear European-type clerical vestments (often black), and are less enthusiastic or emotional in their services than are the “spiritual” churches. (Anderson 2001, p.109)

The other two local AICs, the Zion Prophecy Church and Zion Christian Church, are of a different type, each tracing their roots back to a South Africa church movement. I was unable to secure a clear regional or local history for the Zion Prophecy Church, though one local ZPC leader suggested that it had arrived in the Embangweni area in the 1960's. The Zionist Christian Church (ZCC) came to Malawi by way of Zimbabwe. It was organized there in 1925 by Samuel Mutendi.

---

302 Ibid., 120-121. This, despite the 1934 secession en masse of the Nkhotakota branch of the church, a congregation of some 300 members, to the Last Church.
Mutendi was a Rozwi of royal descent who had attended Dutch Reformed Church schools in the region. From 1919, he started having visions of establishing his own church, and in 1922 he left to find work in the Transvaal region of South Africa. There he admired the teachings of the Zionist Apostolic Faith Mission (ZAFM) founded by Egnasi Lekganyane. In 1923, Mutendi was baptized in the ZAFM, and he was appointed a messenger to Zimbabwe that same year. In 1925, Egnazi Lekganyane broke away from ZAFM and formed the Zionist Christian Church and called all Zionist preachers in Zimbabwe to join him. Mutendi joined ZCC, returned to Zimbabwe, and founded Zion City in Gutu district. Members of the ZCC wear military-style uniforms, dance to music using special drums, believe in spirit healing and possession, and accept polygamy.303

In Anderson’s framework, both of the ZCC and ZPC can can be classified as Spiritual/Prophet-Healing Churches:

The “spiritual” or “prophet-healing” churches emphasize spiritual power...Because written theology is not a priority and is generally less precisely formulated in these churches than in European instituted churches, the differences in belief systems, liturgy, and prophetic healing practices are usually considerable. Foundational to these churches are definite theological presuppositions, found more in the practice of their Christianity than in formal dogma...For the outside observer, the biggest distinguishing feature of many of these churches is the almost universal use of uniforms for members, often white robes with colored sashes and, in some cases, military-like khaki. (Anderson 2001, p.109-110)

All four AICs had well-established presences in the Embangweni area, though only one, the Last Church, could claim a permanent church building in the town, and even it was a fairly small mud and thatch structure on the outskirts of town. The other three AICs met outside, usually in the shade of a large tree, and changed locations frequently to accommodate a widely dispersed congregation and distribute the burden of having to travel far for services.

Pentecostal Churches and the Born Again Movement

Across the membership of all fifteen local Christian churches, but in particular among members of the two Pentecostal churches -- the Full Gospel and Assemblies of God churches -- were individuals who identified themselves to me as ‘born again,’ and who commonly invoked the rhetoric of the broader Born Again movement in Malawi. I have adopted the local linguistic idiom in Malawi of identifying such individuals as “Born Agains”. Both the Full Gospel and Assemblies of God are recent arrivals in Embangweni, and have small but growing local church organizations. Both are the result of church building efforts initiated in Malawi by their U.S.-based parent church organizations in 1931 and 1944 respectively. According to the Full Gospel leaders I interviewed, the church came to Mzimba District in 1991 and to Embangweni in 1993. The local Assemblies of God church was started in 1997 by Foreman Maseko, a young man who came to attend secondary school in Embangweni, did not find his home church present, and so decided to start a local congregation. Both churches emphasize conduct codes derived from European, not African, religious and social traditions, including a ban on polygamy and beer-drinking by its membership. Emphasis is placed on the gifts of the spirit, particularly glossolalia, on doctrinal orthodoxy and abidance to ecclesiastical codes of conduct, and on the potential for the individual’s immediate experience of God. Ancestral spirit possession is equated with demonic possession and necessitates exorcism, and the individual is deemed morally accountable for their experiences of spirit possession. Nevertheless, exorcized individuals are welcomed as church members. Regarding illness, most cases should be directed to the mission hospital, though prayerful intervention to God should also occur and can be effective on its own. It should be noted that there are also Born Agains who worship in other churches, including in first-wave mission churches and AICs, as well as other local churches.
Other churches

There were five other local churches active during my fieldwork time in 1999 and 2000. The *New Apostolic Church* came to Malawi in 1944, starting in the nearby district capital of Mzimba. From there it spread around the northern region to Mzuzu, Nkhata Bay, and Rumphi, and then south to Lilongwe and Blantyre. Since coming to Embangweni in recent years, it had quickly grown into the third largest congregation in the area. The *Bible Believers* is a literalist, fundamentalist church organization that includes many self-proclaimed “Born Agains.” Its historical roots lie with the prophetic movement started by William Branham, a rural Kentucky pastor. It had a small but dedicated congregation in Embangweni. The *Restored Christian Community Church*, affiliated with and supported by the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, was brought to Embangweni in 1995 by an older local man who had lived in a nearby urban center for many years. It had a small local congregation. The *Church of Christ*, also with a small congregation, was centered around the leadership of a middle-aged man and government field officer who had recently introduced the denomination locally. The final church in the area was that of the *Jehovah’s Witnesses*, who were slowly rebuilding a membership base and local presence after 30 years of repression and forced exile by the Banda regime. There was also a small Muslim community in town, populated mostly by immigrant Yao businessmen from the south and their wives, many of whom were locals.

Research methods

This thesis is based on sixteen months of research based primarily in Embangweni but also including research time in Livingstonia, Mzuzu, Ekwendeni, Lilongwe, and Zomba. During my

---

304 According to a June 2002 online Bible Believers newsletter, William Branham is the second Elijah, the prophetic forerunner of Christ’s second coming, sent by God to ‘reconcile fathers to sons and sons to fathers’, as foretold in Malachi 4:5-6, the last verse of the Old Testament.
Embangweni research I approached three primary informant groups within my broader ethnographic strategy of moving, visiting, and talking as widely as possible in the local community. My first group of informants came from the fifteen local Christian churches located in the immediate Embangweni area, as well as from the membership of the local Islamic mosque. As my research progressed, I increasingly focused my contacts and interviews with members of the four first-wave mission churches (Presbyterian, Anglican, Roman Catholic, and Seventh Day Adventist), three of the four AICs (Last Church, Chipangano, and Zion Prophet Church), and all three “Born Again” congregations (the Pentecostal Assemblies of God and Full Gospel churches, and the fundamentalist Bible Believers church). I focused my research on these churches in large part because I found their juxtaposition to reveal much about both long-standing and emergent trends within local engagements with Christianity. As such, most of the quotes and examples that follow in this thesis are from church members or leaders from these three ecclesiastical traditions.

My second group of informants were those who participated in the Vimbuza spirit possession complex, as well as those who consulted regularly with local ng’angas and nchimis. Among these informants were several ng’angas and nchimis themselves, who recounted stories of their own afflictions of possession, and described some of the workings of the spirits and their role as mediators. My third group of informants came primarily from the in-patient population at Embangweni Hospital, as well as from their care-givers. In addition, I also had numerous conversations and interviews with members of the hospital staff, with whom I discussed questions of illness etiology, as well as local therapeutic culture and practice.

Of course, many of my informants belonged to some or all of these ethnographic groupings, as I encountered many church goers who pursued both hospital and divination therapies in their quest for health. In many respects, not surprisingly, it was precisely those people who were
moving in all three arenas who provided the most insightful commentaries on the relationships among the three.

I recorded interviews with approximately 105 individuals, some of whom were interviewed more than once. Fifteen focus group discussions were also recorded, with a combined population of ninety-nine participants. When possible, the following demographic data was collected from informants: names (formal/informal), age, birth order, number of deceased and living siblings, status of parents, marital status of parents (polygamous/monogamous), current residency, home village, occupation, education, tribe, language competencies, marital status and history, number of living and deceased children, history of church affiliations, rank and roles in church, baptismal status and date, participation in holy communion, and histories of parental church affiliations.

The following topics were among those regularly discussed during my interviews and conversations with informants, either by their initiative or mine:

- possession by Vimbuza and other spirits as punishment or protection
- witchcraft, magic and jealousy as causes of illness
- the morality of beer drinking & polygamy
- differences and similarities among local churches
- necessity for proper burial & homage for deceased relatives
- illness types and therapeutic strategies
- the meaning and necessity of being “born again”
- implications of possession by the holy spirit
- methods and purposes of baptism and holy communion
- tithing in church
- Christian hypocrisy

Alongside my own observations and journal notes, these interviews, transcribed and if necessary translated, provide the bulk of the data for this thesis. Several sections of speech analysis from my transcribed interviews are written into Chapters Eight, Ten, and Eleven.
I also followed several individual cases involving illness and/or spirit possession, including that of:

- a young man who worked as a cook for a missionary family, and who came from a long line of mission cooks. He was ill and growing thin and felt convinced that he had been bewitched by a close family member, but was unable to find a therapy that he felt to be effective. He sought out therapy with several local ng’angas and nchimis, and with his employer’s strong recommendation, also visited the hospital. He never seemed to put much faith in the latter’s medicines however, and during the course of my fieldwork, he remained engaged in a quest for village therapies.

- a middle-aged woman who felt a powerful and emotive presence of the Holy Spirit in her life, and who wanted to worship with the Assemblies of God congregation, but whom was prevented from doing so by her employer, the CCAP-run Embangweni Hospital. Frustrated in her desire to worship charismatically for fear of losing her job, she took up a new role within the Hospital as assistant to the Hospital Chaplain during his rites of exorcism, a role that allowed her an expressiveness of faith and prayer otherwise discouraged within CCAP worship.

- a middle-aged man who was an Elder in the local CCAP congregation, a long-time Embanweni Hospital employee, and who felt himself to be possessed by ancestral spirits. As his spirits called him into a new calling as a diviner, he struggled to resolve the contradictions between Christianity and ancestral spiritualism that he had been raised to acknowledge and obey.

- an elderly man who passed away during the first months of my research. He was a member of the SDA church, and had worked for several years heading up the laboratory at Embangweni Hospital. When he grew critically ill, he struggled to find effective therapy, and came to question the larger religious and therapeutic frameworks that had previously guided his thinking.

For this thesis, I have chosen the latter two case studies for extensive analysis, in Chapters Nine and Twelve respectively. I’ve done so for the simple reason that my relationships with these two men developed further than with the other two, and so afforded me a more intimate and detailed accounting of their circumstances. Each of the two cases revolves around a man who is suffering

---

305 The downside of this development is that I do not present a well-elaborated case study involving a woman, and as such am limited in the conclusions I can draw about women’s subjective experiences of religion and spirituality in Embangweni. That said, many of the quotes I reference in Chapter Seven come from women, and through them I do suggest some conclusions about how
chronic illnesses, and who, in the midst of his affliction, finds himself caught between two vying religio-therapeutic traditions, Christianity and biomedicine on the one side, and ancestral spiritualism and magic on the other. As will be seen, through their suffering, each man struggled to come to a better understanding of himself – of his calling, his life history, and his potential legacy – in his quest to find therapy and peace of mind. In the case of the middle-aged CCAP member, his therapeutic journey took him away from his church and employer, and towards a new identity as an nchimi, an agent of the spirits among the living. He did so in part by taking much of his Christian faith and symbolism with him as he transitioned into his new calling. In the case of the elderly SDA man who passed away, his therapeutic quest failed, and he died uncertain whether magic or nature was the source of his demise. In this uncertainty, he also came to question the larger religious and therapeutic frameworks that skaffolded his understanding of illness, and during the final days of his life, as I sat next to his bed late one evening, he confided in me that he no longer knew what to think about the destination of his spirit at death. While I had no sufficient response for him on that evening, his personal struggle of faith has remained with me in a vivid way, perhaps in part because I have waged my own war of faith in recent years. I write about his struggle, in particular, because I think it points the way towards a better understanding of how religion intersects with therapeutic practice, as people from all walks of life struggle to maintain the health of both body and soul, and through them, of mind.

locals in general, including men and woman, have experienced the juxtaposition of Christianity and ancestral spiritualism.
CHAPTER SEVEN

Vimbuza: The History of a Spirit Possession Complex

Introduction

As reviewed in Chapter Five, the Livingstonia missionaries shared a model of personhood and being that included an intellectualized soul and a despiritualized, organic body. This was a dualist model of the body and soul, shaped by both Protestant and scientific assumptions, that was predominantly static, intellectualized, and individualistic. In his critique of the European missionary project, in that same chapter, the Malawian Presbyterian minister Msiska questioned the larger dualist framework that gave form to this model, and in the process rejected the degree of assumed contrast between Christianity and biomedicine and local African spiritual and therapeutic traditions.

In the ethnographic chapters that follow, I seek to demonstrate that this rejection of the Western dualist schema and its accompanying oppositional model has not been limited to trained theologians. Instead, I show that a resistance to Western dualism has also been articulated by many lay people living in northern Malawi, among the general population and among its church-going members. This resistance has not been complete, as some facets of Western dualism, including an increasing biologization of the body, have become widely distributed. Nevertheless, the general reluctance to embrace dualist logic is evident in the creative and coherent ways in which locals have schematized a relationship between Western religion and science, and their own cultural models of body, spirit, and the natural order of things. This schematization has been and continues to be played out through cosmological reflection, discourse, and dialogue, as well as on the ground, in public life, and in the testimony and thinking of many individuals and groups.306 Among the

306 It is because of this grounding in the world of everyday experience, that the term cosmology is more appropriate than the more literary notion of theology (see Arens & Karp, 1989).
more important arenas for this cosmological schematization has been the spirit possession complex known as Vimbuza.

Vimbuza was already prominent in northern Malawi before the Livingstonia missionaries first arrived at the end of the nineteenth century, and, having undergone important changes, it still remains a prevalent and powerful spirit possession complex in the region to this day. My discussion of Vimbuza is divided into two chapters. In this chapter, I review some historical, missiological, and anthropological writings about spirit possession in northern Malawi, all of which share a concern with the predominant pattern of Vimbuza possession specifically. I conclude the chapter by addressing the question of what caused the high prevalence of Vimbuza possession in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and ask whether and how it constituted a substantial change in the organization of Tumbuka ancestral spiritualism. In Chapter Eight, I begin a more detailed description of the contemporary forms, symbols, and organization of a Vimbuza event, as it has been described by others and observed by me. In particular, I focus on the patterns of continuity and change that have characterized the evolution of the Vimbuza complex over the past century, and on the extent to which Christian symbols and forms have been integrated into its contemporary form. To do this, I describe several of the Christian symbolic and ritual elements that are part of the Vimbuza complex today, and analyze the comments and perspectives articulated by my Vimbuza-possessed informants, many of whom were members of African Instituted Churches (AICs). In my conclusion, I argue that while Vimbuza has been Christianized in important ways, it remains at its core a ritual complex that affirms the power of possessive spirits, and, regarding the role of the ancestral mizimu spirits specifically, affirms the authoritative and constructive role they play in people’s lives. Furthermore, I suggest that the ongoing vitality of ancestral spiritualism within the religious culture of northwestern Malawi complicates the usage of
both conversion and hegemony as terms descriptively applied to the transformation of religious culture and practice in the region in the post-mission era.

**Vimbuza as Ngoma**

As it is used in northwestern Malawi today, the term Vimbuza has a polyvalent usage. It is used to describe several classes of possessive spirits, the embodied states of illness they produce in a person, and the therapeutic drumming, music, dance, and ritual that is performed to remedy the symptoms. During my fieldwork in Embangweni, living on the border between the Loudon station and the adjoining trading center, I would often hear Vimbuza drumming coming from villages around the station. This was often on a weekly basis, and most often around the time of the full moon. Throughout the course of my fieldwork, I attended a total of eight Vimbuza dances, six of which were performed at night for ostensibly therapeutic purposes, and two of which were performed during the day as both entertainment and to show the forms and movements of the dance. At its core, Vimbuza possession suggests that a person’s spirit is a composite of both their own personality and experience and the spirits of their ancestors, who still motivate and shape them through inchoate processes that are at times vivid and transformative.

As a cultural practice, Vimbuza is a local variety of that larger therapeutic complex known as ngoma, which is found throughout much of central and southern Africa and has been the focus of important scholarship by John Janzen and others, and even earlier by Victor Turner in his writings about Ndembu “drums of affliction.” Janzen (1992) has identified a set of prototypical characteristics commonly associated with the ngoma, including: (1) the identification of the causes of misfortune and classifying some diseases in terms of spirit causation; (2) therapeutic initiation as

---

307 I have capitalized the whole complex as Vimbuza in order to distinguish from a sub-class of spirits also known as vimbuza, which I discuss below.
a rite of passage for many of the afflicted; (3) the symbolic use of white to mark novice membership in the therapeutic association; (4) the use of animal sacrifice to accommodate both the demands of the spirit and bolster the solidarity of the therapeutic community; and (5) the transition of some of those that suffer into empowered healers.

Broadly stated, these characteristics fit the institution of Vimbuza as it is practiced in Embangweni and elsewhere in northern Malawi. Membership is sequentially attributed to those people who have: (1) suffered from a series of culturally stereotyped symptoms, including headaches, general body pains, and vivid dreaming, (2) have been identified as possessed by Vimbuza spirits by an nchimi (diviner), and (3) who then participate in therapeutic dance sessions and other ritual procedures. Membership is attributed to those who have been instructed by the Vimbuza spirits to purchase one or more uniforms, which are worn while dancing. The standard motif for a novice member is a white uniform with one or more red crosses sewn into it, while some senior members inverse the color schema in their attire. The purpose of the dance sessions is to facilitate communication with the spirits in the hope of relieving bodily afflictions and remedying whatever social disruption is at the root of the problem. In this effort, initiates are supervised by more senior members, who are well versed in the ritual forms, and who have attained a higher degree of mastery and articulation in communicating effectively with the spirits. Some of those who are initiated move on to perform an animal sacrifice known as chilopa, a ceremony that includes the initiate’s ingestion of fresh blood from the neck of an animal sacrifice. There is a hierarchy of chilopas – ranging from the sacrifice and ingestion of a chicken or dove, to a goat, to a cow -- and the size of one’s offering suggests something about the power of the possessive spirits and the claim they have made on a person’s life.

\[308\]

That spiritual illness is understood to have social causes is another pattern widely associated with the institution of ngoma, and was confirmed by my own research.
Some of those initiated into Vimbuza membership move into a new identity as an *nchimi* (diviner) and are attributed with an advanced level of proficiency over the communicative process with the spirits, though not over the spirits themselves. This initiation into a new identity as diviner is generally marked by a *chilopa* of a large animal, such as a goat or cow. With this transition comes an increased authority to dance the spirits not only as ongoing therapy, but as a means to communicate with the spirits and relay their messages to other afflicted.

**Malawian Missiological Scholarship: Ncozana and Soko**

In recent years, a growing body of scholarship has appeared about Vimbuza and its place within the broader religious culture of northern Malawi. These writings suggest that the language used to describe spirit possession within local vernaculars has undergone substantial changes over the past century, and presumably before then as well. The language of possession has not been a stable, consistent facet of cultural life, but rather one that has changed through both internal innovation and the historical migrations and integrations of individuals and groups from various ethnic and tribal backgrounds.

In his book *The Spirit Dimension in African Christianity* (2002), S. S. Ncozana, a Reverend in the CCAP in Malawi, analyzed, and to some extent affirmed, the historical experience and logic of Vimbuza spirit possession among the Tumbuka. In it, Ncozana explores the implications of spirit possession among the Tumbuka through their individual and collective conversions to Christianity, and sets out to understand how the Christian faith has shaped local experiences of spirit possession in the years since. He notes that the church has generally sought to suppress manifestations of spirit possession, and has discouraged and forbidden its members to participate in the dancing and sacrificial elements of the ritual complex. Ncozana suggests this is a
mistake, that the power and efficacy of possession runs too deep in local spiritual culture to simply be suppressed.

In describing the cultural framework that has historically scaffolded the practice of Vimbuza, Ncozana emphasizes that the ancestors are generally seen as benevolent in their engagements with the living. If their possession brings illness, it is usually either to remind people of their social obligations, or to reprimand them for their violation. He writes that “through the vimbuza ritual, the possessed gains religious fulfillment and medical treatment as well as psychological care which frees their consciousness,” and furthermore that “possession among the Tumbuka provides collective opportunities for purification. Impurities such as grudges and jealousies harboured in everyday life, guarded by rules and restrictions, are suspended during possession.” More than anything, he suggests that Vimbuza provides a community and its members an opportunity to commune with the divine.

Ncozana’s thesis was written as a call to his Presbyterian church community to pay attention to the history and relevance of spirit possession within Tumbuka culture, and for pastors to integrate a knowledge of African spirituality into their pastoral work. In doing so, he writes that his goal is to show “to what extent spirit possession formed a substratum of Tumbuka religious beliefs from and with which they responded to the Christian faith,” and, furthermore, how Tumbuka Christians have moved away from “possession in the traditional sense, to possession with the Spirit in the Christian sense”. Following this lay logic, Ncozana argues that “the whole process of possession healing be brought into the church and Christianized.” He writes:

In the light of the past, the Livingstonia Synod ought to engage itself in how best it can provide pastoral guidance and adopt the possession method to assist converts who are perplexed by the activity of the Spirit in their lives.309

As will be seen in what follows, quite in spite of CCAP efforts to suppress it, Vimbuza has remained prevalent as a therapeutic response to illness in northern Malawi. Furthermore, despite its condemnation and exclusion by the established Presbyterian church, and its definition by that church as “unChristian”, the complex has become Christianized in profound ways, even as it has retained a core focus on the will of the ancestors and their value to human life. In my research experience in the Embangweni area, I encountered many self-identified Christians who also participated in Vimbuza and considered themselves possessed by ancestral and other spirits. Within their articulation of these two religious traditions, many of them displayed a complex and nuanced understanding of the spirit world through their experience of it. Yet, as Ncozana also suggests, I also encountered some degree of perplexity articulated to me by people who wrestled with how to locate the ancestral spirits of long-standing tradition within a cosmology of Spirit dominated by the God Jehovah of the Christian tradition.

In addition to Ncozana, other Malawian scholars have conducted studies of Vimbuza and its place within Tumbuka culture and society. In a series of three articles (1987, 1988, 1991) based on research near to Embangweni, Boston J. Soko, a Malawian scholar in the Department of Theology and Religious Studies at the University of Malawi, described Vimbuza as a spirit-possession cult and disease in which the living dialogue with the spirit world. Soko’s articles provide a helpful review of early mission and colonial policy towards Vimbuza (1987), and a detailed account of the diagnostic process and many of the ritual stages and symbols (1991). He suggests that Vimbuza has served as “a kind of refuge to appease tensions” in the face of the successive invasions of Ngonis in the mid-nineteenth century and European colonial invasion.

All three appeared in the Religion in Malawi journal published by the Department of Theology and Religious Studies at the University of Malawi. They were: “An Introduction to the Vimbuza phenomenon” (Religion in Malawi 1:1, Dec 1987, pp. 9-13); “The Vimbuza possession cult: The Onset of the Disease” (Religion in Malawi 1:2, Nov 1988, pp. 11-15); and “The Vimbuza Phenomenon: Dialogue with the Spirits” (Religion in Malawi 3, 1991, pp. 28-33).
shortly thereafter. Comparing it to the function of voudoun in Haiti during the slave era, he suggests that it may have been a form of resistance to these exogenous powers. By Soko’s account, locals view Vimbuza spirit possession as a safety mechanism to prevent them from death in cases of bewitchment. These Vimbuza spirits can be of human, animal, bird, or ecological origins, and can be either malevolent or benevolent. He also notes that possession by Vimbuza often appears in people after marriage, and that it is generally accompanied by much personal ambivalence.

In addition to his descriptive attention, Soko also demonstrated a degree of negative judgment towards the Vimbuza complex and its practice. He suggested that Vimbuza spirits often present themselves to a person in disguise, such that the person is convinced they are possessed by their mother’s spirit, while they are in fact being deceived by masquerading foreign Vimbuza spirits. More problematic, for Soko, is when the illness becomes an apprenticeship, and the spirits possess someone for a long duration in order to make him/her a “wizard”. By way of example, Soko noted how long suffering with the Vimbuza spirits known as vyanusi may lead a person to become an nchimi. Soko wrote of possession complexes like Vimbuza as diseases from which some groups have historically “escaped”. He described them as “spreading” as a “contagion” from one ethnic group to another, and of “the misfortune of having contracted the disease” (1988, p.13).\textsuperscript{311} Despite these negative judgments, Soko’s writings do provide some of the most detailed accounts of the Vimbuza complex and its ritual forms. I return to them later in this chapter.

\textbf{Pre-Mission Histories of Vimbuza}

Scholars of Vimbuza in Malawi have agreed that Vimbuza spirits attributed to human origin are generally attributed to ancestral outsiders, not to members of one’s deceased kin. In Embangweni today, the term “Vimbuza” is commonly used to describe the general category of

\textsuperscript{311} Soko accounts for this negative view of the complex by affirming his own Christian faith.
“spirit possession” and the therapeutic dance sessions associated with it. Within this general usage, however, the term is used more specifically to identify three classes of foreign, non-ancestral spirits who possess people. They are the *virombo*, *vyanusi*, and *vimbuza* spirits. Throughout this chapter and elsewhere in the thesis, I describe these three spirit types as the “classic” Vimbuza spirits, because it has been their prevalence in northern Malawi over the past century plus that has given name to the complex.

Historical scholarship regarding the origins of the three Vimbuza spirit types; the forms of their introduction into northern Nyasaland; and the history of their integration into a single category of spirit possession now known as “Vimbuza” is uncertain and often speculative. Nevertheless, scholars have attempted to trace distinct historical trajectories for each in an effort to locate them within the broader Vimbuza complex.  

Soko suggests that the name “Vimbuza” may be borrowed from one of three terms used in the Bemba Chisungu girl’s initiation ceremonies from neighboring Zambia, either from the term “imbusa”, the collection of pots kept at the site of the initiation ceremony, or from “ifimbusa” or “banachimbusa”, the matrons who gave instruction, often in song, to the girls about adult life. More likely is Ncozana’s theory that the word *vimbuza* is derived from “vumbula”, meaning to uncover or reveal in Tumbuka. A “vumbuzi” is a revelation. Ncozana suggests that the Tumbuka may have brought Vimbuza to the region now known as northern Malawi after they were introduced to it while passing through the western Lwangwa valley region of Zambia during their migration south from the Congo basin region. Or, he suggests, it may have been brought to Malawi by Nsenga and Bemba migrants, previous to or accompanying the Ngoni invasion.

---

312 To date, most of the historical analysis of spirit possession among the Tumbuka in pre-Mission and Mission times has been with regard to these three major sub-types of Vimbuza, all of which are defined as foreign spirits.

313 These Bemba terms could themselves be derivative from the same language root sources as the Tumbuka work “vumbula”, so some etymological connection could be there.
Ncozana notes furthermore that Vimbuza is similar to *mashawe* spirit possession among the lakeside Tonga, and both populations use the terms interchangeably, most likely a development that followed an earlier introduction of the complex.\footnote{I heard the term *mashawe* used only occasionally in Embangweni during discussions about Vimbuza.}

The Tumbuka word *virombo* translates as ‘animals’ or ‘creatures’, and when used in reference to a form of possession and style of dance, it indicates possession by an animalistic spirit. Of *virombo* spirits, Soko writes:

> Virombo spirits are thought by the Tumbuka to have been men who have now become spirits and manifest themselves in both animals and humans. However, *virombo* is centred around the individual. It has no political function and does not have a religious function which extends beyond an individual medium and his ancestors.\footnote{Soko, 1987, p.12.}

According to Ncozana, the Wiza and Senga, who came to northern Malawi from Zambia, introduced Virombo spirit possession, along with the Bemba-Chibisa. In discussing the origin of *virombo* spirit possession, Ncozana quotes a district commissioner resident at Kasungu in 1923:

> This kind of dancing was introduced among the Ngoni and Tumbuka long ago by the Awiza from the west. The women dance with their faces painted in white streaks and are believed by the people to have the power of turning themselves at will into wild beasts, especially lions and leopards…This is in accord with historical events. Between 1830 and 1840 the Wiza, Bemba and Senga of eastern Zambia along Luangwa valley spilt into northern Malawi in considerable numbers. The Wiza and the Senga settled among the Tumbuka as refugees having fled their home for fear of the Ngoni, who, at this time, had crossed the Zambezi. The Ngoni presence north of the Zambezi stirred up much fear among villagers so that many found safety hiding in the thick woods. It may have been that the Tumbuka saw the newcomers as forsaken by their ancestral spirits and living like *virombo* which wander about without a proper home.\footnote{J.A. Martin. 1927. A note on certain local dances and their significance in native minds. Kasungu District Book, MNA, Government records, Vol.1, p.1. Cited in Ncozana, 2002.}
Regarding the vyanusi subcategory of Vimbuza, both Ncozana and Friedson (1996) trace its introduction to the arrival of the Ngoni in Tumbukaland in the 1840's, and suggest the term is a corruption of the Ngoni word itshanusi. In the Ngoni language, the word ‘hnusa’ means “to smell out” and “to detect”. The itshanusi, or “smeller”, was believed by the Ngoni to be a prophet, concerned with the local moral order, and his primary role was to foresee the circumstances of battle and war. If he detected any breach of relationship within the community, he suggested a remedy before the army could be allowed to fight. Friedson characterizes vyanusi as the spirit of Ngoni warriors, as the dance is loosely modeled on the dances performed by Ngoni warriors in the royal cattle kraal. He suggests that most healers consider vyanusi to be the strongest type of Vimbuza, the one that enables someone to smell out witches. My informants in Embangweni suggested the same to me.

At this point, it should be noted that in contemporary local usage and description, the three classic Vimbuza spirits are, as a group of exogenous spirits, generally contrasted with a person’s mizimu, his or her own ancestral spirits, which are also thought to possess and afflict people. This distinction between foreign and ancestral spirits has been noted often in the ethnographic literature from central and southern Africa. During my research locals clearly distinguished between the two, even as they used the term “Vimbuza” when referring to spirit possession and therapeutic dancing in general, including those involving the mizimu. For my writing, I have decided to

---

317 Sokó (1988) suggests that Vimbuza worked as “a kind of refuge to appease tensions” among local Tumbukas in the face of the Ngoni invasion of the mid-19th century and the colonial invasion shortly thereafter. He compares it to the function of voudoun as a form of resistance in Haiti during the slave era.

318 As Friedson notes: “The spirit realm is classified by the Tumbuka into two overarching categories based on a binary opposition that revolves around the origin of the spirit entity and its relationship to Tumbuka society. Any spirit that is not ancestral to the Tumbuka is classified as a foreign vimbuza spirit.”

319 According to locals, this is in part because, in the past, Vimbuza possessions were the more prevalent type, though in recent years there has been change towards an increasing preponderance of mizimu possession.
capitalize Vimbuza when referring to the overall spirit possession complex, and to use its diminutive form in reference to the specific spirit type, along side virombo and vyanusi.

In describing the spirits of the deceased, the Tumbuka also use a third term, viëanda, commonly used in reference to a “ghost” of any ancestral origin. As such, the term can be applied to either Vimbuza or mizimu spirit types. In general, I found people to use the viëanda term when speaking of the spirits in their disembodied “ghostly” form, previous to or apart from their possession of a person. Once they had possessed someone, spirits were no longer ghosts, but a known spirit personality, who often visited during dreams, and who communicated directly with those they afflicted. I encountered some differences in how this term was used in Embangweni, however, often depending on a person’s normative judgment of the spirits as either good or evil, or both. While most used the term to describe all ghosts, some used viëanda to describe only evil spirits, in contrast to the good mizimu spirits. Having a sense of all three terms, Vimbuza, mizimu, and viëanda, as well as the Vimbuza subtypes virombo, vyanusi, and vimbuza, is critical to understanding how Tumbukas and Ngonis themselves organize an understanding of the spirit world.

The Tumbuka Response to Mission and Colonial Policies

The first Livingstonia missionaries were familiar with and critical of Vimbuza. With the partial exception of T.C. Young, they were consistent in arguing that Vimbuza should be condemned as counter to the true reception of the Christian gospel and its exclusive claim to spiritual reality and Divine authority. By Ncozana’s account, the Livingstonia Mission’s policy, from the start, was firmly against any attempts by local African converts to fuse elements of Vimbuza into their new Christian identity and practice. Church members who confessed to dancing any form of Vimbuza were suspended.
A review of the historical literature suggests, however, that from early on many local Christians, from within and outside of the Livingstonia Mission, rejected the Scottish Presbyterian stance against acknowledging the compatibility of ancestral spiritualism, including both the possession experience and its requisite community response, with the newly introduced Christian faith. By the first decade of the 1900’s, senior Christian converts within the Livingstonia Mission began to challenge the Mission’s rejection of Vimbuza within their more encompassing challenge to the enduring predominance of European authority within the church. These African church leaders contested the Mission’s right to condemn spirit possession dances as inconsistent with the newly forming Christian religious culture of the region. In 1901, Charles Domingo, a church elder and one of the Livingstonia Mission’s most accomplished students, delivered a paper at a conference in Blantyre supporting and praising some dances, while in 1908 Charles Chinula, then a Mission teacher, encouraged his students to hold African dances in a place unknown to the missionaries. In later years, even after having been ordained and promoted to headmaster at the Loudon station school in Embangweni, Chinula continued to secretly encourage students to participate in the dance, often with the agreement of other local African church leaders. By the 1920’s, an increasing number of Malawian intellectuals, coming out of the Livingstonia Mission educational system, began to warn of the dangers of overly abandoning traditional culture and practice.

Because of Vimbuza’s increasing prevalence, missionaries became more outspoken and sought to ban it, and by 1910, cases of Tumbuka Christian converts involved in Vimbuza possession dances began to appear frequently in Kirk session minutes. The first case was that of Jane Nkata at Ekwendeni Kirk Session who, under Elmslie’s moderatorship, was suspended for one

320 See discussion of Mwasi and others in conclusion to Chapter Four.
321 See Christianity in Malawi, p.93.
322 Chavula 1974.
year because she had been found dancing Virombo. In 1913, Loudon congregation suspended one man and two women for taking part in possession ceremonies. Between 1901 and 1919, the Livingstonia Mission expelled a total of 613 members, of which 101 were cases concerning possession, representing eighteen percent of disciplinary cases brought to Kirk sessions. By 1915, a Charms and Superstitions Committee had been formed by the Mission at a Presbytery meeting at Khondowe with the aim of more effectively disciplining and discouraging local participation in the complex.

In 1911, the colonial powers passed the Witchcraft Act that forbade participation in divination practices, including the practice of Vimbuza. After World War I, colonial authorities acted further to restrict Vimbuza because of increasing prevalence. In conjunction with this effort, Ngoni tribal authorities also attacked the practice. At Inkosi ya Makosi M’mbelwa’s Native Association meeting in Elangeni in 1920, Vimbuza was banned because: (1) it caused social disruption when witches were named by witchfinders who moved from village to village, (2) dancers moved between villages and committed adultery, (3) ng’angas were con-men, (4) vimbuza is not a real disease, (5) medicines administered by ng’angas did not cure but led to further suffering, and (6) dances occurred during school hours. By 1924, traditional chiefs received a mandate from the area District Commissioner to arrest Vimbuza dancers on site. As a result, the dance went underground, taking place at night in villages remote from mission or colonial authorities.

---

324 They were Nehemia Phiri, Marion Mpata, and Elizabeth Mpando. Cited by Ncozana from Loudon congregation minutes book, 1910-1916, MNA, 1/3/39.
325 Ncozana, 2002.
327 Soko (1987) also notes that kavuwa shrines were still around in the 1920's. Spiritual entities residing within trees, rivers, and mountains were addressed through the ancestors at these shrines,
Movements to Christianize Vimbuza

At the same time of this escalating suppression and increasing prevalence of the complex, there were corresponding efforts by some locals to Christianize the possession method. Ncozana recounts missionary Elmslie’s story of a young Christian convert, Chitezi, who fell ill in 1908. Following Tumbuka tradition, his father sought advice from a ng’anga, and was informed that his son was possessed by virombo spirits and needed a virombo expert to arrange a healing dance. As his father made such arrangements, Chitezi’s loyalty was divided between his father’s tradition and his new religion. He chose a middle way. He obeyed his father’s treatment regime, but at the same time demonstrated his new belief by asking that a Bible be brought to him during the dance. Ncozana suggests that Chitezi saw the dance and the Bible as complementary tools for healing his disease and attributed his quick recovery to both.\textsuperscript{328} Ncozana suggests that this complementarity was taken even further by many Tumbukas, and that manifestations of vimbuza, virombo, and vyanusi possession, formerly associated with traditional spirits, became increasingly understood as possession by the Holy Spirit.

At the same time, during the decade of the 20’s, a strong wave of Holy Spirit possessions emerged within and outside of the church. It was accompanied by a movement of miracle workers. Ncozana tells the story of Lameck Chirongo, a convert from the Livingstonia Mission’s Buyombe congregation, who claimed possession by the Holy Spirit. He claimed that God had given him the power to heal the sick, perform miracles, and know effective herbs. He moved from village to village treating the sick and administering herbs, and Christians and non-Christians alike were attracted to him. Ncozana writes:

\textsuperscript{328} See Elmslie 1970, p.224.
Chirongo had attempted to bring the possession method of healing within the church perimeter. Perhaps he had read in the Bible about how Jesus went about healing the sick and how his disciples did the same after they received the Holy Spirit. He may have seen himself standing in the same tradition as these early disciples and therefore went to test the power of the new religion. At the same time, Chirongo drew from traditional religion where possessed individuals were regarded as endowed with healing power. Chirongo’s activities among both Christians and non-Christians were in accordance with the Tumbuka community approach to religion instead of the individualistic and exclusive method of the church.  

This is an important early ethnographic example of individuals going their own way in interpreting a fusion of local African and Christian religious traditions. As Ncozana notes, it is a particularly good example of an attempt to introduce customary community values of healing and collective well-being into a newly Christianized idiom of possession and holiness.

Livingstonia Mission policy, however, remained firmly against this combining of Christianity with Vimbuza, and members who confessed to spirit dancing continued to be suspended. The Livingstonia Mission’s journal, *Vyaro na Vyaro*, condemned the dance in its pages, and accused *nchimis* of being incompetent and hypocritical, and of dissuading conversions to Christianity, encouraging women’s interest in liberal dancing, and serving primarily as a status enhancing forum for individuals, particularly in rural areas. To a large extent, such remains the Livingstonia Synod’s policy today, which formally condemns participation in Vimbuza as conduct unbecoming a Christian.

**Why the rise in prevalence of Vimbuza?**

---

During the first decades of the 1900’s, the Mission’s growing action against Vimbuza was in part a response to the rite’s rising prevalence. According to both Soko and Wendroff, Vimbuza possession rose to prominence among the Tumbuka, as both curative procedure and mechanism to fight witchcraft, because of two major factors: (1) the Mission’s consistent preaching and teaching against ancestral divination practice and belief; and (2) the colonial government’s outlawing of the traditional mwabvi ordeal, the most prevalent public means of divination and social judgment within Tumbukaland.

Wendroff (1983) notes that in pre-colonial times, witchcraft and witchcraft accusations were kept in check through the use of the poison ordeal, mwabvi. In the ordeal, usually administered under the supervision of a local chief, the accused witch, and perhaps the accuser as well, were given a toxic infusion of the bark of the mwabvi tree to drink. If they vomited up the infusion, they were innocent. If they retained it and died, they were guilty. Wendroff describes how British colonial administrators, who first arrived in Mzimba in 1904, disapproved of the ordeal and passed the Witchcraft Act of 1911 prohibiting it. The Act also forbade all other witch-finding techniques, all accusations of witchcraft (except before a court officer, chief, or policeman), any solicitation or employment of witch-finders, and the presentation of oneself as either wizard (nchimi) or witch. Whereas colonial authorities envisioned it as an attack on the practice and belief system of witchcraft, it was seen by locals as instead serving to protect witches. With the traditional means of witch-finding outlawed, village headmen, who were still held to the task of

---

331 Arnold Wendroff is an American anthropologist who began ethnographic research about Vimbuza, ng’angas, and the relationship between political and therapeutic authority in the Kondowe area in the late 1970’s.

332 Mwabvi is a poison extracted from the Erythrophloem guiniense tree (King and King, 1992, p.25). It is known in chiTumbuka as the chinchocho tree.

333 Wendroff suggests that this act came at a time when sorcery practices were likely on the rise. The hut tax which had been imposed during the 1890’s had driven many men to seek wage labor elsewhere, disrupting local social and labor patterns, and separating men from their wives. Distrust and fear of adultery led men to seek magical assurances.
resolving social conflicts, including those involving accusations of witchcraft, were in a bind. They no longer had a means to identify and judge witches, but were still held accountable for doing so. Their strategy was to turn to local diviners (nchimis) to fill in the diagnostic gap, granting them the power to determine guilt and innocence. By Soko’s account, people in particular turned to vyamusi divination as a substitute for the mwabvi ordeal.

Wendroff suggests furthermore that previous to the introduction of Christianity, there was a strong belief in the intervening activities of mizimu, who punished in response to the violation of social norms. He writes “In the northeast, as elsewhere in Malawi, Christianity has made its way at the expense of these traditional beliefs; only vestiges of the belief in spirits as the agents of disease survive in the area today.” According to Wendroff, while Christianity undermined the traditional worldview, its replacement had not proved “emotionally or spiritually or even intellectually satisfying.” The resulting “anomic void” had resulted in a twofold cultural response -- an increasing belief in and practice of sorcery, accompanied by a corresponding rise in the important of Vimbuza spirit possessions, in which an individual’s afflictions are understood as the byproduct of a battle between a sorcerer’s deadly spells and friendly Vimbuza spirits which fight on the victim’s behalf.

Wendroff emphasized the disjunctive qualities of the Tumbuka encounter with the missionary and colonial enterprises, specifically the latter’s prohibition of the use of mwabvi, and

---

334 According to Wendroff, a system of formal, often written, referrals and responses developed between headmen and nchimis, and the local status and power of nchimis was significantly enhanced. As an aside, Wendroff notes that nchimis often use Western symbolism and appliances in their medical practice, including white coats, the preparation of medicines in pill form, dummy stethoscopes, crosses on clothing, and the singing of hymns. While I did encounter the latter symbolic forms during my research, I did not come across a written referral system among the headmen and nchimis of the Embangweni area.

their negation of spiritual causation for disease. In the first case, a perceived disjunction between Western and African practices was coercively enforced through colonial law. Whether or not local Tumbukas agreed with the British negation of mwabvi as a viable diagnostic tool, they were confronted with a legal mechanism that threatened censure for participation in the practice, and had to respond as creatively as possible to this transformed legal environment. As a matter of practice, the legal ban can be seen to have been effective, at least in the Embangweni area, where I encountered no use of the mwavbi ordeal in local legal and diagnostic activities.

In summary, Wendroff concluded that the 1911 Witchcraft Act forced headmen to turn to other diagnostic tools for dealing with witchcraft, while the Livingstonia Mission’s continual attack on beliefs in the agency of mizimu led to their being discredited. As a result of both European policies, locals turned to Vimbuza possession by foreign spirits as an explanation for what was happening to them in circumstances of illness and witchcraft. The irony in this view is that the introduction of Christianity resulted in the strengthening of Vimbuza possession as an explanatory framework and practical therapeutic modality.

Wendroff began his research in the late 1970's in the vicinity of the CCAP’s Livingstonia station, in the area known as Khondowe, in Chitipa District. The people here are primarily of Phoka descent, though also Tumbuka-speaking. They belong to what Vail called the Northern Tumbuka, and thus would differ culturally in some respects from the Southern Tumbuka of Mzimba District. Nevertheless, as was seen in Chapter Three, the general forms of their religious cultures are similar, as has been their experience of Christianity, first through the missionization efforts of Scottish Presbyterians, and secondly via the post-colonial institutionalization of the Church of Central Africa Presbyterian (CCAP).

Though our respective field sites, Livingstonia and Embangweni, were separated by about 180 kilometers, I believe that the historical and cultural similarities between them warrant
comparative analysis and consideration. The broader literature on religion in northern Malawi affirms Wendroff’s observation that the establishment of Christianity did accompany a shift in the predominance of one category of spirit possession to another -- from *mzimu* to *Vimbuza*. People did articulate an increasing sense of possession by Vimbuza spirits – as missionaries like Fraser and Elmslie noted in their writings. I would like to suggest, however, that Wendroff’s insightful analysis overstates both the extent to which the shift to Vimbuza possession was the result of missionary activities, and the extent to which Tumbukas’ faith in the interventionist powers of the *mzimu* were undone by the establishment of a missionary authority in northern Nyasaland. Rather, the establishment of Christianity in the region accompanied, and perhaps added momentum to, an already happening reorientation of local spiritual logic, one derived from the recent Ngoni invasion and resultant demographic amalgamation of tribes and ethnicities, among them Tumbukas, Ngonis, Sengas, Chewas, Karangas, Bembas, and Thongas. This was already happening by the time early Livingstonia missionaries witnessed or heard of religious ceremonies invoking reference to Vimbuza spirits.\(^3\) What these missionaries witnessed was a Tumbuka population responding to an Ngoni invasion, and to the corresponding introduction of a multiplicity of spiritual agents from a variety of tribal backgrounds. As Ngoni men took Tumbuka wives; as Bemba, Senga, Karanga, Thonga, and members of other ethnicities intermarried and reproduced; and as the remnants of Tumbuka matrilinealism were supplanted by Ngoni patrilinealism, the cross-currents of these multiple lineages and lineage systems transformed local categories and notions of spiritual relationship, heritage, and accountability. Disparate ancestral communities became participant to a range of cross-cutting kinship relationships, and, in some way, became members of the same extended families. Living Tumbukas became linked to deceased Ngonis, and vice-versa. Yet, these new linkages were defined in different terms, as people retained a distinction between the

\(^3\) See for example, Fraser’s reference to the cry “My chirombo has risen!”
ancestors of their own longstanding familiar lineage, and those recently introduced through kinship with members of other tribes. The change that occurred was dramatic, but its roots were in an encounter among African peoples, not in their subsequent encounter with European missionaries.

Likewise, regarding Wendroff’s conclusion that the Tumbuka faith in the mzimu was undermined by missionization, I also think he overstates the case. In contemporary northwestern Malawi, the mzimu are increasing, not decreasing, in importance among the Tumbuka-Ngoni populations, and mzimu possessions have become the predominant form of spiritual affliction, especially among women in the area. Though often possessed in combination with one or more virombo, vyanusi, and vimbuza spirits, it is the mzimu that receive the greatest degree of ritual attention and invocation. Most spirit possessed people I talked to claimed to have both mzimu and Vimbuza spirits operating in them, but left little doubt that it was the mzimu who were the primary spiritual force shaping their lives. As will be seen in the ethnographic examples and cases

---

337 By way of example, the daughter of a Tumbuka woman and Ngoni man might characterized her father’s father as Vimbuza, while her mother’s mother would be understood as mzimu.

338 I would go so far as to argue that the rise in reference to Vimbuza spirits would have occurred even if the Livingstonia missionaries had never arrived on the scene. Ranger describes the broader pattern of religious adjustment to regional invasions and migration as such: “More generally it seems that nineteenth-century Central African societies were becoming increasingly aware of what some historians have called ‘enlargement of scale’. People had to deal with a wide variety of aliens – as raiders, or caravan porters, or trading partners. A first step to dealing with them seems often to have been the creation of a dramatic stereotype, expressing what were held to be the essential qualities of the alien group, and acted out through rituals of spirit possession. People also had to deal with a growing realization that they did not command the process of change but that they were caught up in a much wider movement of transformation. It seemed important to retain the sense of comprehension of what was going on; even so far as was possible a sense of control of it. For this reason, among others, the latter part of the nineteenth century in Central Africa was a high period of prophecy. Spokesmen from within the cults of Central Africa commented upon the new peoples and new events, advising their own people how to respond and explaining how these changes fitted in with the dispensations of God. Often missionaries came directly into this sort of situation and in such a case their message was seen as part of the fulfilment of the prophecy, whether for good or ill.” (Terence Ranger. 1975. Introduction to Part One: Christianity and Central African Religions. Themes in the Christian History of Central Africa. Berkeley: University of California Press, p.7.)
presented below, rather than losing their stature as fundamental agents in people’s lives, the mizimu have again become key mediators with the Divine. Residents of the region, including those living in Embangweni, are once again invoking the mizimu in their effort to respond to the ongoing and worsening bodily crises of poverty and illness.

As such, the establishment of the Mission, and the eventual transformation of local patterns of religious identity to one of near universal Christianity, did not undermine the core logic of Tumbuka ancestral spiritualism -- that the spirits of the ancestors are in ongoing relationship to their living kin, and that they act as causal agents of both illness and healing. While it represented an adjustment to a dramatically transformed social and kinship landscape, Tumbukas’ attribution of illness to Vimbuza spirits was entirely consistent with their spiritual logic, and consistent with the radical demographic changes that had rocked the region in the decades just preceding the missionary arrival. In what follows, I argue that the logic of ancestral spiritualism remains a potent and much invoked reference of spiritual orientation and action for Tumbukas, Ngonis, and many others living in northwestern Malawi today. The forms and assumptions underlying Tumbuka ancestral spiritualism remained intact and operative. There remains a belief that a person’s spirit retains a sentient existence after the body dies, and that a person’s spirit continues to relate his/her still living members, either individually or through a collective ancestral spirit. While Christian elements have been integrated into the Vimbuza complex, the core form and functions of the rite have not been undermined by this syncretic process.

**Contemporary Etiologies and Ecclesiologies of Possession**

As described in Chapters Three and Five, a range of scholars have concluded that there were three non-exclusive categories of illness etiology within pre-Christian Tumbuka medical culture: God, spirit possession, and witchcraft. During my research, I still found all three of these
causal factors invoked by different informants in explaining their own and other’s illness experiences. Other ethnographers of the region have found the same (see Quinn 1993 and Friedson 1996). These categories are non-exclusive in that any specific case of illness may involve more than one cause, as, for example, when being subjected to witchcraft brings on spirit possession as part of the cure. 339

Regarding people’s interpretation and judgment of spirit possession, I encountered both diversity and commonality among the Christian residents of Embangweni, regarding its causes, cures, and perhaps most importantly, its moral and spiritual implications. 340 Patterns of contestation on these matters emerged as I engaged with people from across the ecclesiastical spectrum of Embangweni. While some forms of spirit possession were validated by some, they were condemned by others, as the spirits were judged either favorably or unfavorably as intentional agents who intervene in the lives of the living. A particular point of contention was regarding the relationship between ancestral spirits and the Holy Spirit of the Christian tradition. Are ancestral spirits and the Holy Spirit sometimes allied in a person’s life, or do they operate for different ends in a struggle to shape a person’s behavior and life?

Among the Christian church traditions that have emerged in northwestern Malawi over the course of the past century, responses to this question have varied dramatically. In Embangweni, all of the major church traditions in the country at-large had a local congregational presence, including Presbyterian, Anglican, Roman Catholic, Seventh Day Adventist, Apostolic, Pentecostal, and

339 The notion that God is the author of some diseases is not new to the Tumbuka-Ngoni culture of northwestern Malawi. Before European missionaries began introducing biomedical etiologies of illness, locals understood that God could play a role causing large-scale plagues. Yet, as one university student told me, among the Tumbuka, as within other African cultures, when a person becomes ill, the question has been and remains not “what” caused it, but “who?”

340 I encountered a plural ideational and moral culture in Embangweni regarding spirit possession, a plural culture composed of various ways of modeling the spirit world, its actors, and its hierarchy of authority. While there were in-congregation differences among most churches, clear patterns of distinction among church bodies on a whole were also apparent.
African Instituted churches. Among these diverse Christian churches, there are areas of both substantial doctrinal and theological agreement, as well as areas of considerable disagreement. In the latter vane, a substantial schism within the Christian culture of Embangweni is evident, as I encountered two clear polarities of articulation about the nature of spiritual reality and experience during my research. On the one side are those, especially Born Agains and orthodox Presbyterians and Anglicans, who embrace the missionary oppositional model between ancestral spiritualism and Christianity, a model that parallels the one first introduced by the Livingstonia Mission. This model deems the two religious traditions as incommensurable and qualitatively different, and argues for a fundamental substitution of the old tradition with a new one. This is an argument for what I call substitutive syncretism.

On the other side are those Catholics and AIC members, especially the latter, who reject this opposition, and who have shared in the construction of an alternative relational model between ancestral spiritualism and Christianity, one that sees common purposes and shared sentiments between benevolent spirits and the saving grace of the Christian God. This is a model of complementary syncretism, one that argues for a potential alliance between the ancestors and God, and suggests that the ancestors may share, in some small way, in the infinite goodness and holiness of the supreme God. The ancestors can, in this model, act as sacred agents of God.

Presbyterianism and the Born Again Movement: Reasserting the Oppositional Model

Likewise, within each of these traditions, I encountered a diverse range of perspectives about the nature of the spiritual domain, demonstrating that even within the broad framework of church movements, there is also substantial in-group multivocality. Likewise, the various church traditions influence each other, as each seeks to attract members to its congregations. In particular, the Born Again movement, an outgrowth of the Pentecostal movement, has entered in all of the other church traditions, especially among youth. This is an important trend, and one I have not treated substantially in this thesis. It remains a topic for further research.
As already described in Chapters Four and Five, the Livingstonia Mission preached and taught that people’s participation in Tumbuka ancestral spiritualism was counter to living a new spiritual life in Christ. In the early years of the Mission, this oppositional model was institutionalized in church disciplinary codes, including the suspension of members who participated in Vimbuza and other forms of spiritual divination.\textsuperscript{342} Church leaders were instructed in the theological rationale for denying the validity of ancestral spirit possession, and new converts were instructed to put aside involvement in Vimbuza and other spirit possession forms. This oppositional model is still evident in the testimonies of many current CCAP members, especially elders within the church, who continue to espouse this Mission tradition. In this model, spirit possession is used as an instrument of the devil. This does not necessarily mean that the ancestral spirits are malevolent, only that the Devil is a more powerful agent of possession, one who can deceive people through demonic possession experiences that masquerade as being ancestral in origin. The experience of possession, therefore, is to be distrusted, and should be transcended through an overarching faith in God as Savior and Lord. There are many in the CCAP, especially among the elderly, who continue to espouse this oppositional model. New CCAP pastors continue to be trained in its doctrines, and the CCAP remains the largest church in the north, with a congregational population estimated in the late 90’s at nearly 100,000.

Over the course of the second half of the twentieth century, and most dramatically in recent decades, a powerful new Christian church movement, Pentecostalism, has also emerged that embraces this oppositional model between Christianity and ancestral spiritualism. Though still centered in urban areas, the Pentecostal movement, and the broader Born Again movement resultant from it, has increasingly made inroads in rural areas. In Embangweni, two permanent

\textsuperscript{342} In more recent years, this disciplinary approach has become less pronounced, though members are still threatened with suspension if their participation is deemed too active and overt…link to emergence of Pentecostal churches as competitors for membership.
Pentecostal congregations had been established, and a broader Pentecostal influence was felt through visits by itinerant preachers and by other Pentecostals who traveled or resided in the area.

Among my church informants, members of Pentecostal churches, and more broadly the Born Again movement, were the most likely to associate ancestral spirit possession with the agency of the Devil, and to suggest that the Devil was using other spirit forms to work for evil, including illness, in people’s lives. In this model, the ancestral spirits and the one true God are opposed and incommensurable agencies. It should be noted that this opposition is in part sustained through a simplification and homogenization of the category “spirit possession – a homogenization of the complexities and nuances of distinction and qualification that were part of the pre-Mission schema. Distinctions between ancestral and foreign spirits, ones that generally granted greater authority and validity to the former, have been muted in favor of defining the overall category “possessing spirits” in generalized, gross terms. All possessing spirits, except for the one true Holy Spirit, are “bad spirits” and distinctions between Vimbuza spirits and mizimu spirits are not relevant. This homogenization of spirit types serves to more severely contrast the spirits with their opposing category – true Christian possession through the agency of the Holy Spirit. In this model, the true Christian church does not include those institutional churches that open their members up to exposure and possession by demonic spirits – agents who work counter to the aims of God in people’s lives.

AIC churches, specifically, are the targets of many Born Again members’ criticisms, because AIC churches offer their members an alternative model of the relationship between God and the ancestors, one of alliance and mutual beneficence. This is a complementary model in which the punishing and protective services of the ancestral spirits complement the loving and grace-filled agency of God through the person and presence of Jesus. In the next chapter, I turn my attention specifically to this AIC perspective on ancestral spiritualism, because it provides the most
telling example of how many Embangweni residents, and other northern Malawians, have resisted the missionary oppositional model, and in so doing, created new hybrid forms of religious logic and ritual. In so doing, I point to a key trend in the way many northern Malawians have responded to and reinterpreted the Christian gospel that was introduced just over a century ago.\textsuperscript{343}

\textsuperscript{343} The Catholics also embrace a more complementary relationship between Christianity and ancestral spiritualism – though one that emphasizes the integration of African elements into Catholic faith, doctrine, ritual, and worship.
CHAPTER EIGHT

God and the Ancestors: The Emergence of a Syncretic Vimbuza Form

Introduction

Particularly in rural areas, African Instituted Churches remain as potent forces in the Christian ecclesiastical landscape of northern Malawi. Among them, they hold the loyalty of many people, young and old, who worship in their small mud-brick and thatch churches, and under large, shady trees. Often resource poor, these churches find their appeal among local communities through an open congregational model (where both polygamists and the spirit possessed are welcomed) and a pattern of preaching grounded in local reality and metaphor.

In this chapter, I explore the various ways in which Christian symbols have been integrated into the Vimbuza complex, based both on my own observations of Vimbuza performances, and on my partial exegesis of the testimonials given by spirit possessed participants of the rite itself. Of these testimonials about the integration of Vimbuza and Christianity, most of my accounts come from members of local AICs, as they were most at liberty to talk about their spirit possession and their Christian identity without fear for repercussion from their church leadership. By contrast, I did not receive such explications from local Presbyterians, Pentecostals, or Seventh Day Adventists, as to admit participation in the rite would evidence violation of church dictates and the standards for good membership. Nevertheless, I did receive commentary from these church members and leaders regarding the incompatibility of Christianity and Vimbuza, and on the dictates of their churches that members not seek to integrate the two into one commensurable system.

In exploring the integration of Christian symbolism into Vimbuza, I use an analytic framework articulated by Victor Turner in his substantive studies of Ndembu rituals and symbols, a framework that distinguished among the exegetical, operational, and positional dimensions of
In Turner’s framing and language, each symbolic dimension can be defined as follows:

- **Exegetical** — “the whole corpus of explanations of a particular symbol’s or chain of symbols’ meaning offered by indigenous informants – the informants must of course be classified according to their social characteristics (age, sex, status, religious role, degree of esoteric knowledge, etc.).”

- **Operational** — [wherein] “a symbol’s meaning is equated with its use – here we observe not only what ritual participants say about it but also what they do with it. Here, too, we consider not only the symbol itself but also the structure and composition of the group which at any phase of a rite handles it or performs mimetic acts with clear and direct reference to it.”

- **Positional** — “the meaning of a symbol as deriving from its relationship to other symbols in a specific cluster or gestalt of symbols whose elements acquire much of their meaning from their position in its structure, from their relationships to other symbols.”

In my exegesis and accompanying analysis, I have described my informants’ social characteristics as best able, while recognizing that my exegesis is only partial, as neither my informant-base writ large, nor my knowledge of each informant’s life circumstances, were comprehensive. Nevertheless, I have derived some generalizations from my exegesis about how participants to Vimbuza, and by extension many AIC members, articulate and embody an experience of the ritual complex as infused with Christian practices, symbols, and meanings. These generalizations derive from my various informants’ testimonies, as well as from my own analysis of the operational and positional dimensions of symbolic meanings within Vimbuza, as I both observed them and heard them described.

---


345 Ibid. p.11.

346 Ibid. p.12.

347 Ibid. p.12.
The Ancestors as Agents of Punishment and Protection

On the topic of spirit possession, Embangweni’s AIC members in general articulated a more nuanced perspective of spiritual agency than members of other church traditions. Unlike traditional Presbyterians and members of the Born Again movement, for example, most AIC members, and some other churches’ members, made a qualitative difference between mizimu and Vimbuza during my interviews and conversations with them. While many suggested that both Vimbuza and mizimu spirit types could intervene to protect a person from the malevolent effects of witchcraft, they often distinguished in moral terms between them. While mizimu had a clear right to enforce their authority on their living kin, the Vimbuza did not. Instead, the functions and purposes of the Vimbuza were experienced as more indeterminate, less subject to clear identification and evaluation. They were inchoate and somewhat ambiguous agents. By contrast, relationships to mizimu were generally presented normatively – the living should obey the will of the ancestors as passed down by tradition, and if that collective will were violated, the mizimu had valid authority to possess and afflict the wrongdoers.348

This notion of obedience to the mizimu was not articulated vis-a-vis the classic Vimbuza spirits. Consistent with this notion of obedience, AIC informants generally validated the mizimu as rightful agents of good in human affairs – as agents of just punishment, and as benevolent agents of protection and healing. When mizimu punish, it is generally deserved, and intended to instruct.

Regarding the mizimu’s parental function of punishment, many informants suggested that they were perhaps ill because they had wronged an ancestor, even as they then attributed that

348 It was not generally stated that the mizimu were agents of witchcraft. More likely, they had withdrawn their protective power because of wrongdoing on the part of the living, delaying its reinstallment until illness and affliction had emerged.
ancestor with saving their life from witchcraft. Many explained that violating known social customs and taboos would often invoke the anger and retaliation of the *mizimu*, the guardians of family custom and tradition. Their action might be directed at the offending individual, or perhaps a member of their family. As Mr. Ngulue, a forty-six-year-old Chewa man, practicing *ng’anga*, member of the Church of Christ, and an official Embangweni Hospital Village Volunteer, explained:

> [T]he main purpose of the *mizimu* is to teach people some lessons. That’s why it comes by hurting people. This makes known to people that we have differed from our forefathers with respect to how they lived before. We are leading undesired lives. That’s why the spirits are angry. First, this is like a lesson to people. So for a person to be healed, the spirit must be driven out.

Disrespecting the memory of a recently deceased family member was by far the most common reason given for offending an ancestor. In particular, the failure to perform an *nkwichi* was often blamed. In the local context, *nkwichi* was originally an Ngoni custom, but one that had gained broad currency within contemporary Tumbuka society and beyond. Ideally occurring a year after death, *nkwichi* commemorates the life and death of an elder person by constructing a cement grave with a head stone at their burial site, something not typically done at the funeral ceremony itself. It is an act of loyalty, respect, and obedience to foreparents, and consistent with a tradition of honoring elders, both those alive and deceased. Performing *nkwichi*, however, is an expensive affair, involving not only the purchase of cement, but also the provisioning of food for the gathered

Informants never suggested to me direct ancestral agency behind witchcraft. Instead there was a sense that something had gone wrong in the world of relationships among the living and dead, and that this impurity was manifest through the actions of willful witches.

This explanation raises several questions. Could the same logic be applied to Tumbuka spiritual responses to the Ngoni invasion? If the *vyanusi* were agents of Ngoni custom and tradition, might they punish Tumbuka who were resistant to the cultural and social changes introduced by the Ngoni? This would explain Tumbuka possession by foreign Ngoni spirits, foreign spirits that were now living among them. Situated in the same locality as the Tumbuka, these Ngoni spirits could now enforce Ngoni tribal authority through possessions of punishment.
extended family, and for some, transport costs to their home village. As such, nkwichi ceremonies are often delayed indefinitely until sufficient resources are accumulated. Often several years pass and still no nkwichi has been performed. Several mizimu possessed informants suggested this ritual oversight as a likely factor in their possession experience, and many told of being specifically instructed in dreams by their forefathers to perform nkwichi in their honor. In this model, punishment is not an evil act, but a part of preserving a social order and tradition that is considered beneficial and good.

In addition to punishment, AIC members also often credited the mizimu with a protective function. Specifically, the mizimu were often said to preserve the lives of their living kin through their healing intervention in cases of witchcraft. While Vimbuza spirits were also sometimes attributed with a protective function, it was far more common to point to the mizimu as beneficent agents of care. This is a critical attributed function, as there is a strong sense of individual vulnerability to attack from witches\textsuperscript{351} and many suggested that it was a common and dangerous reality of life.\textsuperscript{352} In their protective role, the mizimu demonstrate love for their living kin, even though their protective possession of their relative often brought illness with it. A description of this protective function was articulated by NyaZuwovu, a fifty-eight-year-old Ngoni woman and co-chair of the Women’s Guild in the African-instituted Last Church, who was also possessed by both Vimbuza and mizimu spirits. In addition to noting the mizimu’s protective function, she suggested furthermore that this protection is empowered by God.

When we talk of spirits, we mean the forefathers who passed away some time. They come as if they are real people. When the spirits have come in you, you will see your grandparent maybe saying, ‘Hey! You child! Look! The witch-men have come to kill you. So you need to this and that in order to survive.’ Sometimes they tell you to buy

\textsuperscript{351} Witches are the prototypical “other”, the epitome of evil doing. Placing mizimu as prime agents in the struggle against them is to sanctify the spirits as agents of good and God.

\textsuperscript{352} This sense of universal vulnerability to witchcraft is likely correlated to a local belief and knowledge that no person can fully avoid misfortune.
something so that you can be alive. If you follow the instructions that you are given, in most cases you get saved. This is because the spirits say what God tells them. So it’s how the spirits come in a person. When you are seriously ill, the mizimu come. You are protected because they have the power of God.

This association between *mizimu* and the Divine was a prominent trend in local comments about *mizimu*. It points to a larger trend in the way many people are thinking through the relationship between local religious traditions and those of Christianity. In morally linking themselves to their *mizimu* through their illness and experience, and subsequently linking the healing action of the *mizimu* to God, many local *mizimu*-possessed church informants, particularly in AIC churches, argue for an embodied linkage to God Himself. In the next chapter, I consider one case, that of a Vimbuza-possessed Presbyterian man, who articulated such an embodied analogy between his own personalized suffering and the ultimate redemptive suffering of Christ, and, in so doing, built a model of alliance between himself, his possessing ancestors, and the living God.

**God and the Ancestors: Possessing Spirits of Authority and Obedience**

When I began the process of collecting quotes about spirit possession for this chapter, I was surprised at the number of quotes from AIC informants that directly related the actions of the spirits to the wishes and directives of God. 353 Though I recognized this trend during fieldwork, I was not aware of just how dominant it was. The quotes below by Mr. Banda provide an explicit defense of this perspective. Banda was a forty-three-year-old man of Chewa descent who was born

---

353 Local perceptions of me and my religious status likely shaped this pattern of response. Many locals in Embangweni viewed me as part of the local missionary community, because of my easy association with the local expat missionary community, and because ‘anthropologist’ was not a well-established social role. More than that even, I think most locals in Embangweni continue to view any Euro-American man living at the station as a missionary, and at the very least as a person coming out of the European Christian tradition. That said, however, I also believe that this local process of Christianizing the ancestors is part of the broader local religious history of trying to reconcile traditions of ancestral veneration and communication with those of the Christian tradition, despite most missionary’s efforts to establish them as incommensurate.
and raised in the Embangweni area. He was both a prominent local *nchimi* and an Elder in the Zion Prophecy Church. Several of his quotes show this direct connection of the *mizimu* to God.

For the spirit [*mizimu*] to go into an individual, it’s due to the power of God. It’s up to God who created them through his spiritual powers... He dropped his spiritual air to be ancestral spirits [*mizimu*] or ghosts [*viŵanda*]. Some people describe the ghosts as diseases when the spirits of their dead parents arise from their graves as spirits through the power of God. When he gives this spirit/wind [*mphepo*], it gathers together and comes to people and stays to rule them.

Later in our same interview, Banda emphasizes even more that the *mizimu* are in cooperation with God. This assertion came in response to my comment that there are some, specifically the Born Agains, who suggest that people like he are involved with demons because of their own possessions and roles in working with other possessed people.

But I know that *mizimu* are real, since they come from God, and his wind (*mphepo*) entered into our bodies. Even in the Bible, these things are found. If you open the Psalms, you will find much information about spirits. So if the Born Agains can’t agree with *mizimu*, then they are in contradiction with the Psalms, where the *mizimu* possessed people are God’s chosen!

Still later, he affirms in two comments that he is possessed by both the Holy Spirit and *mizimu*, and that in some respect at least, they are one and the same thing.

Yes! It is the very spirit that comes with the breath of God, which emerge as a ghost (*chiŵanda*). It is also the same spirit (*mizimu*) that is fit to be the Holy Spirit (*mizimu mutuwa*), because it prohibits doing what? Doing evil things! “Don’t curse! Don’t kill friends!” I don’t do other evils, though I have many problems. But there are some that help me.

I should say that the Holy Spirit operates within my ancestral spirits, because the ancestral spirits come from the Holy Spirit, which prohibits wrong-doing. If you were doing bad

---

354 Friedson (1996) also reports that all of the *nchimis* that he knew attested that their ultimate power comes from God. Yet, he writes, “if God is ultimately responsible for who becomes or does not become a healer, it is only in the sense of a ‘first cause.’ The spirits, the *mzimu* and *vimbuza*, are the active players in the world of human beings.”
things before, they prohibit it when they come in you. If you continue to sin, they will kill you. So I can say that the Holy Spirit is within the possessed spirits.

This was the most explicit correlation of the *mizimu* with the Holy Spirit that I encountered, but other AIC informants also validated the *mizimu* as agents of God. In an interview with Nya Moyo, a sixty-year-old woman of Karanga descent and the regional Chairwoman of the Women’s Guild in the Last Church, she attributed her own spirit possession to the protective intervention of her *mizimu* against an envy-driven witchcraft attack against her. Though the witchcraft had caused a wound on her leg that still refuses to heal, she attributed the intervention of her *mizimu* with having survived the magic act at all. In these comments, Moyo not only attributes a protective function to the *mizimu*, she also suggests that in so doing they are acting as agents of God.

---

355 Two factors that likely shaped his comments should be noted. As a practicing *nchimi*, who also proclaimed a Christian identity, Mr. Nkhoma embodied a public life that was both intimate with and subservient to the *mizimu*, but also subject to the authority and will of God. In his comments, he reconciled these two sources of personal and professional inspiration and the implied validity of both. This effort to present his own spirituality in terms consistent with Christianity is consistent with the validation of Christianity within the local religious culture in general. In addition, however, I also believe Mr. Nkhoma’s effort to validate his professional life to me also points to his framing of me as the interviewer. During my fieldwork in Embangweni, many of my informants associated me with the FWM tradition of Christianity, the result, I think, of both my easy association with the local Western missionaries, and from the fact that most visiting and resident Westerners were somehow affiliated with the Livingstonia Synod as a church institution. This also contributed to Mr. Nkhoma’s and others validation of local traditional forms of spirit possession as commensurate with the Christian life.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>RECORDED TRANSCRIPT</strong></th>
<th><strong>TRANSLATION</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>LINDLAND</td>
<td>Do the spirits cause people to become ill, or do they come to people who are ill?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MULUNGU</td>
<td>Ka mizimu yikwiza kuzakawovyla awa mbaluwali panyake yikupangiska kuti wanthu waluwalenge?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MOYO</td>
<td>Mizimu yikwiza kuthaska uluwali wamunthu yula wakuluwala kweni mizimu ndiyo tikusungilirika nayo umo Chiuata wali kuwikira kukhala mizimu na Chiuata vyose tkwenda navyo pamoza.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MULUNGU</td>
<td>The spirits come to protect someone one from illnesses, and it is these spirits that we live with, in collaboration with God.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LINDLAND</td>
<td>So does that mean that God sometimes chooses to use the spirits to help people, or maybe sometimes to punish people?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MULUNGU</td>
<td>Sono apa tingayowoya kuti Chiuata wakugwiriska ntchiti mizimu kuti wachizgikenge panyake kulanga wanthu kwendera m’mizimu?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Moyo suggests that mizimu are God’s creation, intended to protect the living from harm. God acts through them to bring healing to the afflicted. It is interesting to note that in response to our
question whether the *mizimu* also punish, Moyo affirms the existence of a Divinely-given *muzimu* (soul/spirit), a spiritual state of being that is the embodied correlate of the Divine spirit that manifests itself in the world of experience. As we are spiritual beings, God is able to reach into our lives through spiritual means, including through the agency of the ancestral spirits. Specifically, through illness experiences, the human body becomes the meeting ground of Divine Spirit, ancestral spirits, and the human spirit itself. This view of the human body as the meeting ground of spiritual agency was echoed by others speaking from within the AIC tradition, and suggests something important about the way in which many AIC informants understand personal, ancestral, and Divine agency as facets of a unified spiritual reality. Just as in Neozana’s description of the young Chitezi, who began a ministry of healing by invoking both ancestral and Holy Spirit inspiration, there has been ongoing effort within the AIC church tradition and among its members to find ways of reconciling the two religious traditions.

This trend has been most notable among participants to the Vimbuza complex, many of whom come from AICs, but some of whom also come from the CCAP and other church traditions. Among many of my Vimbuza informants in Embangweni, the embodied grounding of spiritual experience, and the personal, ancestral, and Divine accompaniments of that experience, was assumed. Still more, there was a general consensus among them that the ancestors obey God and that their agency correlates with that of God Himself. In what follows, using a combination of literature reviews, interview testimonials, and my own observational data, I outline some of the forms and meanings of the Vimbuza ritual and dance complex, before then exploring the operational and positional incorporation of Christian symbolism and meanings into the Vimbuza complex, specifically within the choreography of contemporary *mizimu* costume and dancing. In the process, I point to some of the creative linguistic and symbolic ways that many of my AIC
informants, especially the spirit possessed among them, were bridging the ancestral and the Divine in their quest for therapy.

**Descriptions of the Contemporary Complex**

Boston Soko’s three *Religion in Malawi* articles about Vimbuza are among the most detailed ethnographic descriptions of the various stages of the ritual complex, and the summary descriptions that follow are derived from a combination of Soko’s writings and my own observations, with discrepancies noted. As per Soko’s descriptions, the illness experience begins with suffering from a set of symptoms conventionally thought associated with Vimbuza possession, including elevated heart beat, vivid dreaming, and fainting. Upon consulting a local *nchimi*, a test called *kubunyisela* is administered to establish whether it is a case of possession, a necessary procedure because medicines wrongly administered may lead to madness or death. While seated on the ground inside, the head and body of the patient (*musamu*) is covered with a blanket, and s/he is surrounded by a therapeutic group composed of close relatives or guardians. Accompanying drumming, the members of this group begin to sing and clap around the patient.\(^{356}\) The purpose of the test is to bring about the “descent” of the spirits. If the procedure is not taking effect, the patient may then be made to inhale smoke from a burning fire in an effort to “force” the descent. If the presence of spirits is confirmed by the patient’s movements and voice (yelling Hee! Hee!...), an attendant to the patient addresses the spirits and asks them to name themselves. Patients are often possessed by multiple spirits and multiple types of spirits, often carrying different symptoms. After all spirits have said their names, the patient is dressed in a Vimbuza costume, including a leather belt, axe, and flywhisk. The patient then engages in handshaking with the participants and

\(^{356}\) This combination of visual deprivation, physical isolation within the blanket, and musical and rhythmic focus likely help create an altered state of mind and body consciousness in the patient, one that facilitates participation in the movement and therapeutic forms of Vimbuza.
observers, as if to introduce themselves as a new person. Over the next weeks and months, the patient will dance the Vimbuza spirits in the accompaniment of the drums, their supervising nchimi, and their local support group. Several of my informants described experiences similar to this while recounting their own initiation into the fellowship of Vimbuza sufferers.

Therapeutic Vimbuza ordinarily occurs at night, usually outside near to a bonfire, though sometimes inside, where the walls and ceiling of a dwelling can augment the sounds of drums, rattles, clapping, and song. Dancing to the drums is usually reserved for a single dancer at a time, though it is common for a series of dancers to follow one after the other. Sometimes more than one dancer will share the stage, though usually one person is the center of therapeutic attention. The dance stage is form by a circle of sympathizers and onlookers, with one section of the inner circle taken up by three seated drummers. White maize flour (ufu) is spread around the dance area to repel and disable bad spirits and other disrupting influences. Otherwise, as one informant told me, “the drums can’t rise up.” Most of those attending are active participants in the event, providing choral response to the songs of the diviner or song leader, and clapping their hands or blocks of wood together to accompany the rhythms of the drums. The dancer is outfitted with rattles and bells attached to their feet, waist, and hands, so that their bodies become instruments in the rhythm of sound that dominates the event.

As also described by Soko, Vimbuza dancers, whom are called ‘aneneli’ (saints), generally wear white cassocks, though some wear red, which indicates a particular class of spirits, particularly those classified as virombo. The drum (ng’oma) used is generally made from a mubale tree, a light weight wood that is also used as treatment for sleep-walking. The power of the drum can be weakened if menstruating women come into contact with it. During pauses in the dancing, the patient may address the spirits to notify them of a death, as the living should tell Vimbuza

---

357 A significant correlation, in that dreams are associated with the spirit world.
spirits whenever there is a death or serious illness. If not, the spirits may avenge the insult. While
dancing, the possessed person will often speak in unintelligible or foreign terms (Soko refers to it as
glossolalia), often including a number of words and syntagmes from other regional languages,
including from Bemba and Ngoni. As already noted, Vimbuza spirits generally have foreign
geographic and ethnic association with them, and thus are presumed to still speak in the language
of those regions. During the ritual dance, people who can do translation. The dancer should not
turn their back to an audience when leaving the dance floor, symbolizing that the spirits are always
with their victims.

For a person who is confirmed as Vimbuza possessed, a sacrifice to the spirits must take
place. Soko notes that after an initiate’s first dance, a date is set when chilopa will occur, generally
at new moon of the next month.\textsuperscript{358} Chilopa is an animal sacrifice involving the ritualized
consumption of blood directly from a wound in the animals' neck, and the shared fellowship
afterwards of a communal meal of the animals’ cooked meat. The animal may be a dove, a goat, or
for the most serious cases, a cow, depending upon the weightiness of the affliction. The sacrifice
generally takes place at day break, which Soko suggests is symbolic of the passage from sickness
to life.\textsuperscript{359} After chilopa, the patient (now called ‘chimbuza’) will be quarantined for a month,
dressed in skirt of hanging leather belts, and subject to certain taboos, including no sexual
intercourse. They are forbidden to converse with someone until that person has paid a once-only
fee (mboni) in a practice called kwongozya. A final ceremony, kuputula (Bemba for “to cut off”),
occurs one month after chilopa, when the leather skirt is cut off and the person is considered free

\textsuperscript{358} Soko suggests that the word “chilopa” is derived from the Bemba word “umlopa” - which means
blood (similar to the Tumbuka word “ndopa”).  
\textsuperscript{359} Friedson (1996) concluded that chilopa is the central event and symbol of the whole Vimbuza
ritual complex. Ncozana suggested that the communal meal that follows the sacrifice fosters a new
from the spirits. All of the mboni paid to the patient is turned over to their supervising nchimi at this conclusion.

Soko’s description was derived from ethnographic fieldwork done in the mid-1980’s, but most of his characterization of the events and sequence of the complex hold true to what I learned in Embangweni during my fieldwork of 1999 and 2000. Informants already initiated into Vimbuza consistently described enduring the kubunyisela test as the first stage of diagnosing their affliction. Many described having already completed one or more chilopa, or asserted that they had been instructed to do so but had yet to organize the event. Dancers continue to wear white or red cassocks, and put bells on their ankles, wrists, and wastes, effectively turning the body into a musical instrument of the dance. Dancers continue to demonstrate respect to the spirits, their own and those of others, through bowing. Once active possession arrives, they continue to greet locals and guests with handshakes, as if they are a new person. They also continue to exit that dance stage facing their therapy support group and others gathered, as Soko suggested, in order to demonstrate the ongoing presence of the spirits. Several informants also told me that the presence of menstruating women would compromise the proceedings. Perhaps the most significant consistency with Soko’s descriptions is that Vimbuza possession is still danced, and it is danced to the basic Vimbuza beat – vimbuza waka – “just vimbuza”. As a ritualized choreography of drumming and dancing, the broad features of Vimbuza’s sacred repertoire of sounds, movements, symbols, and discourse are still readily identifiable.

There have, however, been changes as well. I encountered a declining adherence to some of the ritual elements of the therapeutic process, and a stronger pattern of change in that process than Soko indicates from his research. Many of my older Vimbuza possessed informants, for

\[360\] As will be explored towards the end of this chapter, in a discussion of Friedson’s musical analysis, this is an important identifying feature of the whole Vimbuza-mizimu possession complex.
example, suggested that they had not been instructed to set a date for *chilopa* after their first dance, but instead after several dances, and several of my younger informants said they had yet to receive such instruction. Many others also said that they had not been quarantined for a month and made to perform *kuwongozya*, the vow of silence and social compensation just described.

Many of my elder informants also suggested the general pattern of local spirit possession was, and had been, changing in recent years. There has been less and less possession by the ‘classic’ Vimbuza spirits, *virombo*, *vyanusi*, and *vimbuza*, and much more possession by *mizimu* spirits. While the distinctions between the three classic Vimbuza types still pertain, the more pertinent local distinction, by far, is between the exogenous Vimbuza spirits and *mizimu*, the spirits of one’s own ancestral line. Informants would sometimes note stylistic differences between *virombo*, *vyanusi*, and *vimbuza* modes of possession dancing, but they consistently placed much greater emphasis and contemporary relevance on the more qualitative distinction between Vimbuza and *mizimu*. Several of my informants noted a recent change in possession styles. The comments of Nya Zuwovu, the fifty-eight-year-old Ngoni woman and Last Church leader quoted above, are representative.

O-ho! In the past *mizimu* were not there. There was only *vimbuza*. But now people suffer from *mizimu*, and many ng'angas have *mizimu*. In the past, most ng'angas emerged [*kutwasa*] from *vimbuza*, but now they are influenced by *mizimu*.

Most of those who dance during Vimbuza therapy sessions today claim possession by both classic Vimbuza and *mizimu* spirits, but it is the latter class of spirits that receive the greatest discursive and ritual attention during dance sessions. I found this same emphasis on the *mizimu* during my interview conversations with dancers as well, and much of the discussion that follows will reflect that emphasis. In summary, by local account, the *mizimu* have become increasingly important as possessive agents during the past twenty years in northern Malawi.
Coinciding with this transition to a preponderance of *mizimu* possession, but probably of longer duration, there have also been changes in the styling and choreography of Vimbuza dancing, some of which are pointed to by Soko. Whereas *virombo*, *vyanusi*, and *vimbuza* were previously characterized by animalistic costume, especially birds, *mizimu* is characterized by the wearing of white and red dresses with red and white crosses sewn into them. The typical Vimbuza costumes of old were a combination of leather belts and straps with metal pieces attached, and elaborate plumes of bird feathers attached to the shoulders, hips and ankles, and arranged to spread out from the body like wings. The most skilled (truly possessed) dancers could mimic the fluttering and flight of birds’ wings through rhythmically shaking their body in pace with the accompanying drums. In contemporary therapeutic Vimbuza dancing, much of this apparel has been dropped in favor of the white and red cassocks and crosses described by Soko. Belts with strips of leather and bells, and bracelets and anklets with bells, are still worn, but gone are the bird feathers. This change, I suggest, is the product of Tumbuka engagement with the dominant symbols of the local Scottish missionary presence, and specifically the use of white vestments by the first generation of Christian converts, as well as by members of the Mission’s medical staff. I address further this correlation of mission church and medical garb later in this chapter.

Another change involves dance style. As a sub-category of dancing within the general *Vimbuza* framework, the *mizimu* dancing is different from the standing dancing of *virombo*,

---

361 I only saw the ‘traditional’ Vimbuza costume during daytime performances of the dance, intended as entertainment for onlookers. It was particularly brought out for European and American visitors to the mission station. This transition of the older form of the dance into an entertaining performance has involved processes of traditionalization and de-mystification throughout the post-mission era, with a corresponding de-stigmatizing of the rite within the emergent Presbyterian orthodoxy of the region.

362 From the historical accounts of other early ethnographers in southern Africa, it seems white cassocks have been in used in possession dancing for many years, at least since the first half of the twentieth century. As such it seems that the specific correlation between white cassocks and mizimu possession that was made by my informants is a recent innovation regarding a more long-standing aesthetic innovation in the Vimbuza complex.
vyanusi, or vimbuza. Rather, the mizimu style involves a sort of seated dancing, where the patients sits on a chair placed in front of the drums, and the dancing motion is concentrated in the upper-half of the body. Patients rock forward and backward, from side to side, but maintain their seated position. Though patients may later rise to dance on foot, it is understand that it is then the Vimbuza spirits within them that are dancing, not the mizimu. Though I have no specific data to back it up, I am inclined to argue that this seated dancing represents an embodied model of fatigue, as the mizimu dancers display the enervating quality of contemporary life in northern Malawi, one characterized by poverty, AIDS, uncertain harvests, and, for women in particular, the labor requirements of daily life.

**Mizimu Dancing and the Embodiment of God and the Ancestors: Examples of Syncretic Integration**

Several Christian symbols and meanings have been incorporated into the Vimbuza complex, and more specifically, into the dancing of mizimu spirits in the years since Christianity was first introduced into northern Nyasaland in the late nineteenth century. The integration of these Christian elements has not, however, changed the central function of the event -- to activate the afflicting spirits, identify them, dialogue with them, discover the source of affliction, and

---

363 These emergent differences of choreography between classic Vimbuza style and its newer mizimu incarnation are reflected in the contrast between the descriptions of spirit possession illness that I found during my research and those described in earlier ethnographic accounts of Tumbuka, and eventually Tumbuka-Ngoni, religious culture.

364 In her seminal book on possession, Erika Bourguignon (1976) suggested that societies that included possession trance among their religious repertoires were generally characterized by marginal subsistence economies, sedentary residence patterns, large populations, hierarchical patterns of social and political organization, and an economic class structure. She argues that the varying stressors that often accompany participation in such social systems are conducive to the emergence of possession trance movements, and notes, with reference to I.M. Lewis’s writings (1971), that the marginal position of women in a society can contribute to their increased involvement.
achieve a range of other possible outcomes, including perhaps the transformation of one’s own religious and vocational identity into that of a diviner. It has, however, changed the cosmological framework within which the Vimbuza and *mizimu* spirits possess, as the Christian Trinitarian God now encompasses the proceedings within his Divinity. This has added a new source of ultimate spiritual authority into the event, and added possible new avenues of legitimacy to the diviners who practice their healing arts.

### The Christian Invocation

Vimbuza dance and divination sessions often formally start with an invocation to God the Father, God the Son, and the Holy Spirit, and later references to the Christian Godhead often follow during the session. This invocation is strikingly parallel to the way all local churches initiated their formal worship services, as well as any other Christian ceremonial event, including weddings and funerals. During my fieldwork, I noted a strict adherence to this practice, as if sacred activity could not really occur without the invocation. During a Vimbuza I attended just across the Zambian border, about twenty kilometers from Embangweni, the supervising nchimi, Mr. Beza, inaugurated the formal ritual action with the following prayer.

God, the creator of everything in this world. You sent your spirit to come and settle in our bodies of blood and flesh. You said you shall come. I should move to different places, but I should accomplish the work which I have been assigned. “Don’t fear and don’t be afraid. I am your God. I give you this authority, so don’t be reluctant.” Thank you! “I had sent this spirit to come and settle in this body.” You are the best healer in this world, because you are the big sin’ganga. There is no one who can obstruct you from accomplishing what you have decided on. If the sheep is weak and tired, you say you will whip and treat it. I don’t have much to say. I speak in the name of your son Jesus Christ. Amen!

Note the lack of the phrase “God the Holy Spirit” to complete the trio. The Holy Spirit lacks a personalized and gendered marker of identity, and thereby remains a more open, fluid category – spirit as potentially manifest and concretized in a range of objects and persons. This is in keeping with the notion of Great Spirit.
In this prayer, Beza does not mention the Holy Spirit by name, but does suggest that the Divine spirit has filled him in order to help him accomplish his sacred work. He invokes the authority of God, and His ultimate healing power, calling him the ‘big sing’anga’. He draws a metaphor of God whipping but also healing a sheep that is weak and tired, and then concludes the prayer with an invocation to Jesus Christ and an ‘Amen’. This prayer is in line with a general acknowledgment that God blesses Vimbuza proceedings because they are instruments of resistance and healing, resisting the evil effects of witchcraft and bringing healing to both individuals and the larger community of the living and deceased.

In positioning the prayer at the beginning of the rite, the invocation of God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit acts to initiate the forthcoming proceedings under the umbrella of the Christian Trinitarian God. This positioning suggests that, in some important way, Vimbuza has become incorporated into an encompassing Christian cosmology that asserts its ultimate authority over the proceedings. I discuss this point in greater detail at the conclusion of this chapter. At the same time, the incorporation of the Christian God into the practice and performance of Vimbuza also demonstrates how the rite itself has become a framework through which locals both understand and enact their Christian faith and identity.

**Colored Costumes of the Cross**

Identified most consistently with its *mizimu* form, contemporary Vimbuza uniforms include the symbol of the cross, often displayed on the chest and the back, as well as on the front of headbands and scarves. As already noted, the most common pattern is that of red crosses on white vestments, though the inverse is also found among some *nchimis* who associate closely with classic

---

366 It should be noted that the metaphor of God both whipping and healing a sickly sheep is consistent with the functions attributed to the ancestral spirits -- including both punishment for wrongdoing and therapeutic guidance, and intervention to bring about healing.
Vimbuza spirits, especially *virombo*. Vimbuza dancers also sometimes wield a wooden cross in hand while dancing. Iconically, in both cloth and wood, the cross is represented in the classic Christian motif, with a slightly longer base below the cross section than above it. In this form, Vimbuza crosses are the most notable inclusion of Christian symbolism within the Vimbuza complex.

This is no surprise, as the cross of the crucifixion was the central Christian symbol introduced by the early Livingstonia missionaries. It was a visible artifact of missionary devotion from the start, and one they institutionalized in a variety of settings and circumstances. Wedded to this symbol of the cross was the central theme of the gospel message: that Jesus was born both human and divine; that he had lived a blameless life; that his Divine Father had sacrifice him as recompense for all earthly sin; that he had died on a cross but risen to life again; and that he beckoned all humanity to accept his rule as sovereign in their life and his grace as atonement for their sin.

That Vimbuza dancers include this cross on their uniforms is not to say that all participants to Vimbuza understand the cross exclusively in such classically Christian terms, as there were likely other antecedents for wearing crosses. Specifically, the cross was likely used as a symbol within the pre-Christian religious culture of Tumbuka-speakers to mark the intersecting journeys of life and death. I base this assertion on the limited literature on Tumbuka symbolism from the mission era itself, and on comparative data from other ethnographies set in south and central

---

367 Note transition from using only *ufu* as a source of whiteness to the white dress, with both its medical and religious connotations.
368 The most prominent, of course, was the cruciform layout of the church building itself, an architectural model replicated on numerous stations throughout the Livingstonia Mission (see p. 336 of *Laws of Livingstonia* for plan for Karonga church). The church at Loudon in Embangweni was among those constructed in this basic design.
Africa. In the latter vein, Wyatt MacGaffey’s writings about cruciform symbolism among the Bakongo people of southwestern Congo are suggestive.

Resonating with ancient Kongo thought, the cross especially signifies “the parting of the ways”, one arm being the boundary between this world and the afterlife, the other arm representing the path of power between the worlds.\(^{369}\)

From her research among the Bakongo as well, Anita Jacobson-Widding quotes one of her informants, a Mukunyi, regarding the journey of crossing over into land of the dead, where the spirits of those untainted by the destructive power of magic live on.

When you die, you will come to a big water. This is dangerous water, which is very difficult to pass through. You will have to struggle hard, in order to get through. But then, at last, you will arrive at the other side. There you will find a land of light. It is so light that at first you can hardly see anything. You get dazzled. Then you will see all the people around you. They are white, very white, and very beautiful. Nobody is sick there, everybody is strong and healthy. And they know everything. Everybody knows and understands everything that they could not understand on earth. They can all read and write. Even I will be able to read and write when I get there.\(^{370}\)

Likewise, Turner makes mention of cruciform symbolism in his description of the boys Mukanda initiation rite among the Ndembu, wherein a cruciform trench was dug, water poured into it, and white, red, and black powders added to it to represent the life forces of life, reproduction, and death.\(^{371}\) The limited early descriptions of the early Livingstonia missionaries and subsequent historical writings about the Tumbuka-speakers of northwestern Nyasaland would suggest that they included the symbol of a crossing within their ritual and iconic repertoire, and that it too pointed to the existential journey from life to death. Nevertheless, the evidence on this point is scarce, and so the analysis that follows is somewhat speculative.\(^{372}\)

---


\(^{372}\) It is interesting to note that the main Tumbuka term for God was *chiuta*, meaning “bow”, and
data from other African societies, it does seem likely that Tumbuka and Mission cosmologies shared a recognition of the cross as a symbol of the key existential journey from life into afterlife. Within Christianity, the cross represents both the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus, of victory over death through a promised reunion with Jesus in heaven. Among many African peoples, including most likely pre-missionization Tumbuka-speakers, the cross indicated the challenge and liminality of the journey across the river between life and death – in which the quality of a person’s relationships with their ancestral forebears becomes a critical factor in how they will be received by those ancestors on the other side. In both traditions, the cross symbolizes the key moment of eschatological transition when the nature of one’s afterlife is being decided.

The use of crosses need not, then, be only, or even primarily, attributed to Christian influence, though, again, the distinctively Christian iconography of the cross in Vimbuza would suggest a definite influence. Rather, the use of crosses can also be attributed, with some qualification due to limited accounts, to vernacular, pre-Mission religious traditions, where crosses were also likely modeled as symbols of life journeys and transformation.

In the case of the Mission and post-Mission history of Vimbuza, there is a third source for the use of crosses, and specifically red crosses, within the therapeutic complex. Within the Livingstonia mission’s biomedical work in northern Malawi, as within other Western missionary and colonial projects, the red cross was used as the dominant symbol of the European medical tradition. In the first year of an established mission presence in the northern section of the country, not long after Robert Laws and others first settled at Bandawe in October of 1881, a red cross flag was hoisted over the nascent clinic to show when it was open for visitation and treatment. The use of the red cross flag has accompanied mission medical work ever since, and today, in Embangweni, bows, when strung, take on a cruciform shape. Likewise, iron bow stands dating to the nineteenth century also had a cruciform structure at their top.
the red cross flag still features prominently in the medical work of the mission, most prominently as emblazoned on the sides of the hospital ambulances. It also features more generally in the medical work done by the government, NGO’s, and other missions and church organizations throughout the country.

Just as there are likely both Tumbuka and Scottish Presbyterian antecedents for the use of crosses in Vimbuza symbolism, there are accordingly both likely African and European sources for the color symbolism of red and white that is prominent in Vimbuza dances today. Most likely, white and red were already fundamental ritual colors in the local pre-Christian religious tradition of Tumbuka-speakers, as it was among neighboring peoples. In his description of Ndembu color symbolism and its ties to morality and social structure through ritual action in neighboring Zambia, Victor Turner writes regarding whiteness:

[W]hiteness stands, inter alia, for goodness...health...ritual purity...freedom from misfortune...for political authority...and for assembling the spirits. To sum up, it represents the entire moral order plus the fruits of virtue; health, strength, fertility, the respect of one’s fellows, and the blessings of one’s ancestors.  

From all that I have been able to determine regarding pre-Mission Tumbuka color symbolism, such a strong association between whiteness and goodness was likewise prominent in their symbolic cosmology. In chiTumbuka, the same adjective, mutuwa, is used today to both describe the color white and identity a state of holiness or purity. In many ritual circumstances, including Vimbuza, the color white, often through the medium of ufù, maize flour, has been and continues to be used to consecrate a sacred space for ritual activity, and spread on faces and bodies to indicate a state of ritual purification. As such, the Livingstonia Mission’s practice of clothing new converts in white tunics, and asserting that this whiteness indicated a new state of holy personhood, would have been a readily understandable form of color symbolism for the Tumbuka-speaking inhabitants of

---

northwestern Nyasaland. This structural analogy of associating whiteness and purity no doubt contributed to the introduction of the mission white tunic into the ritual and dance forms of the Vimbuza complex.

When I asked them about the white vestment of mizimu dancing, my Vimbuza informants often associated it both with the agency of God and redeeming powers of Jesus, as well as the righteous and benevolent intervention the ancestral spirits. Through a form of analogic schematization, white vestments have become polyvalent symbols of purity and healing, symbolizing both the righteous ancestors who protect and intervene to ensure health in their offspring, and Jesus the shepherd who also brings healing and well-being to members of his flock, and who is himself the personification of God as love. This can be described as a form of syncretism through analogy. As a ritual garb of purity and cleansing, and a central symbol within the Vimbuza complex, the white cassock brings both the ancestors and Jesus together in a sacred embodiment of healing power and agency.

An ethnographic example of this color-coded syncretism comes from NyaChavula, a forty-nine-year-old Tumbuka woman, Roman Catholic, and practicing ng’anga. While describing her own possession experiences to me during an interview, she confirmed the association of white with holiness and purity, and of holiness and purity with both the ancestral spirits and Jesus himself.

She told me that she was not happy to be bodily possessed by the mizimu, as she suffered a range of afflictions by result, but that she could not object because they were sent by God, the originator of her affliction.

I was not happy with that [possession]. But since they have entered into my body, I cannot object to them. It means they’ve come from God. He is the one who has brought the problem...The spirits of my grandfather and father told me that [vestment], because where they are, they are white (watuwa)...The meaning is that they are holy (watuwa), and they put on Jesus’ cross.374

---

374 I still have questions about just what is being symbolized here. Explicitly, the spirits are said to be good. They have given life to the living, and have carved out a path of living that has served
In the process of calling the ancestors holy – able to cloth themselves with the holy cross of Jesus – NyaChavula articulates a powerful syncretic fusion of ancestral spiritualism and Christianity. In the process, she articulates a model of whiteness as purity that is grounded both in pre-Christian antecedents of ancestral benevolence, as well as in the Christian claim of Jesus’ cleansing and salvific grace.

In contrast to white, the use of red in the Vimbuza rite suggests a different set of associations, pointing to the danger, uncertainty, and trauma that accompanies physical and spiritual affliction, and to the threat posed to both the individual and community if the sources of affliction are not identified and remedied. This association of redness with danger and drama is reflected in other ethnographies of color symbolism in the region. Writing about red and white dualism among the Ndembu, Turners notes:

There is, however, an important difference between white and red, for the former represents the preservation and continuance of life, whereas the latter may represent the taking of life, and even where, as in the case of certain red symbols, such as the mukula tree, it represents continuity through parturition, it still has a note of danger and discontinuity.375

their families and communities for generations. Their descendants are inheritors of their work and sacrifice, and of the wisdom gained through trial and error. Does this mean, however, that they share in the sacrificial spirit of Jesus? Do they have sufficient moral authority to redeem the living, just as Jesus does? I am inclined to suggest that the red crosses represent suffering and sacrifice, placed on a white field of blamelessness and goodness, and that the aid of the spirits is representative of this inherent goodness. Yet often the dancers acknowledge that they are in the wrong, in for example, not having performed nkwichi. In that case, the whiteness could represent an idealized state, a goal to be strived for. Wearing white during the ritual dance could also symbolize the dance as a cleansing rite, in which obedience to the ancestors restores right relationships. Or, is suffering in-and-of-itself a holy state, because it is a time of danger for the individual, a key moment in life when people either learn and go forward in wisdom (and personhood), or lose their mind and begin a spiral out of community participation and personhood?  

In this description, the color red symbolized forces of both life and death, and the blood involved in both. This usage parallels the conventional Western usage of red to also indicate danger and crisis. In particular, the red cross has become a core symbol of medical trauma, and of the intervening efforts to alleviate that trauma. As with the use of cruciform symbolism then, the use of red crosses in contemporary Vimbuza may well be derived from both African and European sources, the result of a process of analogic schematization wherein the core complementary meanings of redness within both color schemes allowed for a fusion of the two. In Embangweni today, both the hospital red cross and the Vimbuza red cross have come to indicate places of both suffering and healing. As a symbol of illness and a hoped-for rebirth in wellness, red crosses are polyvalent and analogic symbols that carry both African therapeutic and Western biomedical associations.

In summary, the colored cruciform symbolism of Vimbuza is likely derived from all three of the above antecedents: from both pre-Mission color and cruciform symbolism, and from the Mission tandem of Christianity and biomedicine. This incorporation of symbolic meanings from multiple traditions has almost certainly involved some degree of recognizing analogies among the three, as Christian, biomedical, and ancestral spiritualist traditions all provided overlapping associations between crosses and the colors red and white. As evidence by their inclusion in Vimbuza dancing, both the Christian cross and the red cross flag have been adopted for use outside of the mission’s institutions, and have become salient markers of purity and health, embedded within the broader spiritual, moral, and therapeutic culture of the area. As such, these symbols are good examples of how locals take possession of foreign symbols and internalize associations of them that may differ dramatically from their original carrier’s intent. For all of the missionaries’ attempts to objectify meaning in these symbols, their subjectification has inevitably brought transformations of meaning, and thus of the symbols themselves. This does not mean that Christian symbols have been completely emptied of their Christian connotations. Even within the
highly vernacularized form of Vimbuza, the crosses carry profoundly Christian associations. What it does mean is that the Christian cross, as well as the medical red cross, have taken on associations of sacredness and healing that link back to pre-Mission sources of spiritual and therapeutic logic.

This has been accomplished through a series of analogic correlations between the Christian and biomedical associations with crosses and colors, and the preexisting vernacular models that were prevalent in the region. These analogies are examples of what Sahlins called “structures of conjuncture”. The resultant symbolic forms – Christian red crosses sewn on white cassocks during *mizimu* Vimbuza dances – are syncretic hybrids, grounded in a series of symbolic and ritual analogies between both Western and African religious and therapeutic traditions.

It should again be noted that the syncretic integration of Christian elements into Vimbuza has not fundamentally changed the nature and function of the ritual. Vimbuza dancing, and the broader Vimbuza ritual complex, is still intended to facilitate a communion with the ancestral spirits, and to acknowledge, obey, and energize their agencies. While there have been substitutive dimensions to the integration, it is primarily an example of supplementation via recognition of the conjunctive and complementary meanings of both religious systems. Conversations with many of my Vimbuza informants about the meaning of their possession experiences confirm such a polyvalent and analogic usage of crosses and of the red-white dualism, within their ritual therapeutics.

The Bible as an instrument of healing

---

376 Another dominant symbol brought by the Livingstonia missionaries was the flag of the Livingstonia Mission itself, comprising a white dove with an olive branch in its beak, placed on a sky blue background. This flag had flown from the masthead of the Livingstonia’s *Ilala* when it first sailed up the Shire River and into Lake Nyasa in 1875, (McIntosh, p.147) and has been a constant emblem of the Mission and Synod ever since. In Chapter Eight, I consider the case of one spirit possessed man who creatively incorporated sky blue into his spirit uniform.
In addition to the Christian invocation and prominent display of Christian and biomedical symbolism, mizimu dancing also at times incorporates the Bible, the most important Christian instrument and primary source of sacred truth and authority, into its ritual practice. Neozana (2002) suggests that as a result of the Livingstonia Mission’s work, by 1910, the Bible had become the most valuable religious symbol among the Tumbuka-speakers of the northern region. This characterization still holds true today. From being used in divination sessions by local nchimis to being invoked, cited, and interpreted in the meetings of local Christian churches, “the Book” continues to profoundly orient local understandings of spiritual reality and experience.

Within Vimbuza events, a copy of the Bible is sometimes used to gently beat the dancer and their spirits within, using the text as a sacred instrument of imposing ultimate authority over the afflicting spirits, “to beat the spirits into submission”, as one informant put it. I observed this act twice in the Vimbuza sessions I attended in Embangweni, both times accompanied by pleas for the possessing spirits to release themselves and make themselves known. Simon Banda, the forty-three-year-old Chewa man, Zion Prophecy Church Elder, and prominent local nchimi quoted above, explained how the Bible is used during the initial diagnostic process, as well as during some funerals.

When someone who says they have spirits comes, I make them sit on the chair, as we are seated. We take a plate so that the victim and the attendants can put some money, so that the spirits should show up. They offer, whether five tambala or ten tambala, into the plate and then cover it. Then we take a spiritual cloth or the cloth of a dead relative and cover only the head. We don’t even put any smoke from medicine. No. But as they are covered, we give them powdered medicine to swallow. Then we take the Bible and put the offerings on the Bible. Then we open the Bible and put it on the head of the victim. Then we pray to God. We ask God to exorcize the power of the spirit to come out. After praying, we drop the Bible and the plate of offerings and put them in between their thighs, and make them sit down. We can remove the Bible, but not the offerings, because that is for the spirits that are inside them. From there, we sing and beat drums. We will do that until the spirits come out. Little by little you will see that they start shivering, which shows that the spirits have responded to the herbs. If they drink the medicine, sometimes they will start healing. They will tremble a lot and fall down, collapsed. Then we take the
Bible again, because the Bible with mizimu go hand-in-hand. Like when someone has collapsed with the spirits at a funeral ceremony, just beat him or her with the Bible, on the head and on the joints, and flatter the spirits to calm down. “We are at the funeral ceremony. So please forgive. Funerals are always there. Please leave them.” Beat him or her with the Bible. Later you will see the victim back to normal.

In another example, Mr. Kasalu, a forty-seven-year-old Tumbuka man, member of Zion Prophecy Church, and a prominent local nchimi, described how he used the Bible during divination sessions, often instead of dancing.

At certain times I can dance Vimbuza, but most times, I use the Bible, just as I am sitting here, and have visions. As you are sitting here I can diagnose you. By then, it means the spirits have come with the Bible.

Kasalu explained that his aunt’s spirit comes to him through the Bible. Taking a preacher’s stance, standing with an open Bible held in the palm of his hand, he explained that he just has to open the book, and even without reading from it, words come to him. They come to him as a vision, as if he is watching television, and his thoughts are clear, usually more so than when he divines by dancing.

When Mulungu and I asked him why the mizimu instruct using the Bible, he responded:

Oh! It’s because vyanusi and mizimu are different. Mizimu is just like... Someone who is not baptized, so, they make a person to be a Christian. Quite different from vyanusi. That’s maybe why I am a polygamist. Had it been mizimu came first, as I died, I wouldn’t be a polygamist. Mizimu protect. They don’t want polygamy either. You should have Christian manners, while vyanusi encourages someone to keep on marrying.

Note that Kasalu, a Tumbuka, directly correlates polygamy with the Ngoni spirit vyanusi and monogamy with Christianity and the mizimu. Coming from a polygamous man and member of a polygamy-friendly church, this is an interesting characterization of Christianity, one certainly associated with the century-long ecclesiastical authority of the Livingstonia Mission.377

377 Most likely, it also has something to do with his audience – me. His characterization also suggests that the mizimu are more Christian than foreign, non-ancestral spirits. This is consistent
As in the previous examples of Christian invocation and cruciform symbolism, the use of the Bible during Vimbuza events, and the broader use of the Bible in ancestral divination in general, indicate a syncretic cultural and ritual process, one also premised in the recognition of an analogy between the Christian and vernacular forms. Friedson (1996) notes that “[t]he Bible was fitted by the Tumbuka, as were the missionaries, into a preexisting cultural category, in this case, divination. The ‘Book’ was perceived as a powerful instrument that allowed the missionaries to ‘see’.”

During his research, Friedson also encountered nchimis using the Bible as a divinatory tool. Much earlier, the missionary Elmslie noted the use of books in general as instruments of divination, writing that ‘at this time, of course, a book was in their eyes nothing but an instrument of divination, and....they believed that it told us what was in their minds.’

Incorporating the Bible into Vimbuza and divination enables the merging of the power of the Bible into an already potent field of spiritual agency, where ancestral spirits speak through the Bible and share in its positive sacred potentials. Once again, this involves a form of supplementary syncretism, where the Bible is added to but does not replace other ritual practices and forms. White flour still encircles the Vimbuza stage, the drums still beat, and the spirits still dance and speak their truths through the mouths of their kin. But as suggested by nchimi Kasalu, the use of the Bible within Vimbuza and divination introduces a new moral order into the proceedings. In this respect, there has been a degree of substitution involved in integrating Christianity into Vimbuza dancing and divination. Because of its core instrumental value as a tool of divination, the incorporation of the Bible into spiritual divination practices suggests that, in terms of both its operational and positional meanings, “the Book” now holds an important place in scaffolding the cosmological framework that encompasses the Vimbuza complex itself.

with the broader trend of affiliating the mizimu with the Christian God.

378 Friedson, 1996, p. 98.

379 Among the Wild Ngoni, p. 169.
**Witch-finding within the church.**

Throughout my research, I consistently heard another rhetorical motif -- the idea that some churches (particularly the CCAP) forbid *ng’angas* from their membership because they are able to smell out witches from within the church body, often among the church leadership. This critique inevitably came from a member of an African Instituted Church, who used it as a counter-response to any suggestion that their possession status was incompatible with their being a good Christian, something implied by local CCAP policy. NyamuNguluwe, the woman quoted at the beginning of this chapter about her grandmother’s love for her, told me that God liked her spirits, and that there was no struggle between them. In addition to telling Mulungu and me that she often danced *mizimu* with a Bible on her lap, she recounted a story from her own church, Zion Prophecy Church, to refute any suggestion that the *mizimu* are demons, like some other churches teach.

---

**MULUNGU** There are some churches which think possessed people are of Satan. How does Zion consider that?

**NGULUWE** In Zion, they consider me as a spirit possessed person because there are many who have spirits. There are some we had last year and who are still in Zion. The possessed and the un-possessed gathered together, and they thought of dressing them up with uniforms.

**MULUNGU** The very possessed people?

**NGULUWE** They made them put on uniforms, not knowing that the elder who dressed those people had a charm in his pocket. The possessed threw down the uniforms and got hold of the charm in the pocket of an elder. It is then they realized that some people are just strict with the church, even while they are charmed. And they do what?

**MULUNGU** Cast spells.

**NGULUWE** They cast spells. Therefore, we cannot throw away our spirit-possessed people because they also worship God. And sometimes people might move with or without charms. So those who move with charms will confront the possessed members. With that, they allow the possessed, because they also worship the same God.
According to nyamuNguluwe, not only are mizimu not demons, they are agents of God in pursuing evil among the living and bringing it to light. Her example is of Zion Prophecy Church members fingering their own church leader, though, as suggested, the illustration of ng’angas smelling out charms on church leaders was more often directed as a critique of other churches’ policies. It is interesting to note that this notion of the spirit-possessed as agents of Godly revelation against the leaders of the church establishment suggests a complete reversal of the Livingstonia Synod’s polarity of sanctity. In this model, as the Bible puts it, the first are last, and the last are first.

As an example of syncretism, witchfinding in the church does not suggest an opposition between the divination of ancestral spiritualism and Christianity. Rather, it points to an alliance of both spirits and God against a false man – the prototypical example of which is a reverend or other church leaders who preaches the Christian gospel, but who instead lives a life characterized by greed and a lust for power. Again, the spirits and God are brought together in a supplementary relationship wherein, even within His house of worship, God allows the spirits to speak through their living agents to condemn wrongdoing and hypocrisy. The moral prohibitions against greed and the abuse of power that were common to both ancestral spiritualism and Christianity are now enforced in an act that juxtaposes one religious tradition within the other, as a prophet uses ancestral inspiration to divine wrongdoing within the very sanctuary of the Christian church.

God, the Spirits, and Biomedicine

Previously, I suggested that the use of a red cross on a white background within Vimbuza symbolism might also be attributed in part to the introduction of the red cross as the central symbol of the Mission medical project. Just as Tumbukas integrated the Christian cross into preexisting models of the cross as an ontological symbol; as well as fused the association of white with both ancestral benevolence and the sacrificial love of Jesus; so too they may have transported the red
cross, as a symbol of healing, from one domain of therapeutic intervention, the Mission hospital, to another, the Vimbuza dance. This three-part integration of Mission symbols into Tumbuka ancestral spiritualism could occur with little perceived inconsistency, as both the cross of the crucifixion and the red cross of the biomedical tradition could be integrated into Vimbuza as symbols of healing without disrupting the pre-Mission model of the cross as a symbol of transformation. Likewise, both white and red could be integrated in terms entirely consistent with pre-Mission Tumbuka models of white as a color of purity, and red as a color of danger, uncertainty, and transformation, all of which characterize the illness experience.

None of my informants articulated a direct relationship between the red crosses of Vimbuza and the red cross of hospital medicine. This silence on the topic was consistent with a more general reluctance to make definitive comments about the meanings and functions of Vimbuza symbolism, and the ritual symbolism of ancestral spiritualism more broadly. What did emerge during conversations and interviews with informants, however, were descriptions of Vimbuza that linked it to biomedical categories of disease like high blood pressure and malaria. Several female informants explained that the hospital diagnosed their spirit possession as “BP” – high blood pressure, because of the fast heartbeat and agitated state of the body brought on by spirit possession. Some said that the medications provided by the hospital to treat this condition had provided temporary relief, but that they could not provide a cure as the source of the ailment was spiritual, not natural, in cause. “BP” was a descriptive diagnosis, but not a causal one. For this first group of informants, those who granted some partial efficacy to hospital medicine, the biomedical category of “BP” and the spiritual category of spirit possession were partially overlapping categories to the extent that they shared a common recognition of an agitated bodily state – a body in distress. As such, the diagnosis “BP” could be integrated into a more encompassing diagnosis of spirit possession, a diagnosis that went to the root of affliction and provided an avenue of
therapeutic intervention through participation in Vimbuza. Other informants went further to suggest that their bodies had rejected hospital medications; that the hospital’s pills had made them ill. These informants described the “BP” diagnosis and accompanying medication as misguided. The hospital staff had been mistaken in their diagnosis because of the similarity of symptoms between what were two distinct etiological categories of illness. They had prescribed medicines for an ailment that was spiritual not natural in cause.

In addition to the association between spirit possession and high blood pressure, several informants also suggested a relationship between Vimbuza and malaria. As one informant, *nchimi* Nguluwe, the Church of Christ member and Embangweni Hospital volunteer introduced earlier, explained:

O-ho! It’s because malaria, as I said before, is the mother of vimbuza. It is because malaria makes the whole body die, and the soles of feet itchy. Also, the head doesn’t function properly. The only difference is the occurrence of the spirit in vimbuza. The spirit comes for protection in case you were to die, so that’s why it shows you some trees. But malaria goes out. For us, we Africans, as I said, we bonyesera, but you use pills like chloroquine. Sometimes they use local ‘njenje’ (bitter herbs, like chloroquine). The same thing with vimbuza. It’s herbs for treatment are very bitter. For example, muaani and mzakaka are herbs mixed with the vimbuza medicine. They act like Norolon or Chloroquine. So ‘kubonyesera’ is like giving an injection. So if they can discover medicine like chloroquine, it means vimbuza can be treated for good. Because if a person performs frequently, it means they have not been healed. They are still a patient. But a person who has been healed from vimbuza, even if you beat the drums for them, they will still look normal. They don’t even change the language. If strange languages come, it means a person is still a patient.

By drawing parallels between the symptoms and medications for malaria and Vimbuza, Nguluwe suggests that the conditions are comparable as bodily conditions. It is interesting to note that he raises the prospect of a pharmacological cure for Vimbuza, suggesting that even the spirits might be susceptible to a sufficiently potent medicine. This is fitting with his training in biomedical therapeutics, and the presumed efficacy of many of its pharmacological interventions, and suggests
the extent to which he had come to view Vimbuza in partially biological terms. Furthermore,

Nguluwe told us that he understood that mosquitoes were the vector for malaria:

The cause of malaria is how we live our lives. In villages and even at the hospital, people
are advised how to care for water, avoiding mosquito breeding. These are agents of
malaria. When malaria attacks someone, it fails to be epilepsy. Epilepsy is also a result of
malaria. If epilepsy grows in a person, it can lead to death. In trying to avoid death, the
spirit intervenes. So the usual agents cause malaria.

In this statement, Nguluwe suggests that malaria can bring on spirit possession, as the spirits
intervene to protect and preserve the suffering person. In the process, the symptoms of the disease
become augmented and replicated through the possession experience. He describes these
symptoms:

Because in vimbuza, there is malaria. The heart beats very fast. The blood runs fast, and
the head also seems to be running fast. When they examine such people at the hospital,
they find the blood running and the heart running. It can be seen. This speed disturbs the
doctor to measure the content of the blood. The body becomes very hot. The doctors fail
to examine the real cause of the problem. The vimbuza victim will be diagnosed with
malaria and treated for malaria. But they cannot treat malaria completely. The heart will
have a deep breath. That is why you hear a yawning sound, ‘Yi-yo-o-o-o!’ It seems when
he does ‘Hi-yo-o-o-o!’; he rests from deep breathing. It is the air itself that, when not breathed,
pains him in the chest. This is the air of the bad spirit that causes vimbuza. The sound
‘Hiyo-o’ is the chimbuza itself.

In this model, Vimbuza is a spiritual disease that both mirrors, and to some extent is derived from,
the underlying biological disease of malaria. They share a symptomology, and because of this,
Vimbuza is often misdiagnosed as malaria. Yet, Vimbuza is something more than malaria, a
spiritual disease. According to Nguluwe, it’s distinctive symptom is deep breathing that comes
from the heart – the exhalation of foul airs that point to the possessing Vimbuza spirits themselves.
In this model, Vimbuza derives part of its enervating energy from a known biological disease – one
that is carried by an insect and is subject to pharmacological intervention. Yet vimbuza is not fully
defined by malaria. It has something more – a spiritual component.
Biomedicine represented a profoundly new orientation to illness and disease, introducing a scale of reference, an organic and mechanical breakdown of the human body into interrelating component parts, and a technology of intervention that were vastly different from existing local standards of diagnosis and therapy. Perhaps most profoundly, biomedicine argued for an essentialized model of the human body as organism, product of a biological hereditary and subject to biological disease pathologies. This biomedical paradigm has been influential among the residents of northern Malawi, as biological models of the body and of disease have been partially integrated into local therapeutic logic. Nguluwe’s metaphoric description of “malaria as the mother of vimbuza” shows one way in which spirit possession has been partially biomedicalized by some people. It should be noted that Nguluwe is not a typical informant, as he was an active Embangweni Hospital volunteer who was better versed than most local villagers in the language and logic of biomedicine. Yet there were others among my informants from local villages who also spoke of spirit possession as a disease of the blood, something that can be passed on from parent to child, and even as something that can be caught, like a contagion, if trauma comes to the body.

What position, then, do these biomedical models hold within the broader therapeutic frameworks of those with whom I talked? I would suggest that while biomedical categories like “malaria” and “BP” have become a part of people’s descriptions of illness and spirit possession, they have been added to, not replaced, pre-Mission (and pre-biomedical) Tumbuka models of illness and ancestral spiritualism. Even more so than in the integration of Christianity and ancestral spiritualism described above, the integration of biomedical categories into ancestral spiritualism has represented a partial and supplementary addition to an enduring core logic – that the spirits of the deceased are active agents, either for good or ill, in the world of the living. Whereas the integration of Christianity with ancestral spiritualism involved the incorporation of the latter within
the former’s cosmological framework – all are now subject to God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit -- the integration of biomedical categories into ancestral spiritualism has involved no such Western incorporation of the African. Rather, the inverse has occurred. Biomedical categories have become incorporated within an encompassing etiological framework that understands some illnesses to be spiritual in cause, and which places biomedical categories of disease within that larger framework. 

**Hybrid Schematizations of Sacred Personhood**

A historical framing of the Vimbuza possession complex suggests that several “structures of conjuncture” between Tumbuka and Scottish religious and medical symbolism helped facilitate the creation of analogic linkages – in both reason and ritual – between the two systems, and provided ways in which Christian and biomedical symbols could be integrated into Tumbuka ancestral spiritualism. The Christian invocation, the wearing of white vestments and red Christian crosses, and the use of the Bible as a tool of divination and healing – all are Christian symbols that have been syncretically integrated into Vimbuza sessions in a way that is both substitutive and supplemental, having in some respects replaced elements of pre-mission Vimbuza, and in other ways added to and expanded the existing symbolic and ritual system.

During my interviews and conversations with local church informants, the impact of Christianity was reflected in the repeated invocation of Jesus as a healer and of God the father as the divine agency behind the healing interventions of the *mizimu* spirits. The central position of

---

380 In addition, there is another difference. Many locals acknowledge that there are illnesses that occur for known physical reasons, such as when the bite of a mosquito introduces the disease of malaria, and that these illnesses are in a separate category from those of spiritual causation. Thus the two categories are, at least in theory, separate. In contrast, the integration of Christianity and ancestral spiritualism involved a fusing of elements within the same domain – the spiritual with the spiritual.
these Christian facets within the ritual complex suggest a pattern of inculturation in which ancestral spiritualism has been integrated into an overarching Christian framework, one governed by the supreme God of the Bible. Within a broad cosmological framework, this is an important change. Whatever the specifics of pre-mission Tumbuka models of God – as a creative, sustaining, omnipresent force that is somewhat distant from the everyday affairs of humans – those models have been dramatically transformed through their integration into the Christian trinitarian model of God. God has been reconstructed as an all-powerful father, full of authority; as a sacrificial and redeeming son, Jesus Christ; and as an indwelling Holy Spirit, full of righteousness and saving grace.

At the same time, however, the integration of Christian elements into Vimbuza has not changed the central function of the rite – dialogue with spirits in a hopeful resolution of the illness and its underlying causes. In his fascinating study of the role of the basic Vimbuza drumbeat (vimbuza waka) in helping facilitate an altered state of mind during the ritual dancing, ethnomusicologist Steven Freidson (1996) locates the chilopa sacrificial and consumptive rite as the central event and function of the entire Vimbuza complex. Based on my knowledge of Vimbuza, I agree with Freidson’s definition of chilopa as the central symbolic event of the ritual complex. In this respect, the organizing logic and function of the Vimbuza ritual complex remains the same – to activate the spirits within, energize their authoritative, creative, and healing energies, satisfy their hunger for right behavior, and welcome their intervening power as agents of both personal and collective well-being. In bringing Christian and ancestral symbolic practices together to frame the Vimbuza event, contemporary participants to Vimbuza, and those AICs that embrace them, like that first generation of Presbyterian church leaders who broke with the Mission, continue to articulate a resistance to the early missionary oppositional model between Christianity and
ancestral spiritualism. Instead, they have affirmed that the ancestors and God can work towards common ends, and thereby share in the holiness of their mutual agenda.

Likewise, within the testimonials of many of my spirit-possessed informants, biomedical categories – like “BP” and malaria – have been added to, not replaced, an encompassing understanding of witchcraft and spirit possession as the core factors in many forms of illness. The overall structure of illness etiology remains directly analogous to what is known about pre-Christian religious explanations for illness and possession among the Tumbuka. Physical illness is still often modeled as containing a spiritual dimension, often in combination with a presumed act of magical witchcraft. In this respect, there is seeming continuity with a pre-Mission model of many illnesses as crises of both the body and the spirit, and of therapeutic modalities that must likewise incorporate both bodily and spiritual activities and agencies. In the process, this model of participatory bodies and spirits can be seen as a critical rejection of the Western paradigm’s core dualist logic of separating body from soul. Likewise, the very ritual forms of the Vimbuza complex also suggest a denial of the Western dualist model, as the complex organizes its forms and logic around the heightened bodily participation in intense rhythmic drumming and dance, and in the live sacrificial consumption of *chilopa*. In both ritual circumstances, the body, its life energies, and the breath (*mphepo*) of the spirits become the central symbolic foci of the ritual complex.

**Conclusion: Dual Inculturation**

The incorporation of Christian choreographic and symbolic models into the Vimbuza complex suggest that local understandings of spirit possession have been transformed in important ways since the introduction of Christianity to the region. In particular, the recognition and articulation of certain structures of conjuncture between Tumbuka and Christian religious and spiritual systems – about God, crosses, colors, and tools of divination – has enabled the emergence
of a new, analogically schematized, hybrid religious form. For some at least, this hybrid schema of Christianized ancestral spiritualism has become an articulate fusion of symbols, meanings, and practices that derive from both traditions, a fusion that can be invoked and enacted in circumstances of both physical and spiritual crises.

For those possessed by spirits, then, and in particular for those AIC members who publicly articulate their possession status, they are participants to a historical and ecclesiastical tradition of dual inculturation, wherein Christianity has been integrated into the core ritual and symbolic forms of ancestral spiritualism, while ancestral spiritualism itself has been located within an encompassing cosmological framework of Christian divinity. In either case, participants to Vimbuza sessions today invoke and validate both ancestral and Christian spiritual powers as the agents who define human life, health, and well-being, and establish the moral framework for everyday life. Throughout their ritual initiation into the membership of the possessed, patients prostrate themselves on the ground in honor and respect to their mizimu, but they also nod their heads in prayer to the Trinitarian God to initiate the initiation itself. This process of dual inculturation contains within it processes of religious resistance and continuity, as neither religious tradition has fully dominated the other. It has involved both a rejection of the early Livingstonia Mission’s oppositional model and dualist framework, as well as the incorporation of many Christian and biomedical elements into its cosmological and therapeutic framework.

This process of dual inculturation returns us to the theoretical questions that have framed this thesis. Specifically, what does this partial and dialectical relationship between ancestral spiritualism and Christianity mean in the context of efforts to define the results of missionization in terms of “conversion” or “hegemony”? Is a self-identified Christian who also participates in Vimbuza converted? Has Christianity, as a religious system, been hegemonic if it has failed to subvert the core logic and vitality of the Vimbuza complex? Were the missionaries successful
agents of hegemony if in fact they failed in their effort to impose a dualist ontological framework within local cosmology?

In the case study and other ethnographic chapters that follow, I explore these questions further in an attempt to account for patterns of both continuity and change within local responses to the introduction of Christianity, and within their forms of relating it to the vernacular ancestral spiritualism. In the next chapter, I consider the case of one man, a lifelong Presbyterian who worked as a Medical Orderly in Embangweni Hospital, and who was, when I knew him, wrestling with how to define this relationship between the spirits and God. In the process, I describe the creative and syncretic ways he came to reconcile his own possession by the ancestral spirits with an ongoing profession of faith in the Christian God.
CHAPTER NINE

Embodying Spirits: A Case Study in Transitional Syncretism

Introduction

In November of 1999, about four months into my extended field research in Embangweni, my primary research assistant, Mulungu, now well-versed in my research agenda, told me that I should try to interview a friend and countryman of his, George Kapoka. Mr. Kapoka, like Mulungu, was Sukwa by tribe and from the Misuku Hills area of Chitipa district, in northern Malawi, near the border with Tanzania. At the time, Kapoka was forty-six years of age and worked as a Medical Orderly at Embangweni Hospital. He also took and developed photographs for people as a side business. He was an elder in the local CCAP church and was monogamously married with seven children. He had been living in Mzimba District, among Tumbukas and Ngonis, for twenty-two years.

I already knew Kapoka as an acquaintance, one of many members of the hospital staff I would stop and talk with during my almost daily visits to the hospital complex. Mulungu told me that Kapoka suffered from a very potent form of ancestral spirit possession, that he danced Vimbuza, and that there were many additional circumstances that made his case particularly complex and interesting. Intrigued, I asked Mulungu to ask Kapoka if he would be willing to talk with me about the circumstances of his spirit affliction. When Mulungu did so a few days later, Kapoka deferred, and Mulungu speculated that he was unwilling to increase his public exposure on the matter, as he was both a CCAP church elder and a hospital employee, and his off-station Vimbuza activities and consultations with ng’angas would create undesirable attention. I told Mulungu that we need not push the matter further, and that perhaps circumstances would change in the future. I had little idea at the time that Kapoka would eventually become one of my principal informants.
Living with spiritual disease: the onset and recurrence of ancestral affliction

As a young man, Kapoka had been a student at Livingstonia Secondary School, still one of the premier schools in the nation by reputation. Half-way through his schooling there, he had run into difficulty paying school fees, and ended up staying with relatives in Ekwendeni, where he began attending a less expensive Night Secondary School. While there, he applied for and was accepted into a two-year training program for medical orderlies at Ekwendeni Hospital. This was 1977. He was subsequently employed there as an orderly for ten years, from 1979 to 1989. He left in 1989, he said, because he wanted to try something new. After a brief, but by his own account not very successful turn as a fishmonger, he again sought out and found work again as a medical orderly at Embangweni Hospital in 1991, where he had been working ever since.

In 1984, while still working at Ekwendeni, he came down with a set of symptoms that at first felt like malaria — fever, chills, body ache — and he sought out treatment at the hospital. The symptoms persisted, however, and he began to have insomnia at night. When he could sleep, he had vivid and disturbing dreams, often involving visitation by the ghostly figures of his ancestors, in particular that of his deceased father’s father. He also dreamt of running, often alongside a flowing river, and then struggling to cross the river, or perhaps, a large lake. These early visions and dreams also included episodes of mortal combat with fierce animals, including lions and snakes.381 The dreams were vivid and often disturbing, and he would awake anxious and concerned. A friend suggested he consult an ng’anga, an “African doctor,” and Kapoka decided to follow his advice. He went with a skeptical attitude, but was surprised when he responded to the

381 When I asked him to interpret these dreams for me, Kapoka told me that he could not. Yet his reference to a water barrier, and his struggle to find passage across it, is a metaphor of transition to the afterlife that is mirrored in ethnographic accounts of other cultures in sub-Saharan Africa. (See Chapter Eight)
beating of the drums and began to dance. The ng’anga’s diagnosis was that his mizimu, ancestral spirits, were responsible for his suffering and vivid dreaming. Kapoka told me that he now recognized his early symptoms as typical of spirit possession, but at the time, the diagnosis came as a surprise to him and his family. His family was distressed by the development. Both his father, still living at the time and a man of strong Christian faith, and his brother-in-law, a Reverend, asked him to stop dancing, and instead to concentrate on praying to God for healing. In one interview, he quotes them “No, no, no. Don’t concentrate on this!” When prayers did not alleviate his symptoms, his father accused him of having weak faith. He quotes them “It is you who is not fully dedicated with faith! That, if you put in your faith, definitely this is going to cease in you!” In the years since the onset of the disease, he had experienced periods of greater and lesser affliction. His most recent episode of acute affliction – characterized once again by insomnia, vivid nighttime dreaming and daytime visions – had started the previous March. This year, again in the early part of the year, it was again growing in intensity.

In his dream world, Kapoka continued to interact and communicate with the ancestors, the spiritual embodiments of his once living kin. They appeared to him in recognizable bodily form, and often took him on fantastic journeys of flight (including, in a recent dream, in a helicopter) to his home area and village. Because of these experiences, Kapoka was convinced his affliction was spiritual in cause, and thus beyond the bounds of hospital treatment. He had sought remedy from a range of ng’angas through the years, but at best their medicines had brought temporary relief, perhaps for months or even years, but sleepless nights and bad dreams had always returned sooner or later. Members of his church, the CCAP, as well as Christians from other churches, had also

---

382 In my assessment, this conviction was shared by the vast majority of Tumbuka-speakers living in Embangweni town and on-station.

383 Kapoka also suggested that ng’angas’ treatments sometimes cure people completely of spiritual afflictions, but this had not been his experience.
come to his home and prayed for him. This too had sometimes provided temporary relief, but usually of even shorter duration than ng’angas’ medicines.

**Ancestral affliction: protection, punishment, and calling**

During my first interview with Kapoka, after he had described the onset of his affliction, I asked him the general question of why the ancestors make people ill. He gave several possible reasons. First, the spirits might afflict in order to push a person towards becoming an ng’anga, an herbal healer. In that case, a person must pass through several stages of affliction in the process, including episodes of insomnia offset by vivid and disturbing dreams. Their affliction and its accompanying ritual remedies would act as a kind of calling to a new profession as healer and medium. Secondly, the ancestors might make a person ill in order to protect them from bewitchment, though in telling me this, Kapoka added “sometimes with the extension that someone should become an ng’anga.” In the case of bewitchment, both the initial witchcraft and the counter-move by the spirits make a person ill, but the latter illness of spiritual intervention must be welcomed, as without it, the person would probably die. He suggested that bewitchment could have played a role in the onset of his possession experience, but he was not sure.

A third reason ancestor spirits possessed was because something was amiss in a family and had upset them. In that case, the spirits bring affliction to one or more members of the family as motivation to amend the violation. Kapoka said that this was the most likely cause of his own suffering, that the spirits had chosen him to take the lead in remedying a derelict family situation. In particular, Kapoka speculated that the family had been delinquent in not performing a specific ceremony of respect, known as nkwichi, at the grave of his deceased father’s father, the same spirit who has been troubling him through the years. He said he thought this was a large part of the problem, and the reason why some of his brothers and other family members had also been
suffering with spirit afflictions. In cases like this, the spirits need to be approached and honored in order to appease them. As he put it, “they should be cooled down,” suggesting that their anger is a heated one, parallel to the Western metaphor associating heat with anger. The family had agreed to do the nkwichi ceremony last year, but funds and time were lacking. They are in discussions again to do it this year, perhaps in August.\(^{384}\)

As we approached the conclusion of this first interview, however, Kapoka admitted his fear that his mizimu might not be satisfied only with a performance of nkwichi. Instead, he was increasingly coming to believe that they were furthermore intent to push him into becoming an ng’anga.\(^{385}\) He said that he was resisting their pressure with great effort, and suggested that he would already be an ng’anga were it not for his resistance. I asked him why he resisted.

Ahm, the problem with practicing African herbalist, it has got problems on its own, especially on my sight. I'm working, but at the same time I am a Christian, so which means one part of the other could be left out. And it would be very easy with... concentrating much with the healings, when you have got so many people flocking, and you get possessed, and it has got so many problems on its own. It's a difficult task. It's not comfortable. So that is why I try not to put too much attention, but I know sometimes I can get troubled.

In this statement, Kapoka suggests some kind of opposition between the work of ng’angas and Christianity, but then quickly refocuses his own motivations for resisting becoming a spiritual

---

\(^{384}\) It is important to note that this was a primarily non-subjective explanation for his affliction, one that generalized the fault for offending the ancestors to the family at large. It should also be noted that both Kapoka and Mulungu told me that the nkhwichi ceremony was not common practice in their home area of the Mbuya Hills. This is not to say they did not have ceremony around the graves of their deceased kin, for they did, but it did not include the practice of purchasing cement and building a concrete grave and cross. Nevertheless, having both lived in an Ngoni-dominated society for many years, they each acknowledged that it was an important symbol of respect for one’s forefathers and should be completed when resources were sufficient to do so.

\(^{385}\) Earlier in the interview, based on his own description of his insomnia and vivid dreaming during the onset of his affliction, I asked him if he thought the spirits were pushing him towards become an ng’anga. In his response, he had wavered between saying “Yeah” to “I’m not very sure” to “I don’t think so.”
healer, pointing to the problematics of the profession. Instead of describing any specific inconsistency with Christianity, he instead emphasizes the burden and difficulty of being a diviner and having to embrace the discomfort of one’s possession status. Yet, as will be seen in subsequent statements by Kapoka, this was an early indication to me that he recognized a tension between Christianity and the world of ancestral spiritualism, one that played a prominent role in his current therapeutic and professional dilemma. It also pointed to an effort on his part to deny or overcome that tension.

**Guided by the spirits: models of kinship, consumption, and authority**

After concluding our first interview, in which he described the calling of the ancestors and his resistance to that calling, Kapoka and I arranged to meet again the following day to continue talking. I started that interview by asking him about local spiritual terminology. During the previous day’s interview, he had used the three most common terms for spiritual entities, viwanda, mizimu, and vimbuza, and I now asked for clarification. Kapoka defined them as follows.

Yeah. First of all we will start with...viwanda. Viwanda is a general name, ah, which is composed of the spirits, ahm, which is also in connection with ancestors, people who died some time back. So that is what we will call viwanda in the African language. Yes, within viwanda, we have got two groups of, ahm, mizimu and vimbuza. These are the two groups within viwanda, and the way they perform, ahm, in their culture. So, mi...vimbuza is a different....I mean is another section within viwanda, and ah, mizimu is also another group within viwanda. That's why we'll see in most cases, viwanda is a bit complicated in their form, rather than vimbuza. Because vimbuza, normally, people [who] have got vimbuza, they can come to become traditional healers, but they don't last long. Maybe they can practice for five years, and then they finish. And some can just be treated locally with African doctors and they get well. But with mizimu, it's a bit complicated, because it goes in generations from parents to sons, to offsprings. So if someone had mizimu sometime back, dies away, and another one will be coming with mizimu. So most of the people who have got mizimu will practice with African doctrine for quite a long time. It's generation to generation.
In this telling by Kapoka, viwanda is the general category name used to refer to the spirits of the deceased. Among the viwanda, there are two distinct groups: mizimu and vimbuza. Mizimu possession is the more serious, sustained, and complex of the two types, and the one which often leads those possessed into long careers as ng’angas, in the practice of what he calls “African doctrine.” It is often inherited within the same family, as he suspected in his own case. Later in the same interview, Kapoka explained that the mizimu are the ancestral spirits of people from within the family who can still be identified, while Vimbuza are the spirits of generations long past and no longer individually identified, what he called “unknown generations.” He included among these unknown spirits ancestors who lived many generations ago, including those who came from different families and tribes, who were, as he put it “different spirits from different cultures.” He emphasized that Vimbuza possession, unlike that of mizimu, is not necessarily a life-long condition, and is less likely to lead someone into a prolonged ng’anga’s practice. By way of example, Kapoka suggested that if someone with Vimbuza takes chilopa, they are often cured. By contrast, for someone with mizimu, taking chilopa does not cure and bring an end to their affliction, but rather leads them further into practice as ng’anga. He told me:

[I]t’s the requisition from the viwanda, to tell you, “At this time, at this point, we need chilopa.” Yes. It will come to some people in visions; some people when they’re dancing. That’s when you exactly see what is going on. You come to speak whatever is needed, especially when you are dancing. So you will not be speaking on your own. It is the mizimu that will be speaking during that time. So, those people who are presenting will come and say, “This is what is needed, and this is what is needed before you can start practicing.”

Chilopa is an animal sacrifice involving the ritualized consumption of blood directly from a wound in the animal’s neck, and the shared fellowship afterwards of a communal meal of the animals’ cooked meat. The animal may be a dove, a goat, or for the most serious cases, a cow, depending upon the weightiness of the affliction.
By this account, a person is most in tune with reality when they are living embodiments of the spirit(s) of their ancestral kin. As Kapoka says, “That’s when you exactly see what is going on.”

As he says regarding the chilopa ceremony, it is the viwanda who demand the rite, and it is in obedience to their dictates, and in order to feed their demands and needs, that chilopa is performed. Furthermore, it is the viwanda who consume the blood of the first stage of the chilopa sacrifice. The living only consume on their behalf. Likewise, when a possessed person is dancing, it is the mizimu who speak out through the possessed, stating their demands, and the demands of the current situation. It is their presence in the living afflicted that gives authority to the words spoken.

Consuming a living sacrifice: from chilopa to Christ, and back

During the same second-day interview, having just discussed the ancestral and African side of his spirit possession experiences, I directed our interview in another direction, and segued into a question about the Christian notion of the Holy Spirit. Shortly after Kapoka concluded his statements above about chilopa, I asked:

LINDLAND  What do you understand to be the role of the Holy Spirit? What does the Holy Spirit do in your life?
KAPOKA  Aahm, to my understanding, the Holy Spirit was presented, it would be presented to me or to anybody else to guide, as a guidance, ahm, especially when we have come at a time of faith. Because people have got different fain. This one can have this faith. In the way of understanding, we are different, and it is only the Holy Spirit which should guide, and he who guides me. Yes. It’s a part of faith that someone has.

For his part, Kapoka had not yet done chilopa when we talked. He said that if and when he did so, it would mark the final stage of transition into practice as an ng’anga, and he had not yet been instructed to do so.

Upon re-reading my interview transcripts, my shift to questions about the Holy Spirit seems in some respects sudden. Yet, at the same time, by this point in the interview, Kapoka had made his point that Vimbuza and mizimu possessions are in some core respects different, in source and severity. He has also made it clear that the mizimu are more immediately involved in directing the course and fate of one’s life, including his own. In part because of this latter emphasis, my shift to questioning the directive role of the Holy Spirit seems consistent with our conversation.
Now, yesterday, you were able to give me a date when the mizimu first started to trouble you. I think it was 1984.

Can you also give me a date when the Holy Spirit first began to guide you? Was it an event like that, or is it more difficult to put your finger on a date?

Ah, it’s very difficult. But in my experiences, I have seen so many things. Ahm, yeah, of the latest, I think it should be two years ago, yes, when I started to see the vision of Jesus Christ. It has been [going] on for several years. For the first time, in my vision, I could see Jesus moving past so many people. And, yeah...well to say, this is Jesus. Jesus used to move with a big crowd of people. So I have seen that. Aaah, and I have seen Jesus getting crucified right at the cross. I have also seen the cross, but the difference with the cross is that someone is giving me the cross to swallow. And it gets attached to my heart.

In this exchange, Kapoka begins his response by stating that the Holy Spirit is an active guide for people of faith (by implication Christian faith), and emphasizes that this guidance is present among people even as the specifics of their individual faiths differ. His statements do not suggest that the Holy Spirit, as Spirit, is changed by this diversity of faiths, but does suggest that the particular path of guidance by the Holy Spirit may, by result, be different. He concludes his first statement by personalizing the guiding role of the Holy Spirit in his own life. When asked to date the initiation of the Holy Spirit in his life, he does not specify a start date, but rather points to a more recent life episode in which the presence of the Holy Spirit took on new meaning and immediacy. Specifically, he refers to a vivid vision in which he witnessed the crucifixion of Christ, and then subsequently is fed and swallows the cross. Though his description of the vision is brief, it includes both graphic and bodily qualities to it, and suggests a set of profound analogic assumptions on the part of Kapoka about his own relationship to the living Christ of the Christian tradition.\(^{389}\)

\(^{389}\)In later conversations, he would elaborate on this and other visions of Jesus in greater detail. For now, I will simply note the graphic quality of the vision, and the central role of both
As Kapoka describes, he first witnesses the figure of Christ surrounded by crowds of followers, the image of Christ as authority and savior to all. He then witnesses the resurrection of Christ on the cross, and is fed and consumes the material form of the cross, which, in its journey into the body, becomes “attached” to his heart. Anyone familiar with Christian doctrine and ritual will recognize the direct parallels between this vision and the ritual and doctrines of the Eucharist or Holy Communion. Both involve consuming elements of the sacrificed and resurrected Christ, and in so doing, incorporating some facet of His power and sanctity. Yet while Kapoka’s vision is imaginary, it is in many respects more graphic and immediate than regular communion services, such as those Kapoka experienced throughout his life in the CCAP. While church communion is about remembering the life, death, and resurrection of Christ, in his vision Kapoka actually witnessed that crucifixion before his eyes. And whereas in communion service, believers partake of the “blood” and “flesh” of Christ through the sanctified yet readily consumable forms of bread and wine, in his embodied vision, Kapoka consumed what is normally not consumed -- the cross of the crucifixion itself, directly following the sacrificial death of Jesus.

Both the consumption of the cross itself, and its particular attachment to his heart, suggest that Kapoka envisions himself as participating in the redemptive sacrifice of Jesus Christ, as the cross, as symbol and form, becomes a metonym for the crucified and resurrected body of Jesus Christ. Through the processes of witness and consumption, and the location of that cross in his heart -- the center of sentiment and will -- Kapoka comes to incorporate the sanctity and redemptive personality of Jesus Christ.\(^\text{390}\)

\(^{390}\) This vision includes graphic, bodily, and moral components, all of which seem to resonate with Kapoka’s circumstances and dilemma. If one adheres faithfully to the core doctrine of Christianity, which asserts the full bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ, Kapoka’s recounting of his vision suggests that he has become participant to that resurrection and its healing power. In some respects, this is similar to the Catholic notion of transubstantiation during the Eucharist. The larger
In addition to its parallels with Christian communion, Kapoka’s vision also bears semblance to the *chilopa* sacrifice of the Vimbuza rite, and to the broader framework of spiritual authority, sacrifice, redemption, and personal transformation that characterizes Tumbuka ancestral spiritualism. Whereas in *chilopa* the initiate consumes the fresh blood of a sacrificial animal, in his vision Kapoka consumes a cross that, just moments before in his vision, bore the bloody and sacrificial body of Christ. Unlike the reflective distance of communion—particularly within Protestant traditions that do not embrace a notion of transubstantiation—Kapoka’s vision, like *chilopa*, is closer to the bodily immediacy of sacrifice and its healing/redemptive power.

“*African*” and “*Christian*”: a pulling within

After describing his vision of incorporating the crucified Christ during our second interview, Kapoka went on to say that his wife tells him that he sings Christian choruses at night while he is sleeping. Both his vision and his reported singing at night are evidence, he suggests, that he has the Holy Spirit within him. Yet, he also has visions during the day, sometimes during church, when he feels as if he has fallen into a deep sleep, and yet he is awake. The meaning of these visions is often not clear to him, and, once again, he suggested that they could be the result of an inner tension. The following lengthy exchange suggests these tensions. The reader should note that I have underlined Kapoka’s use of personal pronouns throughout several sections of this interview segment, as I think they point to a key structural shift of positioning on his part while answering my inquiries.

KAPOKA Yeah. Aah....what I'm trying to say here, is that we've talked of faith here, of the Holy Spirit. Yes. And we have talked of the ancestral spirits. So it could be one of question for me is to what extent and in what way Kapoka understands himself to be becoming a medium of the life-giving power of Christ.

391 It points to set of schematic conjunctions between the Christian framework of life, sacrificial death, redemption, and resurrection.
these that is pulling, to my understanding. But I try to give interviews to other people. A number of people have had similar visions. Some people have had vimbwaza. And, ah, they are OK now. Some people had mizimu, and now they are practicing. So I don't know which is which. Yes.

LINDLAND But now, ancestral spirits...can they be good spirits? Can they be spirits that guide you in good ways?

KAPOKA No, I don't think so.

LINDLAND Why not?

KAPOKA We know...ah...we know God as Christians, that it is God who guides. Spirits couldn't have power to guide someone. Even though the differences, as we have said...sometimes these ancestral spirits could come back and look after when someone has been witched. That is when we understand a number of things. But God will...is always there to be guided, I mean to guide when someone is in a problem, or is not in a problem.

LINDLAND Yeah.

KAPOKA We have that general understanding. It seems the ancestral spirit is there to come in....but we know that God is there to guide and to protect. But the African culture on its own, I think there it is a bit complicated. When they say someone has been bewitched, aahm...that is where it is a bit difficult to understand. I think that is where the problem lies. But we know God is there to protect, and guide us.

LINDLAND Now do you think that God might ever use ancestral spirits to guide, to work for good purposes in peoples’ lives?

KAPOKA Ahm....ahm....in the understanding, no, I think it is difficult. Yeah.

LINDLAND OK. So does that mean you think that the Holy Spirit and mizimu...are they working for different purposes in your life? Are the mizimu trying to do you harm, and the Holy Spirit is trying to do you good?

KAPOKA No, they are doing the same. They will be doing the same purposes.

LINDLAND OK, but then how is it that they are pulling inside of you? How is it that they are pulling at each other?

KAPOKA The pulling. As a Christian, we, we don't recommend the African doct...I mean spirits. We know that God is there...to guide and protect. God is protecting...ahm...and the mizimu is also protecting, but the only difference, is...it seems the mizimu is coming in too fast..... Yes, it's another belief that people have, yes, that the mizimu comes to protect...some lives.

LINDLAND When you say it is coming too fast, what do you mean?

KAPOKA Ahm, say, if someone is a Christian, we know, like myself. I know I am a Christian, but it would be very difficult to explain to some people, to say “This is what is happening in my life,” so they can understand. Yes. Aahm...we have got different faith. This one has got his own faith. I have got my own faith. But we all know we are being protected by God. And the Christians know they are being protected by the mizimu, the ancestors, in a different way, but they cannot have a general understanding of the mizimu because they don't have. (laughs)
Aahm...yes. So I agree, the spirits and the Holy Spirit, they work together in peoples’ lives.

LINDLAND  Now you said that you know you are a Christian. How do you know that you are a Christian? What does that mean...to be a Christian?

KAPOKA  Being a Christian...it could mean someone that belongs to a certain church. We call the organization, different churches, Christian. But the same people have got different faith in their Christianity.

In his first comments, Kapoka notes that we have talked of both ancestral spirits and the Holy Spirit, and of his sense of a “pull” between them. He suggests that he knows others who likewise experience a tension between their Christianity and their African kinship heritage. In the comments that follow, he first uses the subjective plural pronoun “we” to reference this group of people caught between two cosmologies, using it both in reference to “we” as Christians, as well as to “we” as Africans who know the spirits to be real and active.

We know God as Christians, that it is God who guides. Spirits couldn’t have power to guide someone.

...sometimes these ancestral spirits could come back and look after when someone has been bewitched. That is when we understand a number of things.

We have that general understanding. It seems the ancestral spirit is there to come in, but we know that God is there to guide and protect.

In these comments, Kapoka includes himself as a member of a group that acknowledges the power and authority of the Christian God, as well as that of the ancestors. Yet, a few sentences later, he shifts his rhetorical stance to distance himself from what he calls “African culture on its own”. He does so by introducing the third-person plural pronoun “they”.

When they say someone has been bewitched, aahm, that is where it is a bit difficult to understand. I think that is where the problem lies. But we know that God is there to protect, and guide us.
In the previous day’s interview, Kapoka had affirmed the *mizimu*’s protective function, and acknowledged it as a possible cause for their role in his own life. In this second day’s interviews, having been brought to the topic of the Holy Spirit by my inquiries, he affirmed his identification with Christian understandings of God’s supreme role in the world. In so doing, he partly separated himself from the traditionalist “they” who acknowledge and appreciate ancestral spirit intervention in human affairs, but acknowledged that the disparity brings some confusion with it.

He acknowledges that Christian claims that it is only God who protects are undermined by this “African” perspective, and says that “It is a bit difficult to understand.” He concludes that response by again self-identifying with the Christian perspective. “But we know God is there to protect, and guide us.” A few lines later, when I ask him about the internal “pulling” he has mentioned previously, he again stakes out a Christian position for himself in affirming Christian opposition to involvement with ancestral spirits, and by association the work of *ng’angas*. Yet even as he affirms that “we” Christians see God as guide and protector, he acknowledges (without a pronoun to frame the statement) that the *mizimu* are also protect. Unwilling to leave God and the *mizimu* on equal footing as protectors, however, he suggests that the *mizimu* are coming in too fast.

He then reestablishes an intellectual space between himself and traditionalists by stating that *mizimu* protection is “another belief that people have.”

The pulling, as a Christian, we, we don’t recommend the African doct...I mean spirits. We know that God is there...to guide and protect. God is protecting...ahm...and the mizimu is also protecting, but the only difference, is ... it seems the mizimu is coming in too fast..... Yes, it's another belief that people have, yes, that the mizimu comes to protect...some lives.

When I ask him what he means in saying the *mizimu* are coming too fast, he does not answer directly, but instead responds:

Ahm, say, if someone is a Christian, we know, like myself. I know I am a Christian, but it would be very difficult to explain to some people, to say “This is what is happening in my life,” so they can understand. Yes. Aahm...we have got different faith. This one has got
his own faith. I have got my own faith. But we all know we are being protected by God. And the Christians know they are being protected by the mizimu, the ancestors, in a different way, but they cannot have a general understanding of the mizimu because they don't have. (Laughs) Aahm...yes. So I agree, the spirits and the Holy Spirit, they work together in peoples’ lives.

In this section, Kapoka claims Christianity for himself, and introduces a pluralist ethic into the Christian faith. “I know I am a Christian......This one has got his own faith. I have got my own faith.” For the first time, he also uses the third person plural pronoun “they” in reference to Christians, something that comes only after he uses the first person singular pronoun “I” in affirming his own Christian identity. It is as if saying “I am a Christian” opened up a discursive space for validating Christian pluralism, and with it, movement away from mission Christian orthodoxy. This introduction of his own and other’s subjectivity into his narration also provided him with the opening to suggest that many Christians have a poor understanding of how the mizimu operate because they are not afflicted. A short chuckle at their inexperience completes the break with a fully conformist version of Christianity, and leads him to a definitive statement of personal belief, one which counters classic mission Christianity: “So I agree, the spirits and the Holy Spirit, they can work together in people’s lives.”

As described in Chapter Five, the Presbyterian mission/church tradition in which Kapoka was raised has judged indigenous forms of spirituality as, at best, disorderly and debilitating, and at worst demonic. As a CCAP church elder, Kapoka is well aware of this “official” line. Yet, he has found it to be profoundly incompatible with his own personal experiences. My questioning to him on these matters puts him in a position of struggling to articulate a vision of spiritual reality that is faithful to his church’s doctrines, but also true to his own spiritual experience and ambitions. The problem he faces is that the CCAP was established in a contradistinction to vernacular forms of spirituality, and he is struggling against a century of church history to do otherwise. In doing so, he starts by adopting the collective Christian perspective and contrasting it to African culture,
employing the language of “we” and “they.” But eventually, as the rigidity of the ideological perspective fails him, he resorts to subjective determinations of truth by referencing personalized faith. This is a key intellectual maneuver. By individualizing Christian faith, and specifically his own faith, he opens up an avenue for arguing that the traditional opposition between the Holy Spirit and the ancestral spirits is not necessarily correct. Instead, as he will come to argue with increasing strength in the months to come, Kapoka maintains that the ancestral spirits are also agents of authority, and may be working in common cause with God himself.

Vivid dreams

A few months after completing my third interview with Kapoka, I left Embangweni for ten weeks to travel and return to the United States. I returned in mid-August, and saw Kapoka a couple of times in the weeks that followed. Then, in early September, I heard that he had been involved in an incident in the trading center that day involving both drunkenness and fighting. I went to see him late the next morning at his house, and his elder son invited me to take a seat in their family sitting room. After waiting a couple of minutes, Kapoka emerged from his bedroom, looking haggard, with bloodshot eyes, and clearly having been roused from his sleep. I apologized for the interruption, and excused myself to leave. Before I left, we arranged for him to come by my house later that afternoon to talk.

When he arrived in the mid-afternoon, we sat down on some tree stumps in our yard, shaded from the bright afternoon sun by two trees, and he caught me up a bit on recent events in his life, in particular events of recent days. He had been having very vivid dreams, frightening and disturbing vivid dreams. In one dream, the mzimu had brought him and his wife to his home in
Chitipa and shown him two graves, the first in disrepair and the second nicely cemented. The first was his grandfathers, and he was told to cement it so that it matched the other grave in quality. In another dream, he was shown the cow he must use to do *chilopa*. He was also shown the site to build his *templi* (temple, or divination center), and many people were brought to him for divination. In his dream, he began to discern their problems and prescribe remedies. In another dream he was again active as an *ng'anga*, this time working to counter “chitaka” – magic done by some people to take away other people’s riches. In another dream, shortly after a patient in the male ward died, he was taken to the dead man’s home where the dead man spoke to him and complained of the various pains that had been ailing him. Kapoka commented that this was a strange dream in that this man was not his relative. Yesterday he awoke in a particularly disoriented state of mind. He had told his wife that he was going to go out walking, and spent much of the day in a daze, feeling as if he were not controlling his own movements. By his own description, he had gone a bit mad, and the evening had culminated in the incident in the trading center. He did not offer to describe the specifics of what had happened, and I decided not to push the point.

He continued talking, and told me that his spirits were just too strong, stronger than those of many of the *ng'angas* who had tried to help him. Several months back he had received medicines from Nya Maphiri, a fellow CCAP member who also had a discrete practice as an herbalist, but they had been ineffective, an indication that her spirits were not strong enough to counter his. Now he is feeling an increasing urgency to accomplish what the spirits have demanded of him, before his sanity fully slips away. In addition to his sister-in-law, who is a practicing *ng'anga*, a younger brother (cousin) has recently gone mad. He was a good boy, very responsible, raised well, but now he’s crazy. He says he is fearful of becoming like him, and, once again invoking the possibly hereditary nature of the illness, expresses fear for his children. In the meantime, an *nkwichi* ceremony has been tentatively set for late October in his home village, but in
the meantime he feels he must take steps to calm his symptoms. He suggests three possible courses of action: speed up the date for the nkwichi, contact his ng’anga, Beza, and ask him to come and prescribe medicines for him, or ask local church members to come and pray for him. He presents these three as alternatives, but seems most inclined towards the first two.

Our conversation continued, though by this point Kapoka was doing most of the talking, and without much prompting from me. I could tell he had a lot on his mind and a lot to say, this being our first substantive conversation in over three months. He talked extensively about the various stages of a spiritual illness. The first stage, he reminded me, is kubonyisela – the diagnostic stage. The second stage is the time of dancing and taking herbs to alleviate, and perhaps cure, the symptoms. He is now about to enter the twasa stage, which comes after having done chilopa, and which leads into full time practice as an ng’anga. Mulungu later explained to me that “twasa” comes from the verb “kutwasa” which means to emerge, and can be used in a variety of ways to denote an emergent property. Sometimes one ng’anga will use the term in reference to his/her involvement in apprenticing another ng’anga. He will say “Natwasiska,” meaning “I have made him to be...” The term is also used in reference to the moon when it has just started to wax, or to a tooth that is just emerging from the gum. In the latter case, it is said “Kajino katwasa,” or “The tooth is emerging.” As Kapoka had told me before, Kajino is his spiritual name. Both kajino and katwasa suggest a change from the old to the new, a rebirth of personality and person.

At one point in this conversation, Kapoka reiterated his belief that mzimu often come to people to protect them from witchcraft, and I asked him again if he thought this was the case in his situation. His response differed in tone from previous ones I had heard. He said that his condition was a response to a more general condition of there being too much witchcraft in the area. The implication was that he was being called to serve society by becoming an ng’anga and resisting all forms of evildoing. In a later interview he would say that “the spirits have come through me to
focus! I can talk to them, something which is needed to do, to be done, so that we settle these
problems.” This pointed to a more expansive new understanding of his calling than had
previously been suggested, one orientated not only to helping individuals who are sick and
afflicted, but to helping cleanse society as a whole of malady and evil.

At this point in our conversation, I told him that one of the mission doctors had expressed
interest in his case, clearly out of a desire to understand his condition so as to best help him. He
asked me only to tell him that he was planning to perform an nkwichi, but not to mention the fact
that he was preparing for chilopa. Whereas the former can be interpreted as a paying of respects,
the latter clearly involves a much deeper association with the spirits. It was clear to me that he
wanted to avoid being too strongly associated with ancestral spiritualism and its ritual forms, for
fear of coming under scrutiny by his employer and church.

The next day, Mulungu went to see Kapoka. He also encountered Kapoka’s wife, Nya
Bandya, on the path and spoke with her about her husband’s condition. Later in the day he told me
what he had learned from each of them. According to Nya Bandya, her husband got very drunk in
the trading center (TC) on Friday and Saturday nights, and got into a fight, in which he was struck
in the head and knocked out. He was brought to his home by ambulance, the decision being that a
trip to the hospital would bring unwanted complications for him. The hospital staff had found him
lying in the street and splashed water on his face to wake him, so he arrived home wet. After
arriving home, he had remembered that he’d left his camera behind, and had returned to the TC.
Some said he was partially unclothed upon his return. Though a colleague covered for him at work
on Sunday morning, he had spoken harshly to a female ward-maid who came to his house to see
him that afternoon. He had left his house on Sunday afternoon, apparently intent on walking to
Zambia to consult with his ng’anga there, but his behavior was sufficiently erratic that his wife was
fearful for him, and once again the hospital ambulance was sent to retrieve him. This time they brought him to the hospital and he received an injection of sedatives.

A few days later, I stopped by to see Kapoka at his home. He told me that he had consulted with his brother by telephone and that they had confirmed the idea of going ahead with the nkwichi in October. He has also been in communication with his ng’anga, Mr. Beza, who was in agreement that they must move quickly to appease the spirits by doing both nkwichi and chilopa as soon as possible. Kapoka also said that Nya Maphiri is also in agreement with doing both nkwichi and chilopa, in the hope that these two acts will appease the spirits, and Kapoka might not have to become a practicing ng’anga for him to maintain good health.

I talked with Mulungu later in the day, and told him what Kapoka had said. More than I had ever seen before, Mulungu adamantly disagreed with Kapoka’s decision-making logic, and said that the mzimu are such that the more you obey them, the more they will demand of you. Mulungu told me that he had confronted Kapoka on the matter, and told him to focus on the nkwichi, but not waste time consulting ng’angas. He also told him to put less attention on his dreams, as following every dream can lead people into problems, and that he was at risk of becoming a slave to his own dream world. Mulungu also quoted Kapoka’s wife, with whom he’d recently talked: “When we tell him to pray, he doesn’t accept!” Mulungu said that if and when Kapoka did pray, “his heart was not praying.”

Two days later, Kapoka stopped by my house on his way home from the trading center. He told me his wife was strongly against anything more than a ceremonial nkwichi, and that she continued to accuse him of having weak Christian faith, and of having made “a space” for evil spirits within him because of that lack of faith. He had also talked recently with Chaplain Chirwa, who told him that he was in danger for having allowed the problem to go on for so long, and warned him against fulfilling any more of the mzimu’s wishes. After Sikwese told the Chaplain of
his dream of seeing Jesus crucified, Chirwa told him that this viewing of Jesus’ bloodied body on the cross could only mean that he would soon feel called to perform *chilopa*, but that he must resist.

The events of two weeks ago in the trading center, involving his aggressive behavior and the resulting scuffle, were, Kapoka now told me, like “a key turning on an ignition.” The next time it happened, he warned, the engine could continue running and he would go permanently mad. By his own telling, his sanity was on the line, and yet at the same time, the severity of his affliction and the obvious strength of his spirits indicate that they and God have a larger plan for his life. It was at this point that I realized the extent to which Kapoka had decided to embrace his calling towards divination and a new profession in life.

**Dazed, dizzy, but dancing with dreams**

Later that same day, Kapoka and I conducted our fourth recorded interview, during which he described a series of visions and dreams he had had over recent months and weeks. In what follows, I describe several of those visions, though I do not attempt to deconstruct and analyze all of them. Nevertheless, my hope is that they will indicate to the reader some facet of Kapoka’s state of mind during this time in his life, and that they will contribute to the partial analysis I do offer.

From the start, Kapoka emphasized to me that his life was out of balance and matters were critical. When he goes to work, his eyes go dim, he hears vibrations in his ears, and he becomes disoriented. He has been having sleepless nights as of late, full of complicated and disturbing visions and dreams. He has struggled to understand them, and his lack of clarity on their meanings has contributed to his mental and physical distress. Sometimes he has visions during the day, while lying in bed but awake. He described them as “something like a movie” with images “dancing in my mind.”
He had recently had an incident while on duty in Female Ward. Shortly after administering medication to a patient, he had become dizzy and disoriented, and had to struggle to return to his duty room on his feet. Once there, he turned to sit down and completely missed his chair. Clearly disoriented, he was relieved of his duty for the day, and he returned home to sleep. While asleep, he dreamed he was talking with five smartly dressed men. Another man started to approach him from behind with a *chichova*, a fly whisk, the primary instrument and symbol of divination which all *ng’angas* have, in his hand. Kapoka turned and grabbed the man and then grabbed hold of the *chichova*. I asked him why he thought this man was approaching him from behind with the whisk.

Ahm, the thing is, that is how my mind should work. If there is something coming behind me which I do not know. There should be something which I do not know, maybe people should be discussing about me, something that they don’t tell me personally. And then if there’s something that, ahm, to be translated in these senses, then it means that thing has got to, the *chova* [flywhisk] works something like a transmitter. That’s why every *ng’anga* has got one. That thing translates something which is not know to him, so he can dream, or something is coming. It is through the, the *vichova*. So he was coming behind me. He, not knowing that someone is coming behind me, and then I have to see him, which means my brain was working, “Someone is coming behind!” and then I was grabbing him.

I asked him why he tried to grab the *chichova*. He said it was something related to becoming an *ng’anga*, and he needed to have it, and for the first time in my presence, directly acknowledged himself to be on the path towards becoming a practicing *ng’anga*. “That is where it is dragging me to.”

He then described other recent dreams of the past two months. In one, his deceased father was calling for him. He could see his father at a distance and began to approach him. Between them were two covered plates, and as they neared each other, his father told him to uncover them. In one were a few coins, *mboni*, and in the other, some *chibama* (banana corn bread) and some shiny roots. His father asked if he had seen it all, and then told him to cover the plates again.
Then, pointing to an old mud and thatch house, he told him to destroy it and build a new one. This was his father’s mother’s house. He easily took off the old roof of the house, and then struck the walls with his hoe. The whole house shook, and he said to his father that this house was not strong and would easily come down. Then his father asked him where his keys were. Kapoka could not find them. His father said that he had already taken them from him and given them to a boy to go and open the door at another location. His father started shouting at him “Look! Your wife does not understand what people say. She does not understand what we want!” His father continued talking about the difficult circumstances people in his home are facing. Then Kapoka awoke. He said this latter part of the dream is a true reflection of his circumstances, because his wife has not been sympathetic to what the *mizimu* have demanded. She continues to tell him to just pray and have faith in God, and that he can do *nkwichi*, as custom dictates, but not in strict conformity to the *mizimu*’s demands. He says that he agrees with her that prayers are good, but it does not make me any change. So it seems I’m fed up. Ah, since this problem has been with me for sixteen years. We have prayed several times, and it has given me no change, no difference. So, since then, dreams have been coming differently, on and off, but it has been worse much of about two weeks ago.

Kapoka continued by narrating another recent dream of the past two weeks. He was amongst people, but found himself in the midst of a large fire, yet was not getting burned. It was as if the fire was comfortably warming him, as if he were warming himself next to a bonfire. The people around him were against him, and they were surprised that he was in the fire, yet not getting burned. He began to play with the fire, stepping outside of the flame, then reaching in for a handful and dousing himself, until he was engulfed in flames again. Then he started chasing the people around him, and casting flames of fire at them. People ran away from him to escape. He says the *mizimu* were upon him with great force at this time. He felt their presence very intensely.
At this point, Kapoka gave a brief description of what had happened in the TC a few weeks earlier. On his way home from work, he heard voices in his mind telling him to “Get out! Go and drink some things!” So he went down to the trading center and began to drink beer. After a while, he began to get aggressive and started confronting and accusing people. As he said during the interview,

So we were drinking, and then, just in there, I could feel my brains changed. I was in attack, now trying to talk to people different “You are doing this! This is what you are doing! That is what you are doing!............This is what you are practicing! And when do you think you are going to become rich?”

He began pushing people, and physically removing them from the bar. He was struck and fell, knocking his head and losing consciousness. According to others, a few of his hospital co-workers carried him to his house, where he then slept and again had vivid dreaming.

In one dream, he saw a cow. This was to be the clan cow in his home and he heard instructions to take the cow to his home. Then two men came and picked him up and put him in a machine, something like an airplane. There were many people on the plane. The plane traveled at a very fast speed, and traveled over many mountains. He was in the plane for a long time, what seemed in his dream like many hours. Then they arrived in an area he recognized as his home area. He asked where the airport was, as he could see no runway below. He saw that his last born child was with him. Then the airplane started to hover, like a helicopter, and soon was just above the ground. The two men directed him off the plane and towards a big market nearby. At each market stand the sellers were asking him to buy their products, but he could only respond that he had not come to buy, and was only interesting in seeing how they were doing. They moved through the market for a long time. From there, Kapoka doesn’t remember well, until he found himself in his family’s graveyard. The two men who were with him instructed him to call his wife. He protested that she had not come with him, but then turned and saw her at a distance, slowly approaching. In
the graveyard, he found two open grave pits. The men told him that these were the graves of his father and his father’s father. There were stones laid around each pit, and he was told that this is the task that he must finish. “We have taken you home to come and do this work.” Then the two men took him to a different place where all of his relatives were gathered, including brothers, sisters, and aunts. It was not his village, but an area in the bush without residential structures. Upon his arrival, the assembled people began to celebrate, cheering and dancing, and then they directed him to sit in a special chair, facing the assembly. People continued dancing and cheering, and the two men who had brought him there began to speak to the assembly of people. Kapoka said he couldn’t remember what they said, until the end where they said “This is the place where we need you to build your temple.” With that, the people immediately began to build a temple, clearing the area, erecting rafters, thatching the roof, filling in the walls, and in short time completing the building. Then the two men, whom Kapoka never identified for me, dressed him in the uniform of an *mizimu* dancer and told him to turn to his east. There he saw a large gathering of people. The men told him “The people have come here. They need you. You should help them. They are suffering. So you must help these people.” So he immediately began divining their problems, and, as he put it, he was “fully activated.” Then he awoke from his dream.

And the game ended there. As the game ended there, my brain was also confused. I started talking languages that my wife also does not understand..... That’s how I went mad. And then I was really, fully mad.

When he awoke from his dreams, he remembered some of what had just happened in the TC, and that he had taken his camera to the bar. He returned to retrieve it. He was angry and carried a whip with him. He confronted the bar owner, who handed over the camera. Three days later, he returned to the bar to apologize to the owner, who in turn recounted the events of the evening. As he listened to the account, he started to speak in strange tongues, a glossalia that lasted through the evening until he went to sleep.
The next day, while he was still in his house, he was instructed to go leave and start walking into the bush. He was walking around, speaking in tongues, and acting strange. Eventually, fellow hospital staff members managed to get him to the hospital, where he was seen by Dr. Connor, and eventually put under sedation.

So they were discussing. “Ah! Maybe this is psychotic. Ah, psychiatric, or maybe he’s getting mentally confused.” Interviewing my wife. Interviewing me. I said “No! This is not mad. This is not madness. But this is the spirit. It has been here with me, and I have been resisting it, over sixteen years.” And definitely, I have been trying to resist, but now it is taking over, the cover, that the, ahm, the situation now is not good with me. And over the fifteen years, my life has not been very good. In fact, my mind has never been stable. Ahm, so, that is the trouble, and this is how it happened.393

The next day he sent his son to visit his ng’anga, Mr. Beza, and give an update on his condition. His son returned with herbs and roots, which improved his condition over the course of the next day. Beza, already familiar with the circumstances of Kapoka’s situation, sent a message that he should not delay in fulfilling the mizimu’s directions. He had already delayed too long in performing the nkwichi, along with the other instructions to perform chilopa and begin practicing as an ng’anga. Kapoka paraphrased Beza,

So that’s why this time they’ll be taking you [by] force, and you must do that. If you don’t do that, with this situation, then, really, really you are going mad.

Kapoka agreed, saying:

So it seems this time my brain and my, it is, eh, all completely absorbed. Definitely, completely absorbed. The mizimu has taken over too much space in me. Hhmm. So that’s the problem.

393 In this quote, Kapoka recognizes the biomedical category of psychosis, but insists that it is a misdiagnosis. Instead, he asserts that it is the spirits who are driving him mad, and that much of his misfortune and suffering over the past decade and a half is a result of their affliction.
His wife has grown increasingly frustrated with his situation, and continues to accuse him of having no faith in God. The hospital chaplain has also warned him not to do the nkwichi as it will only encourage the spirits to demand more from him later on. Neither of them understand the gravity of the situation, he says, and they underestimate the strength of the mzimu. Both the nkwichi and chilopa must be performed, the sooner the better. The village headmen at his home have given their permission for the chilopa to be performed. His sister, who is an ng’anga, will supervise the beating of the drums. The mizimu will drink chilopa through Kapoka, and then the family will do “family prayers”. Some of the blood of the chilopa will be mixed with roots and sprinkled at the graveyard. He suggests that perhaps that will appease the spirits, and he will not have to move into the third stage of actually practicing as an ng’anga.  

I ask him if there were any events from his childhood that could have indicated these troubles were coming. “Yeah!” When he was living with his paternal grandparents, at the age of about fourteen, he had a dream one night in which he defeated a lion in hand-to-hand combat. He told his grandmother of the dream, and her response was forceful. “No, no, no, no. Don’t say that! Stop!” He thinks now that she understood where such dreams might lead him. “She could possibly think something was, ah, cooking in me!” Then, about two years ago, he again dreamed of fighting lions, and these time he slew seven of them. Several ng’angas have told him that this means his spirits are very, very strong, in fact stronger than their own. The fact that his mzimu are demanding a cow for chilopa, rather than a goat, chicken, or dove, is another indication of their strength. He quotes Nya Maphiri as confirmation, “I can’t give you any medicine. It can’t work with you!........No, no, no. I’m just too far for your mizimu. Maybe, in Mzimba here, you could be the only person having strong mizimu like you.” His own ng’anga, Mr. Beza, says that his spirits

---

394 Here is a retraction from previous statements that he is on an inevitable course towards a career as an ng’anga.
are junior to those of Kapoka, and that once Kapoka is practicing, his powers of divination and medicinal knowledge will surpass those of most other ng’angas.

A canceled trip

For some time, Kapoka had been planning an October journey to his home in Chitipa to conduct the nkwichi ceremony demanded of him. In the days leading up to his planned departure, I expressed an interest in accompanying him and he agreed that both Mulungu and I would join he and his wife on their trip north. In addition, Kapoka had invited his ng’anga, Mr. Beza, to oversee the ceremony, as he was knowledgeable about Kapoka’s case, and their spirits were in communication. The day before our planned departure, Mr. Beza arrived from his home village, located about 30 kilometers to the west in neighboring Zambia. Mulungu and I met with Kapoka and Beza at Kapoka’s house on station, and we all confirmed that we would meet at the bus station at six AM the following morning to depart for Mzuzu, and from there, on to Chitipa. Beza insisted that two assistants must accompany him to assist him in the ceremony, and so we were a group of seven who would travel north. That night, I interviewed Beza, accompanied by his eldest son, about the circumstances of his own professional calling and that of Kapoka’s current affliction.

The next morning I arrived at the bus station shortly before six and took a seat to wait for the others. Within a matter of minutes, one of Kapoka’s sons arrived with a note, informing me that the trip had been canceled. On my way back to my house, I encountered Mulungu, who had also been given the news at his house. We walked across station to Kapoka’s house to inquire. Beza was packing up his bicycle for his return trip home, and along with Kapoka we bid him fair well. Kapoka said that Beza had bad dreams the previous night in which his mizimu communicated to him that the timing was not right for the nkwichi ceremony. There was still not a consensus at Kapoka’s home about what to do, and proper arrangements must first be made. Kapoka related the
That evening I told my nightwatchman Dada Mizwa about these recent events, and he speculated that Beza pulled out of the trip to Chitipa because he feared being challenged as an ng’anga upon arrival, perhaps through an act of witchcraft. Paraphrasing Kapoka’s family members and other local elders, he queried: “How does this young man think he can come here to claim one of our cows?” You have to have proven credentials to practice as an ng’anga, to oversee the slaughter of a cow and mediate a critical ceremony. Mulungu agreed with this assessment, and said it would be dangerous for Beza to go alone without his wife or son for company. Who would cook for him, and ensure his food was safe? I asked Dada Mizwa if an ng’anga had to be present at the nkwichi, and he said yes, it must be done with prayers, or else it is a waste of time.

The Sins of the Father

A few days after our canceled trip, Kapoka traveled to Chitipa alone, in order to consult further with his family. When he returned a week later, he looked like a different man. Though his eyes are still extremely bloodshot, his body language, facial expression, and general demeanor look more relaxed and confident than he had seemed in months. He told me it was a good trip and that he had satisfying and productive consultations with his family. He learned that several other members of his family have also been suffering with the spirits, and it seems now that he has been given the special role of bringing the family together in order to restore harmony to it.

He had first met with two of his brothers (actually paternal cousins) and they had talked for two days. Both of them were also experiencing afflictions, though less extreme than that of Kapoka, and both had been told by ng’angas that the ancestors were also displeased with them. They had all agreed that their gogo (grandfather) is still not at peace because his grave had not been
cemented, and his spirit has been unable to return home because proper ceremonies have not been performed. These ceremonies include taking some possessions of the deceased, carrying them to his home and burying them there. Kapoka reminded me of his dream in which he was in the airplane but could find no place to land, just as his *gogo*’s spirit has been moving around but unable to come to rest in its home.

Eventually, after talking over possible causes for their various afflictions, they’d decided that a previous incident with Kapoka’s father was the probable cause. Many years earlier, Kapoka had received instructions from the *mizimu* to sacrifice a cow to them. As Kapoka told me and Mulungu affirmed, each clan has a cow that is put aside as a reserve for the spirits. It is neither to be sold nor slaughtered unless instructed by the spirits to do so in sacrifice. If it dies naturally, it should be replaced by another cow that will also be held in reserve. Kapoka’s father had decided on his own to sell this clan cow, and had given the profits to the church (CCAP). This was, the brothers agreed, a terrible act of disrespect and one that led the mzimu to retaliate by possessing their father, and eventually other members of the family.

Shortly after this incident, Kapoka’s father switched from CCAP to a local Pentecostal church and became very charismatic in his worship. Kapoka says his father had *mizimu*, but either didn’t know it or wouldn’t acknowledge it. Eventually he fell ill with a sort of madness, went into the hills to pray, and did not return. People eventually found him there, living off the land, but very sick. He was taken to a hospital but did not recover, and within a week he had died. Kapoka’s mother was divorced from his father over 40 years ago, and Kapoka hasn’t seen her since. She lives in the city of Mbeya in southern Tanzania. Kapoka said that he was instructed in a dream that she must be present at the *nkwichi*, and that he plans to travel to Mbeya to bring her back with him. The *nkwichi* and *chilopa* are now set for the end of the rainy season of the following year.
Kapoka also told me that during his time in Chitipa, the mizimu instructed him through a dream to buy red, white, and black cloth, which he has done, though he’s not sure what will come next. He already knows some basic associations with the colors. White is for when things are clear aim and easily seen. Red is for when things are murky and ambiguous. Black is more difficult to read as an ng’anga’s color, though it is known to be associated with chiefly powers.

Members of his family were OK with the purchases, agreeing that he must obey the spirits, though there were some initial reservations about the implications of the black cloth. But that eventually changed to talk of Kapoka possibly returning home to take on some political responsibilities. His brother is a sub-chief in the area, and their clan is the “royal” clan of the area. Kapoka would later tell me that the instruction to integrate black into his possession uniform was an indication that he was to assume chiefly powers in his practice as an ng’anga.

**Vimbuza Event**

Two days later, in the late afternoon, Mulungu and I set out on our bicycles, riding twenty kilometers west and southwest towards the village of Kamalazi, just across the border into Zambia. Kapoka had already made the journey earlier in the day, to consult with his ng’anga, Mr. Beza, and to prepare himself for dancing Vimbuza that night. We arrived just before dusk, and were invited in to rest, have a drink, and bathe before the evening’s ceremonial events were initiated. Gradually a group of people begin to congregate around the bonfire that has been built in front of Beza’s residence, among them men, women, and children, eventually numbering about thirty.

After the drummers had warmed both themselves and their drums by the fire and with their beating, Mr. Beza entered the encircled space. He was clad in typical western style clothing, with black jeans and a pink sweatshirt. He announced his intent to pray.

God, the creator of everything in this world. You sent your spirit to come and settle in our bodies of blood and flesh. You said you shall come. I should move to different places, but
I should accomplish the work which I have been assigned. “Don’t fear and don’t be afraid. I am your God. I give you this authority, so don’t be reluctant.” Thank you! “I had sent this spirit to come and settle in this body.” You are the best healer in this world, because you are the big sin’gang’a. There is no one who can obstruct you from accomplishing what you have decided on. If the sheep is weak and tired, you say you will whip and treat it. I don’t have much to say. I speak in the name of your son Jesus Christ. Amen!

With a sacred therapeutic space now defined, he called “Bring on the drums!” The assembled group, especially the women and youth, began to sing in repetition.

*Spirit go!*
*Heya-ye!*
*In the past, you were refusing!*

Kapoka emerges from Beza’s house, barefoot and clothed in a white dress embroidered with a red collar and two red crosses, one on the upper left chest, and another on the back between his shoulder blades. He wears a red and white scarf around his head, in the manner of local women, with a red cross sewn onto its front, directly over his forehead. He walks over the to chair positioned in front of the drums and sits down. Two large offering plates, one covering the other, lie on the ground a short distance away. The sound and feel of the beating drums are right behind him now, and he begins to rock back and forth to the rhythm while still seated. He carries a *chichova* (fly whisk), the primary instrument of an *ng’anga*, with him. This one has a red handle and the long black hair of a cow’s tail. He leans over as he sits, variously resting his head on his hand, or on the *chichova* itself. He begins to hum and continues to rock slowly back and forth in his chair. Beza, who has been standing to the side observing, now steps into the clearing in front of Kapoka and faces him. He speaks to him and all gathered. “You have arrived at the place of Grandfather Doctor Dreams!” He continues, “In speech they called you Kajino. So tonight, your father has called you because it’s past time you saw each other.” Kapoka rises from his seated position and begins to dance, a steady rocking back and forth, arms swinging to the side, but
without much further elaboration. Beza joins him, and together they dance to the drumming. After several minutes, Kapoka returns to his chair, and Beza takes a seat on the ground at his feet. One of Beza’s assistants brings the two plates and gives them to Kapoka. In them are three pieces of cloth – red, black, and white. Beza starts to sing “Go, go, go, go spirit. Go, go spirit.” The choir continues the refrain.

Still seated, Kapoka begins to rock back and forth, and to exhale and inhale with force. He speaks in a strained, high pitched voice, like that of a small girl crying, and struggling to get her words out between sobs.

KAPOKA Sshh! Shh! Sss! Sss! Heeeeeeeeee! Hmmmmmmmmmm (continuing into following speech).
ELDER 1 No. Feel free. Be happy. What they are giving you now are for you to explain. Explain how the patterns of sewing will be. Thank you!
KAPOKA Hmm! Hmm! Hmm! Ginama. Hee! Mene! Hinama! Hinama! Ginama!
ELDER 1 We want you to tell us in Tumbuka. We don’t get what you are saying!
KAPOKA Hmm! Mmm! Mmm!
ELDER 2 Even if you say in those languages, we won’t get anything.
ELDER 1 Tell us in Tumbuka!
KAPOKA Hee! Eee! Eee! He-ummm! You.
GROUP (Laughter).
ELDER 3 So if you laugh, will you get anything?
KAPOKA Aah! Ginama! Jina! Ine! Ine! I, I, the cloth..... hee! The w..h..i..t..e...
Hmmm!

BEZA Thank you. We understand that. Complete the saying. Don’t just block us. If a person comes to his father, he becomes happy and kneels properly.
KAPOKA Hmm! Hmm!
BEZA Out with the air! Air out! Everyone should understand you. Thank you.
KAPOKA Jin...dress, the cross...on...the...back, and on the chest.
BEZA Thank you. We have understood.
KAPOKA Hmm! Hee! The blue cross on the blouse, on...the back, and the white cross on the hat.
BEZA The hat on the head. The white cross on the forehead. I have understood that very well. Thank you. You have really said. So it is the hat only that is to be required on the head.
KAPOKA No, it should be like that (Gesturing to the back of the head).
BEZA OK. Thank you. Thank you.
KAPOKA On the back. On...on...on the back!
BEZA On the back. OK. Thank you.
KAPOKA The cross here, here! Yes.
BEZA OK. Thank you. Ehe!
KAPOKA Now, now...really! Hmmm. Hmmm.
BEZA Thank you. You have said it, and I have understood well. Thank you! I have understood. You have clarified everything. Thank you. A song please!
CHOIR (Singing) I asked for that peace. My life should be saved.
KAPOKA Hmmmmm! Hmm! Hmmmm!
CHOIR (Singing) Jesus here and now.
Come, he is calling you.
Come now.
What will I say to God?
Jerusalem. The new Jerusalem.
I shall sing a song there!
BEZA (Singing) Hiyo, hiyo! Hiyo!
Go, go spirit.
My father who died some time ago, go!
(Speaking) Hee! I have come. I am Doctor Dreams!

An elder man in the village then stands to speak and thanks Mr. Beza for being there among them.

He then notifies him that there are visitors present, including a white man from Embangweni, who has come to chat with him about his work as an ng’anga. Beza responds by informing those gathered that I am a researcher, and continues by introducing himself and his qualifications. He came in to the world, he tells them, to heal. He refrains from Satanic practices as some others do, and his grandfather, like he, was also a destroyer of spells. He moves far and wide healing without fear.

After telling a proverb and briefly lecturing a young woman patient about not spending too much time in the bush, he calls Kapoka over to him again and provides a summation of

---

395 He then tells a proverb about a dog and man who hunt a hare. The dog smells the hare first, and takes a posture that indicates to the man that there is prey nearby. Once the hare comes into view, the man kills it, and then he and the dog return to their village where the spoils are shared with the community. I took this proverb to indicate the roll of the nchimi, who smells out witchcraft, and the benefits that accrue to the community when a successful “hunt” for witchcraft is accomplished.
Kapoka’s problems. His oration is long and broad ranging, and interspersed with assertions of his own authority as an *nchimi*. In summary, he asserts that Kapoka’s forefathers have brought him his suffering, though it is also they who have saved him from near death. He also notes that Kapoka is an employee but is unsatisfied with his work, and that neither his wife nor his church are concerned with his suffering, the latter because they consider his activities Satanic. He contends that if Kapoka remains idle and does not obey the spirits, he will die or go mad. He then restates the demands of the spirits:

They ask you to go and conduct prayers at the graveyard. And also they ask you to do *nkwichi*. If you can only do that, you will find life. If you ignore these, you won’t work effectively because the spirits feel you are wasting time with the employment. Because they want you to accomplish what they have assigned you first.

Having just noted that Kapoka was dissatisfied with his job, Beza asserts that he is wasting time in his job, and instead must follow a different calling, the calling of the ancestors. He goes on to assert that there are many spirits in Kapoka, and that they require both the blood sacrifice of *chilopa* and the proper adornment to dress themselves in. He notes, however, that these instructions are not uncontested in Kapoka’s daily life.

**BEZA**

There is a problem in your house. The argument is about the church. That shouldn’t be a problem. Who created the spirits? Was it by Satan? I am not opposing the church. But a church of only words attracts many people. The Apostles have failed here. People, am I telling lies?

**GROUP**

No!

**BEZA**

They said they heal with words only. They said with a possessed person “We simply beat him or her on the head and the demons go out.” But one failed and came to see me. Dear people, we don’t argue or compete with God. Those who do that in this section are actually following what Jesus Christ was doing. It was him who healed with words only. The lame people stretched their legs, hands. Those who were crawling stood up and walked. It’s what they think they can do.
Beza continued by insisting that Kapoka must take his spirits from where they are currently buried to where they were supposed to rest. He also explained that the nkwichi could not be performed previously because there were misunderstandings in the home. Other members of the family were also suffering. But now Kapoka has met with his family. They have seen that the inheritance of royal positions has not been followed carefully. It must be corrected.

Beza concludes his oration by noting that God has chosen Kapoka to be a shepherd in this earth, and has placed many spirits within him. First, a cow must be sacrificed, and all of the graves in the family graveyard must be honored with that blood, and then Kapoka will have his own temple in which to practice. He asserts that the spirits are guiding Kapoka honestly, and must not be cheated, or they will bring misfortune. He ends his oration with an assertion of his authority:

I am Doctor Dreams. I deal with spirits, and I know them very well!

Post-vimbuza

Three days after our return from Zambia, Kapoka, Mulungu, and I sat down for a recorded conversation about Kapoka’s trip to Chitipa, the events of the recent vimbuza divination session, and what the future might hold.

As Kapoka recounted, while in Chitipa, his brothers had been impressed with his retelling of his dream of being taken into the mountains and shown his family’s graveyard, and of being seated on a special chair facing his family. They agreed that he was being given a special responsibility, a political one, and that the spirits had perhaps afflicted him in order that he might return home to take up this responsibility. For Kapoka, this explained why the mizimu had demanded a black cloth, along with the red and white that typically accompany possession by
mizimu. He had already known that chiefs wore a black headband, but this responsibility was a new revelation to him.

In the same dream, the mizimu had also shown him the place he would build his temple. The temple had been built, the sick had come, and he had started to divine their afflictions. The message was clear, that he was to begin practicing as an ng’anga. His brothers agreed that this was the clear instruction. Upon questioning, Kapoka acknowledged that being an ng’anga and a village headman at the same time would prove a difficult task. Working as a full time ng’anga would leave little time for chiefly duties, yet “if it is honored to me...it is very difficult to run from it.”

I asked about his work at the hospital and his church membership. He said that both he and his afflicted brother had received prayers from their fellow church members, but in all of their cases it had proven ineffective. They had agreed that church prayers were not going to help in this situation. Instead, they decided “that it is very important that we should follow the...ancestor’s channel. That we should try to do cemetery, [to] give them what they want.”

As for his church membership, he says that he hopes he can keep it. He will explain that he has not chosen this course for himself. It has been thrust upon him. “What I have is not something that I wanted that I should have. It has just come.” How can they deem him guilty for that which he cannot control? He says that upon his return to Embangweni yesterday, people were inquiring with his wife as to his health and state of mind. They were glad to hear that he had improved, and some were speculating as to whether he could continue in the church, despite his increasing involvement with mizimu. To push the point, and to show that even people in good standing with their churches can experience troubles with the spirits, Kapoka raised the example of a CCAP Reverend, once the Head-of-Station at Embangweni, whom was publicly known to have wrestled with spirit possession. This is not just something that happens to heathens. It is not something for which he should be judged morally at fault. Mulungu decided to push the point.
MULUNGU: So this is an issue which involves faith, and faith goes with the ethics of the church, eh? The doctrines of the church. So if you have faith in the church, and in God, and in Christ, yet you know the church you belong to does not allow some of the things which are happening to you. So, where do you think you have a stance in your faith, having mizimu, having a faith in the church, knowing that these things, the church does not favor. Yeah, so how would be your faith?

KAPOKA: Ah, Mr. Mulungu, the thing is this. When we talk of faith, it, it works in the individuals in different angles. Ahm, when we say someone is a Christian, not all Christians, ah, communities have got faith. They are very few people who God can work with them, and they can understand the situation. So it is the same with me. I cannot say that I have got faith in the church. Sometimes, which I do not understand. So that is a very difficult question. Yeah, the faith is only that you can say. It’s not because you go to the church. It’s not because sometimes you understand the regulation of the church. But faith is a gift. And who gives the faith, it’s only God. (Laughs)

LINDLAND: Just to follow up a bit, because this is a very difficult issue, but it’s a very central one, I think, in some ways. And I know that early on, when we talked, you did express to me some tension between feeling that the spirits were pulling you in one direction, and not only your church, but your own beliefs about God and about being a Christian, were pulling you in another direction. It seems, it seemed to me that you felt some tension at that time.

KAPOKA: Yes.

LINDLAND: And I’m wondering if you still feel that tension today, or maybe as your thoughts have developed, if that tension has gone away, or if you have, ahm...ahm...decided to push one to the side and just to follow the other. Or, how that tension that I sensed early on has been resolved?

KAPOKA: Hm-hm [+]

LINDLAND: Ah...

KAPOKA: Yes, I think there, the same, ah, the faith is still there. Ahm...

LINDLAND: Faith in?

KAPOKA: In God.

LINDLAND: In God.

KAPOKA: Yes, this is there, very strongly. Ahm, in the way that I understand it, ahm, ... it’s very complicated. But my feeling is that definitely God is with me, not just because, but because I have got faith in Him. My feeling is that all this working, ah, all of this, I mean, ah, I mean, ah

MULUNGU: Problem.

KAPOKA: Problem, is there, ah. That, at least, what I feel, there is something that God would like me to do...yeah..in my life. Ahm, it’s very funny. Like as we were there in Zambia. I noticed it. You see I was screaming a lot. Ah, when I was trying to talk of those clothes. The cloth that gave me problems was the red. (Laughs) That red really gave me problems. Those symbols were difficult, picking them, but before I
could pick this symbol, what I saw in my, ahm, my vision, was the cross. (Laughs) .... The cross, not the cross of the, the, the...something that they put on a cloth, but the real cross of Jesus Christ, came on this side, and then came on this side, with Jesus on the cross. “Hey!” So, ahm, that’s where sometimes, you have said things, very difficult to understand. I don’t know exactly, but my faith is there. But what is going, happening to me, is something that I do not understand.

There are several things to note from this exchange. Mulungu’s initial question is one that likens faith to abidance with church ethics, and more generally with codes of practice. He does expand the notion of faith a bit by saying “if you have faith in the church, in God, and in Christ” but concludes his question by asking about “having faith in the church.” This institutional model of faith is common in Embangweni, and involves a strong association between religious identity and faith.396

Kapoka responds by individualizing faith as something that “works in individuals in different angles” and suggesting that God works in ways that are often mysterious to people. He says that he does not have faith in his church, and that understanding or abiding by a church’s code of conduct does not mean a person has got faith in that church. Here is a clear distinction between behavior as an external marker of identity and faith as an internal disposition of the heart. While external behavior can be performed through a conscious act of will, matters of the heart are less susceptible to willful control. Faith is a gift from God, beyond human will.

When I pursue the question of tension between his involvement with spirits and his Christian faith, one he had previously articulated, he responds by unequivocally affirming that he does have faith in God, that he believes God is with him because of that faith, and that God is working a purpose through his life.397 Nevertheless, he is aware that he is still caught in an unclear

396 Yet it is also one that many people I spoke to challenged.
397 This question of where one locates one’s faith is important. What is the relationship between one’s faith in church and one’s faith in God. What does it mean to “have faith in a church”? What is the measure of “true” faith? What is at issue here is not whether or not Kapoka has faith in God,
and complex situation, accepting Mulungu’s offer of the word “problem” to describe his situation. His struggle with the color red – the classically Bantu color association for circumstances of ambiguity – is an affirmation of the complexity and difficulty of his situation. Yet, he suggests that God is working a purpose in his life, and though he cannot understand all of its details, he continues with faith in God.

As he had on previous occasions, including the night before, while clinging to the back of my bicycle as we struggled through the sand on our return trip from Zambia, Kapoka once again reiterated his description of a recurring vision of Jesus on the cross. In the continuation of our recorded interview, I asked him to describe this vision in further detail and speculate on its meaning.

In his description of the vision, the cross bearing Jesus moved from the left side of his body to the right, and then back again. In his vision, the two primary colors were red and blue, which is not a typical color combination. He says that the color blue has been coming in his visions often. He thought that when the colored cloth for the nkwichi was finally revealed to him, that one of them might be blue. Instead, he was instructed to buy red, white, and black. But the mizimu have designated blue for the color of the crosses themselves on some of his clothing. Mulungu said that his spiritual clothes would be “labeled” in blue, because the cross is the primary symbol on them.

Kapoka said that in a previous conversation with Chaplain Chirwa, he had told the chaplain of his dream of seeing Jesus crucified on the Cross. The chaplain had said this was surely a symbol of blood, and a sign that if Kapoka agreed to the mizimu’s demands for nkwichi, they will follow it

as his wife might argue, but rather the kind of God that he has faith in -- perhaps a God that allows the mizimu to work through people’s lives.
up with demands for chilopa. Kapoka thinks that seeing Jesus on the cross, against a red
background, is indication that he will have to sacrifice to make it through this difficult process.

These visions were confirmation to Kapoka that God was involved in the circumstances of
his life; that God was with him in his suffering, and would see him through it into the next stage of
his life, including realizing his full potential as a healer. He told me that these visions were
confirmations to him that Jesus was with him, and was an active agent in his current trials and
tribulations, this despite his involvement in activities that his own church would deem “un-
Christian”. The symbol of Jesus on the cross, in particular, suggests to him an affinity between
Jesus’ suffering and his own. As he summarized regarding his own suffering, “It is a difficult
task; difficult, very difficult task.”

“Your father is your second God”

Before we could go on with this topic, Mulungu again raised the question of how Kapoka
was going to reconcile his Christianity with his increasing involvement with the mizimu. This
section of our conversational interview was mostly a dialogue between Mulungu and Kapoka. In
his line of questioning, Mulungu makes a distinction between “real Christianity” and a lifestyle that
acknowledges ancestral spiritual agency in one’s life, but also suggests that there should be a more
tolerant religious environment in which the two can be merged without fear of recrimination.

MULUNGU: I’m thinking very philosophical, because I can see on one hand there is
Christianity, and on the other hand, there is our cultural belief, which means here, now, we have got two religions. So I don’t know how Dada Kapoka would think it would help us, we Africans, to have a free worshipping atmosphere. Because we are merging the two. How, do you think it would be good for we Africans? [To]

KAPOKA: [To] do?

MULUNGU: In order to worship very freely, not fearing the church, which is very strong in Christ. And again, not to feel offended with our spirits, the mizimu. Because it seems in your mizimu, Jesus is coming there. Your gogo is coming there, here. But real Christianity does not allow this other thing, so what can you...
LINDLAND  Is it real Christianity, or *mzungu* Christianity?

MULUNGU  Ah, it must be real Christianity, because we talk of Christianity, we talk of Jesus. And in our traditional beliefs we don’t mention much about Jesus, but God.

KAPOKA  Ahm, there Mr. Mulungu, I think we are repeating again.

MULUNGU  Yeah, it’s good.

KAPOKA  You know, ahm, the culture is still there. I think the culture has been respecting the *mizimu* for quite a long time, at different angles. My, my family has got the respect to the spirits that you do not have. So, you, I’m, I’m trying to think. My *gogo* is coming in. He would like to be respected. My father has not respected him. He’s complaining. Eh? He’s complaining. That’s why he’s, aah, asking for the cemetery. And, eh, I think which is very important to keep him warm, because he has said this, when these spirits were threatening me, he says “I’m feeling cold. So you must cover me.” So, not knowing, we had to give him, we provide white and red cloth, and then this didn’t work. It is now too late that we realize that he needs the *nkwichi*. So many things have happened. So many things have changed our understanding, our, our, in our life. You see. And, being emerged to the spirits, that I should speak tongues, is now three years ago. But I have been sick for seventeen years. Of which, I have moved from that stage to a different stage. I think that’s where the problem lies. But Jesus, you see, I was trying to explain to my wife yesterday. We also had a very long discussion. “But why should these things happen?” I was trying to explain “Look, in the Bible, it says ‘Respect your...’”

MULUNGU  Your father [and mother.]

KAPOKA  [Your father] and mother when you are still alive so that you should be added many days in your life. Ahm, because your father is the second, is [a] second God, your second God. That, (brief laughter) that covenant is there, but we have not observed it. Ahm, so we cannot say...God is very far away from the spirits, those who are dead and those who are alive. (Brief laughter)

MULUNGU  You are answering very well.

LINDLAND  He is answering very well.

KAPOKA  (Laughter)

There are two things to note about Mulungu’s framing of the question. The first is that he is continuing to frame “real” Christianity as embodied in the church, in opposition to ancestor spiritualism. In doing so, he is mirroring CCAP orthodoxy, itself a reflection of early mission Christianity. Secondly, he framed his question in terms of fear, both of church and spirits, and by

---

398 Vernacular for a white person.
implication their respective disciplinary systems. In essence he asks, who do you fear more? The church or the mizimu?

Kapoka does not question Mulungu’s assumption that both institutions are to be feared, but he does, once again, indicate an unwillingness to see the two systems as incommensurable. He summarizes: His father disrespected his grandfather. His grandfather wants Kapoka to compensate and show him respect. He wants his grave cemented over “to keep him warm.” Initially, Kapoka had responded to his affliction by buying a red and white uniform to honor his ancestor in dance, but this hadn’t worked. It is only now that he realizes he must perform nkwichi. “So many things have changed our understanding...in our life.” And then, in an intellectual move that leaves Mulungu smiling and shaking his head with appreciation, Kapoka invokes the Biblical Ten Commandments to affirm both a faith in the Christian God and the need to respect one’s parents.

Respect your father and mother when you are still alive so that you should be added many days in your life.

A kinship model of Christian identity: authority and allegiance

Several months earlier, during my third interview with Kapoka, I had asked him why he was a CCAP member. He had responded:

Ahm, it’s because my father was in CCAP. I can say, the family...in my father, all belong to CCAP. I have had, I have had, made no choice, to go to any church which I could like myself. Because that is not very common here. Ahh, if your parents, parents belong to CCAP, ahhm, that’s husband and wife, their son, definitely, they will all belong to CCAP. Because they start, they get born, grow, attend glasses, get baptized there, and become full members, church members. So, it seems it is a routine that I followed, as like other people do.399

In addition to explaining his church membership, Kapoka concluded the above quotation by outlining a chronological ordering of the Christian life-course B a highly conventional pattern of growth into church membership, including participation in doctrinal training, baptism, and church membership. He described no radical moment of illumination that initiated his faith, but rather emphasized the emergence of his Christianity as part of an integrated trajectory of life experience and church affiliation. The specific trajectory Kapoka outlines B conception, birth, growth, education, baptism, and church membership -- is not the classic pattern for someone born into the
Kapoka’s response to this effect was one I heard often during my research in Embangweni. Many of my church informants, from the CCAP, other first-wave mission churches, and AICs, attributed their current or former church membership to the example set by their parents and grandparents. This is a model of allegiance to the ecclesiastical example established by one’s forebears, in which a person is morally accountable to their example and witness. As Kapoka said, “I have made no choice.” The locus of control is external, and grounded in a precedent of ancestral kin authority.

As a matter of emphasis, this kinship model of Christian identity contrasts with the Western Protestant focus on the role of individual faith and conviction as the key barometers of Christian experience and life, and a corresponding emphasis on the total authority of God and Christ in the Christian life. Instead, it is a model of continuity between a man’s religious identity and that of his forefathers through the institution of the denominational church, which becomes one avenue through which a man maintains his relationship to his lineage. In the process, the church Presbyterian church and baptized in it as a baby, as was Kapoka. That said, it was the pattern in the early years of the Mission, when youth and adults of both sexes had to participate in rigorous catechumen classes before they could qualify for baptism. It still is the pattern for members of some other local Christian churches, most notably Pentecostal ones, in which baptism is delayed until a boy or girl passes through puberty and becomes a young person. In addition, Kapoka’s ordering of the ideal Christian life-course is consistent with a model of emergent personhood that is grounded in pre-mission culture and widely distributed throughout sub-Saharan Africa. This is a model of growth and education into maturity, initiation into adulthood, and the gradual emergence of full personhood.

---

400 The clear exception to this trend is found among members of local Pentecostal churches, who generally joined those churches of their own choosing, and only after leaving their natal churches. Pentecostals were the most vocal public dissenters from the kinship model of church membership.

401 Such a kinship model of Christian membership was not unique to Kapoka, as it was by far the most conventional local rational for validating church membership that I heard during my time in Embangweni. It is also not unique to the Tumbuka, Sukwa, and Ngoni cultures of northern Malawi, nor, for that matter, to a broader assortment of sub-Saharan African cultures. Rather it has been documented ethnographically among peoples and cultures throughout many parts of the non-Western world. It frames both personal identity and family affiliation as mirrored facets of the Christian life and experience. It is a model of Christianity as an institutional community defined by membership and common participation in ritual functions. It is also a model of respect for one’s elders and ancestors and the accumulated wisdom of the ages.
becomes the venue for constructing a particular kind of self-image, one vested both in the values and symbols of the church, but also in a recognition of the agency and authority of the ancestors.\textsuperscript{402}

Returning to our three-way interview conversation, Mulungu continued to push his line of inquiry.

MULUNGU So the main, central point is on God, but where I’m driving to is on Jesus. You can see that, wait, the spirits are introducing Jesus to him. That’s why he is appearing on the crosses in his spiritual mood, eh? Maybe, would you think that your faith in Jesus Christ is weak, so the spirits are trying to push you towards Jesus?

KAPOKA No, that’s not true.

ALL (Laughter)

KAPOKA [That’s not true]

MULUNGU [(Laughter)]

LINDLAND [(Laughter)]

KAPOKA [[That’s not true.]]

MULUNGU [[(Laughter)]]

LINDLAND [[(Laughter)]]

KAPOKA You see, if me, if I have disobeyed my father, or maybe I’m at loggerheads with my father, do you think God will be happy?

MULUNGU No.

KAPOKA God will not be happy. God will need peace. Peace in families. Peace in the communities. Peace everywhere. And now that this is coming to me through the mizimu, and I’m very sure, God is there. Eh? Because God will need peace in our family! But, an [indecipherable] that it is working, that is where it is very difficult to understand. Not many people in my family understand what we need to do. It’s not the mizimu, I think, it is God. We should try to rebuild, ah? Maintain something. And then the spirits will still be there. Because these spirits are the channel, because the channel is there. Those mizimus, I mean spirits, ancestors have never been respected. The chieftainship as well. My father, my grandfather

\textsuperscript{402} This contrast between a Western emphasis on individual faith and an African emphasis on lineage authority can, however, be overstated. Applying an African kinship model to Christian identity is, for example, consistent with Western Presbyterian practices of baptizing infants and raising and educating children in the traditions and standards of the church, a form of attempted ecclesiastical lineage as well. Likewise, Kapoka’s commitment to a kinship model of Christian identity can also be overstated. In this same interview, shortly after making the above statement, Kapoka acknowledged the potential for more personalized and subjective decision-making, saying that if it were up to him, he would join the Roman Catholic church. Yet, even considering these qualifiers, I would argue that Kapoka’s view of himself as a Christian was derived more from a model of generational continuity through the church, rather than a notion of individual faith and right doctrine.
was supposed to be buried where he came from, but he was buried somewhere here, in the, in the strange country. So his spirit is also not happy, and then it is working like that, pushing me, pushing me there. And that now, they understand that “No, no, no. We must go and take back his, his spirit back there.”

In many respects, this section of conversation gets to the crux of what the three of us were talking about that afternoon. Kapoka had been raised in the CCAP church. As an infant, he had been baptized by sprinkling in the church, and as a teenager, had attended church catechism classes, and enthusiastically participated in youth fellowship groups and choirs. It was during these years, through a gradual process, he had told me earlier, that he truly came into his Christian faith. As a young man he had joined the CCAP men’s guild, Madodana, and in recent years had ascended to a leadership position as a church elder, among those who (along with the Reverend) composed the members of the local kirk session, the primary decision-making body within a Presbyterian church congregation. He had a lifetime of participation in Mission Christianity behind him – a lifetime of growing status and authority in the church, of Mission employment and residence, of public identity in terms of both, and, perhaps most critically, of partial self-understanding in such terms. His current life circumstances, and the, to him, undeniable presence of the spirits in his life, posed a direct threat to all of this. How then to move forward? How to make commensurable what others judge as not so?

In the final paragraph cited above, in his response to the pressuring of Mulungu, Kapoka states in the clearest terms yet how he is responding to this dilemma, and reveals a strategy for articulating a response that is both personally meaningful and publicly tenable. In the simplest sense, it involves a denial of the classical Mission opposition between the mizimu and God. Instead, Kapoka embraces an alternate logic, in which his ancestral spirits are not demons, but to the contrary, are agents of Divine will. They are, as he puts it, channels of God’s will in the world. In his case, God’s will and his grandfather’s will are one. They are both working towards peace in
the family, and by extension, in Kapoka. Both desire that things are as they should be, and there is
here an assumed standard of “normality”, of correctness, of order that needs to be reestablished.

For the first time, during this interview, I learn that Kapoka’s grandfather died far away
from his home area, and was buried in that distant land. By tradition, it is right that he be returned
to his home for a proper reburial, and this is what he is demanding of Kapoka and his family. Yet,
as Kapoka says, “it’s not the mizimu, it is God” that is pressuring him to restore the right order of
relationships. The mizimu are tools of his divine will.

As seen in the previous chapter, Kapoka’s “solution” to the problem of his possession is
not unique to him, but rather has a long history of articulation within the AIC Christian tradition, a
tradition Kapoka was keenly aware of. That said, I cannot help but think that Kapoka still had to
wrestle his way to this conclusion, to arrive at it by his own emotional logic, and not just in simple
imitation of an already existing model of ancestral and Divine alliance. Yet it also seems clear that
Kapoka used that alternative historical model as a guide for his journey of emergence. As Kajino,
the emergent tooth, he was a partly willing participant in a ritual process of becoming something
new.

It is perhaps not surprising then that only a few moments later in the interview, for the first
time in our nine months of conversation about these matters, Kapoka states unequivocally that he is
an ng’anga. As he puts it “I’m total ng’anga.” He knows full well that he has not completed the
nkwichi ceremony, nor the chilopa ceremony that will accompany it, but these now seem inevitable
to him. The conversion process, in his mind and will at least, has been completed. He has found a
way to remain in the good graces of God while still obeying the rightful demands of the spirits.
This is, Kapoka knew, not a full solution to his dilemma, for the response of his church, the CCAP,
remains a present and future challenge.
Conclusion: A “pulling” within: work, status, and the calling of the spirits

In writing of the Tellensi of northern Ghana, Meyer Fortes (1987) argued that the Tallensi modeled personhood as an emergent property of a person’s participation in kinship networks and social relationships. In this model of the person as member of society, it is society that provides each person with definitions of possible roles, statuses, endowments, and qualities, and characterizations of who they were, are, can, and will be. At the same time, the Tallensi recognize that people experience the world as individuals, and that individual experience is not fully determined by social forms. Fortes takes hold of this distinction to argue a more general theoretical point, that theories of personhood must account for this distinction between the social person (what Mauss called the personne moral) and the individual. In his summary of African concepts of personhood, Ivan Karp summarizes the importance of Forte’s distinction:

One of the most significant aspects of the concept of the person that is addressed by Fortes’ distinction between person and individual is the complex and changing relationship between the socially prescribed and the individually experienced, in which locally based, vernacular interpretations about personhood are developed.

In this chapter, I have outlined some of the ways in which Kapoka found himself caught between the particulars of his individual experience and the social constraints of two historical distinct religious systems of social relationship and accountability, Christianity and ancestral spiritualism. As a possessed Presbyterian hospital worker, Kapoka embodied a set of ecclesiastical and occupational expectations for what it means to be a good Christian and a biomedical professional. As a man possessed by ancestral spirits, Kapoka embodied a set of kinship expectations for what it means to be a good member of an extended, multi-generational lineage in which he assumes the

Ironically, in this model, a person does not achieve full personhood until his/her death, assuming that death comes in a way that is proper, legitimate, and appropriate to one’s social status. (Fortes, 1987, p.272)

responsibilities and powers that are his by inheritance. In the experience of his own troubled state of mind and heart, Kapoka embodied his own individual conflict between these two systems of social proscription, an inner-conflict that he articulated to me as a “pulling within.”

In this summary of Kapoka’s case, I want to suggest that a part of what made Kapoka’s individual circumstances so trying for him was a deep ambivalence about his professional status, one deriving from a keen awareness on his part about the differential implications and consequences of either maintaining his current professional status as a CCAP medical orderly or moving into a new professional calling as a spiritual diviner. In this sense, I suggest that Kapoka’s experience of inner-conflict goes deeper than the explicit terms in which he expressed it to me, though on several occasions he hinted at these deeper professional frustrations and motivations. At the same time, the disjunctions between his Presbyterian doctrine and the logic of ancestral spiritualism, both of which he had a lifetime of exposure to, were clearly playing a role in his mental distress. Alongside his economic and social concerns, Kapoka was also a thinking man, one attuned to theological and cosmological frameworks and aware of their presumed implications. As such, his ambivalence was multiplex, to borrow a term from Robert LeVine (1984), existing at several levels of his awareness and embodiment of experience. The clear result to all who knew Kapoka at the time was a form of suffering, one that seemed to manifest most evidently as mental distress.

As was clear to most of those around him, Kapoka was suffering mental distress during the many months of late 1999 and 2000. He had been in a serious and violent confrontation in the trading center, been found wandering the paths around the station in a daze, had missed work on several occasions, and, at least once, had literally fallen down on the job. His wife, friends, doctor, and employers were all concerned about him. By his own testimony, his state of mind was troubled, as was his state of sleep. The intensity and frequency of his visions had been growing,
and with them a sense of not being master of his own fate and thoughts. He told me and others that he feared he was losing his mind, and felt compelled to act to save it.

By his increasingly public account, it was his ancestral spirits who were slowly driving him mad, and doing so in righteous anger against he and his family’s delinquency in not given them a proper burial of respect and loyalty. Never once during our interviews and many long conversations did Kapoka suggest that the spirits were not real. By his own account, and as evidenced in his therapeutic quest as a course of action, their demands and their role in his affliction had become undeniable to him. Furthermore, Kapoka also consistently asserted the validity and authority of his ancestral spirits, though his moral argumentation often took a back seat to his insistence on the pragmatic necessity of obedience. By his testimony, he had no choice but to obey the mizimu and fulfill their demands. Otherwise, he feared, he would lose his mind and perhaps with it, his life. The spirits, not he, were in control.

In the process of attributing this external cause to his state of being, Kapoka invoked a highly conventionalized model to explain his affliction, and to reveal a course of remedial action, one that was slowly but inexorably transforming his personal and public identity, as both a Christian and a healer. At the same time, however, throughout his life history narrations, Kapoka provided several clues suggesting other reasons for his current affliction, clues that pointed to a

---

405 While most of those around Kapoka also acknowledged the reality of the spirits, many of them, including his wife, questioned his investment of authority and faith in those spirits.

406 At various points in my interactions with Kapoka, I asked myself to what extent he was consciously and willfully moving himself towards this new profession, or to what degree he felt himself reluctantly pushed along by the demands of the spirits. His rhetoric always suggested the latter, almost exclusively, but his reality probably lay somewhere in the middle. Over the course of the nine months that I closely followed his situation, he became increasingly open in declaring his trajectory, such that by the time I left Embangweni in late October 2000, he was a self-declared ng’anga, the “real” thing as he put it. I don’t know to what extent the change in his rhetoric was reflective of a still emergent change in his own self-image, or merely of an increasing willingness to let me view and understand a change that had already, to a large extent, happened. Again, I suspect it is a combination of both.
parallel set of motivations for his current course of action. As he noted at the beginning of his biography, he had started his adolescent life with much promise, attending one of the most prestigious schools in the country – Livingstonia Secondary School -- the oldest secondary school in the nation. For economic reasons, however, he had been forced to shift to a lower status and less rigorous Night Secondary School, an event he reflected upon with a tone of fateful regret. Left unstated in his telling of these events was the fact that his subsequent educational and professional life was almost certainly compromised by the shift.

Dissatisfaction with the course of his professional life, and the ways in which his life had become structured within the institutions of the Mission, was also evident in Kapoka’s storytelling, though he did not directly address the topic. During my first interview with him, he had not gone into detail about his move from Ekwendeni Hospital to Embangweni Hospital, and I had been left with the impression that he had moved directly from one job into the next. It was only later, during a conversation with his wife, that I learned that he had quit his job at Ekwendeni out of frustration with the work and pay, and went into business locally selling fish that he brought up from Monkey Bay, near the southern tip of Lake Malawi. Once, while in Monkey Bay, the spirits confronted him and ordered him back to Ekwendeni. He had left everything in Monkey Bay and returned home, and fell very ill. After a long illness, he had recovered, but in the meantime had lost all his business capital. Without income, he had sought a job with a nearby lumber company, without success. Eventually he had found a job, once again as a medical orderly, at Embangweni Hospital, where he had started work in late 1991. Now, more than two decades later, he was still working the same lower-level hospital job he had started with, and earning a wage that with inflation was dramatically falling in value.

Kapoka’s ng’anga, “Dr. Dreams” Beza, had made note of this occupational dissatisfaction during the Vimbuza dance in Zambia at which Kapoka received color-coded instructions for his
uniform. Most likely based on conversation with Kapoka, Beza described how Kapoka was unhappy in his work, and, even more pointedly, how “the spirits feel you [Kapoka] are wasting time with the employment”. Beza included these comments as a part of his larger rationale for Kapoka’s obedience to the ancestral spirits. Though Kapoka himself never directly denigrated his occupation to me, or said that he was unhappy with it, the circumstances of his life history, the deterioration of his job performance, and his emergent decision to go his own way as a healer all point to such a professional discontentment.

And so, Kapoka was on the road to a new professional identity, as a prophetic healer, a practicing *ncehi*.407 In the script being laid out for him by the spirits, he would move back to his home area in Chitipa, for the first time in almost a quarter of a century, where he would build his *thempli* on the land shown to him in his vision. This was not to be a discreet side practice, an addendum to continued hospital work, but rather a full-fledged *chipatala* (village hospital), one that might rival the great Chikanga’s by reputation.

Yet this was not an unproblematic decision-making process for Kapoka. These decisions were rife with tensions both internal and external to himself, as Kapoka himself attested in describing the “pulling” within himself, and in predicting the likelihood of negative public and institutional reactions to his changing professional calling. Kapoka was fully aware that this full engagement with the spirits was counter to both the traditions and doctrines of his church and the practices and policies of his employer. If he answered the calling of the spirits and began a new profession of divination, he knew it would most likely cost him both his church status and his job.408 If he lost his job, he would lose with it the security of having a monthly cash income with

407 During my interview with him, Kapoka’s *ng’anga*, Mr. Beza, confirmed that Kapoka would already be practicing as an *ng’anga* were it not for his job at the hospital.

408 Hospital employees were not supposed to actively participate in *Vimbuza* and neither were they allowed to actively work as *ng’angas* or *ncehims*. Yet, there were some members of the hospital staff who were widely known to actively participate in Vimbuza dancing and its accompaniments.
which to purchase basic commodities like sugar, salt, cooking oil, soap, tea, bread, and clothing, among other items. He would also lose his free housing on station, as well as access to discounted medical care, the hospital insurance scheme, financial loan plans, and a pension plan.

Likewise, as a CCAP Elder, Kapoka was held to a doctrine of theological orthodoxy and a church code of conduct and demeanor that forbade active involvement in spirit possession and divination. His new calling would likely lead to his suspension from the CCAP, and he would be removed from his position of ecclesiastical authority as a member of the local kirk session and from the personal status it brought. His white jacket, black tie, and black pants, the uniform that shows to all that he is a member of the Madodana, the Men’s Guild of the CCAP, would be put away in a closet, indefinitely.

Yet, at the time of my research, Kapoka was nevertheless moving forward with a decision to follow the call of the spirits and become an nchimi. He was seemingly committing himself to a course of action, involving nkwichi, chilopa, and a full-fledged divination practice, that would jeopardize his current social and professional status. As already suggested, the reasons are

---

A woman who belonged to the Roman Catholic church was excepted from the rule forbidding involvement in Vimbuza activities, so she and others told me, because her church had a more accepting attitude towards spirit possession and Vimbuza. In addition, she told me, there was an understanding between her and the hospital administration that her participation would remain that of a patient seeking healing, and not change into that of a diviner as therapeutic medium. It should be noted that the Roman Catholic church was one of nineteen churches that were formally recognized by the Livingstonia Synod. Members of these approved churches were eligible for employment by the mission hospital, while members of other non-approved churches were technically not, though that latter list was sometimes conveniently ignored because of the shortage of competent job applicants.

Other benefits could accrue to those firmly linked to church institutions, including the hospital. During recent episodes of acute food shortages throughout Malawi, Embangweni Hospital B largely through the coordination and fundraising of the Marian Medical Mission -- had started a grain-bank that provided loans and grants of grain employees and their families. Other benefits were less urgent, but nevertheless highly valued. Over the past few years, for example, various members of the Embangweni Hospital Choir had been hosted for month-long singing tours of both the United States and Northern Ireland. One small benefit that would accrue to Kapoka upon suspension from CCAP.
multiplex. By his own account, the spirits were leaving him no choice. Though significant others in his life, including his wife and chaplain told him otherwise, he held firm to the idea that the spirits would not be satisfied with any other course of action. A decision of obedience had to be made, as the status quo, one of partial resistance, was untenable.

As I have suggested, his own dissatisfactions with his professional life were another likely motivation for his decision to move forward with these changes in his life. Kapoka knew that he would most likely be trading in his current professional status for a difficult and uncertain future of private practice as a diviner, a therapeutic personality who depends for his livelihood on his own skills and the demands of others for his services. Yet, he also knew that it would be a job that would bring with it a different kind of status from that of CCAP Elder or hospital employee. Like those two identities, the work of the ng’anga, and even more so the nchimi, carries both religious and medical connotations and responsibilities, but they are ones grounded in vernacular Tumbuka and other local African customs and conventions. In this sense, there was a continuity to his professional calling. Unlike his two Mission statuses, however, the work of the diviner is one that would allow Kapoka to himself claim the charismatic role of spiritual authority and healer. No longer just a junior hospital staffer, or yet another Elder in the church, his work as an nchimi would allow Kapoka to realize and express his own vision of life, tradition, and well-being.

It should, perhaps, not be surprising that Kapoka would find the means to realize some of his previously frustrated ambitions through a turn back to a highly traditional cultural and religious schema, ancestral spiritualism, and to syncretic processes of reconciling such traditional spirituality with the potent forces of Western Christianity. In doing so, Kapoka was following in the footsteps of many others whom have sought both refuge and status in breaking down the wall of opposition between the two religious systems. For all of the creative struggling that has characterized his quest to find resolution to his affliction, he entered into a well-trodden path of seeking out
conjunctions between the two traditions, and of using those conjunctions to integrate and juxtapose them both into a meaningful and coherent whole. Ever since the days of Yesaya Mwasi and Charles Domingo, members of the first generation of CCAP trained ministers, many northern Malawians have embraced syncretic movements that created new hybrid forms of Christian ancestral spiritualism.

Yet Kapoka was doing so in his own unique way. In the process, he was not only carving out a new public and professional personhood for himself, but also creating a new kind of self-image for himself, still a Christian, still a therapeutic agent, but now who followed what he, Mulungu, and many others, called “African tradition”. As Kapoka himself acknowledged on many occasions, the transformation was one wrought with difficulties, occurring in a religious society dominated by an oppositional model between that “African tradition” and a “modern Western” Christianity and science.

Yet Kapoka, or rather his spirits, were choreographing the transition as best they could, striving to find a middle path between the two religious cultures of the region. While he will ingest chilopa, and with it feed the sacred ancestral energies within him, through his visions he will also consume the living sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the cross. While he will adorn himself in the standardized garments of the mizimu possessed, red crosses on white vestments, he will add to his spiritual costume the primary color of Mission Christianity – sky blue. As a diviner and therapist, he will embody in both costume and rhetoric both the ancestors and the Divine as sacred sources of authority and healing. And while he will give up his therapeutic role in the hospital, he will maintain a healing identity as a new kind of therapist, one who still wields biomedical knowledge, but whom can now speak to patients and their afflictions in the language of the spirits. As an

\[\text{For as long as his good-standing within the CCAP lasts, he will presumably also continue to partake of Holy Communion during monthly services.}\]
nchimi, Kapoka will enter into an everyday world full of ancestral spirits, his own and those of others, powerful agents who both support and punish their living kin. It is a world where the living must tread diligently, amidst powers greater than themselves, and be careful to ascribe to the ritualized forms that have proven pleasing to those spirits. He will become an agent of communication with the spirits, a medium of judgment and instruction, and an interpreter of their efforts to counteract witchcraft, preserve tradition, and maintain the long-term well-being of their anticipated lineage.

Yet, in his juxtaposition of this lineage spirituality with the forms of Western Christianity, Kapoka was -- in his own highly personalized ways -- invoking a tradition of syncretic integration among the two religious cultures. This was a form of supplementary syncretism, one that resists the oppositional structures of Mission Christianity, and instead seeks out both historical and novel means of reconciling the sovereignty of the Christian God with the callings of the ancestors. In this way, Kapoka hoped, I think, to resolve the “pulling” within him, and in so doing, to restore his own body and spirit to a place of health and well-being.
CHAPTER TEN
Contested Theologies of Baptism: Body, Mind, and Ritual Symbolism

It happened at this time that Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptized in the Jordan by John. At the moment when he came up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn open and the Spirit, like a dove, descended upon him. And a voice spoke from heaven: ‘Thou art my Son, my beloved; on thee my favour rests.’ (Mark 1: 9-11, The New English Bible)

Indeed, it is possible further to conceptualize the exegetic meaning of dominant symbols in polar terms. At one pole cluster a set of referents of a grossly physiological character, relating to general human experience of an emotional kind. At the other pole cluster a set of referents to moral norms and principles governing the social structure... [W]e call these semantic poles respectively the “orectic” and the “normative” pole. (Victor Turner, The Forest of Symbols, p.54)

Introduction: Field and Frame of Inquiry

This chapter is about Christian baptism, though baptism was not a topic I set out to study at the beginning of my fieldwork. Nor was baptism a presumed chapter topic at the beginning of writing my dissertation. Yet, after returning from the field, as I worked my way through my transcribed interviews with church members and leaders from the various churches in Embangweni, a noticeable trend emerged. Often, when I asked members and leaders from both Pentecostal churches and AICs about similarities and differences among local churches, they invoked baptismal methods as among the most relevant points of contrast between their church community and the established Presbyterian church of the area. Specifically, and perhaps not surprisingly to those familiar with the broader Christian church history, these Pentecostal and AIC informants often invoked the contrast between sprinkling and immersion techniques in baptism as an important point of differentiation among local churches.411

411 As will be seen later in this chapter, this was not the only point of contrast consistently raised by these church leaders, but it was a highly prevalent one. The timing of baptism -- whether
As described in my introduction, I arrived in Embangweni intending to explore the various ways in which people were modeling both the body and spirit as facets of being and personhood. I particularly hoped to address the topic of spirit possession, understood in terms of both ancestral spirit possession and Christian possession by the Holy Spirit. My initial intent was to spend the majority of my time talking to lay members in the various local churches, rather than local church leaders. It quickly became apparent that such a consultation was premature on my part, and that it was appropriate and respectful to first talk to the senior membership of the church. This was an important early lesson to me regarding local standards of authority and respect. This protocol was often suggested, and to some extent enforced, by regular lay members, church leaders themselves, and by my primary research assistant Mulungu, who was very conscious throughout the course of my fieldwork to ensure my continued good standing among members of the community and within local structures of tribal and ecclesiastic authority. 

In the end then, I returned to the U.S. with an extensive documentation of church leaders’ views on religious and spiritual topics. Though I also talked to and interviewed many regular church members by the end of fieldwork, I have chosen to focus on my conversations with church leaders for this chapter because of their greater willingness to speak authoritatively on the topic of baptism. As such, this chapter considers a range of quotes from my formal, recorded interviews with selected church leaders from across the spectrum of Christian churches in Embangweni. As such, it is a comparative study of local church

immediately following repentance, or delayed for purposes of doctrinal instruction -- was also raised as an issue, as was, to a lesser extent, the differing rationales for infant versus adult baptism. Furthermore, once the topic of baptism had been raised, the spiritual implications of baptism also often became a point of contrast.

This steering of my research towards local leaders says something about local cultural models of authority and knowledge, as well as about my own inclinations to abide by local standards of propriety.

These church leaders are defined as such because they are recognized to carry formal or informal positions of institutional and/or theological authority within their church groups. They are members of the ecclesiastical governing elite, usually by some combination of self-promotion and group support.
authorities’ pneumatologies (theologies of spirit) and an intimation of the theological and doctrinal diversity that is being articulated from the pulpits of local churches each Sunday (or Saturday) morning. The chapter also provides an example of the Christian pluralism that predominates in Embangweni today and points to important trends in the history of diverse local response to and articulations of Christianity over the course of the past century.

In addition to the fact that many local church informants raised the topic of baptism as an important event within Christian ecclesiastical life, and as a significant point of contrast among church communities, there are other reasons I have found it a worthy topic of consideration. The rite of baptism has held a central sacramental place within the Christian faith tradition from biblical days to the present, across the spectrum of Christian branches and denominations worldwide. It is both a core practice and core concept within Christianity, and in Embangweni, as throughout Malawi, water baptism is an explicitly Christian rite of passage. All fifteen Christian churches I visited in Embangweni practiced some form of baptism involving water. By local account, and in those baptisms I witnessed, it was always conducted in the name of the Christian Trinity – “Chiuta Dada, Chiuta Mwana, na Mzimu Mutuwa” – “God the Father, God the Son, and the Holy Spirit”. Even as rationales for the rite differed somewhat, it was acknowledged by almost all of my informants to be an important event, and the very ubiquity of it in Embangweni already indicates a substantial transformation within the religious culture of northern Malawi since the days Mission Christianity was first introduced.

Baptism is also an important topic because, as a rite, it is so clearly a practice focused on the body, even as it carries important spiritual implications. During baptism, as distinct from much of ecclesiastical life, the individual human body is the focus of ritual attention and intervention. Played out in dramatic form in front of the church community, the individual and mediating minister are the focus of group attention and affirmation. In both its sprinkling and immersion
forms, the latter in particular, baptism is an activity clearly set apart in bodily terms from the routines of ecclesiastical life. Yet it is a central church experience, and as such is distinct from everyday patterns of interaction with water, specifically the bathing of the body or face.

Baptism also has profound eschatological importance within the local religious culture. As my research progressed during fieldwork, it became clear to me that for many in Embangweni, their understanding of the efficacy and implications of the baptismal rite was central to how they understood the fate of the human spirit after bodily death. In talking about baptism, the Christian notion of salvation was consistently used to frame death and the afterlife, and with them, the eschatological consequences of the ritual action.

In summary, this chapter explores how various local Christian church leaders model baptism as both bodily and spiritual experience, including the necessary precedents for its performance, and the implications and consequences proceeding from its enactment. In assessing the variety of perspectives on baptism articulated by these leaders, I argue that foundational cultural schemas about body-spirit relations, derived from pre-Mission, Mission, and post-Mission religious cultures, are all in evidence in the local modeling of baptism.414 For many AIC church leaders, in particular, their understanding of baptism is still profoundly shaped by pre-Livingstonia Mission religious sensibilities, often at times in stark contrast to the dominant Presbyterian mission orthodoxy of the past century. In particular, these leaders expressed an emphasis on the embodied nature of the ritual experience, insisting on full-bodied baptism by immersion, and were critical of the Presbyterian, Anglican, and Catholic practice of sprinkling. Born Again leaders, products of a later mid-twentieth century missionary movement, also articulated a concern with the embodied quality of the baptismal experience, and likewise insisted on immersion baptism as the only valid

414 A secondary concern, considered most extensively in the conclusion, asks how these patterns of schematization are in part reflective of local patterns of inter-church relations and the socioeconomic differences that characterize their respective memberships.
The conjunction of these two separate Christian traditions, and their joint contrast to Presbyterianism on the topic of baptism, suggests an interesting commonality between what are otherwise very different Christian church traditions. In my conclusion to this chapter, I point to some potential implications of this shared emphasis on embodiment for the future growth of the Born Again movement in northern Malawi and elsewhere in Africa.

**Contrasting Methodological Models of Baptism: Immersion and Sprinkling**

As I have suggested, many church leaders raised the topic of baptism during interviews and conversations, often in response to a request to compare and contrast local church communities. As a point of contrast, differences in baptismal practice mirrored long-standing points of debate within Christian church history: between sprinkling and immersion techniques; between the rationales for infant or adult baptism; and between immediate or delayed baptism for those who make a knowing commitment to the Christian life and faith.\(^{415}\)

Of the fifteen Christian church communities I studied in Embangweni, eleven practiced immersion baptism, while four practiced sprinkling. They are as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CHURCH</th>
<th>Baptism Method</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Church of Central Africa Presbyterian</td>
<td>Sprinkling</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Roman Catholic</td>
<td>Sprinkling</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seventh Day Adventist</td>
<td>Immersion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jehovah’s Witness</td>
<td>Immersion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chipangano</td>
<td>Immersion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Last Church of God and His Christ</td>
<td>Immersion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zion Prophecy Church of God</td>
<td>Immersion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zion Christian Church</td>
<td>Immersion</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^{415}\)On the issues of age and timing, opinions differed regarding the requisite level of Biblical knowledge for baptismal candidacy.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>New Apostolic Church</th>
<th>Sprinkling</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Church of Christ</td>
<td>Immersion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Full Gospel Church of God</td>
<td>Immersion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bible Believers</td>
<td>Immersion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anglican</td>
<td>Sprinkling</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Restored Christian Community Church</td>
<td>Immersion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assemblies of God</td>
<td>Immersion</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Leaders in the eleven immersion churches generally argued for baptism by full immersion as the only true form of baptism, while leaders of churches practicing sprinkling baptism generally accepted both methods as valid.\(^{416}\) Leaders from the four local African Instituted Churches (AICs),\(^{417}\) more than any other church type, emphasized the contrast between sprinkling and immersion, though Born Again leaders in both local Pentecostal churches (the Assemblies of God and Full Gospel), as well as the Bible Believers, also invoked methodological contrasts and argued that immersion was the only legitimate form of baptism. Leaders of other churches, in particular from the Restored Church, also defended immersion baptism exclusively.\(^{418}\) These various apologies for immersion were often normative in tone and articulation,\(^{419}\) and suggested that

\(^{416}\) Of these eleven immersion churches, only one, the Seventh Day Adventist church, is among the first-wave mission churches. It stands apart from the other three first-wave mission churches in its practice of immersion and other baptismal policies.

\(^{417}\) Zion Christian Church, Zion Prophecy Church, Last Church, and Chipangano Church.

\(^{418}\) The Restored church does not fall neatly into any of the three major categories of churches I encountered in Embangweni. It is not a first-wave mission church, nor an African Instituted Church, nor part of the Born Again church movement. Throughout this chapter and others, however, I include quotes from its members as an example of a church that occupies an interesting doctrinal and disciplinary middle-ground between the other local churches.

\(^{419}\) This is a key point. That members of different church types invoked different issues in response to questions about how local churches differ suggests a more fundamental contestation between church groups.
members of contrasting church communities were at fault, either by their own agency or that of
others, in their baptismal practice and its guiding logic.

To demonstrate this, I start with a quote from a leader in the local Seventh Day Adventist
(SDA) congregation. In the following quote, William Nyirenda, a seventy-year old man of Tonga
heritage who is the local SDA Elder, affirms the prescriptive quality of Jesus’s baptismal example,
and attends to the relevance of full-bodied baptism. Raised as a child attending CCAP churches
and schools, Nyirenda switched his church affiliation to SDA at the age of forty-nine. Even though
he had been baptized by sprinkling in CCAP as a child, he was rebaptized by immersion. During
our first interview, I asked him why this was.

LINDLAND  How about the baptism issue? Why when you returned to Seventh Day did they
tell you “Your baptism in CCAP was not a real baptism. You must be baptized
again.” Why did they tell you that?

NYIRENDA  Because I was a pagan.

LINDLAND  Even though you were coming from one Christian church to another?

[Or]

NYIRENDA  [You] you, a church could lead you to be a pagan, by what they are following. You
might be following the...ahm...instructions which are contrary to what Jesus taught.
You were in CCAP and the system of baptism in CCAP is not acceptable in
Seventh Day Adventist. They put a small quantity of water in a bowl, or a plate.
Holding that plate, dipping his fingers, a few fingers, or his fingers in that bowl,
then [he] touches the fingers [to] the face of the person being
baptized. And that’s
what Jesus didn’t tell us. Jesus set up an example for immersion, baptism by
immersion. He was baptized by immersion, River Jordan, and that is the example
he set. We should follow that.

There are several things to note from this passage. Nyirenda’s first comments are in some respects
his strongest. The word ‘pagan’ is a strong one, one that implies a state of being that is
categorically distinct from Christianity. In saying that he was a pagan coming out of youthful
participation in the CCAP, he suggests that the CCAP is not part of the true church of Christ, and
that its members are being deceived. Given orthodox Christian eschatology, he is perhaps even
suggesting that they are condemned to hell for their false belief. It should be noted that his
comment implies that you are a pagan because of the ritual instructions you follow, a highly embodied and kinesic notion of sin and its spiritual implications. Though he does not, in this brief quotation, go into the specifics of what baptism accomplishes that makes one either a real Christian or a pagan, it is clear that the efficacy of the rite is dependent upon following the right methodology. Secondly, he gives a detailed description of the sprinkling baptismal method used by the CCAP. The lack of embodiment and physicality employed in the technique is emphasized throughout the description. As Nyirenda describes it, the minister dips but a few fingers into a baptismal bowl that has only a bit of water in it. The image is one of light motion in which minimal contact is made with the sparse water involved. From there, the minister merely touches the face of the person being baptized, again implying a lightness of physicality and bodily experience. Nyirenda does not explicitly critique this physical model of baptism for its lack of bodily engagement, but its contrast with full-bodied immersion is clear. He concludes this speech segment by stating that Jesus instituted a prescriptive model of the ritual in being baptized by immersion in the Jordan River. The meaning of his comments is evident: immersion baptism is the only sacred, true, and effective ritual form, and members of churches practicing other methods will be judged by God for their disobedience to its biblical standard.

Throughout the course of my interviews, I found similar perspectives echoed by most leaders of local AICs. In the context of northern Malawi, these are either churches that split from the Livingstonia Mission-CCAP, which practices sprinkling, or independent churches that came to Malawi from South Africa. The following recorded exchange between myself, my research assistant Mulungu, and Kalengo Ndhlovu, a sixty year old Ngoni man and Archdeacon in the Zion

---

420 Several other informants also referred to immersion baptism as being baptized in the Jordan, a process of metonymic logic whereby any body of water used for immersion baptism becomes ritually equivalent to the Jordan River itself. This metaphoric locating of the baptismal rite in a defined place – the Jordan River.
Prophecy Church, is representative of this trend among AIC members to defend immersion baptism as the right, true, and effective method.\textsuperscript{421}

LINDLAND How does Zion Prophet Church, are its teachings, are they quite different say from CCAP or from the Catholic Church?

MULUNGU For your church to have more people, does it have distinct teachings from CCAP or Roman Catholic?

NDHLOVU Yes. We differ.

MULUNGU Where is the difference?

NDHLOVU We differ in many aspects. One, we differ on baptism.

MULUNGU How do you baptize?

NDHLOVU We baptize in the Jordan.

MULUNGU OK.

NDHLOVU Everybody. But our friends baptize by sprinkling water from a plate. The difference starts there, and therefore our teachings cannot be similar. But a problem for our friends is that they don’t read all chapters or verses. What we want is to make use of all the scriptures of the [Book].

MULUNGU [OK!]

NDHLOVU So that an individual should learn for themself what they please. If not, they should leave. Yeah.

In this brief exchange, Ndhlovu introduces the topic of baptism in response to a question about how Zion Prophecy Church differs from the local CCAP and Roman Catholic churches. While Mulungu and I proposed the topic of difference\textsuperscript{422}, Ndhlovu introduced baptism into the interview as a relevant area of contrast.\textsuperscript{423} Secondly, he then directly contrasts the Zion Prophecy Church method of immersion baptism, baptizing “in the Jordan” as he says, and the practice of sprinkling used by “our friends”. Thirdly, he suggests this practical difference is a fundamental one, such that

\textsuperscript{421}The local language used during the vast majority of interviews was chiTumbuka, the lingua franca of northwestern Malawi (and parts of northeastern Zambia). An occasional interview was conducted in chiChewa, the vernacular nationalized by Hastings Kamuzu Banda in the early years of his thirty-year dictatorship. All quotes below are in English and/or chiTumbuka, unless otherwise indicated. Quotes represented in italics were originally in chiTumbuka, but have been presented directly in their English translation.

\textsuperscript{422}Note that Mulungu added a concern with membership recruitment to my initial question about difference.

\textsuperscript{423}This was the first time baptism came up in our conversation or interview. Both the topic and associated methodological model were generated by Jere.
other disparities between the churches start there. “The difference starts there, and therefore our teachings cannot be similar.” In this view, baptism is not a trivial practice, but one central to the Christian life that carries implications for other facets of the faith. He concludes this speech segment with a critique of the CCAP and Roman Catholic Church, still without mentioning them by name, for being selective in their reading of the Bible, a serious accusation. By implication, the Biblical model set by Jesus provides the authoritative model of the right, true, and effective baptismal method.

Other AIC respondents also argued for immersion baptism by asserting a required consistency of form between Jesus’s baptism and contemporary ones. Wisdom Mizwa, a sixty year old Ngoni man ordained as a pastor in the Last Church, had this to say in response to questions comparing the two methods. It should be noted that Mizwa had already made comments about the relationship between baptism and the coming of the Holy Spirit, which Mulungu followed up on in his question quoted here. That earlier exchange will be examined later in this chapter. The focus for the moment is on Mizwa’s rationale for immersion as opposed to sprinkling.

LINDLAND And does it matter how you are baptized? Can you be baptized by sprinkling? Baptized by immersion? Does it matter how you are baptized?

MULUNGU So does it mean that for someone to be reformed by having the Holy Spirit, a person needs baptism by sprinkling, or maybe they must be baptized by immersion in order for the Holy Spirit to come with strength?

MIZWA Hmm. On baptism, I have observed many churches. I have also heard that they do baptize by sprinkling. But total immersion, whereby one is dipped in water and raised, means that Jesus died and was crucified. During his baptism, God said that ‘This is my son with whom I am pleased.’ The voice came from heaven, that he is his beloved son, and the spirit came upon him. So just pouring water on the head is not meaningful. Uh! No!

In this quote, Mizwa suggests another important analogy between the practice of immersion baptism and the life of Jesus. This time the reference is not to the actual kinesic modeling of baptism by immersion in the Jordan, but to the symbolic correlation between the passion of the
death and resurrection of Jesus and the passage of the baptismal process itself. He also invokes biblical verses to emphasize the affirmative voice of God Himself, giving his blessing via the Holy Spirit to Jesus after he was baptized by immersion. Implied in this, I would argue, is a notion that there was a specific value attached to the particular performance of the baptismal act. It was not a casual or random choice of ritual process that God was blessing, but a specific sacred choreography of the body.

Like the just quoted AIC leaders, most Pentecostal leaders in Embangweni also made strong apologies for immersion baptism. Below are passages from a joint interview with two leaders from the Pentecostal Full Gospel church. Boyd Chavula was a thirty-one year old Tumbuka man, farmer by livelihood, and lay leader in the church. He was interviewed together with Happy Soko, a thirty-five-year-old Tumbuka man and pastor of the congregation. Both were self-identified ‘Born Agains’.

CHAVULA...When you are baptized, the Bible says, you are dying together with Christ, and rising together with Christ. Just as Christ went to the grave and rose from the grave. So when you are baptized, you are dying together with Christ and raised together with Christ. That’s fulfilling the Christianity. Yes!

LINDLAND Does it matter...thank you Hosana. Ah, you can close it, just close it. Does it matter how one is baptized?

CHAVULA Oh! Yes!

LINDLAND Why?

CHAVULA OK! When you are a Christian, you have to follow the steps of Christ. And Christ went into the water and came out from the water. That was total immersion. So for you to be baptized, you must be immersed in water.

Chavula suggests, as did Mizwa from Last Church, that the baptismal process parallels the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. He suggests that this is not merely a metaphoric, symbolic

---

424 I was assisted during this interview by Hosana Nyirenda, an early research assistant of mine and a former member of Full Gospel who had been forced to leave the congregation after taking a second wife.

425 A reference to my front door.
parallel, but should be an embodied one as well, mirroring the burial and rising of Christ. He concludes by invoking the example set by Jesus Christ in being baptized by full immersion by John.

This invocation of the bodily parallel between the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ and the baptismal process was also echoed in an interview with another self-proclaimed Born Again, Edson Phiri. Phiri was a twenty-eight-year-old man of mixed Chewa and Ngoni descent, who served as a worship leader in the local Bible Believers congregation. He was raised a CCAP member, but switched to Bible Believers in 1996 after being challenged by a preacher to read certain passages of the Bible about “true baptism” and holy communion. On the former, he became convinced that immersion baptism is the only true form. While explaining his break with the CCAP in a lengthy monologue that covered a wide range of topics, he stated:

**PHIRI** Baptism, it symbolizes the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. So maybe I can ask you a question. When someone has died, [do] we bury the whole body? I think so. You can’t bury someone, only the face! (Laughs) So it was with me. The body of Jesus Christ was buried and rose. With Jesus Christ, in [the] form of baptism. So I read, okay, I think this verse is true. If you can go back to the Bible, Jesus Christ said you should go and preach and everyone who hears the word of God, you should baptize him in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

The implication here is that just as baptism symbolizes the death and resurrection of Christ, so baptism must mirror the burial process. Just as burial is an intermediate process between death and resurrection, so baptism is the intermediate process between an old life of sin and a new life in Christ. As the whole body is buried, so too the whole body must be baptized through full immersion. In this case, the analogic character of the physical act is central to its potency, and sprinkling water on the head is simply not effective. Again, he references the Bible as authority, and specifically invokes the Trinitarian God as the basis for that baptism.

---

426 That Jesus was entombed and not buried was not an issue in our conversation. The meaning of Nkhoma’s comments are still clear.
Each of the church leaders quoted above articulated a range of public and private defenses for the policy of immersion baptism. In these explanations, what happens to the body in real, physical terms is critically important to the symbolic and spiritual implications of the rite, and perhaps even its eschatological consequences. The model is of a ritual orchestration of the whole body, from head to toe. As a methodological model of baptism, immersion becomes, in these statements, a sacred choreography of the body.

**In Defense of Sprinkling**

As noted at the beginning of the chapter, members of the four churches practicing sprinkling were not inclined to invoke baptismal method as a relevant point of contrast between churches, and unless put on the defensive, the issue seemed to be a backgrounded concern. In the following quote, and prompted from a question from me about baptism, Kumbira Mtonga, a sixty-year-old Tonga man and church warden of the local Anglican congregation, invokes biblical criteria in his defense of sprinkling as a church practice shared by the Anglican, CCAP, and Roman Catholic churches.

**MULUNGU**  
*There are some people we have chatted with who say that real baptism is that of total immersion, which Jesus had in the Jordan river, but not that of sprinkling water on the head. How can you enlighten us on that?*

**MTONGA**  
*No! As I have already said earlier on, different churches do differently because of simply copying. So we Anglicans, Roman Catholic, CCAP, baptize by sprinkling because it was certified by Jesus Himself when the Holy Spirit came. This was started by the apostles and most churches take after that, simply sprinkling water on the head. During the time of Jesus, most people were being baptized by total immersion. John also refused to accept baptizing Jesus because he was superior. But Jesus insisted, saying that he ought to be baptized by John because he was given that veto by God. That’s why a dove came with the Holy Spirit and the words, ‘This is my son with whom I am pleased,’” were heard. The other churches take after that. The dove stood on his head and the Holy Spirit came.*
Grouping his own Anglican church with CCAP and Roman Catholic churches, Mtonga defends sprinkling as authorized by Jesus, and adopted by the Apostles, and as corresponding with the coming of the Holy Spirit following Jesus’ own baptism.\(^{427}\) It was also the method adopted by the Apostles. He acknowledges that immersion baptism was the initial method, and recounts the baptism of Jesus by John, when the blessing and Holy Spirit of God descended upon him. In a non-judgmental but also non-defensive tone, he notes that is why other churches practice immersion.

Walter Mwale, a forty-four-year-old man of Chewa descent born and raised in a local village, was the local CCAP minister and Head-of-Station at Loudon during my fieldwork in Embangweni. In the following exchange, he argues for a strongly symbolic understanding of the baptismal rite.

LINDLAND: But I’m wondering if there are particular areas of theological concern or confusion that people come to you about, specifically. Is there, are there any theological issues that you find people in your congregation are consistently wrestling with?

MWALE: Yes. True. Aahm, like you asked me earlier on, what, what complaints do parishioners come to you with.

LINDLAND: Yeah, it’s a s...

MWALE: One of the main questions is about baptism.

LINDLAND: Hm.

MWALE: They’re saying “Well, many sects,” again, confrontation with sects, “are saying your baptism is false, because to be baptized, to be fully baptized, one has to be immersed in the water, in much water.” You see. So this is a common point of concern.

LINDLAND: [Now]

MWALE: [And] baptisms here involve…

LINDLAND: yes, on the head, sprinklin[g]

MWALE: …[s]prinkling

LINDLAND: Yeah. Yeah. Now what we are telling them is this. Baptism is only the symbol. The water that is poured on your head, or in much water, is only a symbol that the water washes away your sins. What begins is the Word of God, then repentance, and then, aahm, you get baptized. Yeah, so baptism is only a symbol. In fact somebody at college, at the theological college told me, told us, that you could also

\(^{427}\) See Matthew 3:13-17.
be baptized with sand if you are in the desert. (Laughs) I couldn’t believe that, but again it’s a symbol. You see?

This exchange followed an earlier one in which Mwale argues that many of the smaller local churches, which he refers to with negative intonation as ‘sects’, pose a threat to Christian orthodoxy and morality in the area. In this exchange, he introduces the topic of baptismal method as one doctrinal area where these churches are fostering confusion among the local population.

Without defining the specifics of their logic beyond an argument for immersion baptism exclusively, he counters that theirs is a misinterpretation of the baptismal rite. The use of water, whether by immersion or sprinkling, is only symbolic, not constitutive, of a washing away of sin. He outlines a sequence that begins with exposure to the Bible, moves on to repentance, and concludes with the public, symbolic act of baptism. It’s important to note that he also invokes the metaphor of water washing away of sin, but by emphasizing the symbolic value of baptism, he implies that it is the act of repentance that is effective in cleansing the individual from sin. His final reflection from his days in theological college reaffirms an emphasis on the symbolic, not material, form of the rite. The contrast between the immersion and sprinkling models of baptism points to a second set of differences among these two types of churches, differences that revolve around the question of what criteria are necessary and sufficient for a person to qualify for religious initiation through baptism.

---

428 It should be noted that his use of the term ‘symbolic’ is derived from classically Western usage. This suggests a mostly communicative efficacy to symbols, rather than a deeper ontological one. This question of what symbols are and what they accomplish will be addressed more fully later in this and the next chapter.

429 Though I did not pursue this example of sand baptism as an extreme case, I presume that Chunga would have still argued for a ritual form that would mimic the pouring of water of the head, a standard gesture of washing. So, even at this heightened symbolic degree – using sand rather than water – there would likely be some minimal physical analogy required – the pouring of sand over the head – for the rite to be even recognizable as a baptism. This is not to say that some other physical movement and process could not be constructed to be baptism, but in the case of the CCAP and most other Christian churches, this has not happened.
Is a change of heart enough? Repentance, knowledge, and sacred personhood

In responding to my questions about comparing and contrasting local churches, several informants, in addition to differentiating between immersion and sprinkling, also referred to the length of time a new church member had to wait before being eligible for baptism. While all of my church informants articulated the need for repentance and/or behavioral reformation, only some put added emphasis on church knowledge, specifically theological and ethical knowledge, as an additional criteria. Going into baptism, how knowledgeable must the involved individual be about the rite’s normative associations before they qualified to participate? Again, both church policies and individual opinions differed on this, but clear patterns emerged from my sampling of leaders of various local churches. Among both Born Again and AIC leaders, a person was eligible for baptism, often on the same day, if it was accepted that the newcomer (1) showed knowledge of the basic gospel message of acknowledging one’s sinfulness and submitting oneself to God, and (2) professed a repentant heart. In this case, knowledge and repentance are fused, in that repentance is only meaningful in Christian terms if framed in a knowledge of personal sin and of the power of God. More often than not, Born Again and AIC leaders emphasized the transformation of the heart over that of the intellect as the criterion for baptism. By contrast, in first-wave mission churches, including SDA, new members were asked to demonstrate a more extensive knowledge of Christian theology, and if found wanting, were made to partake in catechumen classes that often lasted for many months. In general, members of either type of church tended to defend their respective church policy. As with the issue of baptismal method, this difference of perspective

---

430 This issue, like that of baptismal method, was raised independently by my informants as a basis of contrast, and often complaint, against the local CCAP church establishment. There is an engagement here with the power of CCAP and its attempt to dictate local definitions of Christianity, in particular via its disciplinary and employment policies.

431 Born Again leaders include all of the Pentecostal leaders interviewed, as well as a leader from the Bible Believers and Last Church respectively.
points to an important underlying difference of framework vis-a-vis the embodied and/or intellectual attributes of faith.

Wisdom Mizwa, the sixty-year-old Ngoni man and Last Church pastor quoted earlier in this chapter in defense of immersion, argued for immediate baptism on the basis of both biblical example and the unpredictability of life. He had this to say about the circumstances of his leaving CCAP and eventually joining Last Church.

MIZWA The Bible says that when Jesus was, got the words and was baptized, because it was in this time that he got the words. Suppose you die in the course of learning the church ethics. You have got no fees. Then you die. What can you do? But in that time that you get affected by the words, you must, you should be baptized. If one hears the words, repents, and is called, then we should baptize you.

Mizwa argues that immediate baptism should follow directly on the heels of individual repentance – that baptism should follow someone having been affected by the Christian message. In this model, the only criterion for baptism is a repentant heart. It should be noted that he refers to both the “learning of church ethics” and the burden of “fetching fees” as ecclesiastical policies in his critique of those churches that delay baptism, at a cost to the possible eschatological welfare of the individual.

Moses Banda, a thirty-one-year-old local Tumbuka businessman and also pastor in the Last Church, also argued emphatically for prompt baptism.

BANDA We are following the movement of Yohani. Yohani was moving here and there. Now there is a person who says ‘I want to follow Jesus.’ They just took him and baptized him, without any step, saying ‘We are on this step. Now we are on step

---

432 I am not sure what Mwiza meant by the reference to how Jesus “got the words”, but I suspect it is in reference to the first three Gospels’ account that God proclaimed “This is my Son, my Beloved” when Jesus came up out of the water after his baptism by John.
433 The Tumbuka version of ‘John’.
434 Original: “mwakuti”
what.’ No! Just baptize him. Soon after baptizing him, then teach him ‘Do this, this, this.’ Yeah.

In this quote, Banda seems to invoke the New Testament account given by John in the Book of Acts, wherein during the days and months following Jesus’s resurrection, the apostles immediately baptized those who heard and embraced their message, and displayed a repentant heart. He emphasized the lack of procedural delays after the simple, initial commitment to follow Jesus is made. As in Mizwa’s quote, there is to be an immediate and direct correspondence between the internal act of repentance and the ritual act of baptism.

Banda is interesting intermediate figure, because he is both a member of an AIC and a self-ascribed “Born Again”, who unhesitatingly described himself as such when asked. As a businessman, Banda regularly travels to nearby urban centers (including Lundazi in neighboring Zambia, and Mzimba, the district capital) where he likely comes into contact with members of the Born Again movement. On this issue of the timing of baptism, both his AIC membership and his Born Again sensibilities conjoin. Both support immediate baptism with a similar rationale; that the litmus test of Christian faith is a matter of the heart, not the intellect. This conjunction points to a key underlying conjunction between the sacred logics of AICs and Pentecostal churches – that the body is an integral part of spiritual personhood, and the body is central to any experience of the Divine.

This perspective is echoed by another young Born Again church leader, Edson Phiri, the twenty-eight-year-old Bible Believers study-leader quoted earlier. He, like Banda, is a businessman with regular contact with members of the Born Again movement in urban areas, and had identified himself as a Born Again during our interview. As already mentioned, he started our recorded session with a long monologue in which he explained how he switched to Bible Believers

---

435 Note the language of following. It is an active image of walking in another’s footsteps – of living and doing, not theologizing.
from CCAP after becoming convinced that the CCAP’s policies on baptism were wrong. Shortly
after he critiqued the CCAP policy of baptism by sprinkling (see quote above), he cited Acts 2: 37
to confirm the fact that baptism can and should immediately follow a person’s repentance and
public confession.

PHIRI You will find this, that is Acts, chapter 2, verse. So here Peter is baptizing some people.
That was on the day of Pentecost. That is after Jesus Christ. Then they were in Jerusalem,
and now Peter is saying, verse 37: “Now when they heard this, they were pricked in their
hearts, and said unto Peter and to the rest of the Apostles, ‘Men and brothers, what shall we
do?’ Peter said unto them, ‘Repent and be baptized, every one of you in the name of Jesus
Christ for the remission of sins and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost.’” You see
here, the verse is saying Peter was one of the people who was with Jesus. Jesus Christ told
them that you should go preach the Gospel and baptize the people in the name of Son,
Father and the Holy Spirit. And you will see here Peter is baptizing in the name of Jesus
Christ.... Peter was with Jesus Christ and here is baptizing people in the name of Jesus
Christ. And he continues for the remission of sins. You will find most of [the] churches
make people, that first you should take class one, class two, class three, class four. Then
it’s when you get baptized. While here the [verses] say, it, they were baptizing the same
day, as long as you have repented your sins. If I was doing this, I was doing this, it ends
there. It’s your time to be baptized.

Phiri cites from the book of Acts to suggest that it is the act of repentance to God which is critical
to qualify for the forgiveness of sins and reception of the Holy Spirit. The verse uses a particular
metaphor of personal transformation, that of having one’s heart pricked. The image invokes a
moment of piercing sensation, a stinging acknowledgment and moral unease centered in the human
heart. This is a metaphor for the sense of guilt that should accompany a recognition of one’s sinful
nature and behavior, and the need to repent to God.436 Nkhoma does not define in specific
intellectual/knowledge-based terms what constitutes the act of repentance, and, like the AIC

436 Later in the interview, Phiri argues that a person can continue sinning even while they are in
theological training, so the emphasis should be on repentance, not training. He says CCAP and
Roman Catholic members still sin through practices of witchcraft, vimbuza dancing, beer drinking,
and adultery. They have had their intellects trained, but not their hearts changed. He states that
even so-called “Reverends” commit these sins.
leaders already quoted, he critiques the over-intellectualization of the faith suggested by delaying baptism for formal instruction.\footnote{Interestingly, as will be seen later, a fellow Bible Believers church leader uses the same verse to defend a policy of not baptizing children, because repentance includes certain minimal knowledge requirements. His is an argument for not fully de-intellectualizing the qualifications for the rite. See quotes by Mkumbwa below and accompanying commentary.}

In contrast to this AIC and Born Again perspective, leaders from first-wave mission churches were unanimous in arguing for the correctness of delaying baptism until a new convert has achieved a prescribed degree of theological and doctrinal competence. Maria Ngwira, a fifty-two-year-old Tumbuka woman and leader in the local Roman Catholic congregation, voiced such a view during one of our interviews with her.

LINDLAND  Now when she looks at her church today, how does she see the Roman Catholic church here as compared to some other churches in this area?

MULUNGU  He is saying that as now you are a person with some authority at Rome, how do you compare the Roman with other churches around Embangweni?

NGWIRA  I will just generalize because I haven’t been to all the churches, giving them marks.

MULUNGU  Not marking and looking at the behavior of people in churches as such, yes?

NGWIRA  O-ho! As I am in the R.C., I observe the churches around, may be in funeral tasks. There is a big difference there, that up to now I can see. In many churches, many members lack knowledge of their faith because they do not have good lessons, or no lessons at all in their churches. They just worship routinely, as I was doing with PIM. They don’t have a chance of having lessons in their church, maybe, except for the CCAP, as they have some lessons. They don’t have real direction to enlighten their members about salvation. That is why if a person is converted today, you will see them getting baptized tomorrow. And the following day he is a pastor or deacon! That’s why I can’t see light in such churches.

Ngwira begins her response with the qualification that she has not been engaged in a process of formally judging and ranking local churches. This is, I would argue, a response to Mulungu’s identification of her as a Roman Catholic church leader, and her way of suggesting that her comments are her reflections and not church policy per se. She then suggests that her best basis of
comparison is from what she sees while attending local funerals. Within local experience, funerals are, without question, the most common public setting in which people are formally exposed to the theology and doctrine of other church institutions. As such, they provide a good basis for comparison. On this basis, Ngwira directly critiques the level of theological competence she has observed among many church memberships, and suggests this is because they lack formal class instruction before baptism. She mentions only the CCAP by name as a church that avoids this error. She then suggests that baptisms are too rushed in other churches, and then adds, with a note of light sarcasm, that it is only part of a larger trend of premature advancement of personnel who are not doctrinally competent. She then invokes the metaphor of light as indicative of truth to conclude that these churches are misguided.

Ngwira’s comments reflect a defense of Christian orthodoxy and the value to a person of a formal inheritance of a church’s doctrinal history. They reflect a concern with religious knowledge, a person’s ability to intellectually engage, understand, and articulate the premises of their faith and new life in Christ. This is echoed by Walter Mwale, the local Presbyterian Minister and Head-of-Station at Embangweni.

LINDLAND And I guess a couple, two questions for you on that. One is whether or not you have a sense that there are some sects in this area that are really growing faster than others. And secondly, this question of baptism that I’ve had a couple people mention to me, that they have decided to seek membership elsewhere because the requirements for baptism in CCAP are difficult.

MWALE Hm. Strict.
LINDLAND Are strict, yeah. And I wonder if you could comment on both of [those.] [OK]. To begin with, I’m aware of the fact that we have a number of sects around, but to say that one is saying much faster than the others, I wouldn’t tell.

MWALE I haven’t done the statistics, and I don’t even intend to do so. (Laughs) The second question was baptism. We believe that for a person to become a Christian, he must be well grounded in the scriptures. By well grounded, I mean, he or she begins as

\[438\] This is a topic worthy of further research.
a Sunday school learner, and then, catechumen, and then becomes a full member. So that when he becomes, he is baptized or she is baptized and becomes a full member, is able to preach the gospel to other people. Now Paul warns us that we should be faithful with the doctrines we have learned. In other words, we should be able to defend our faith to other people. Now you don’t defend your faith to other people on, on a light footing, from a small base. You really have to be grounded into the scriptures. Yes. So, we want people who become Christians to be people who understand the scriptures. And, more than that, when they become Christians, the elders are supposed to support these people spiritually. Because, you see, faith is growth. Every time you are learning. You begin with milk, then you go to the solid food, and so on, as Paul says. Is it Paul or Peter?

Mwale argues that baptismal candidates must be well grounded in the scriptures, as this enables them to defend their faith and spread the gospel message by their own accord and ability. He traces the requisite movement through Sunday school and catechumen classes, and defines faith as growth, comparing it to moving from a diet of milk to solid food. The individual must be able to consume solid doctrine before they qualify for baptism into the Christian community. In his second statement, he suggests that delayed baptism is not the real reason people leave CCAP. Rather, in this view, it is because they seek out churches that have less disciplined doctrinal policies.

---

439 Mwale would probably agree with Elmslie’s comment in a 1898 letter to fellow missionary Dr. George Smith that “Zeal without knowledge would weaken the native church for all time coming.” (Cited in Thompson 1995, p.97)
William Nyirenda, the seventy-year-old Elder of the local SDA congregation quoted above, also argued in favor of delayed baptism on the basis that candidates must be able understand the full implications of their conversion before participating in the rite.

LINDLAND Now when we were at church together on Saturday, and you walked me around to the different Sabbath classes: one for the children, the youth, the adults. There was a special one for baptismal candidates. Was that right?

NYIRENDA The, yes.

NYIRENDA [Yes.] The ones who have decided to follow certain Bible lessons, after which they would be qualified for baptism.

LINDLAND OK. Why does one have to be qualified for baptism?

NYIRENDA This question leads me way back. Ahm, in Seventh Day Adventist, we don’t baptize children, the very young children, aging from one to seven, eight years, because they cannot decide. They, we shouldn’t baptize them before they realize, they come to senses “Why am I being baptized.” Ahm..

LINDLAND And what does that mean to? What does it? If someone comes to their senses that they should be baptized, what have they realized?

NYIRENDA The Bible lessons will tell them, ahm, who created them, ahm, the, ahm, let them know God, and what God wants them to do. They should know good things and bad things, as per, eh, the Bible. “Do you know that stealing is bad? Killing is bad? Do you know that respecting Sunday is one of the sinful asp.. items?” One has got to know that bad, dist, one should be able to distinguish bad and good things. Then, we would call that as mature. He is ready for baptism.

LINDLAND Yeah.

NYIRENDA There are questions before baptism, eh, Bible questions. And once those are successfully answered, then we, we are satisfied he is ready for baptism.

It is noteworthy that in responding to a question about catechumen classes, Nyirenda turns to the question of infant baptism, and suggests that the two issues are related because both involve what he calls the “senses”, the conscious realization of the gospel message and its implications. In this exchange, Nyirenda affirms that SDA does not baptize infants because children cannot realize why they are being baptized, by implication a prerequisite for baptism. He relates this to a justification for catechumen classes, which are intended to develop an individual’s understanding of the ultimate authority of their creator God and of his normative injunctions for how to incarnate a mature Christian life. Again, as with Roman Catholic Nzima’s and Presbyterian Mwale’s
comments, there is an emphasis on knowledge, knowing whom and what is to be distinguished, respected, and obeyed.

**Methodological Models of Baptism: a summary of issues**

Within the Christian ecclesiastical culture of Embangweni, the timing and age requirements for baptism have become points of contestation, as some argue for immediate baptism following repentance while others argue for delayed baptism in order to allow time for doctrinal training. This question of criteria conjoins with the earlier issue of baptismal methodology in terms of modeling the body as the locus of spiritual experience and change. The defenders of both immersion and immediate baptism shared a focus on the body as the ground of one’s being, and an on the parallel between the heartfelt act of repentance and the ritual act of baptism, both of which help effect an internal transformation and emotional remaking of self.

By contrast, the first-wave mission church leaders emphasized theological education. This bias towards an intellectualizing of faith reflects an emphasis on the symbolically abstracted value of baptism as an indicator of normative competence. The practical result of this view is that baptisms are often delayed in sprinkling denominations so that new converts can receive doctrinal training and a degree of mastery within their respective orthodoxies.

This summary of baptismal theologies reveals a clear line of bifurcation between those church traditions that emphasize the bodily dimensions of the rite, and those that emphasize the knowledge-based criteria that should accompany it. The alliance of AIC and Born Again leaders on one side of this split is notable, as the two church communities are at odds with each other on many fronts. Both AIC and Born Again leaders invoked a correspondence between the literal death and resurrection of Jesus Christ and the figurative death to sin and resurrection to a new life in Christ embodied in the baptismal rite. My use of the term ‘figurative’ is not random, as in these spoken apologies for immersion, it is precisely the full bodily figure of the person that must experience
baptism. In this view, there is something especially efficacious about a full-bodied baptism, which sprinkling cannot accomplish. As will be seen in the next section, this implies that the new Christian life is literally embodied during the rite of baptism.⁴⁴⁰

AIC and Born Again leaders also emphasized that it is the act of repentance, not doctrinal literacy, that qualifies a person for baptism. Doctrinal training should follow baptism, but should not itself be a condition for participation in the rite. Rather, baptism should follow immediately upon a person’s genuine repentance to God and submission to his will and authority. In this respect, their perspectives are de-institutionalized, in that the primary criterion lies with the individual and is not subject to church mediation. The general tone of their comments emphasized a change of being that is emotional and behavioral rather than intellectual.

It should be noted that the AIC and Born Again emphasis on the experiential power of the repentance experience as prior to any process of indoctrination in the knowledge and ethical systems of churches is not fully at odds with CCAP and other first-wave mission policies that do delay baptism in favor of prior teaching. These latter churches also affirm an internal transformation of the heart as the essence of repentance. This is an important conjunction, one central to all of these churches’ claims to a Christian affiliation. The difference lies in what other qualifications should be met. While the AIC and Pentecostal leaders focus on a basic recognition of personal sin and Godly power and decision of the heart, CCAP doctrine affirms that a change of heart must be followed by a growing intellectual engagement with the truth of the gospel message.⁴⁴¹

⁴⁴⁰ Among those already quoted, this concern with the transformation of the full bodied person was also echoed in Mwale’s reference to the rite as bodily cleansing process, a topic more thoroughly addressed in the next chapter.

⁴⁴¹ Note that the policy of requiring catechumen classes, as practiced by the CCAP and other first-wave mission churches, suggests a model of personhood that conceives of intellect and spirit as mutually constitutive. This is consistent with the model of psychic soul that emerged within the modern Christian tradition, as described in Chapter Two.
As for church leaders from the Anglican, Roman Catholic, and Presbyterian churches, their defenses of delayed baptism and sprinkling suggested a different pattern of interpretation. The Anglican Mtonga, like the AIC and Pentecostal leaders also quoted, affirmed the Bible as sacred authority, but rather than emphasizing the baptism of Jesus by John in the Jordan, he pointed to the practice of the Apostles of baptizing by sprinkling, and the recognition by the Holy Spirit of that method. Ngwira (Roman Catholic) and Mwale (CCAP) both argued that theological instruction should precede baptism to confirm that church members have a knowledgeable and mature faith. These leaders also emphasized the necessary act of repentance, but suggested that further Christian knowledge should precede the rite. These comments were consistent with both churches’ practice of requiring catechumen classes for new adolescent and adult members, despite the fact that both churches also baptize infants. This is a model of Christian faith that includes a highly intellectualized, knowledge-based standard of doctrinal competence.

The CCAP minister Mwale made the strongest argument for attributing a strictly symbolic value to baptism, and his arguments get to the heart of how the local defense of sprinkling differed from that for immersion. In this view, baptism is an act of communicating, to God and one’s church, a change that has already occurred in the state of one’s soul. It does not effect that change. For Mwale, the rite is representative of another, more fundamental transformation that should already have taken place, and is not constitutive of that transformation itself. The material and kinesic qualities of the event are not central to its work or function as a symbol, a function that is primarily expressive and communicative.442

442 Regarding baptism, the Presbyterian theologian John Mackay writes: “Baptism is the symbolical ceremony of initiation into the Christian Church, which is the sphere where the grace of God operates in a special manner. The symbolism becomes most fully apparent when the baptized person is dipped in water. This act signifies spiritual renewal through his dying to sin, his rising with Christ from the dead, and his engagement to be the Lord’s, whose name he bears. There is nothing indeed in the Presbyterian standards that would forbid a minister to baptize an adult by immersion. The Confession of Faith states explicitly, however, and rightly, that “dipping of the
The Seventh Day Adventist Nyirenda occupies an interesting intermediary place between the embodied logic of AIC and Pentecostal churches, and the more intellectualized position of the other first-wave mission churches. In his comments, Nyirenda validated the logic of delayed baptism through an argument against infant baptism. In this model, the individual to be baptized must have a mature faith, and be submissive to their creator God and aware of his injunctions for how to live a moral life. Neither children nor the uneducated repentant have this personal maturity. Like the other first-wave mission church leaders, Nyirenda invoked the idea of personal and doctrinal maturity as a litmus test for baptism. The individual is not a mature spiritual person without the knowledge that comes through exposure to church instruction. In this model, being subject to church authorities and their teachings is part of the pathway to true Christian knowledge, and thus true faith. By implication, only someone with true faith should be baptized.

**Baptism as an Orective and Normative Rite: Victor Turner and the Question of Symbolic Efficacy**

I began this chapter by quoting from the Gospel of Matthew’s account of the immersion baptism of Jesus by John the Baptist, and Victor Turner’s classic study of Ndembu rites of passage. In the latter, Turner argues that the symbols employed during Ndembu ritual action have a variety of meanings and associations that cluster at one of two semantic poles, which he calls the sensory/orectic and normative poles respectively. As he articulates them, the former pole emphasizes the symbolic associations between human physical and emotional experiences and the ecological correspondences of each symbolic object utilized, while the latter pole makes analogies.

---

person into the water is not necessary, but Baptism is rightly administered by pouring or sprinkling water upon the person.” What is important is the element used, not its amount nor the form of its application. While for the baptized person, especially the adult, Baptism becomes a special means of grace, it does not involve spiritual regeneration, as is held by some Christians.” (John A. Mackay. 1960. *The Presbyterian Way of Life*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, p. 159.)

443 *The Forest of Symbols*, p.54.
between symbols and a set of normative social associations and responsibilities. Each symbol analyzed by Turner among the Ndembu carried meanings located at both semantic poles, and he emphasized that for the Ndembu, both the orectic and normative poles are central to understanding the forms and functions of ritual action.

Turner based his analysis on both his interpretation of local exegesis on ritual symbolism, and his own observation and analysis regarding the operational and positional meanings of those same symbols. It is important to note at this stage that, as Turner suggests, the orectic and normative are not exclusive categories, but at opposite ends of a spectrum of meanings and orientations association with a given symbol. In Turner’s discussion, the symbolic object itself becomes the focal site for the juxtaposition of these two poles of meaning, as throughout the ritual action, the normative message is imparted to the initiate while they are in physical engagement with that object and the embodied experiences it references. In Turner’s analysis of Ndembu rites of passage, the orectic pole of the symbol refers to a generalized physiologic state, as, for example, the chikoli tree symbolizes an erect penis during Mukanda, the boy’s initiation rite, and the mudyi tree mimics lactating breasts during Nk’anga, the girl’s puberty ritual. This is not a state necessarily experienced during the ritual process, but is one associated with the life stage the initiate is moving into.

In his analysis, Turner emphasizes that among the Ndembu symbols have effective potency. They do not all communicate messages to their participants, but also effect changes within them. He writes:

It must not be forgotten that ritual symbols are not merely signs representing known things; they are felt to possess ritual efficacy, to be charged with power from unknown sources, and to be capable of acting on persons and groups coming in contact with them in such a way as to change them for the better or in a desired direction. Symbols, in short, have an
orectic as well as a cognitive function. They elicit emotion and express and mobilize desire.\textsuperscript{444}

This Turnerian notion of the orectic and normative dimensions of symbolic action, and of the efficacy of such action for transforming its participants, can be similarly applied to an exegetical analysis of Christian baptism and its meanings among the Embangweni church leaders I consulted. For all of them, the baptismal rite carried both orectic and normative associations. Towards the orectic pole of the symbolic spectrum, the baptismal rite was associated with an individual’s experience of repentance -- a deep emotional recognition of one’s sinful nature, and a corresponding submission to the will and authority of God. This is an emotional state that was universally associated with the heart-mind, \textit{mtima}, the center of personal sentiment and will.\textsuperscript{445} As a rite of passage into a new Christian life, baptism involved a symbolic cleansing of the body by water, a washing away of sin. At the same time, baptism also carried strong normative associations for all of the Christians I interviewed, implicating that the person being baptized is embarking on a new path of living, one guided by biblical injunctions to follow the life, message, and witness of Jesus Christ.

In spite of these commonalities, however, differences did emerge. Across the spectrum of AIC, Born Again, and first-wave mission church leaders, they differed in their emphases on one symbolic pole or the other, as well as in their definitions of what constitutes the “normative.” For defenders of immersion, the orectic associations of the rite were emphasized, as the experience of the body takes center stage in the rite. As a transition into a new state of being, its meaning and efficacy are fundamentally tied to the choreography of full-bodied immersion in water. In this model, immersion baptism mirrors the death and resurrection of the body, as the rite symbolizes a

\textsuperscript{444} Ibid., p.54.
\textsuperscript{445} Several of my informants explained to me that the same chiTumbuka word, \textit{mtima}, is used to reference both the content of the heart and the mind, because, as my research assistant Mulungu explained it to me, “your thoughts follow your heart.”
person’s death to an old way of life, and rebirth in a new Christian spirit of life everlasting. Often with hands crossed over chest, as corpses are sometimes arranged, the initiate is momentarily buried, face up, beneath the surface of the water – quite literally cut off, if only momentarily, from life-giving air – before they are raised anew, with a new breath, and a new spirit. This is a highly embodied modeling of death and resurrection, and one that is presumably a more intense bodily experience than having water sprinkled on the forehead. 446

The same church leaders who argued for immersion baptism also argued for immediate baptism following repentance. In this respect, these leaders were also emphasizing the emotional or ecstatic qualities of the ritual experience, rather than any associated intellectual criteria. 447 Likewise, these AIC and Pentecostal leaders used explicit metaphors of individual baptism as a figurative passage through death, burial, and resurrection, arguing for a choreography of the rite that should not be symbolically disembodied, but instead must retain some of its ‘gross’ physiological (and presumably emotional) correlates in experience. Though these apologists for immersion gave mostly biblical rationales for their arguments, I will argue that this concern with the body is also tied to a local pre-Christian cultural model that attributes the value and efficacy of ritual action to the body’s ecological, kinesic, and physiological experiences.

The leadership of the first-wave mission Livingstonia church emphasized a different set of associations with the baptismal rite. The Loudon Head-of-Station and CCAP reverend Mwale, for example, placed most of his emphasis on the normative pole of the rite as a whole, and specifically on the new moral nature of the individual who has repented and sought to make a public

446 Implied within Turner’s essay is a notion that the human body experiences many ritual actions in a state of heightened physiological activity (from fear, exertion, deprivation, temperature variation, enclosure, or other factor), and that this is key to the personal efficacy of the event.

447 The contrast between immersers and sprinklers can be overstated, however, as the normative pole is also important to AIC, Pentecostal, and Born Again defenders of immersion baptism, in addition to their focus on the embodiment of the act.
demonstration of that changed heart.\footnote{This relates to Turner’s use of ‘normative’ as the “moral norms and principles governing the social structure” \textit{(The Forest of Symbols, p.54)}.} For Mwale, sprinkling baptism is sufficient because it only represents, not effects, an already accomplished inner transformation of heart and mind. In this model, even though the use of water and gesture of washing has been maintained, the embodied physicality of the act is downplayed in favor of a concern with normative meanings of the rite – the individual’s previous repentance and demonstrated doctrinal competence, and the preaching that accompanies the baptismal ceremony. While baptism does effect a change in a person’s status as member of a church community, an important matter, the rite is not seen to effect a fundamental change in the person’s relationship to the Divine, and as such, is less ontologically significant.

Built into this logic of the rite is a gradual reduction of the necessary bodily engagement within its forms. In correlation with this conceptual disembodiment of the significance and efficacy of the rite is a real disembodiment of ritual action, as it becomes less ecologically, kinesically, and physiologically resonant via factors of intensity and duration. For the defenders of sprinkling, this disembodiment of the rite is conducive to its strong symbolization. Likewise, correlated with this inverse relationship between embodiment and symbolization is a changing understanding of ritual efficacy. As the rite becomes increasingly disembodied and given stronger symbolic value, the ontological implications realized for the individual involved in the rite are less significant; less essential to the present state and future of their soul. One could say this involves an abstraction of ontology from the human body itself.

This contrast between sprinkling and immersion theologies, between an emphasis on the embodied/sensory/orective pole, on the one hand, and on the more symbolically abstracted, normative pole on the other, point to another set of ontological and theological issues that arose in
local church leader’s exegesis on the topic of baptism. It is to these issues that I now turn in Chapter Eleven.
CHAPTER ELEVEN

Contested Theologies of Baptism: Cleansing, Salvation, and Ritual Efficacy

Introduction

In Chapter Ten I examined a range of church leader’s comments on the methods and qualifications for baptism. Contrasts among their perspectives suggested a theological bifurcation between those who emphasized the embodied and orectic facets of the experience, and those who emphasized its abstracted, intellectual and normative dimensions. In general, leaders from AIC and Pentecostal churches tended to articulate the first, while members of three of the first-wave mission churches (Presbyterian, Anglican, and Roman Catholic) emphasized the latter. In the other first-wave church, the Seventh Day Adventist, its spokesman argued for a theology of baptism located somewhere between the two poles of emphasis, arguing for both the methodology of full-bodied immersion and the intellectual criteria of doctrinal competence for baptismal candidates.449

It should again be noted that AIC and Born Again leaders also emphasized the normative implications of being baptized, which were in no way secondary to its bodily procedure. But in particular on the matter of candidacy for baptism, their concern with norms was centered on the emotional transformation of repentance and the behavioral changes that should follow from it, not with the intellectual mastery of doctrinal knowledge and its ethical implications, as among the four first-wave churches.

Among all of my church leader informants, baptism was understood to mark some type personal transformation. For all, there was an emphasis on repentance as the ultimate criterion for adult participation in the baptismal rite, though as will be seen below, informants placed more or

449 This is an intermediate position, emphasizing the orectic qualities of baptism as an immersion ritual of rebirth, and its normative dimensions as a ritual that should only follow a mastery of doctrinal knowledge.
less emphasis on different kinds of behavioral change as the mark of that repentance. For all, though, repentance is the initial act that brings change to the person. On this matter of personal transformation, however, another theological difference emerged during my interviews. It revolved around the question of whether the baptismal rite, specifically, was necessary and effective in completing the transformation initiated by repentance. While all of my informants agreed that baptism represented the initiation of a person into a new church community, there was disagreement as to the ontological and eschatological consequences of the rite. This disagreement centered around the question of whether baptism change a person so qualitatively that they take on a new being and destiny in the eyes of God.\textsuperscript{450}

\textbf{SDA and AIC voices: Baptism as sacred cleansing}

This question of change and personhood takes me to my first set of quotes, and back to the contrast between immersion and sprinkling techniques discussed in Part One. Specifically, several church leader informants invoked the language of “cleansing” in discussing the form and function of the rite, and argued in favor of immersion on that basis. If baptism cleans the body, then it is the whole body that must be cleansed. I begin with a quote by SDA Elder Nyirenda.

\begin{center}
\textbf{RECORDED TRANSCRIPT (English original)}
\end{center}

NYIRENDA  
Baptism, involves the person being baptized to be immersed in water. The moment you are immersed; you are dying with the sin. You leave the sin into the water, [and] come up a clean person. We, we basically base on that belief. Ah, Jesus was immersed. He didn’t sin, but he wanted to set an example for us to follow.

\textsuperscript{450} Related to this issue is a further question of who is a Christian and what that means. As will be seen, a variety of definitions of ‘Christian’ were in circulation in Embangweni during my research, each carrying different implications for understanding the place of Christianity in individual lives, and in the larger religious culture of the area.
In these comments, Nyirenda specifically invokes the language of both cleansing and sin. Baptism is a cleansing rite of passage, involving death to one’s sin and resurrection from the water as a morally clean person. “You leave the sin into the water.” He notes that because Jesus was without sin, he didn’t have to be baptized, but did so only in order to set an example for humanity. This final emphasis parallels his previous argument, in Part One, that Jesus’s baptism by immersion was a prescriptive example, and that there is a necessary analogy between the death and resurrection of Jesus and the passage of the baptismal process. Whereas Jesus’s death was a bodily one, the baptismal death is a moral one. Later in the same interview, we had the following exchange:

| LINDLAND | [I]n my conversations with some CCAP members, I have talked about this baptism issue, and their response to me is this: The water that is used in baptism, it is a symbol of God washing your sin away. It is a symbol. It’s not like you can literally wash the sin away, so whether it is being washed in a river, or having a little water dribbled down your face, it is only symbolic. So there is no difference between the two. Now, how would you respond to that? |
| NYIRENDA | Jesus set examples to be followed. And he meant that to be followed. Whatever Jesus did as an example, he meant that to be followed, precisely. Aahm...he set a clear example by going into enough water himself, without minding his clothes. Aahm...I don’t think any, any person is capable to change that. |
| LINDLAND | But now, does the water really wash away your sin? |
| NYIRENDA | Ahm, the.....yes. By believing that Jesus taught us, this is symbolic for clearing your sins away. If you do not do that, you are not, you, you haven’t changed. Ahm, the difference between, touching a person with water, in any fashion, is not the answer. Ahm, you, someone touches you in your face, forehead rather, ahm, ahm, that is not, we, we, we take that as misleading, because nobody set that example in the Bible. No one has set that example. But who is doing things the other way around? He should be responsible for misleading. This is how we look at it. |

This exchange can be subject to various interpretations, dependent in large part upon deciphering our usage of the term “symbolic”. During this interview, I used the term in a classically Western sense, implying that symbols are representational of experiential meaning, but not efficacious in
realizing that experience. My usage suggested that symbols function more as communicative measures rather than accomplishing any deep ontological change. As was seen in Turner’s study among the Ndembu, however, many Bantu cultures understand symbols to have efficacy, to be instruments of change and transformation themselves. In such case, my use of the phrase “only symbolic” would be misplaced. Despite my usage, Nyirenda’s responses suggest he understood the distinction I was making and the question of efficacy it implied. In his first response, he again invokes the authoritative biblical example set by Jesus. When I restate the question in more direct terms, he hesitates before answering affirmatively, and then, in what seems to be a weightier usage of the term “symbolic”, suggests that the rite is instrumental in washing away sins. To emphasize his point, he returns to a methodological contrast between sprinkling and immersion, again criticizing the superficiality of only “touching the face” and the lack, in his view, of biblical precedent therefor.

In a separate interview, Clara Chisale, a fifty-year-old Tumbuka woman, Nyirenda’s wife, and a leader in the SDA women’s guild, Dorica, supported this emphasis on the cleansing power of the rite.

---

451 For Bantu-speakers, these transformative qualities of symbols are generally not separated from their communicative functions. Through ritual engagements with symbols, those symbols transform those who participate in their meanings. Even as initiates act upon symbols, those same symbols act upon their bearers.
Chisale introduced the language of being “new born” and “clear” to argue that a person is blameless immediately following baptism. She said they are lucky those who die immediately after the rite because they are blameless. When I asked for more clarification of what she meant, she explained more explicitly that baptism removes all past sin, that “straight from the water, you are just free.” She acknowledged, however, that a person may begin to sin again directly thereafter. As in her husband’s account, Chisale presents a view of baptism as a ritual of cleansing transformation.

Similarly, the AIC leader, Archdeacon Ndhlovu from the Zion Prophecy Church, who was also quoted in the previous section, invoked the language of cleansing in discussing the importance of baptism, but with added emphasis on the act of personal repentance and surrender to God.
And why, why is it important to be baptized? What happens when one is baptized?

Ka tchakuzilwa uli kuti munthu wababatizike, ndipo chikuchitika tchivichi wusange munthu wababatizika?

Hmmm. (Coughs) Ka tchakuzilwa uli kuti munthu wababatizike, ndipo chikuchitika tchivichi wusange munthu wababatizika?

Hmmm. (Coughs) Baptism is offering oneself to God. And when we see such a baptized person, we believe they are in a covenant with God; that they have really followed Jesus’ commandments, and have followed what Jesus said. This is where there is a weakness, because we just believe.

So when we baptize someone, we know that we have washed them, and their sins have been reduced. If their sin emerges again, that is another case, but we feel one is cleansed from the time of baptism, and the sins are forgiven because one has surrendered oneself to the Lord Jesus, to God.

This is an interesting segment of speech, because Ndhlovu suggests a strong ablution role for baptism, but only in combination with a more fundamental personal surrender to God. He suggests a strong role for the rite itself in cleansing the person, but without omitting the need for individual surrender to God in order for the cleansing to be efficacious. In his first comments, he says that a baptized person is one who should have offered themselves to God, and who should be living a moral life, in right relationship to God. By implication, this pattern of conduct is not the result of the baptism, but of the individual’s own decision and commitment. Ndhlovu suggests this by
noting the problem that church leaders cannot know the individual’s internal commitment, but can only believe it to be there. Ndhlovu goes on, however, to suggest that baptism does accomplish something, a cleansing of a person’s sin up until that point. This, it would seem, is a model of baptism as necessary to but not sufficient for personal sanctification. Even then, as he states, the cleansing accomplished does not guarantee a termination of subsequent sin. In a sense, Ndhlovu articulates an ideal model of baptism, one in which the rite is cleansing because the person involved has already surrendered to God.

All three of the church leaders just quoted, Nyirenda and Chisale from SDA and Ndhlovu from ZPC, are from churches that practice immersion. In their statements, they suggest that the physical act of baptism by immersion is accompanied by an internal process of transformation, specifically the cleansing of the spirit from all previous sins. This is not to deny the necessary precondition of repentance, nor the reality that people may continue to commit sins even after baptism (indicating that a person’s sinful nature is not undone), but it does point to the ritual event itself as a moment when the human body and soul are experientially juxtaposed – when the physical experiences of the body carry core spiritual consequences for the soul. It is for this reason that, in this model, a true baptismal rite is one that washes the whole body. If the whole soul is to be washed free from sin, then it is the whole body that must die to sin through immersion in the cleansing waters of baptism. This is a model of baptism as a ritual that is not only symbolic in a communicative sense, but also effective in-and-of-itself in producing change within a person. While it points to the act of repentance as the core emotional act necessary to starting a new Christian life, it also asserts the effectiveness of immersion baptism as a rite that completes the cleansing of the body-spirit from sin.

This is a model of the whole body as a repository for sin, a container in which sin builds up internally, just as filth does externally.
**Born Again voices: When does the Holy Spirit come?**

As was seen in Part One, Born Again church leaders were consistently in agreement with their AIC and SDA counterparts on the topic of baptismal methodology, insisting with them that immersion is the only valid method of baptism. One might predict, then, that Born Again leaders would articulate an equally strong perspective on the efficacy of baptism as a cleansing rite that washes a person free from sin. As will be seen below, however,

Born Again leaders did not invoke the language of cleansing in their descriptions of baptism. Instead, their concern was with the role of repentance and baptism, respectively, in initiating the coming of the Holy Spirit into a person’s life. For all of the Born Again leaders quoted below, the question of when and how the state of person’s soul changes – from damned to saved – is, at its core, tied to the intervening agency of God as Spirit. On this there was agreement. Debate, however, existed around the question of whether it was baptism, or the preceding moment of repentance, that was the critical juncture at which the Holy Spirit indwells a person and confirms their status as a new being in Christ. For some local Born Again leaders, especially those still in AICs, the baptismal rite completes the process of transformation initiated through the act of repentance, and it is during baptism that the Holy Spirit finally rests his presence upon a new Christian. Among other Born Again leaders, however, specifically those trained in Pentecostal churches, it is in the moment of repentance alone that the Holy Spirit enters into a person’s being, and as such, it is repentance alone that qualifies one for salvation. The quotes below demonstrate this debate among four self-identified “Born Agains”.

In the quote below, Abraham Nkoma, a Last Church member and self-proclaimed Born Again who was also quoted in Part One of this chapter, argues that baptism is critical to an individual’s reception of the Holy Spirit.
Nkhoma not only affirms that one must be baptized to have the Holy Spirit, but furthermore, that one must be baptized to get to heaven. He frames both events, receiving the Holy Spirit and going to heaven, around the status of being baptized and Born Again. In doing so, he builds a causal chain of mutual dependencies. To go to heaven, one must have the Holy Spirit. To have the Holy Spirit, one must be born-again. To be born-again, one must be baptized. In the second part of his statement, he also affirms that a person who has been baptized should also be transformed in their behavior, leaving behind a life of sin, and instead following in the path of Jesus.

Like Nkhoma, another local Born Again leader, Edson Phiri of the Bible Believers, told me that baptism was crucial to receiving the Holy Spirit.
Phiri is unambiguous in his answer that both repentance and baptism are necessary for reception of the Holy Spirit. He also knows of a specific authoritative verse to back up his knowledge claim, one that is seemingly straightforward in its meaning, at least regarding the chronology of the spiritual possession. This position grants a powerful spiritual function to baptism.

The positions of both Nkhoma and Phiri are in contrast to the positions of other Born Again church leaders with whom I spoke. In particular, all four Pentecostal church leaders – Soko and Chavula from the Full Gospel church, and Maseko and Shumba from the Assemblies of God – emphasized the act of repentance as the moment of Divine spiritual indwelling.\(^{454}\) The excerpt

\(^{453}\) *When they heard this they were cut to the heart, and said to Peter and the apostles, ‘Friends, what are we to do?’ ‘Repent,’ said Peter, ‘repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus the Messiah for the forgiveness of your sins; and you will receive the gifts of the spirit. For the promise is to you, and to your children, and to all who are far away, everyone whom the Lord our God may call.* (Acts 2: 37-39, The New English Bible). Also note: Acts 2: 37 was also cited by fellow Bible Believers member Kayange.

\(^{454}\) I suspect that the different emphases on baptism seen between the self-declared Born Agains Banda and Nkhoma, on the one hand, and the Pentecostal Born Again leaders on the other, to do with the latter’s greater exposure to more formal Western Protestant theological instruction. Both
below by Boyd Chavula, the thirty-one year old Tumbuka man and lay leader in the Full Gospel church quoted in Part One, does not address baptism directly, but does demonstrate his understanding of Holy Spirit intervention.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>RECORDED TRANSCRIPT (English original)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>LINDLAND</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAVULA</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In answering my question about people who do right but are not Born Again, Chavula invokes the writings of Paul (from the book of Romans) regarding the judgement and fate of those who abide by their conscience. Though he is willing to grant some level of Godliness to these people, and seems to struggle a bit in articulating a problem with their status, he eventually does so by returning to the language of rebirth, and insisting that a person must have repented their sins, received the Holy Spirit, and become Born Again in order to be saved. He makes no mention of baptism, and rather points to the act of repentance as the critical factor.

Soko and Maseko have been trained in pastoral training centers in urban areas, and both Chavula and Shumba have likewise spent time in urban Pentecostal church congregations, which are subject to greater exposure to their respective formal church doctrinal stances.
All three of the Pentecostal Born Again leaders quoted above, all of whom were trained in urban-based church centers, agreed that repentance alone brought on Holy Spirit possession.\footnote{These Pentecostal churches are products of the Western Pentecostal missionary movement of the mid-twentieth century that launched the Born Again movement in the region.} By contrast, both Nkhoma and Phiri, neither of whom were formally trained in Pentecostal theology, went further to suggest that baptism as well is necessary. In this respect, they shared a common perspective with leaders and members of local AIC churches, all of whom emphasized the orctic and effective qualities of ritual experience. Last Church member Nkhoma, in particular, articulated a theology of baptism entirely consistent with his AIC upbringing, even as he embraced the Born Again emphasis on repentance and right living.

**Baptism as Salvation? The Eschatology of Ritual**

The topics of baptismal method, waiting time, infant baptism, cleansing, and possession by the Holy Spirit have already raised the matter of baptism as an ontological event – concerned with the nature of being and becoming a full human being, a full person, in the eyes of God. At the same time, baptism is considered by many to be also an eschatological event – concerned with the status and destiny of the human spirit-soul at death.\footnote{There is no term in chiTumbuka that translates directly as “soul” as in our English usage. Instead, the multivalent word ‘mzimu’ is used to refer to the basic spiritual dimension of each person. The meaning of ‘mzimu’ is consonant with its English usage in that it consistently translates as “spirit”. Likewise, the meaning of the term can vary depending on linguistic and contextual usage. It may refer to the spirits of the ancestors, or to the animating and moral spirit of each individual (similar to our Western usage ‘soul’), or, with the adjective ‘mutuwa’ (white) or “uweme” (good) added after it, to the Holy Spirit of the Christian tradition. This multivalent use of the word is used consistently by individuals from across the local church and religious spectrum, a pattern of usage that is both individualized and collectivized. In Embangweni, the characteristics and implications associated with each use of the word are seen to correlate and interrelate with its other uses. For most, there is a meaningful connection among the uses of the word ‘mzimu’ as personal spirit, as collective ancestral spirit, and as Holy Spirit respectively. This connection/participation may be one of disjunction or conjunction, depending upon a person’s theology and pneumatology. Patterns of usage are evident, as locals from the same and similar church communities share doctrinal understandings about the kinds of relationships that pertain} In what follows, I consider a range of
commentaries on the relationship between baptism and spiritual salvation. This was an issue that came to my attention through the fieldwork process, as informants raised the issue while talking about baptism. I eventually began to raise the issue myself when discussing baptism if it did not arise through the initiative of my informants. That said, most informants were able to articulate coherent explanations, of varying degrees of spontaneous formation, on the topic, and often tie it back to issues previously addressed in our discussion about baptism. In the quote below, Mulungu and I asked Benjamin Soko, a fifty-two year old leader in the AIC Chipangano Church, about baptismal methods, and whether or not baptism was necessary to get to heaven.

between an individual, the ancestors, and the Trinitarian God. There is not, however, cultural uniformity, but rather diversity and some level of contestation. 

---

457 People vary greatly in the degree they reflect upon doctrinal issues. While some engage in sustained Bible study and dialogue with other Christians on the matter, and often formulate explicit doctrinal stances on issues, others are content to leave such issues more open and unconsidered. This is an important difference that will be discussed in the conclusion.

458 Mr. Soko held the formal title “Missionary” in the leadership structure of the Chipangano Church.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>LINDLAND</th>
<th>Is it necessary to be baptized if you want to go to heaven?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>SOKO</td>
<td>Tchakuzilwa kuti ubabatizike pala ukhumba kuya ku chanya kweni kubabatizika wakacha. First of all ujifumbe ndanga umu ulili. Are you changed? Have you changed? Kweni pala undasinthe uchali mechigewengagewenga waka nthena wamubabatizika wamubila nadi you are not going to heaven! (Laughs) You are not changed. Kweni chakuzilwa ujifumbe iwe wamwene ka nasinthika nadi pala naguwa pala na sinthika ipo nkhwenera ku babatizika.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MULUNGU</td>
<td>So it’s not a matter of being baptized, but you evaluate; are you worthy to enter into heavenly, kingdom of God. Are you worthy baptizing? If you think you are worthy baptizing, you can be baptized. It will be meaningful and you may have eternal life, not being baptized, while you are vandalistic in your heart. That won’t help you anymore. Yeah.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LINDLAND</td>
<td>But the question could become: what if you are good in your heart, but you have not been baptized?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MULUNGU</td>
<td>OK! That is now questioning, for faith, now. Sono munthu wakumubatiza, ah, wandakubatizecha kweni mtima nguwnemi ka unganjanjira kuchanya?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SOKO</td>
<td>Ah, ivo cha! You are going to hell!</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**TRANSLATION**

It is important to be baptized if you want to go to heaven, and not without. *First of all, you have to identify how you are. Are you changed? Have you changed?* But if you are not changed, you are still a sinner, and you deliberately get immersed, *you are not going to heaven*. (Laughs) *You are not changed.* So the first and most important thing is to ask yourself if you have really changed. Then you can qualify yourself to be baptized.

*OK! That is now questioning, for faith, now.* So a person is baptized, ah, is not baptized, but they have a righteous heart, can they enter heaven? *Ah, not that! You are going to hell!*
There are several things to note from this exchange. Soko starts his response by affirming that baptism is necessary in order to get to heaven, but then stresses the importance of a personal behavioral transformation, one of turning away from sinful conduct. Only when one is no longer actively sinning is one qualified for baptism, and only then can the rite be effective. Without change, the rite itself will not function. In our follow up question, Mulungu and I question why baptism is necessary at all if one is truly righteous. Soko’s response is immediate and unambiguous: the rite is essential to salvation. In this brief exchange, Soko affirms a model of baptism as necessary—but-not-sufficient for salvation, and that a transformation of behavior from sinfulness to righteousness is a prerequisite.

Mulungu and I asked a different, though related, question about the necessity of baptism of Wisdom Mizwa, the sixty-year-old Ngoni man and Last Church pastor quoted twice in Chapter Ten. In his response, he echoes fellow AIC leader Soko’s concern with the moral condition of the individual being baptized. Whereas Soko did so by invoking the change from sinful to righteous behavior, Mizwa does so through reference to the agency of the Devil, an obvious marker of evil in a person’s life. He also asserts the Holy Spirit’s presence in one’s life as the conditional factor in changing that moral status.
Now, I have an idea that there are many people who, ah, they very much want to be baptized because they believe “If I’m not baptized, I cannot go to heaven.” So I wonder if maybe there are people who are baptized, but they are not really repentant. But they want baptism, so they pretend. In such a case, if that person has been baptized, but they have not repented, is the baptism enough for them to go to heaven?

There are some people who seem to repent today but in a real sense they are not repentant. But they know that for someone to go to heaven, you need to be baptized. So can such people who get baptized for formality’s sake enter the kingdom of God?

No! They cannot see the kingdom of God, because they have come out of the Jordan without receiving the Holy Spirit. As I said, we have Satan as well as Christ. Then it means that in such people, Satan is great. So if a person deceives God like that going into the Jordan, sometimes they can die in the water during baptism. They can take in some water and choke.

It should be noted that in this exchange, I introduce the possibility that baptism would be in-and-of-itself sufficient for salvation. But by framing the question around the lack of repentance, I also suggest a likely complication with such a possibility. Both Mulungu and I frame the question to Mizwa as an unambiguous case of non-repentant baptism. This framing of the question likely
facilitated Mizwa’s equally unambiguous response, that for an individual without a repentant heart, even participation in the true form of baptism is ineffective. In this view, repentance, not baptism, is the foundational ontological, and thus eschatological, event. It is necessary in order for a person to receive of the Holy Spirit, and must precede baptism. And as one cannot enter God’s kingdom without the Holy Spirit, being possessed by it is essential to salvation itself. In addition, more than being only futile, seeking baptism without a repentant heart is evil and dangerous because it violates the idea of repentance itself, which posits a full, honest, and open confession to God. Mizwa implies that only Satan could lead someone to bear the ultimate false witness of seeking baptism, meant to be a moment of sacred communion with God and one’s church fellowship, without repentance. As such it is evil. It is also dangerous because God will punish those who do so. Though for Mizwa the external rite is clearly secondary to the state of one’s spirit after the act of confession, he is convinced that the baptismal form of immersion is critical to its efficacy and value.

In other comments from the same interview, Mizwa affirms the importance of baptism, and suggests that baptism is necessary for salvation itself, because it is both the moment of personal oath to God, and of God’s response in sending the Holy Spirit to possess a person. Thus, it is the moment of initiation into the Christian life. This interview segment came directly after a discussion about what it means to be a Christian, in which Mizwa had explained that a Christian is someone who has changed from a life of bad deeds to good deeds.
LINDLAND  OK. But now, Adada Mizwa, would you say that you have been a Christian all of your life, or is there a time when you think back, you think “Eh! That is when I became a Christian.”?

MULUNGU  Mungajitora kuti mli kuwa wakhristu nauko mulikuwilako panyake pali nyengo zinyake is mkukumbuka kuti “Ah! Nyengo yila nkha wa mukhristu cha?”

MIZWA  Hmmm. Apo nkhabatizikiranga nkhalapa unenesko wose kuti uheni wose nchitengecha. Sono panyengo yino umukhulaëiskira naumo chalo chilili, nkhuzaikalawiska kuti ine vyakutimbanizgika vilipo kweni ipo chakuziwa chomene usange nkhuwona vila vyakuti mbanizika vila nitole Baibolo niwazgengeno, nizizipize vila vikuchilika, usange unono ukwiza.

MULUNGU  Kweni muli kuwa wakhristu naumo muli kuwilako?

MIZWA  Umo nilikuwilako?

MULUNGU  Eh!

MIZWA  Kufuma apa nkhabatizikira kumasinda nko cha! Chifukwa nkha chitanga vinthu ivyo vyambula kumanyika.

MULUNGU  OK. OK. So he says I became a Christian since my baptism, not before I got baptized. And he says after I got baptized, I knew that now I have become a real Christian. I had to change from what I was doing before to a new life. Yeah.

TRANSLATION

Have you been a Christian all of your life, or there was a time that you feel you were not a Christian?

Hmmm. When I was being baptized, I made an oath that ‘You shall sin no more.’ So seeing how the world is from that time, I feel there is a lot of confusion. So when I see that, I feel like taking the Bible and reading, so that I can endure what is coming my way.

But have you been a Christian ever since?

Since I was born?

Yes.

From when I got baptized, and not before that, because I was doing unsound things.
| LINDLAND | But now is it possible for someone to be a Christian before they’re baptized? | Can some people be indebted to Christ without baptism? |
| MULUNGU | Waliko wan’thu wanyake wangawa wa Khristu kwambula kuti wawabatiza? | No. They can’t be Christians. |
| MIZWA | Uh-uh. [negative] Wangawa wakhristsu cha. | Because they have no *key*. A person should have a *key* to open the house. |
| MULUNGU | You cannot. | |
| MIZWA | Chifukwa wa lije key. Munthu wawe na key wakujulira nyumba. | |
| LINDLAND | It’s like the key opens the door. | What is it about baptism that is so important? What happens when you are baptized? |
| MIZWA | Yeah. | What important work is accomplished when a person is baptized? |
| LINDLAND | Yeah. OK. What is it about baptism that is so important? What happens when you are baptized? | When a person is baptized, the spirit comes into them. |
| MULUNGU | Ichi chikuchitika ntchivichi chomene pala munthu wabatizika? | Which spirit? |
| MIZWA | Pala munthu wabatizika icho chikuchitika chomene, mzimu mkati mwa iwe ukwiza. | The Holy Spirit. |
| MULUNGU | Mzimu ngu? | OK. |
| MIZWA | Mzimu utuča. | They consider the past, and sometimes feel sorry, so that they have stopped the previous deeds and have now started a new good life. Yeah. |
| MULUNGU | OK. | |
| MIZWA | Wakuyanayanila vyakumanyuma na ivyo iye wapulika, nyengo zinyake wakuzakawa wa chitima kuti ivi nalekerathu ipo nilondezge umoyo uwu ndiwo uwemi. Yeah. | |

In these comments, Mizwa frames his own Christian life as starting with his baptism. This was the time when he committed his life to Christ and left behind unsound behaviors. It was the moment he made his oath to God, an oath reflective of a repentant heart that has recognized its wrongful ways and committed itself to be a new kind of person. He uses the modern metaphor of a key opening a house to define a critical role for baptism in gaining access to heaven. Yet, as was clear in his previous comments, he does not suggest that baptism alone saves one. Though baptism is the key to the Christian life, and the moment when Divine inspiration comes through the Holy Spirit, it
is only meaningful when accompanied by repentance. As he said, baptism is the time when people “consider the past and sometimes feel sorry.” This is a model of baptism as necessary but not sufficient for salvation. It is a key of entry, but it must be carried by a person who has already been transformed through a change of heart.

Edson Phiri, the twenty-eight-year-old Bible Believer and Born Again quoted above and in Part One, also argued that baptism serves a critical function within a person’s journey into a new life as a Christian.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>RECORDED TRANSCRIPT (English original)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>LINDLAND</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PHIRI</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In this quote, Phiri traces out the ideal sequence of initiation into the Christian life. It begins with a person repenting their sins. This repentance should be followed by baptism, the moment at which a person receives God’s forgiveness and emerges as a new creature in Christ, or as Phiri puts it, a “new creation”. It is only then that the Holy Spirit comes to take control of a person’s life, and begins to transform a person’s behavior so that it now corresponds to the life and witness of Jesus. For Phiri, all three happenings -- repentance, baptism, and Holy Spirit possession -- are necessary for a person to become a Christian.
It is interesting to note that Phiri locates the ritual of baptism between the subjective act of repentance, and the Divine act of Holy Spirit possession, and in so doing, locates the ritual event between a person’s transformation of heart and the active intervening agency of God through the Holy Spirit. It is the ritual event that brings the repentant person into communion with God through the latter’s agency of Holy Spirit possession. Baptism is also the moment that marks a person’s re-entrance into society as a transformed person.

Both AIC leaders, Soko from Chipangano and Mizwa from Last Church, and Born Again Phiri from the Bible Believers, affirmed in their comments the need for repentance and behavioral self-transformation as a prerequisite for salvation. A new Christian is to turn away from past misconducts and turn towards a new, self-disciplined, and righteous life according to the example set by Jesus. Yet, they also all agreed that baptism is necessary for salvation, because it is the ritual moment that triggers Holy Spirit possession. This is a model of baptism as necessary-but-not-sufficient for salvation.

Other Born Again leaders in Embangweni, however, disagreed with this model, and as on the topic of Holy Spirit possession, there were differences of opinion about the eschatological consequences of baptism. Once again, the pattern of differentiation was between Born Again leaders trained in Pentecostal theology, and those who remained grounded in local AIC congregations. While the perspectives of doctrinally untrained Born Agains remains rooted in local African religious culture, those of trained Born Again advocates articulate the classically Western Protestant emphasis on a person’s recognition of sin and heartfelt repentance as the only criteria for salvation.\(^{459}\) During my joint interview with Foreman Maseko and Phillip Shumba, Pastor and

---

\(^{459}\) This is an important difference, as the Pentecostal movement grows in southern Africa, and as the derivative Born Again movement grows to increasingly count members of AICs within its fold. As AICs remain the most vocal and relevant articulators of a Christianity that is compatible with ancestral spiritualism, it remains to be seen just how Pentecostalism – with its similar emphasis on
Elder in the local Assemblies of God congregation respectively, both men emphasized the necessity for personal repentance to God in order to find salvation. I ask both men why baptism is necessary at all, and if perhaps repentance alone was enough?

RECORDED TRANSCRIPT (English original)

LINDLAND  Why, why, why is it necessary to be baptized? Why is it not good enough just to repent? Bas.
MASEKO   OK, bas, to repent. Oh!
SHUMBA   Aahh!
MASEKO   (Laughs)
SHUMBA   OK. Let me, [let me. ]
MASEKO   [Oh, yeah.] Answer please.
SHUMBA   OK. Ah, it is necessary to be baptized. In the, before baptism, repentance is more necessary than baptism.
MASEKO   Yeah.
SHUMBA   I can say this because, ah, baptism cannot come without repentance. If we can read the book of John, it is says “John was baptizing, was baptizing people because, ah...” It was just a remission of their sin. Turning away from their sin. Repenting. Coming to the, ah, to be pure. Then later on, after repentance, that person has to be baptized. And that baptism, it is repentance baptism. The, that’s the book of John says so. Repentance baptism. So a person has just repented.
MASEKO   Yeah.
SHUMBA   And has believed that only the Lord Jesus is the saviour, and can save his life. And later on, has to be baptized. And we have to follow what Jesus did. And that is why repentance alone is nothing. It’s more important, but it’s nothing. Because if a person is being baptized, it says, ah, it teaches us about the death and resurrection of Jesus. The death of sin, and sewing of a new life in Jesus Christ. As Jesus died, and he re.....
MASEKO   He resurrected.
SHUMBA   Resurrected to heaven. Eh? So later on, we are following the same thing: the death and resurrection of a new life.
LINDLAND  When you are baptized?
MASEKO   [Yeah.]
SHUMBA   [Yeah.] The death of our sin. Has repented that person. And now, he’s dipped in water, death of our sin, and resurrection of our new life, the new body. That’s why two things work together. Baptism alone is nothing. And repentance alone is

the embodiment of spiritual experience – will shape the emergent theology of the next generation of AIC leaders and their congregants.
nothing. However, it can work if somebody has just repented and has not been
baptized, but has repented their sin. He’s going to enter in heaven.

MASEKO Yeah.
SHUMBA There’s not any problem.
MASEKO Yeah.
SHUMBA But if a person has repented and be baptized, it’s another, ah, ho, holy thing again.
It’s a different thing, because Jesus was baptized. He was a pure person, but he
was baptized. And also to ourselves, we have to be baptized, as Jesus did. Then
later on, we can say, baptism is more important. And repentance is more important.
But two things work together.

LINDLAND OK.
SHUMBA Yeah.
LINDLAND Thank you.
SHUMBA Thank you.

Like the AIC and other Born Again leaders quoted in Part One, Shumba invokes the parallel
between baptism and the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. For the individual involved,
baptism indicates their personal death to sin and resurrection to a new Christian life, in a “new
body” as he puts it. In line with orthodox Protestant theology, he acknowledges that repentance
alone is sufficient for salvation, but still wants to emphasize the important contribution that baptism
makes to personal holiness. It is, as he says, “another holy thing again.” Repentance and baptism
are meant to work together, as part of the ideal model for Christian life. Shumba refers to this as
“repentance baptism.” This is clearly a model of repentance alone as sufficient for salvation, but
one that still places great significance on baptism as a sacred fulfillment of the ideal life trajectory.
Thus Shumba’s use of the awkward phrase “more necessary” which he applies to repentance over
baptism, and the implied dual degrees of necessity. He seems to be suggesting that to live a true
Christian life during this lifetime, baptism is necessary because, coming on the heels of repentance,
it fulfills God’s intention for humanity. In this framing, baptism could be said to be an ontological

---

See quotes in defense of immersion baptism, in Part One of this chapter, by AIC pastor
Mizwa (Last Church) and Born Again leaders Phiri (Bible Believers) and Chavula (Full Gospel).
necessity, but not a salvific one. It is necessary to becoming the fullest kind of person, but not necessary to the salvation of the individual soul for transition into the next world of communion with God. From the eschatological perspective, there is a hierarchy of consequence here, as the significance of baptism rests on an earlier conscious emotional transformation, the act of repentance. This repentance is premised in an act of recognition as to the wrongfulness of one’s actions, (and perhaps the depravity of one’s own sinful behavioral tendencies) and their social consequences. Baptism without repentance is ineffective and meaningless, or worse, actually dangerous. Repentance without baptism is still profoundly meaningful, and is the more fundamental ontological, and therefore eschatological, event. The value of the rite is dependent upon the value of a new state of being.

Just following Shumba’s comments above, his church colleague Maseko, the pastor-in-training at the Assemblies of God’s pastoral college in Lilongwe, also addressed my question by recalling the example of the repentant thief on the cross next to Jesus Christ during his crucifixion, who acknowledged both his own wrongdoing and the righteousness and divinity of Jesus. Immediate to this act of repentance, Jesus affirmed that they would be together in heaven.461 Maseko gives this as a defense of the primacy of repentance over baptism.462

461 Only the gospel of Luke gives this account. “One of the criminals who hung there with him taunted him: ‘Are not you the Messiah? Save herself, and us.’ But the other rebuked him: ‘Have you no fear of God? You are under the same sentence as he. For us it is plain justice; we are paying for our misdeeds; but this man has done nothing wrong.’ And he said, ‘Jesus, remember me when you come to your throne.’ He answered, ‘I tell you this: today you shall be with me in Paradise.’” (Luke 23: 39-43, The New English Bible)

462 It is important to note his phrase “being practiced on several occasions” which marks repentance as an on-going process in life, not a single, concluding event.
Other Born Again Pentecostal leaders also affirmed the primacy of repentance over baptism. In an interview with Boyd Chavula and Happy Soko, from the Full Gospel church, I asked them if it was necessary to be baptized to go to heaven. Chavula responded first, followed by supporting commentary from Soko.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>RECORDED TRANSCRIPT</th>
<th>TRANSLATION</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>LINDLAND</td>
<td>Must you be baptized to go to heaven?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAVULA</td>
<td>Yes, to fulfill, yes!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LINDLAND</td>
<td>To fulfill?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAVULA</td>
<td>Yeah. Because when you are Born Again, you are to see, just to see the heavens. But for you to be baptized, you are fulfilling the journey of Christ. Yes. So you are able to go to heaven. But if you have only repented of your sins, and accepted Christ, then you die, you will still go to heaven.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LINDLAND</td>
<td>So why is it important to be baptized?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NYIRENDA</td>
<td>Nkwakuzilwa uli kubabatizika? ēati ka ntcakuzilwa wuli?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SOKO</td>
<td>Kwa Chiuta munthu wakukwaniriska ulunji ngeti umo Yesu akamsangira Yohani ku Jordan. Yohani wakakananga kumubatiza Yesu, kweni Yesu waka yowoya mazgu ghakuti wakenera kuti “Wabatizike kuti wakwaniriske ulunji wose.” Kweniso ku mpingo chikulongola kuti munthu ni membera wa mpingo.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NYIRENDA</td>
<td>So he says that baptism means fulfilling the righteousness, just like John the Baptist once refused to baptize Jesus. But he said Jesus, that, that should be done so that someone can fulfill that he is righteous by baptism. So even in the church if you are baptized, you are fulfilling that you are a member of the church. It is fulfillment that is there.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAVULA</td>
<td>Just to add on that. When you are baptized, the Bible says you are dying together with Christ, and rising together with Christ. Just as Christ went to the grave and rose from the grave. So when you are baptized, you are dying together with Christ and</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
raised together with Christ. That’s fulfilling the Christianity. Yes.

My initial question is very direct. Must you be baptized to go to heaven? Chavula’s initial response is affirmative but qualified. Yes, it is necessary to fulfill the ideal model of the life journey established by Jesus Christ. This metaphor of life as a journey, one which should ideally end in heaven, suggests that life is a movement of transitions through life stages, and that there is an ideal path. Nevertheless, as did his counterpart in Assemblies of God, he affirms, almost reluctantly it seems, that repentance alone is sufficient for salvation. Soko, a pastor-in-training in the Full Gospel church, then invokes Jesus’ own example of being baptized by John, again using the language of fulfillment, and notes the affiliatory function of the rite as well. Chavula concludes by invoking the parallel between the baptismal rite of passage and the death and resurrection of Christ.

**Before Church and God: Baptism as Communicative Symbol: First-wave Born Again Voices**

The Pentecostal position just examined -- one that hinges salvation on the act of repentance alone -- is not new to northern Malawi. Instead, it is the position that has marked over a century of Christian missionization in the region by the Anglican, Catholic, and Presbyterian churches, all first-wave mission churches. This is a classically Protestant perspective, though one that is now officially a part of Catholic doctrine as well. As Reverend Mwale had argued in his defense of sprinkling baptism in the last section, it is the act of repentance that effects the core ontological change in a person. In this view, baptism is only a symbolic act that communicates that inner transformation. This model does not grant core ontological or eschatological consequences to the baptismal rite, but rather frames it as a public demonstration symbolizing a person’s repentant heart and new commitment to God. This lesser model of baptism was framed most succinctly by Edwin
Chirwa, a fifty-five-year-old Tonga man and self-proclaimed Born Again member of CCAP who worked as the Hospital Chaplain at Embangweni hospital.

**RECORDED TRANSCRIPT (English original)**

LINDLAND So they say “Ahh, the baptism that they are doing in CCAP, that they are doing in Roman Catholic, it is not real baptism. You must be immersed.” How do you respond to that?

CHIRWA When I meet that Christian, I say to him “Baptism is not salvation. Baptism is not salvation. Yeah. Salvation is Jesus Christ. Yes. Baptism is not salvation.”

LINDLAND OK.

CHIRWA Yes.

LINDLAND What is baptism, if it’s not salvation?

CHIRWA Salv, baptism is a matter of show yourself to your friends who are already Christians. Then you come to them to show to them now that you belong to them now. You must be baptized. Yes. Yeah. It’s a matter of showing yourself to your friends. Yeah. It’s not salvation.

LINDLAND Many people think it is.

CHIRWA No! (Laughs) No, Eric.

LINDLAND No, it's true though, [many]

CHIRWA [I un]derstand you. Yes! Yes. Exactly. They mean that when someone is baptized, then he is being saved. It’s not really so. No. No. No. But the Bible says “The one who believes in Jesus, that man is saved.” Not in baptism.

LINDLAND But then why, do you think, for example, in the Presbyterian Church, why do they baptize children?

CHIRWA Oh, for that, there are some scripture who tells us that there were some Christians. Then those Christians took their children to church, and those children were baptized. For example, we have another example that is that man who was waiting for the prisoners, inside the prison. Yes. When that, that man believed in Jesus, then all their family came to Jesus, and all their family were baptized. Yes. So that’s why we CCAP, then we baptize our children.

LINDLAND OK. I understand.

CHIRWA Yes.

LINDLAND I understand.

CHIRWA Yes. And again in the Bible, old Bible, they said that they were just sprinkling the blood to the people. Not baptizing them, but only sprinkling the blood to the people. All of them were being saved. Yes. That the Old Testament says.

Chirwa’s succinct response to my first question suggests a familiarity with the issue and a somewhat practiced response to and negation of a model of baptism as necessary to salvation. In
his view, the efficacy of the rite lies in its symbolic value, of showing oneself to one’s church community, not in any direct eschatological consequences, and he points to the Presbyterian practice of baptizing infants as an indicator of this symbolic, rather than salvific, function of the rite. He concludes with a brief defense of the sprinkling technique, based on the Jewish practice described in the Old Testament.

Because he is both openly Born Again and an acknowledged CCAP leader in his public life, Chirwa’s comments provide an interesting comparison with those of other Born Again leaders. His strong symbolic view of baptism, derived from years of doctrinal training and practice as a Chaplain within the CCAP, is a particularly noteworthy contrast to those Pentecostal Born Again leaders who still emphasized the near necessity of baptism as an embodied replication of the death and resurrection experience. Though Chirwa embraced many facets of the Born Again emphasis on the embodied nature of spiritual experience, including its expressive, charismatic, and healing practices, he, as fitting his office, retained an adherence to the classically Western symbolic doctrines of the Presbyterian church.

Members and leaders of other first-wave mission churches echoed Chirwa’s symbolic interpretation of the baptismal rite. Among them were leaders who, like Chirwa, embraced the language and spirit of the Born Again Movement, and saw it as consistent with the classically Protestant emphasis on repentance, an emphasis that dates back to Luther’s first thesis in his famed

---

463 In this same interview, he also mentions verses in the Bible where a man expressed faith in Jesus, after which his whole family, including his children, were baptized. He also referenced Old Testament verses in which blood was sprinkling on a crowd.

464 I characterize Chirwa as Born Again on the basis of his personal testimony, given early in our first interview, and numerous conversations. He dated his repentance and becoming born again to 1970, the time, as he puts it, “when myself I agreed that I am a sinner, so I must accept Jesus, so that Jesus should be my personal savior.”

465 This got him into trouble.
Disputation on the Power and Efficacy of Indulgences.\textsuperscript{466} In the following exchange, Maria Ngwira, the fifty-two year old Tumbuka Roman Catholic and self-identified Born Again quoted in Part One, gives a strong statement affirming the symbolic, not salvific, value of baptism. She argues that baptism does not initiate the coming of the Holy Spirit, nor accomplish a person’s salvation. Rather, salvation comes to the person who has repented, received the Holy Spirit, and become reborn as a new person in Christ.\textsuperscript{467}

\begin{tabular}{|l|l|}
\hline
\textbf{RECORDED TRANSCRIPT} & \textbf{TRANSLATION} \\
\hline
MULUNGU Wakuti chigomezgo chithu ntchakuzilwa chomene olo panyake icho tingsasambirapo kuti icho chili special nadi ku umoyo wa uzimu wa munthu? & They are asking if our faith is very important, or maybe we can learn that faith is very important to people? \\
NGWIRA O-ho! Chisambizgo cha number one fuma mwa Yohani, chapitula three, cha Nekodemu kubabikaso. Munthu wambula kubabikaso waleke kumanya kupoka Yesu kwambula kubabikaso waliye kumanya kuwona umoyo wamuyilayila, chiffukena cha kubabikaso lekani munthu wakuwa mukhristu, chiffukena cha kubabikaso lekani munthu wakuwa navinjeru lekani nisambire visambizgo vyakutu viniwovyile lekani nilondezenge Yesu, panji kumunyana Yesu mwakukwana. Sono kubabikaso ndiko kukovyila munthu kuti wapokere mzimu wa Chiuta kuti wamavyole kuwa mkhristu. Ehya! Kubabikaso mu maji na mu mzimu, fukwa ubatizo nawoso & O-ho! The number one lesson of value to human life, according to Christianity, is that found in John, chapter three, about Nicodemus being born again. A person who is not born again does not know Jesus and cannot have an everlasting life, because being born makes someone born in Christ; because being born makes someone to become wise and learn about Jesus, and to know much. Being born again helps a person to receive the spirit of God, which helps in Christianity. Yeah! Being born in water and in spirit. This is because baptism by water alone cannot bring salvation to
\end{tabular}

\textsuperscript{466} This document is more commonly known as the Ninety-five Theses.

\textsuperscript{467} Ngwira is notable as a Catholic leader who embraced a classically Protestant theology, one concerned with repentance and personal faith as the guarantors of salvation. Based on my interview and conversations with her, I would define Nzima’s theology as highly consistent with both local Presbyterian and general Protestant theology. Two theories as to why this could be: (1) she spent her first 18 years in the Providence Industrial Mission, and (2) she has spent the past thirty-five years living within the direct sphere of influence of the Livingstonia Synod’s Loudon (Embangweni) church station. At the same time, Ngwira was a strong advocate for the process of inculturation advocated by the Roman Catholic church, a process that encouraged the integration of African ritual, symbol, music, and dance into church functions and mass.
In this quote, about “the most important lesson to human life,” Ngwira equates being a Christian with being born again, as described by Jesus to Nicodemus in the third chapter of the Gospel of John. She says specifically that being born again involves receiving the spirit of God, and that this is distinct from the ritual of water baptism. She suggests that the Holy Spirit is necessary to salvation by stating directly that baptism by water cannot bring salvation. She notes that Jesus received the Holy Spirit after being baptized, but does not suggest any causal link between the two. Instead she equates being born again and having the Holy Spirit as both products of having changed from an old to a new life.⁴⁶⁸

A little further on during our interview, I asked Ngwira why the vast majority of local residents claimed a Christian church affiliation. Her response turns again to the centrality of repentance in effecting transformation within a person.

---

⁴⁶⁸ Just following this exchange, Ngwira noted that not everyone who calls themselves a Christian is really a Christian. Instead, she says, some will arrive at the gates of heaven and say “Lord! Lord!” and Jesus will tell them that he does not know them. See Matthew 7:21.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>RECORDED TRANSCRIPT</th>
<th>TRANSLATION</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>LINDLAND</td>
<td>Why does everyone around here, or almost everyone, say they belong to a church? Why is it important?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Ngwira begins her response by giving several what are, in her opinion, unauthentic reasons why people join churches: because they like the uniforms; because they want to ensure for themselves the ceremony of a church funeral; or more simple because they do not want to stand apart as a non-
church goer. She then returns to our earlier discussion of Christianity where she defined a Christian as someone who received the Holy Spirit through Jesus. She specifically rejects the idea that baptism makes a person a Christian. As did Maseko, from the Assemblies of God, Ngwira refers to the thief on the cross, whom Jesus said would enter heaven solely on the basis of his repentant heart and faith. According to Ngwira, the thief received the Holy Spirit then and there and was promised entry to heaven, having never been baptized. She concludes by specifically referring to baptism as a symbol.

Continuing on during the same interview, nyaNgwira then offered an analogy to help explain the role of baptism within the Christian life. During the interview, her description of the analogy follows directly from the speech segment just analyzed above. In this next citation, I start with my question to her about the pervasiveness of church membership, repeat her initial response about the need for repentance, then continue on with her description of the analogy, and her question-and-answer dialogue with Mulungu.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>RECORDED TRANSCRIPT</th>
<th>TRANSLATION</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>LINDLAND: Why does everyone around here, or almost everyone, say they belong to a church? Why is it important?</td>
<td>O-ho! That is very true. Eh! I should say people join churches for very different reasons. Some join churches unreformed, but maybe they admire the uniform of a particular church. Others just look for belonging so that their funerals should be marked with a church ceremony. Ha! Some are just afraid of being laughed at for being different because they are not part of a church of Christ. As I said earlier on, a person is considered to be a Christian if they have received the</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**MULUNGU**

Mbwenu tchidindo chila wawikapo chilata.

**NGWIRA**

No! Chakuzilwa nikalata yamkati chifukwa ndimo muli mazgu, (Laughs!) mazgu mkati. Sono thupi othila ni envelop ila nipala wakuwikapo chichindo chila sono niubatizo. Sono chidindo na envelop titaya eti! Chilije ntchito, china ntchiti nivichi wati?

**MULUNGU**

Kulata.

**NGWIRA**

Chifukwa yina vichi wati?

**MULUNGU**

Yina uthenga.

**NGWIRA**


Spirit from Jesus Christ. Because had it been that baptism qualified people to Christianity, that thief on the cross would not have been saved by Jesus. He entered paradise simply by confessing that he was a sinner. He also said that the punishment against Jesus was undeserved. Jesus promised him paradise the same day. This means that he was given the Holy Spirit on the spot. Jesus said he would go to paradise. This means baptism is not very important. Baptism is just a symbol. OK! For example, if you are sending a letter to Lilongwe, you stamp the letter and take it to the post office, right? So what is important between the letter and the envelope?

It's the stamp on the letter.

No! The letter inside is important, because it contains the words, (Laughs!) the words inside! So the envelope is the body. The stamp is like baptism. When a person receives a letter, they throw away the stamped envelope. But what is important?

The letter itself.

Because it has what?

It has the message.

It has the words, not so? Yeah! So even if you can be stamped on the body, it is useless in the eyes of God. Baptism of the body is just an indication that you have joined a church. Eh! But you should be baptized in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Spirit. It is these words
As just summarized above, Ngwira begins her response by affirming the salvific value of repentance, and the relative unimportance of baptism. Then, moving into a highly conventional local narrative form, she begins a series of commentaries concluded by affirmative questions. In doing so she draws out, using a material reference, an analogy between a letter and a person to explain the fundamental importance of repentance as primary to and distinct from the baptismal rite. She asks which is more important, an envelope or the written message inside? Clever as he is, Mulungu responds that it is the stamp, using the logic, presumably, that neither the envelope nor message can travel and thereby fulfill their function without a stamp. With slight frustration that she easily laughs off, Ngwira corrects him and outlines a different model of the envelope, written letter, and stamp relationship, one which emphasizes the message content of the whole communicative unit, and therefore places primary emphasis on the written letter itself. In correcting Mulungu’s misguided response, she lays out the analogy explicitly. The envelope is the body. The stamp is baptism. When a letter is received, both are thrown out as useless. And so what is important, she asks? By this time, Mulungu, following her logic, responds that it is the written message inside. And why? Because it has the message, the meaning of the communication. Here Ngwira continues her concrete explication of the analogy. Baptism is like a stamp on the body just as stamps are put on an envelope. Neither are inherently valuable. She then says that baptism is merely effective for demonstrating church membership, but, by implication, not for touching the soul/spirit itself. Instead, baptism is important because one is baptized in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and because “it is these words that will affect the soul/spirit inside.”
Interestingly, Ngwira’s explication on baptism uses a tripartite schema of both a letter and
a person, and uses both metonymic and metaphoric logic to build the analogy. It is metonymic in
comparing, firstly, an envelope to the human body, secondly, a postage stamp on that envelope to
the baptism of that body, and thirdly, the written letter inside the envelope to the human spirit
(soul) within the body. This is a correspondence between parts in the two structural relationships of
parts to whole.

\[
\text{envelope} \approx \text{body} \\
\text{stamp} \approx \text{baptism} \\
\text{written message} \approx \text{spirit-soul}
\]

Her analogy is also metaphoric in saying that the relationship between a baptism of the body and
the human spirit within that body is parallel to that which pertains between a stamped envelope and
the written letter within it. On both sides of the analogy, there is a physical container, an
imprinting process on that container, and a core site of meaning within. This is a correspondence of
wholes in the structural relationship between parts of each whole.

\[
\begin{array}{c}
\text{envelope} \\
\downarrow \\
\text{stamp} \\
\downarrow \\
\text{written message}
\end{array}
\quad
\begin{array}{c}
\text{body} \\
\downarrow \\
\text{baptism} \\
\downarrow \\
\text{spirit-soul}
\end{array}
\]

In the positional structure of her analogy, Ngwira models the person as a tripartite unity of body,
spirit, and life process. Note that Ngwira never explicitly states that the written message is the soul,
as she did to describe the envelope as body, and stamp as baptism. Instead she works towards a
meaning wherein the written message \textit{becomes} the soul by virtue of an internal imprinting process.
This is, I would argue, a subtle but significant point of analysis regarding the analogy, because it
suggests a dynamic and literary model of the human soul as one not inherently infused with
meaning. Just as the letter inside is meaningful because it is a blank sheet of paper inscribed with a message, so the soul is meaningful because it has been inscribed with the gospel message of the living God.\textsuperscript{469} As she said,

...you should be baptized in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. It is these words that will affect the spirit inside. These words will fill the spirit.

This is a profound ontological statement – that fulfillment of one’s spirit depends upon being affected by the Christian gospel message of an authoritative, present, and grace-filled God. In this model, the soul is not itself inherently fulfilled with meaning. Rather, fulfillment of the soul depends upon a person taking to heart the trinitarian personhood of God, and letting his claim upon their life provide them with spiritual meaning. This is a model of spiritual vacancy before repentance. As had her Anglican and Presbyterian colleagues, Ngwira asserts the primacy of repentance over ritual, comparing baptism to a stamp that is of little intrinsic value in-and-of-itself.\textsuperscript{470}

In summary, both AIC informants (Soko and Mizwa) defended the vital function of baptism as a part of the ideal model of the Christian life trajectory. As supplement to a previous repentance and change of behavior, they attributed the rite with an essential salvific role. Likewise, the young Bible Believers leader Phiri, who self-identified as a Born Again, also argued for a critical role for baptism within a person’s journey into full Christian living. Local Pentecostal

\textsuperscript{469} One can of course imagine scenarios where a blank piece of paper enclosed in a stamped envelope would be profoundly meaningful. Staying within the analogic form, this possibility provides interesting implications for a further elaboration of the analogy. But for the purposes of Nzima’s analogic example, this possibility is not directly relevant.

\textsuperscript{470} She does not point to the necessity of stamps in order for letters to reach their destination. Such an observation could be used to argue that baptism is in fact necessary to salvation, as it provides the means for the soul to reach its final destination in heaven. Instead, she emphasizes that the letter/soul itself is the core center of meaning, and therefore it is the only relevant site for determining salvation.
leaders (Shumba, Maseko, Chavula, and Soko) also emphasized the importance of baptism in fulfilling an ideal Christian life trajectory, but in the end acknowledged that repentance alone was sufficient to ensure salvation. Taking this repentance model of salvation a step further, both first-wave mission church leaders (Chirwa and Ngwira) downplayed the importance of the rite as anything more than a communicative and affiliatory mechanism, and instead emphasized confession and repentance as the core ontological and eschatological event.

Concluding Analysis

In Chapter Ten, I used Turner’s distinction between the orectic and normative poles of symbolic meaning to demonstrate a divergent theological exegesis among four types of churches located in Embangweni. The leadership of Protestant and Catholic first-wave mission churches, ones derived from the Victorian era missionary movement in southeast Africa, tended to emphasize the normative pole of baptismal symbolism rather than its embodied orectic qualities, focusing on the communicative rather than transformative efficacy of the ritual experience. Quotes by Presbyterian, Anglican, and Catholic leaders in defense of sprinkling baptism and doctrinal competence demonstrated this tendency. By contrast, leaders of local African Instituted

---

471 All of my leadership informants agreed that there are important normative associations with the baptismal rite, even as the particular behavioral, emotional, and intellectual patterns linked to this normative dimension varied. Where an important difference emerged was with regard to the orectic semantic pole of the rite, where different church traditions either emphasized or deemphasized the transformative qualities of symbolic ritual experience. These theological divergences among church leaders are likely traced to separate histories of personal exposure to varied church traditions, as well as their varied readings of the Bible.

472 The classical Western Protestant tradition also concerns itself with the body, not through an emphasis on the immediacy of experience, but rather through a concern with moral living, and with the regulation of the body through obedience to doctrinal codes of conduct.

473 In this view, a valid performance of the rite does not require the full-bodied experience of immersion. Rather the rite is symbolic of a series of normative commitments the individual has already made through the act of repentance, ones which also involve surrender to God’s will. As such it is representative of an antecedent set of normative and intellectual commitments by the individual to the truth of the Christian gospel message. Because of this focus on ritual
Churches, churches created by Africans in Africa during the early twentieth century, retained an emphasis on both the normative and orecic poles of symbolic meaning and experience. Quotes by these leaders argued for full-bodied immersion baptism, one following immediately after repentance and mirroring the physical resurrection of Christ. This bodily model of baptism was associated with obedience to a biblical standard of ritual performance, one analogous to the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and his surrender to his Father’s will. In this focus on the bodily dimensions of the ritual experience, this AIC perspective remained largely consistent with regional pre-Mission African religious traditions that emphasized both the interplay between bodily and ideational activity, and the effective as well as communicative qualities of ritualized symbolic experience.

Leaders from the Seventh Day Adventist and Pentecostal churches articulated an intermediate perspective between those of other first-wave mission churches and the AICs. Like AIC leaders, SDA and Pentecostal leaders defended immersion as the true baptismal form, maintaining that the full-bodied kinesics of the act were of central importance to its value and efficacy. In this view, baptism is a critical part of the individual’s normative embodiment of self-surrender to God’s will and commitment to the Christian life. Because of this focus on representation, these informants shared a consensus that the precise bodily enactment of that representation was not critical, because participation in the rite itself does not constitute the realization of that normative status. It should be noted that a prominent Roman Catholic leader, Maria Ngwira, echoed this classically Protestant emphasis on repentance and the merely communicative function of baptism.

The contrast between Victorian era Protestant churches and the concurrent Seventh Day Adventist, as well as between Victorian Protestantism and mid-to-late twentieth century Pentecostal churches, suggests that over the course of the past century and a half, there has existed an ongoing dialectic between minority perspectives that emphasize the embodied qualities of spiritual experience, and a dominant mainstream tradition that emphasized the intellectual qualities of spiritual experience. With the rise of Pentecostalism globally over the course of the past several decades, the balance has shifted increasingly toward a growing predominance of the embodied logic.
embodiment, AIC, SDA, and Pentecostal leaders all shared a consensus that the full bodied format of the rite is critical to its meaning and efficacy.

On the topic of baptismal timing, however, SDA and Pentecostal leaders diverged. SDA leaders joined with other first-wave mission church leaders in arguing for delayed baptism until doctrinal competence can be established. Pentecostal leaders, on the other hand, argued along with AIC leaders that baptism should immediately follow repentance. This difference between the two groups indicates a consistent theological bifurcation within Christian theology, between those AIC and Pentecostal churches that emphasize the embodied criteria for baptism (the embodiment of repentance), and those first-wave churches, including the SDA, that emphasize intellectual criteria (the mastery of biblical meanings and church doctrines).

I began this chapter with four quotes by SDA and AIC church leaders asserting the cleansing function of baptism, comments that corresponded with their previous emphasis on the embodied facets of the baptismal experience. That was followed by Born Again voices -- from a range of local churches -- that emphasized possession by the Holy Spirit as the critical ontological and eschatological event in a person’s life. As was seen, however, there were substantial differences among Born Again perspectives as distributed across the range of local churches. Specifically, the previous theological agreement among AIC and Pentecostal leaders -- about the need for immediate, full-bodied baptism -- came undone. Born Agains who were members of AICs argued that baptism was necessary to salvation, as it was the moment when the Holy Spirit possessed a repentant person’s heart. In this view, both repentance and baptism are criteria for the possession of the Holy Spirit and the salvation of the soul, as the normative commitments of repentance must be matched with bodily performance of the ritual act. In contrast, Pentecostal Born Again leaders argued, at times in seeming reluctance, that repentance alone was necessary to salvation. In this position, they were aligned with local first-wave mission church leaders, who
argued that the Holy Spirit possesses at the moment of repentance, without waiting for a ritual
demonstration of a changed heart. In this model, repentance is the moment when personal and
Divine agencies combine, and when salvation is guaranteed. At the same time, however,
Pentecostal leaders shared much of their AIC counterparts’ emphasis on the rite, and came close to
insisting on its necessity in the Christian life. They shared with AIC leaders a language of the
human life as a journey, and argued that, for Christians, baptism was a critical rite of passage on
this life journey. It should mark the passage into a new phase of sacred personhood, in which a
person leaves behind wrongdoing and follows in the exemplary footsteps of Jesus.

Like their Pentecostal counterparts, Born Agains leaders from first-wave mission churches
also argued for the primacy of repentance over ritual as the core ontological act in a person’s life.
Even more than Pentecostal leaders, however, first-wave mission leaders, like the Catholic Ngwira
and Presbyterian Chirwa, denied the necessity of a uniform bodily enactment of baptism, and
downplayed its intrinsic ontological implications. In Ngwira’s analogy of a stamped letter, she
dismissed the stamp, along with the envelope, as significant to the value of the letter, and thereby
minimized the importance of bodily baptism to the status of the human soul. In this view, baptism
acts as a stamp on the body indicating that another more fundamental imprinting, the result of
repentance and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, has already occurred. Just as a written letter is
itself the product of a willful agent’s writing process, so too the fulfilled, meaningful soul is the
product of a willful inscription on the human heart. This is a model of textual transformation,
completed through the dual agencies of both individuals and God. Just as individuals repent and
devote themselves to God and his sacred scripture, so too the Divine acts to shed his grace up those
who submit to him. The ritual of the body is not of critical importance, serving only as a public
demonstration of a completed transformation. This has been a central tenant to orthodox
Protestantism since the time of the European Reformation.
By contrast, AIC leaders emphasized that the practice of baptism is of fundamental importance to its meaning and effect, along with its theological correlates. To frame this view within the structure of Ngwira’s analogy, they suggested that the imprinting process of baptism is ontologically fundamental, in that it is the moment of Divine cleansing action through the Holy Spirit. The stamp is important because without it the letter will not arrive at its destination. It is interesting to note that this was Mulungu’s initial assumption when Ngwira introduced the analogy. In this logic, the individual person will not reach heaven at the conclusion of their life here on earth unless they have been stamped by baptism. Staying within the structure of the analogy, this would also imply that the status of the spirit/soul is fundamentally shaped through the embodiment of ritual action. Body and soul fuse through ritual practice. This AIC logic of embodiment, as applied to the baptismal rite, suggests that the orietic qualities of the ritual experience facilitate the subjective internalization of its associated norms. The enacted embodiment of an ecclesiastical ritual form enables the normative maturation of the human spirit, individual and collective. As within Turner’s analysis of Ndembu ritual forms, there is an understood analogy of experience between participation with ritual’s dominant symbols and facets of broader individual life experience.\[475\]

How then to summarize an understanding of the contested theologies of baptism I encountered in Embangweni? Perhaps most pointedly, many of the differences revolved around the question of ritual efficacy and the transformative qualities of symbolic experience. At the intersections of these differences, one can identify patterns of cultural and religious schematization of both Bantu and Western heritages. The Bantu emphasis on the dynamic, embodied, and

---

\[475\] In the boy’s initiation rite, Mukanda, the dominant symbols and movements of the rite invoke a set of experiences that are soon to come, specifically those of puberty and adolescence. They include normative dimensions of group solidarity, courage, and stoicism. In the girl’s rite, the dominant symbols invoke the changing body and status of the individual girl involved, and of the normative value of her fecundity and the reproductive, matrilineal system more generally.
participatory dimensions of ritual experience are evident in the AIC focus on baptism as an ontologically transformative event. The Western emphasis on the strictly symbolic functions of the rite are evident in the assertion by first-wave mission leaders that the rite merely communicates, not effects, a far deeper ontological change accomplished through repentance. This is an important difference, one that points to a key theological shift accompanying the break-away of the AICs from the European Christianity introduced to the region.

As was seen in Chapter Four, the history of segmentation of Christianity in Nyasaland – specifically the establishment of regional AICs – was motivated by political as well as cultural factors. In the process, Tumbukas, Tongas, and other regional Africans found ways whereby this potent new religious force, Christianity, could be wedded to longstanding traditions, including those of polygamy and ancestral veneration. In this respect, the AIC Christian tradition is substantially different from the first-wave mission tradition. Not only does it hold to the viability of polygamy as a marriage practice, but it also maintains righteous agency of ancestral spirits. Furthermore, the AIC tradition, at least as articulated to me in Embangweni, remains consistent with a vernacular African assertion that the body and the heart-mind-spirit nexus are inexorably fused – that what happens to the body does have ontological import because our bodies are central to who we are. This is not an emphasis derived from the first-wave missionary movements, movements that emphasized the literary and intellectual facets of faith. Rather, it is continuous with an African – in the case of Embangweni, Tumbuka and Ngoni – emphasis on the unity of the body and the spirit within the experience of life in general, and, more specifically, within the movements, sensations, symbols, and sentiments of ritual experience. Because of this emphasis on the wholeness of experience, and the unity of body and spirit, AIC leaders argued that baptism should be timed closely with the moment of repentance\textsuperscript{476}, should be performed through full body

\textsuperscript{476} And presumably sharing in its emotional tenor.
immersion, should mirror the physical death and resurrection of Christ, and should initiate a new pattern of living. Likewise, they argued that baptism is the moment of Holy Spirit possession, and, as supplement to repentance, is the guarantor of one’s salvation. Within this model, it is the whole person -- body and spirit -- that experiences the rituals of life, and it is because of the wholeness of this experiences that rituals transform their participants. In this model, even as rituals may represent a point of continuation with already initiated changes within a person, such as that associated with repentance, they are also important in-and-of-themselves as moments when processes of personal transformation are subjected to formalization through participation within choreographed and symbolically articulated ritual events.

In conclusion, the AIC theology of baptism I encountered in Embangweni is a Christian tradition that remains consistent with some of the core ontological assumptions of the Tumbuka-Ngoni religious culture that preceded missionization. As such, it can be seen as a social and cultural act of resistance to a century long missionary effort to construct an oppositional model between Christianity and ancestral spiritualism. Through processes of supplementary syncretism, AIC leaders and their congregations have instead created hybrid religious cultures, ones that remain grounded in the core assumptions of ancestral spiritualism and retains respect for ancestral agency, but which adds to it the broad Christian cosmological framework of Divine agency and authority, and of salvation through Jesus Christ. In practice, this means that AIC members participate both in social and ritual practices of pre-Mission antecedents, such as polygamy and Vimbuza dancing, as well as in Christian services of worship and instruction.

What remains to be seen is to what extent AIC churches will persist as centers of resistance to more recent Western missionary efforts, specifically that of Pentecostal churches like the Assemblies of God, Full Gospel, and Living Waters churches. Particularly considering that, like AICs, Pentecostal theology focuses attention on the embodiment of spirit as a core facet of
religious experience, it is reasonable to assume that many aspects of Pentecostal worship and teaching will resonate with members of AICs. As I learned during my fieldwork, this is in fact a widespread pattern, especially among youth. I encountered many young people worshiping in the two local Pentecostal churches whom had left AICs, their natal churches, in order to join. I also encountered young people who embraced much of the emphasis and language of the Born Again movement, a movement in large part initiated by Pentecostal churches, but whom remained in their natal AIC churches. Ongoing fieldwork by others about the Pentecostal movement in Africa and elsewhere in the world will hopefully address this trend and describe its forms.

In this chapter, my various church informants described baptism in terms that raised both ontological and eschatological questions about the being and becoming of the human spirit as it matures and, eventually, confronts the death of the body. These questions are not, of course, confined to theological speculation and interpretation, especially not only to those invoked during ethnographic interviewing by an anthropologist. Rather, these are questions that also emerge within the course of people’s lives, and that are often tied directly to their ongoing life circumstances. In the chapter that follows, I consider the case of an elderly Tumbuka man who

---

477 Like AICs that acknowledge and respect spirit possession, Pentecostalism gratifies people’s thirst for an embodied religious experience. At the same time, Pentecostalism’s appeal may also be tied to its resonance with the dominant Presbyterian tradition in the region, one that maintains a classically Protestant emphasis on repentance, not ritual, as the only substantial act of personal transformation.

478 As both a member of a prominent local AIC, the Last Church, and as a self-identified Born Again, Banda’s perspective points to an emergent trend within the Christian history of northern Malawi, and elsewhere in Africa – that of young people affected by the language and perspective of the Born Again movement, whom nevertheless opt to remain within their natal AICs.

479 There is a second Western missionary movement of Apostolic churches that also warrants further attention and analysis. In Embangweni, the Swiss-headquartered Apostolic Church had recently grown to be the third largest congregation in town. My access to its leaders and members was more regulated by the church leadership than in most other churches I studied, though I eventually did gain interviews with both. It’s theology also seems to conjoin with Tumbuka and Ngoni ancestral spiritualism in important ways, and I plan further study of this church’s growth and appeal in Embangweni.
faced such core ontological and eschatological questions during the last weeks of his life. Though I was just beginning to get to know Dada Mkandawire before he grew ill and passed away during the early stages of my fieldwork, it was clear to me that there were many unresolved questions in his mind during the final weeks and days of his life -- about the nature of illness, of spirit, and of the afterlife. His story is that of a man who, when at the crossroads of his own life, found himself caught within the crossroads cultures, and, in the process, no longer sure what to think.
Dada Mkandawire was dying and he knew it. It was a muggy evening in early October 1999, and I was sitting with him in his back bedroom for what turned out to be the last time. Over the course of the previous five months, Dada Mkandawire had been seriously ill. He had fluid in his abdomen, a condition known as ascites, and his belly was severely swollen. He had consulted both mission doctors and numerous local healers in search of treatment, but to date none had been effective in remedying his condition. The mission hospital was periodically draining fluid off from his abdomen, but it provided only temporary relief and was not a permanent solution. As he now lay propped up in his bed, he told me that he could tell the end was near. His family already knew it. His eldest son, who worked in a town to the north, and his daughter, who had traveled up from the capital city, Lilongwe, were both here with him, as was his younger sister. His current wife was also here, looking visibly fatigued and distressed from the toll of the illness and her fears for the future.

When I first met Dada Johnson Mkandawire, he was a healthy looking man of elder stature who’s face, partly hidden behind a pair of thick lensed-glasses, gave off a friendly and confident expression. I had just arrived in Embangweni, in northwestern Malawi, a week or so earlier to evaluate it as a possible field site for my dissertation research. It was April 1999, and Embangweni, or more specifically the Loudon mission station centered there, was the third and final mission station I was visiting to evaluate as a field site. The hospital complex at Embangweni was large and active. It was and remains a nationally known medical facility with a catchment area of 100,000 people, three satellite health clinics, weekly mobile clinics in surrounding villages, and an expanding community-based well-water program. Among the hospital’s facilities is a laboratory where tests are routinely done for diseases, including malaria, TB, and when test kits are
available, HIV. It was there that I found myself about a week or so into my visit to Embangweni, having been asked by one of the mission doctors if I would be willing to donate a pint of blood for a woman who had been hemorrhaging. I agreed to the blood test to see if I was both compatible and HIV negative, and went to the lab, where Dada Mkandawire, the supervising lab technician, drew my blood. This was my first meeting with him, and afterwards, we talked a bit. By this time, I was already favoring Embangweni as my field site, and as I described my research project, I told him I would likely be returning to the station later in the year. He mentioned that an American missionary had once given him a Polaroid camera, but he had long since run out of film for it. Would I be willing to bring him some film back? I agreed, and we arranged for me to stop by the lab again to get the camera model before I left Embangweni to return to the U.S. A few days later, I stopped by and got the model number. We talked again briefly, and I left.

When I returned to Embangweni four months later to start the main portion of my fieldwork, I was surprised to learn that Dada Mkandawire had been quite ill for several months. When, in the company of several hospital employees, I asked the source of his illness, I saw several glances exchanged, before one of the mission doctors said that it was most likely a liver disorder of some kind. Only later did I learn that AIDS was suspected by many. Dada Mkandawire was in one of the private rooms in the hospital and I went to see him there. When I arrived at his room, I was surprised at the man I encountered. Gone were the full cheeks and well-fleshed body of the man I had previously met, and in his place was a thin man, with sunken cheeks, baggy skin, and a

---

480 Some months later, I received the following written assessment of Dada Mkandawire’s physical condition from one of his supervising doctors. “On laboratory examination, heart and kidneys were normal, but there did seem to be liver disease as noted by an elevated bilirubin (and possibly another liver enzyme). Liver disease can cause ascites, and likely causes of liver disease in Malawi would be alcohol, chronic Hepatitis B or C viral infection, or a parasitic or tropical infection that we never uncovered. None of these possibilities have any treatment in Malawi. Therefore, we just treated symptomatically with diuretics (Laxis). As his symptoms progressed, he was uncomfortable with the belly swelling and often short of breath, and received therapeutic taps of his abdomen (paracentesis) to draw off fluid.”
slow demeanor. It took him a moment to recognize me, but then he remembered and we exchanged greetings. I told him I had brought the film he requested, and he expressed surprised that I had remembered, thanked me profusely, and in short time seemed on the verge of tears. Surprised by this strong expression of emotion for what seemed a simple gesture, I wished him a quick recovery, and hurriedly left the room.

**Prescription and Faith: A Diagnostic Journey**

The next week, I was catching a ride to Mzuzu with one of the Embangweni Hospital ambulances, something I would do dozens of times over the course of my fieldwork. I found myself sitting in the front seat, sandwiched between Dada Mkandawire and the driver, John, a Presbyterian Church/USA missionary in Embangweni, and the chief engineer for the mission hospital. John and several other hospital affiliates, seated in the fold-down side seats in the rear of the ambulance, were traveling to Mzuzu to run errands and make purchases. I was going to renew visas for my wife and myself. Just as we were leaving Embangweni for what is generally a two-hour trip, Dada Mkandawire told me that he had hired a hospital driver to take him further north than Mzuzu into Rumphi district, to the village of Kowe, in order to visit the clinic of a reputable and powerful healer ng’anga there. This “African doctor,” as Dada Mkandawire called him, had been recommended to him by one of his daughters, who had been very sick and had been treated by this man with good effect. It struck me as ironic that we were traveling to see an ng’anga in a mission hospital ambulance, and I found the excursion all the more interesting for the reason. Dada Mkandawire was very open about the purpose of his trip and immediately began to tell me of the events leading up to it.

---

481 John was the son of Presbyterian missionaries who had helped initiate the expansion of the hospital throughout the 1990’s and had since passed away. The hospital’s chapel was named in his father’s honor.
In April, shortly after I left Embangweni following my first visit, he had begun to feel weak and his abdomen had started to swell. He had gone to the hospital, and the doctors found fluid in his abdomen, but were unable to determine its cause. They had run tests for liver function and tuberculosis, and done ultrasounds of his liver and kidneys, but all tests had been inconclusive. He had been treated for malaria and T.B. as precautions, but had responded to neither treatment. His symptoms had persisted and worsened. It was at this point, he said, that he had finally concluded his condition must be the result of bewitchment. Otherwise, why else could the hospital not determine its cause? He said that ailments caused by bewitchment could only be identified and treated by ng’angas, as hospital medicine could neither diagnosis or treat such illnesses. He had gone to see several ng’angas in the Embangweni area, and though all had confirmed a magical cause for his ailment, none had yet provided effective treatment. These local ng’angas, he said in retrospect, tend to be quite weak and inexperienced, unlike those of Rumphi and Chitipa districts further north, whom are knowledgeable and powerful regarding the substance of magic, and effective in fighting its ill powers. He told me that some ng’angas have visions, as clear as watching a television screen, in which they can see both the causes of people’s ailments and their effective treatments. Dada Mkandawire said that he had faith that this ng’anga, a Mr. Mundoli, would be able to help him. Then, reflecting on his own situation, he said that he had to maintain his faith in this ng’anga’s treatment if it were to have a chance for success. Without faith, he said, a person cannot be healed, and even suggested that the right medicine will not bring cure if a

---

482 Such illnesses of magic could not, he asserted, be treated by the hospital, but only by competent ng’angas. As he told me: “So, the disease of magic and the disease of natural, their treatments differ. You can’t be treated...by hospital drugs when it is magic. You will only die. Of course, sometimes, God helps, but usually you die...If you’ve got strong belief in God, God I know can help. And the help...that’s why we go to these people. Many times God does not help directly. He can help you through those people who practice those things.”

483 This was a sentiment I heard often throughout the next year. Ng’angas in the north, people advised me, are not to be fooled with, as their powers to both help and hurt are potent and real.
person lacks faith in it. If he lacked faith in the ng’anga he was about to visit, he told me, his treatment would surely fail.\textsuperscript{484}

Sensing my interest in Dada Mkandawire’s story and circumstances, John offered to visit the immigration office in Mzuzu on my behalf if I wanted to continue north with their trip. I asked Dada Mkandawire if he would mind my accompanying him, and he agreed with enthusiasm. We were to be accompanied by his wife, Nya Nyirongo, and the driver, Mr. Chirwa, and would stop and pick up an “uncle” (actually his father’s brother’s sixth wife’s brother), a man only a few years senior to Dada Mkandawire, and still living in their home area.

After dropping John and the others off in Mzuzu, we continued north, and well over an hour later, and several miles off the tarmac, arrived at the home and clinic of Mr. Mundoli. We found him sitting on his front porch with another elderly man with whom he was talking. He rose to greet us, and Dada Mkandawire went directly to meet him. After introductions, Mundoli gave his own chair to Dada Mkandawire, and the other elderly man vacated his chair for Mkandawire’s uncle. Mundoli brought out a small wooden bench for Chirwa and I to sit on, while Nya Nyirongo sat on the edge of the porch itself. Mundoli asked me about myself, and through Mr. Chirwa, who volunteered to be my ad hoc linguistic and cultural translator for the day, I told him I was a graduate student from America interested in the work that ng’angas do. He said that it takes many years for someone to learn about the work of ng’angas, but that he was happy to have me look on. He dubbed himself “The Professor” and took on a slightly didactic air for the beginning of the consultation. It was a title Dada Mkandawire and I would use in referring to him over the course of the next several weeks.

\textsuperscript{484} On the necessity of faith for healing: it was a theme I would hear repeated by many in Embangweni throughout my time there. People said it regarding themselves and others, and referring to both Christian and indigenous forms of spiritual healing. I heard it less with respect to hospital medicine.
During the consultation on the front porch, Dada Mkandawire explained in detail the events of the past four months, and as he did, the Professor began grasping and touching parts of Mkandawire’s body. First a wrist, then a foot, then the extended abdomen itself. Each he held for a few seconds, nodding affirmatively as he did so, as if understanding were entering his body through this contact. After a couple of minutes, he entered his house, and Dada Mkandawire said that he had now gone to consult his “video screen.” The Professor returned a few minutes later carrying a paper pouch full of a reddish-orange powder, which he poured in his patient’s mouth with instructions to chew and swallow it. Dada Mkandawire said it was bitter and consumed it with difficulty but determination. In a brief statement, The Professor confirmed that this ailment was in fact magically caused, and then returned into his house. Twenty minutes later he brought out a cup of hot tea, with an assortment of roots floating on top. He instructed Dada Mkandawire to drink it down to the last inch, and then smear the remainder on his distended midriff. After drinking the balance of the tea, he began smearing the remaining liquid on his midriff, and then his wife took over the effort. The Professor returned into his home, and Mr. Chirwa leaned over and said “He is consulting his...his...his God,” and again used the television-screen metaphor. After fifteen minutes or so, the Professor returned, carrying another powder, this one very fine and brownish in color. He instructed Nya Nyirongo to spread this powder over her husband’s belly and legs. As she began to do this, he walked around to the back of his house and started digging up a root from the bushes nearby. He added sections of this root to other roots and branches already collected next to his home, and quickly chopped a series of them into small pieces. These he put into a small clay pot and handed over to Nya Nyirongo. He instructed her to use the chopplings to make a tea: three times a day for ten days; then two times a day for ten days; and finally once a day for five days. At the conclusion of the treatment, Nya Nyirongo was to return with the pot and give an update on Dada Mkandawire’s progress. At no point did either Nya Nyirongo or Dada
Mkandawire inquire as to the identity of the received roots, but they took them, and without payment, thanked him, and said they would follow his instructions.

The diagnosis and prescription concluded, the rest of us thanked The Professor for his hospitality and service, and climbed back into the LandCruiser to leave. At this point, the Professor took a few steps off his porch and spoke out to Dada Mkandawire, already seated in the front-seat of the vehicle. He told him, and the rest of us, that this magic had been introduced into his body because of harsh words exchanged between he and another person. He didn’t elaborate further, and with that we drove away. On the return drive to Mzuzu, Dada Mkandawire confirmed that he felt this man had correctly seen the cause of his ailment, bewitchment, and that he had confidence that the prescribed medicine was going to bring healing. Though he did not know what roots lay in the clay pot his wife was carrying, he would consume them in faith and with hope.

I do not know to what extent Dada Mkandawire really believed and felt that confidence at that moment, or whether he was putting a good face on things for both my benefit and his. Perhaps both. Having faced so many previous disappointments, from both hospital and indigenous treatments, it seemed probable to me at the time, and still does now, that he would carry doubts into new treatment regimes. What seems likely, then, is that his voicing of faith in The Professor’s remedy was an effort to build confidence within himself through his conversation with me, a narrative constructive act of confidence-building and belief. As he himself had told me on the drive up, one must have faith for medicine to work.

The circumstances of Dada Mkandawire’s case, and his comments about it up until this point, suggest several observations. While articulating his reasoning for assuming a magical origin for his ailment, he said several times previously that he was convinced someone had bewitched him because the doctors at Embangweni Hospital had been unable to find any natural cause for his condition. Their failure could only mean that this was not a “nthenda ya Chiuta” (a disease of
God), the local term for a natural disorder with no responsible human agent. Instead, it must be a "nthenda ya ufwiti" (a disease of witchcraft) caused by the malevolent magic of another person. Dada Mkandewire never raised the prospect that his was an "nthenda ya mzimu" (disease of the spirits), as early on in our conversations when I had raised the prospect, he discounted the possibility because he had not been having encounters with ancestral spirits in his dreams. In a later conversion, he told me that he did not believe in ancestral spirits as agents of affliction at all. In his current circumstances, that left witchcraft (ufwiti) as the best explanation for what was happening.

Dada Mkandawire’s statements that his illness was magical in cause do not, however, imply a lack of faith in biomedicine on his part. Rather, it suggests the inverse: that it was because of his confidence in biomedical diagnostic techniques for determining natural pathologies that, after inconclusive tests, Dada Mkandawire attributed his illness to an altogether different model of illness causality, the magical. If his faith in biomedical models of explanation had been weak, he could still have imagined that his illness was natural in cause but that the doctors and hospital were simply not competent to discover it. Instead, their diagnostic failure led him directly to an alternate culturally validated model of illness etiology, one with antecedence in vernacular models of illness etiology by bewitchment.

This logic of explanation by Dada Mkandawire reflects a broader pattern in local etiologic and therapeutic culture, and indicates a very conventional way biomedical logic has been integrated into local medical culture by many people living in northern Malawi today. As summarized in Chapter Three, a highly conventionalized understanding of illness types predominated among the Tumbuka in the years preceding the arrival of Livingstonia missionaries. This intellectual framework affirmed the existence of three non-exclusive classes of illness etiology: natural, spiritual, and magical. The early Livingstonia missionaries sought to undermine this framework by
challenging both its spiritual and magical components. Regarding the spiritual dimension of life, Livingstonia missionaries recognized the power of God or the Devil to affect well-being, and so acknowledged a possible spiritual role in physical affliction. But most of them rejected the moral viability of ancestral spirits as agents of illness, and condemned them as evil. They did not necessarily discount the reality of such spirits, but argued that the living must not place their faith in them, as false gods. Faith in the One True God must replace faith in ancestral spirits as agents of either blessing or curse.

Regarding magic, Livingstonia missionaries disaffirmed the reality of magical causation, and sought to replace magical models of illness etiology with those of Western biomedicine. In school classes and tutoring, and in the medical practice of mission doctors and nurses, biomedicine was not simply another explanatory model and curative technique, complementing the magical, but it was the other explanatory model and technique. In terms of explanatory power, biomedicine’s gain was magic’s loss, in a zero-sum game of ideological competition. On both fronts then, spiritual and biomedical, the mission project was characterized by an effort to institutionalize a form of cultural and practical substitution, in which Western religious and scientific models would displace vernacular models of spiritual and magical explanation for illness.

As suggested by Dada Mkandawire’s own explanation for his illness, many in Embangweni have not embraced the substitutive logic of the Western missionary schema, regarding both spiritual and magical causes for illness. Putting aside for the moment the matter of spiritual causation for illness (which Dada Mkandawire disaffirmed regarding his own circumstances), his case provides one example of how people in Embangweni, and elsewhere in northern Malawi, have schematized a supplemental, not substitutive, model of biomedicine’s relationship to magic. Dada Mkandawire’s rationale for his illness invoked a widely distributed and broadly conventional cultural schema of supplemental syncretism, in which biomedical models
have been added to, but not replaced, vernacular magical models of explanation.\textsuperscript{485} Within this framework, biomedical logic has dramatically augmented those naturalistic explanations that already existed within the indigenous system of thought, while also introducing radically new categories of biological function and mechanics. Instead of replacing “superstitious” and “ignorant” beliefs in magical causation, as the early missionaries had hoped, biomedical explanations have been integrated into a therapeutic system as a syncretic complement to magical and spiritual explanations. In my research in Embangweni, I found that such a hybrid etiological schema was invoked by people from across a wide spectrum of the population, including people from the range of church traditions in the area.\textsuperscript{486} Though most people did not articulate a knowledge of biological categories and functions as well as Dada Mkandawire, a trained lab technician, they were clear in recognizing natural causality as a category of illness etiology, and knew and used terms like “malaria,” “TB,” “HIV,” and “BP.”\textsuperscript{487} Dada Mkandawire’s comments during our drive to Rumphi and back suggest that he was using such a supplemental syncretic schema within his own efforts to explain his illness, a schema combining both biomedical models and Tumbuka magical models of illness etiology and remedy. When biomedical technique and knowledge failed, he had changed his causal reference to an alternate, vernacular model.

**Illness and Doubt: Remedial Failure and the Modeling of Disease**

\textsuperscript{485} *Supplemental syncretism* can be defined as a conceptual and/or behavioral schema in which models from two different cultural traditions are articulated without radical displacement of models from either tradition. If one model is not appropriate to the circumstances at hand, there is reference to an alternate model. This form of supplemental syncretism is different from an ideal-typical *contextual syncretism* in which, depending on a person’s life context, one model fully displaces another, such that there is an either/or conceptual relationship between the models. In the case of Dada Mkandawire’s reference to magical models of illness, he did so while still fully aware of the biomedical model as a possible causal explanation.

\textsuperscript{486} Another of my informants, an elderly man of 85 years of age who was a CCAP elder and had been a member of CCAP for 66 years, agreed that witchcraft is a continuing reality, and that the bewitched person “cannot find medicine in the hospital, while traditional healers can help.”

\textsuperscript{487} TB referring to tuberculosis; BP to blood pressure.
Five days after our return from The Professor’s clinic in Rumphi, I went to visit Dada Mkandawire in his home. He was not looking good. While his abdomen remained equally distended, the rest of his body was noticeably more thin and withdrawn. He said he was happy that I had come to see him again and beckoned me to join him in his sitting room. As we began to talk, he told me that he had felt improvement during the first couple of days drinking the Professor’s tea, but now he was feeling worse again. He had gone to the hospital again to have his abdomen tapped and fluid drained, but knew that it was only a temporary measure. He was still taking the diuretics prescribed by the hospital, even as he was on day-five of the Professor’s tea. He expressed disappointment with the Professor’s treatment, and said that he didn’t think it was working. For the first time in my conversations with him, and without my prompting, he expressed doubt that this illness was magically created. Perhaps, he suggested, it was a natural disorder if this powerful ng’anga, who had demonstrated his healing powers with his own daughter, was unable to cure him. But, he continued, if it was a natural illness, why then couldn’t the doctors determine its cause? Then in a phrase he would repeat often, while shaking his head, he said “These magicians are wonderful!”

I was momentarily confused. Why is he calling witches wonderful? I quickly realized that this was not a term of praise, but an acknowledgment that witch’s activities are beyond comprehension. They literally make one full of wonder at their power and mystery. He said he just did not know why he was sick anymore. In the meantime, he would continue taking the hospital diuretics and drinking The Professor’s tea for another five days before seeking out yet another ng’anga for diagnosis and treatment.

At this point, I asked Dada Mkandawire why he was going to quit the treatment program after only ten days, when the prescription was for twenty-five? I was unwilling to discount the Professor’s remedy as without possible merit, and had already decided that I was not going to
always play the detached observer role during my fieldwork. Along with other friends and family members, I had become a participant in Dada Mkandawire’s quest for therapy and so had decided to speak my mind when I felt it appropriate. I suggested that even in western medicines, it sometimes takes a long time for them to demonstrate effectiveness, and often the patient feels worse before they feel better. His daughter seconded this motion strongly, and said he should give the regiment at least eighteen to twenty days. Nya Nyirongo, his wife, agreed as well and supported the twenty-day dosage. Giving in to this pressure, Dada Mkandawire agreed that he would continue the course of treatment for at least twenty days. Before I departed, we agreed that I would return the following day to record his life history, as well as the specifics of this illness episode, and to take some pictures of him and his family. By this point, Dada Mkandawire seemed to me a man struggling with what to believe about the source of his illness. There were times when he expressed confidence and certainty in his pronouncements, and other times when he wavered. When The Professor had brought out his various powders for Dada Mkandawire to consume, the latter had done so without demonstrating hesitation or question. At the time, he was holding to the belief that his illness was magically induced, that the Professor was a “real” ng’anga, and that therefore he could heal him. Yet five days later, with the swelling of his abdomen still not subsiding, he felt something was amiss in this therapeutic logic. In parallel with his earlier supposition that the hospital’s diagnostic failure implied a magical source of illness, he now confronted a reputable ng’anga’s failure. Whereas he could have decided that The Professor was not an effective therapeutic agent, he instead questioned magical causation altogether. At this point, Dada Mkandawire was at a loss. Competent practitioners of both natural and magical treatment had failed, and he had arrived at the limits of knowledge. He no longer knew where to put his healing faith.

A life history
As had been arranged the previous day, when his wife, daughter, and I had encouraged him to continue the Professor’s regime through to its end, I returned the following day to interview Dada Mkandawire about his life history and the circumstances of this latest illness. Upon arrival, I found him seated in his regular chair in the sitting room with a small coal burner near his feet for warmth, as the day was cool. We talked a bit more about my research, that I wanted to write a book about local culture, and I reviewed the kinds of questions I would ask during the interview. He expressed an eagerness to get started, and with only a short break for tea, we spent the next two and a half hours talking.

As he tells it, he was born Johnson Matthew Mkandawire in Southern Rhodesia in 1928, where his father, like many other Malawian men before and since, had gone to find work in the mines of the copper belt. His parents had not been completely voluntary migrants from their village in northern Mzimba District, however, but had left their home under duress. Their first three children had all died within a year of their births, and his parents and others suspected witchcraft. To escape, they had decided to leave their village and walk the 600 kilometers to Southern Rhodesia, where his father could also hopefully find employment. After the move, and as if to confirm their suspicions, their fourth born, Johnson, survived, as did a subsequent daughter.

As had his parents before him, Dada Mkandawire attributed the death of his elder siblings to the actions of a jealous aunt, who wished to claim the head seat in the Mkandawire family for her own son. As Mkandawire tells it, his father’s elder brother was not a blood sibling, but had been adopted into the family. Mkandawire’s father, Matthew, was the only biological son of his parents, and he was heir to the family lineage. The elder brother’s wife had sought to undo this natural progression by bewitching her sister-in-law and her offspring and thus entitling her own progeny to the status and authority of eldest son.

Because of that jealousy...she had to practice magic, so that every son born to my mother, Nya P...[s]o that from that family there should be no son, especially, and actually no
children. So because of that ... when it was discovered by the magicians, my father and my mother had to run away from that village.

Two years after Johnson was born, his paternal grandparents called for their son and daughter-in-law, and now grandchildren, to return home to Malawi. Their step-son and his wife had left for the lakeshore, and now the parents were alone and in need of their son’s companionship and care. Johnson’s parents returned, and two years later his grandfather died. A few years later his grandmother, a practicing herbalist, also passed away, but not before she had introduced young Johnson to some of her medicinal knowledge. At times she would instruct her young grandson to dig up roots for her, and he would watch her prepare them to give as medicine. In a tone of regret, Dada Mkandawire said that he used to know many different roots, and had written some of them down as a young man, but had long misplaced the notes and forgotten most of the roots. Shortly after the death of his grandmother, his own mother died, and his father sent the two children to live with one of their paternal great uncles (his father’s mother’s younger sister’s husband). That same uncle helped his father pay bridewealth to take another wife, but his new stepmother was unwilling to accept the children. So he and his sister remained with their great uncle, and grew up in the home of their great aunt. This woman, whom Dada Mkandawire called “grandmother”, was his primary care taker for the rest of his youth. It was she who struggled to pay his school fees when he started primary school. Eventually, just as he was to move from Class 4 to Standard 1, she was unable to pay, and Mkandawire moved to Mzuzu to find whatever work he could there. He found employment on an agricultural estate owned by the CDC company of London, and worked in crews that cleared the land of trees in order to plant crops. His income provided enough surplus to consider paying school fees. He applied to several mission schools for entrance, and was accepted at the Seventh Day Adventist’s Lwazi School, located about halfway between Mzuzu and the lakeshore, where he began several years of attendance. Eventually, however, he ran into problems
with school fees again.

Now, there, when I had...passed Standard 5 to Standard 6, I had another problem. The fees were raised. So to come to Mzuzu for my piece work, I failed...They didn’t accept me. So I had problems. I had to stop work, to stop schooling. Then, that was 1951....I was supposed to write the exams in 1951. I didn’t write because I had no fees. Then, in 1952, I decided to go to South Africa, on my own! Then, mainly, so that I can find some funds, so, to continue [my] education. On May 7th, 1952, I went to South Africa.

Unlike his parents’ sojourn to Rhodesia, he did not have to walk to South Africa. He took a bus from Mzuzu across the Zambian border to Lundazi, then to Lusaka, and on to Bulawayo, in Rhodesia. There he encountered troubles getting a visa for South Africa, and so hid in the bathroom of a train and managed to smuggle his own way in.

I was a young man, yet I was brave! And I kept on praying God. I was...my grandmother taught me about praying God...She was a Christian of CCAP. So, she was praying day and night for me. And she told me about praying. So I always kept God in my heart. So I know God led me. I managed to hide there, although a certain man wanted to catch me in the toilet. He opened the door. I was inside. He opened the door, but he mistook that there was nobody inside. I was there!

He traveled through Fransistown, Mafikeng, Kimberley, and Springbok before his journey ended at the copper mines of Nababeep, a mining town in northwestern South Africa, only forty-five miles or so from the Atlantic Ocean. He worked there for two years and it’s there that he took his first job in a medical facility, as a medical orderly in the mining company’s clinic. He said his good skills with English from his schooling got him the job. He began sending money back to his uncle in Malawi for safe-keeping in hopes of returning to continue his education. In 1954, after two years in Nababeep, he returned to Malawi and got married. With the earnings his uncle had put aside for him, he started school again at the Seventh Day Adventist school at Lwazi the following year.

Two years later, he passed the Primary School Certificate, and, with assistance from the
school director, gained admission to the Seventh Day Adventist's medical school at Malamuru.\footnote{The first Seventh Day Adventist medical clinic was opened near Thyolo, in southern Malawi, in 1915.} After four years of study, he successfully completed their Hospital Assistant course in 1960, and immediately found employment in the dispensary of a major tea estate in the southern Mtoro District, where he worked for three years. During this time he also studied for and passed the Junior Certificate of South Africa exam. This certificate opened yet another career door, and with assistance from the medical officer in Mtoro, he applied to and was accepted into a government course for training to become a Laboratory Technician. From 1962 to 1965, he did course work at Blantyre’s Queen Elizabeth Hospital, and after completion, was posted as a Laboratory Technician to the District Hospital in Kasungu, in the central region of Malawi.

It was here, in May of 1966, that he had his first subjective run in with malevolent magic when one morning, after taking his breakfast tea, he suddenly felt weak and began to shiver. The medical officer in charge at Kasungu Hospital suspected malaria and gave him a shot of chloroquine, after which Mkandawire fainted. In the days that followed, his abdomen began to bulge and fill up with gas, reaching a point where he felt his ability to breath being choked off by the pressure of his expanding belly. He was referred to the central hospital in Lilongwe, the capital city, and then on to hospitals in Blantyre and Zomba in the far south. In all three hospitals, findings were inconclusive. After returning to the hospital in Kasungu, a fellow patient suggested that this ailment was the product of magic, and that he should consult an African doctor because this was an illness hospital doctors were powerless to treat. Dada Mkandawire took his advice and consulted an old ng’anga who lived just a kilometer or so from the hospital. He prescribed a regiment of herbs that Mkandawire says helped alleviate his symptoms, but did not provide a full cure. He consulted other ng’angas, and his wife consulted an nchimi (diviner) on his behalf. The
latter said that it was two of Mkandawire’s workmates who had bewitched him, and gave his wife medicine for him to take at night before going to sleep. It would enable him to see the guilty parties during his dreams. The medicine was applied by first making two small incisions on the side of the face and then rubbing the medicine into the fresh wounds.\footnote{This is a common method for the application of medicines, and it is unusual to meet a Malawian in the north who doesn’t have at least one small set of scars, known as “tatoos,” from this method somewhere on their body. Most people have many.}

As suggested by the nchimi, Mkandawire did dream of two of his workmates that night, one of whom was also a classmate from his days at Lwazi school. He awoke convinced that these men were responsible for his sickness. Friends suggested that Mkandawire should leave Kasungu as soon as possible, as these men clearly wanted to kill him, and could pay off herbalists and diviners to ensure that he never recuperated. So, like his parents before him, Mkandawire decided to move away from the threat of further bewitchment, and requested a transfer to Queen Elizabeth Hospital in Blantyre. It was accepted, and it was not until he had moved to Blantyre and consulted with other ng’angas there that his symptoms finally subsided in full. The whole episode had taken six months to transpire.

In retelling the story, Dada Mkandawire estimated that he visited up to fifty different ng’angas during this time, purchased numerous chickens and goats, and paid out large amounts of cash in his quest for effective therapy. In retrospect, he suggested that many of the ng’angas who treated him were only after his money, and provided no real service to him. Still, he said there were certain ones among them who did do battle with the witches and who did help restore his body to health.

After this episode, he continued his quest for more education and enrolled in a correspondence course for the O levels through London University. He passed those, and went on studying for the A levels. By this time he had developed an interest in law and so was taking
courses in British Constitution and Law. On the A level exam, he did well on his British Constitution test, but passed his Law exam with a very low score of seven, not enough for application to university. By this time his children had themselves reached school age and required school fees, and so he stopped his own studies and settled into his profession as a laboratory technician.

His subsequent career took him from Blantyre in the south to Nkhotakhota District on the central lakeshore, back to Blantyre, then to Nkhata Bay District, and by 1983, to the district capital of Rumphi in the north. In 1985 his first wife died and, wanting a change of setting, he requested a transfer back to Karonga. After six years there, he requested another transfer, this time to the district capital of Mzimba. He started work there at Mzimba District Hospital in 1991. In 1992 he married his current wife, Nya Nyirongo, a younger woman from near his home area in Rumphi. Then, in 1993, at the age of 65 and after 29 years of employment with various government hospitals throughout the country, he retired. In Mzimba, he leased a plot of land from the local District Commissioner, and built several small houses on it to rent out. In 1995, however, he decided to return to work and applied to Embangweni Hospital for a position in their laboratory. He began work there as the Laboratory Supervisor in March of 1996, and had been there in residence ever since.

Nya Nyirongo’s views

The day after interviewing Dada Mkandawire, I interviewed his wife Nya Nyirongo. She agreed with most elements of his narrative of illness. It had started in April with malaria-like symptoms, including shivering, dizziness, sweating. He had taken fansidar and quinine, but to no effect. His abdomen started swelling and the hospital found water outside of his intestine, and she knew to call the condition ascites. He had undergone the thirty-day injection program for TB, but it had also been to no avail. Finally, in July, they had decided to seek “African medicine”, and she
had gone alone to visit a local *ng’anga*, near Chimutu, about 13 km northwest of Embangweni. He said the condition was magically caused. “How did he know that?” I asked. “Thinking through brains,” she said, and added that he used a cow’s tail whisk, known locally as a *litchowa*, as well. Like her husband previously, she said that *ng’angas* have special devices, like videos, that enable them to see if a sickness is caused by magic or is “God’s sickness”. She said that even before she explained anything to him, this *ng’anga* told her he knew her reason for coming. Her husband was sick. He had been to the hospital, and yet his illness still persisted. He told her that doctors cannot treat this illness because it is magical. Dada Mkandawire took this first *ng’anga*’s medicine, cooked into *mpala* (porridge) for only four days, however, before deciding it was ineffective. Nya Nyironga said she was frustrated with his lack of patience.

Shortly thereafter, he had gone with one of her sons on a bicycle to visit a second *ng’anga* near Mabiri, about fourteen kilometers away and site of an Embangweni Hospital rural health clinic. He had confirmed the message of the first *ng’anga*. Your husband has water outside of his intestines. The ailment has been caused by magic. The hospital can not help you. This *ng’anga*, however, refused payment until Dada Mkandawire was healed. He prescribed an herbal treatment that was supposed to last two weeks, but after only five days, Dada Mkandawire again decided it wasn’t working and refused to take more. When word reached the *ng’anga* that his patient had faltered, he came with his wife to see Dada Mkandawire in Embangweni to administer the treatment himself. He stayed a few nights, and said he would return at the end of the month to evaluate his patient’s progress. Nya Nyirongo said this *ng’anga* never did return because he had seen through magical means that Dada Mkandawire had only followed his regime for five days and then had thrown the rest away. He had also seen that by the end of the month, Dada Mkandawire had gone to on to consult another *ng’anga*.

Early on in the illness, they had also gone to stay for a week with a local husband and wife
team who both work as *ng’angas*. They had said it was people in Dada Mkandawire’s home village who had bewitched him, but they did not believe the accusation. In retrospect Nya Nyirongo says they were not real *ng’angas*.

I asked her about her church’s policy towards its members visiting *ng’angas*, and she said that the Seventh Day Adventist church does not like it. “Only that we, we are in trouble. That’s why we are meeting many *ng’angas* now, because of the troubles we have.” She said that CCAP has the same policy of discouraging its members from visiting *ng’angas* because often times they identify witches within the church community and thus stir up conflict and resentment between church members.

Many people in churches, as how I know, they are witches. So how can they allow, how can they allow a person to go to *ng’anga*? Maybe that *ng’anga* can, can reveal them, that ‘Ah! That one is a witch!’ That’s why they don’t want some people to go to *ng’anga*!

By her account, many church leaders do not forbid people to visit *ng’angas* because it is a bad thing to do, but out of self-interest to protect their own evil doings. But members of her church, Seventh Day Adventist, were different. They had come to her and told her to take her husband to see local *ng’angas*. They had said “It’s better for you to go to *ng’anga*. We are sorry for you. You have taken a long time in your illness.” According to Nya Nyirongo, even the church Elder, Mr. Nyirenda, had, during a visit with them, said they should see an *ng’anga* as perhaps this illness was the result of magic.\footnote{More than one informant suggested noted a disjunction between what people acknowledge as an institutionally sanctioned code of conduct -- don’t visit *ng’angas* -- and the reality of life circumstances -- people get bewitched and the only person who can help them is an *ng’anga*.}

She noted that The Professor said the bewitchment was the result of a quarrel between
Dada Mkandawire and another person about the boundaries of their gardens. She said she was not sure whether the episode occurred here in Embangweni or in Mzimba, but suspected it was a Mzimba incident. She also said that The Professor had offered to seek revenge on the guilty person, but that she and her husband are only interesting in being healed. “God will judge.”

Nya Nyirongo’s comments showed a frustration with her husband’s impatience and his lack of confidence in many of the ng’anga’s treatments he had received. Yet they also showed her agreeing with her husband’s belief that magic was responsible for his condition, and actively participating in his quest for therapy among local herbalists and diviners. Her distress regarding her husband’s illness was evident in both her speech and demeanor, and she exhibited both uncertainty and resolve in explaining the circumstances of his illness and their quest for therapy.

Illness Etiology, Social Conflict, and the Power of Suggestion

After interviewing Nya Nyirongo, I returned twice in the next couple of days to see Dada Mkandawire, but on both occasions he was resting in his bedroom, and I said I would return another time. When I did see Dada Mkandawire again, about three days later in early September, I found him sitting outside in a chair in back of his house, in the corner of their fenced-in yard. His younger sister sat on a mat a short distance away shucking maize. He didn’t look any better than the last time I’d seen him, though not much worse either. He had a large, blue and green scarf wrapped around his neck and the coal burner was once again lit near his feet. He told me he was still taking The Professor’s medicines, and said that he still had hope that they would eventually work. In fact, he said, if this treatment regime of The Professor’s did not work, he would really have to question whether it was a magically induced illness after all. This ng’anga was a man who had a reputation for treating magical illnesses, and Mkandawire had testimony from a member of his own family that this man’s medicines were real. Failure could only mean that it was in fact a natural disease, in which anti-magic medicine would have little effect. This was the third time in
my conversations with him when he expressed a changed mind as to the cause of his illness. Later in the conversion, he again wavered, and suggested that it still could be a magical illness, but only that the Professor’s medicine had failed. Regarding the Professor’s treatment, he commented “We shall see if it’s a lie.”

At this point, just as during the first days of taking The Professor’s medicines, Dada Mkandawire was again clearly disappointed. Yet another therapeutic intervention was failing, leaving him sick and still uncertain as to the source of his illness. The confidence and certainty in of earlier pronouncements was again replaced by wavering between two modes of self-diagnosis, and an inability to decide conclusively what was physically wrong with him. The hospital’s diagnostic failure had steered him towards acknowledging a magical source for his illness. Now he was confronted with a reputable ng’anga’s failure. Had The Professor’s medicine failed because The Professor had misdiagnosed him (along with all the other ng’angas), and his illness was in fact not magical in origin? Or had he been bewitched, and The Professor’s medicine had failed because it was no good, because it was, as Dada Mkandawire had said, “a lie.”

Our conversation continued. Having just equivocated on the cause of his illness, Dada Mkandawire went on to recount a set of circumstances that led him to again assert that witchcraft was involved in his illness. He told me about a land dispute that he thought was the one The Professor had named as the source of the bewitchment. Part of the land that Mkandawire had leased to purchase from the District Commissioner in the city of Mzimba had been occupied for many years by a couple. They had left some time earlier, but their son was still there and claimed ownership of the land. He claimed the land on the basis of a customary residence, a category of ownership Dada Mkandawire recognized as historically valid, but which he said did not apply

---

491 He did not raise the prospect that his physical ailments were in any way tied to some spiritual fault on his part, but remained caught between magical and natural explanations.
within the city limits of Mzimba. According to his account, for zoning purposes, urban lands are subject to public law, not customary law. The city of Mzimba had slowly been expanding its borders, and the land in question had been incorporated into Mzimba in recent years. He had purchased it under its new status, whereas the other man claimed the land under its old legal status. The argument in question occurred the previous year, when Dada Mkandawire sent his sons to get clay for making bricks from an ant hill on the property, and the man chased them away. For Dada Mkandawire, here was the conflict and enmity that provided a probably cause for an act of bewitchment. The Professor’s general comment that an argument had been involved was now situated within a specific episode in his life. This link further supported the idea that magic was involved.

In the meantime, the night before this encounter with Dada Mkandawire, I had had a dream in which someone came to me during my sleep and fed me magical substances, just as Dada Mkandawire and others had described to me. I awoke from the dream with a start, and feeling anxious. Had I just been bewitched? I managed to drift back into sleep, but awoke in the morning upset with myself for giving witches room to play in my subconscious mind, but still a bit fearful for the experience.

New Revelations

492 This example points to an important topic in the study of economy and law in Malawi and elsewhere in Africa: the expansion of state-law over customary-law during the colonial and national eras of state formation.
Two weeks passed before I saw Dada Mkandawire again. I had stopped by on a few previous occasions and been told he was resting. This time it was early evening, and I was beckoned back into his bedroom, as he was too sick to come out in the sitting room to chat. I found him propped up in bed looking gaunt and weak and Nya Nyirongo said he had been having difficulty keeping any food down for several days. He had also been unable to move his bowels and was in noticeable physical discomfort.

A new twist in the circumstances surrounding his illness had appeared with Nya Nyirongo’s return from her visit to The Professor. She had gone to return his clay pot, give him an update on the situation, and take any further steps he might recommend. He had suggested to her that Dada Mkandawire’s uncle was hurting, not helping, the situation, and that he might be involved in having bewitched in the first place. This was the same uncle whom had accompanied us on our initial visit to the Professor. Before that trip, on hearing of Dada Mkandawire’s illness, he had come to visit him in Embangweni and had brought “African” medicine with him, which Dada Mkandawire had taken. Both Dada Mkandawire and Nya Nyirongo agree that it was shortly thereafter that Dada Mkandawire became very constipated, to the point where he was unable to defecate for three weeks and vomited any food he consumed. Now in retrospect, and in light of the Professor’s suggestion, they were considering the possibility that this uncle’s medicine might have been responsible. Dada Mkandawire wasn’t sure of the accusation, but Nya Nyirongo thought it quite likely. Like Dada Mkandawire, I thought it unlikely, but did not voice my opinion.

The following week I went to see Dada Mkandawire again. Nya Nyirongo had been to see another local ng’anga the previous day, a woman living about thirteen kilometers south of the station, near Mabiri. A man in the Seventh Day Adventist church had recommended this woman as someone with real powers. He had taken his daughter to see her, after the daughter woke up one morning with her armpit hair shaven. The ng’anga said that someone had come in the night and
shaved the hair, and told them of the woman who had done it. She also told them that they needed to go quickly before the hairs were turned over to another person who would use them to bewitch and kill the girl. As the story goes, the woman was pursued and forced to appear before the *ng’anga*, who found her in possession of the girl’s hair. With this impressive story as a vote of confidence, Nya Nyirongo went to visit this woman while she was performing a nighttime divination session. The *ng’anga* told Nya Nyirongo that Dada Mkandawire’s illness was natural, not magical, in origin, and that all of the previous *ng’angas* had been deceiving them and just taking their money. This was the first time an *ng’anga* had said this, and Dada Mkandawire said he believed this woman divined correctly. Coming on the heels of the Professor’s failed treatment, this was a confirmation for Dada Mkandawire that his illness is natural, not magical, in origin, and perhaps the result of a kidney or liver failure of some sort. He told me that he will ask the hospital to tap his stomach again the following day, and hope that his ability to eat and defecate will return so that he can regain some strength.

Dada Mkandawire and Nya Nyirongo had responded differently to the two revelations of the previous week. She seemed convinced by The Professor’s suggestion that Dada Mkandawire’s uncle was involved in witchcraft, while he seemed more convinced by the Mabiri *ng’anga*’s assertion that the illness was natural and beyond her remedial efforts or those of other *ng’angas*. Yet, in the days to come, Dada Mkandawire would again equivocate in his effort to understand what was happening to him physically, even as he took steps to prepare for the possibility of his death.

**A last will and testament**

A week later, I was once again sitting with Dada Mkandawire in his bedroom. It was evening, and the room was sticky and hot. Both Nya Nyirongo and his eldest son, Henry, came back in the room and sat with us briefly. Nya Nyirongo left after a few minutes, and then Henry
left as well. Dada Mkandawire was lying on his back and his stomach was still terribly swollen. He said that he was still having no bowel function, and wasn’t keeping any food down. I suggested maybe he lie on his side, as that would take the pressure of the water in his abdomen off his bowels and maybe open things up a bit. I helped him adjust his pillows and turn on his side until he found a comfortable position. He was now laying and looking directly at me as I sat beside him. He said that he was worried about what might happen in the near future. When he died, he wanted all of his possessions, pension, and property, including the disputed lots in Mzimba, to go to his six youngest children and his current wife. He had told Henry this and asked him not to make troubles for them, but he now said he was worried Henry would try to take everything from them. He went so far as to say that his son was in Embangweni not out of any concern for him, his father, but only out of hunger for his possessions. He acknowledged that by custom, his eldest son should become guardian of all his possessions, and that it should fall to him to care for his remaining dependents. But he said he wanted to bypass tradition in this case and use a legal will to ensure his wife and small children’s future. He called Nya Nyirongo and told her to retrieve his will from a small suitcase in the closet. He showed it to me. It named all six of his youngest children and Nya Nyirongo as his beneficiaries, and was signed by him at the bottom. He emphasized that this was a legal state document that should supersede custom, and it was clear to me that he wanted to be sure that I could testify to his intentions and perhaps assist in some way his wife in making her rightful claim.

Our conversation then returned to the topic of his illness. Picking up where earlier discussions had left off, he said he just did not know what to think about his illness anymore. Was it natural or magical? Then, looking right at me, he said that he didn’t know what to believe any more about death and what follows it. He said that Dr. Lincoln, one of the missionary doctors, had come by earlier in the day, and they had talked about these ultimate matters. Dr. Lincoln had
assured him that if he had faith and trust in the Lord Jesus, that he would have nothing to fear, and had prayed with him. But now here he was telling me that he just didn’t know what to believe. African beliefs tell us one thing, he said, and Christianity says another. One says our spirit is going to be with the ancestors, the other that we are going to heaven. He made no mention of hell, but only said “I don’t know where my spirit is going.” On this evening, I found myself talking with a man who no longer knew what to think about the after-life and his place in it. I felt wholly inadequate to be sitting at his bedside at that moment, and could offer him little consolation for his uncertainty. I do not know if he wanted me to pray with him, or to tell him what I believed, but I did neither. I said something about finding peace in his heart, but felt that it was too easily said. Our conversation on matters of the spirit ended on this indeterminate note, and both agreeing that he needed to rest, I bid him good night and departed. A week later Dada Mkandawire passed away.

Magic, Medicine, and the Afterlife: A Life History Modeling of Indeterminancy

There are many possible reasons why Dada Mkandawire would have the doubts he expressed to me during my final visit with him. The existential crisis of facing one’s own death likely brings on a host of memories and emotions, including feelings of regret, ambivalence, and affirmation regarding one’s own life decisions and experiences. Other than his final comments of doubt during that last visit, I do not know the details of Dada Mkandawire’s inner examination during the weeks and days leading up to his death. He did not share much about that facet of his life with me in the brief time that I knew him. But in reflecting on the circumstances of his life, I have come to wonder what role his last illness experience played in motivating his spiritual questioning at the conclusion of his life. Was the failure of his therapeutic quest part of what led him into questions about his own spiritual status? Did his indeterminacy of self-understanding regarding his own body lead to an emergent indeterminacy regarding the status of his own spirit
and soul? Did the failure of one mission system, biomedicine, lead him to question the other, Christianity, and in both cases to fall back on more deeply rooted, established cultural forms?

During my primary interview with Dada Mkandawire, he had asserted that there are two basic categories of illness: natural and magic.\textsuperscript{493} The former can be caused by viruses or germs, but they come to the body naturally. The latter are the result of witchcraft, and can only be treated through the therapeutic intervention of ng’angas or nchimi.\textsuperscript{494} As already described, Dada Mkandawire wavered between both explanations for his illness during my conversations with him, depending on his assessment of the efficacy (or lack thereof) of the vernacular and biomedical interventions he had tried. During my last recorded interview with him, he told me:

Africans can do wonderful things. They are very creative! … I know… I know you Europeans, white men…no, they don’t believe in magic. But as that Professor said “The magicians are there.” And I’m sure it’s true. The magicians are there. But the, most of you young men cannot know them. But…they say…it’s there, and the word ‘magician’ is English! And it’s from the Old, and even in the Bible, it’s there! Magicians are there.

In view of Dada Mkandawire’s life history, this faith in the reality of magic and witchcraft is not surprising. From the day he was born, his life had been affected by stories and experiences of bewitchment. As he tells the story, his own survival beyond infancy was the result of his parents’ escape from their bewitching in-law. Presumably from a fairly early age Mkandawire had been conscious of bewitchment as a factor and potential threat shaping his own and his family’s life. His grandmother (great aunt), a CCAP member, had worked as an ng’anga and so as a boy he had

\textsuperscript{493} It should again be noted that he was silent on topics of spiritual affliction regarding his own case, and invoked neither ancestral or Divine agency in his illness. Most other informants I consulted also suggested that the spirits can cause illness, though often such spiritual affliction was correlated with incidence of bewitchment.

\textsuperscript{494} According to many of my informants, people are most susceptible to magic during the night as they sleep, when magicians come and force magical substances (nyanga) into people’s mouths, or elsewhere on the body. Often the person will dream these events as they are happening, and awake in the morning knowing they have been bewitched. Dada Mkandawire did not, however, recount such an episode of force-feeding of nyanga.
been witness, and assistant, to her efforts to counteract magical afflictions and return people to health. His personal experience with bewitchment in his late 30's, a six-month ordeal of illness and uncertainty, seemed only to have confirmed his knowledge that witchcraft was real and potent. Like his parents before him, he had felt compelled to geographically relocate to save his life and prevent further magical harm. He attributed his eventual recovery from this illness to the effective intervention of various ng’angas who assisted him.

Yet Dada Mkandawire also had vast experience and training within biomedicine, and was well versed in biomedical thinking. He had first gained exposure to biomedicine as a young, relatively well-educated migrant worker in South Africa, where he found work as a medical orderly. His medical work and training there was followed by further medical education in Seventh Day Adventist schools back in Malawi, training that had led him into a long career in commercial, state, and mission biomedical facilities, one that spanned forty-six years by the time I first met him in Embangweni. During his medical training, as a Hospital Assistant and then as a Laboratory Technician, he would have received lessons in chemistry, biology, anatomy and physiology, osteology, pharmacy, bacteriology, and toxicology, among other subjects. During his professional career, he had worked in multiple hospital and clinic settings and become well versed in identifying a range of chemical and organic conditions and pathologies. He was knowledgeable biomedical technician.

In the early stages of this illness, he had good reason to expect that doctors would find a biomedical cause for his illness. Working in a biomedical laboratory, he was regularly in contact with blood, saliva, and other tissue samples that regularly confirmed the existence of natural pathogens as agents of disease. But when early liver and kidney tests, and tests and treatments for

\[\text{495 See King and King (1992) and Mkandawire (1998) for descriptions of medical training programs in Malawi during the early and mid-twentieth century.}\]
T.B. and malaria failed in determining the root causes of his own condition, he was confronted with the need to look elsewhere for explanation. He turned to magic, as parallels with his earlier experience of witchcraft in 1966, notably the ballooning abdomen, were suggestive that a similar act of malevolence had occurred. Many of those around him, including his wife and many friends, agreed with his conclusions, and he was not alone in thinking that his current therapeutic quest among ng’angas was an appropriate and legitimate response to the circumstances of his illness. Yet the failure of numerous ng’angas also left him at a loss to discern the reasons for his condition, and with this uncertainty came a disquiet that accompanied him to his grave.

Within both the Seventh Day Adventist and Presbyterian missionary projects in Nyasaland in the late nineteenth century, as among other Christian missions elsewhere in Africa, the emergent field of biomedical knowledge and practice was introduced as companion to the introduction of the Gospel message. Scientific rationality and Divine biblical authority were both modeled as true accounts of reality. While science was enclosed within the parameters of Divine mandate and Natural Law, its active pursuit lay in the material world of biology, chemistry, and physics.

---

496 I do not know if Dada Mkandawire took a conclusive test for HIV, whether by instruction by a doctor or of his own initiative. Not once did he raise the possibility, and I colluded with him in his silence on the subject.

497 Mission medicine and mission evangelism had been companion since the earliest days of Christianity in northern Malawi. For the missionaries and their supporters, the practice of biomedicine was upheld as a service to African peoples, and as a witness of God’s love. This notion of service, however, was often framed in ethnocentric and paternalistic language, as metaphors of “childishness” and “ignorance” were attributed to African peoples, whom were deemed in desperate need of physical salvation by agents of a scientifically enlightened Europe. Mission medicine was also praised as a facilitator of the broader Christian mission to convert and “civilize.”

498 The western Christian tradition includes a highly conventionalized appeal to the power and will of God, and to His purpose for the world and each individual in it. In this model, God is control, and there is Divine purpose and meaning behind all events. Still today, for many Christians in the west, when biomedicine reaches the limits of knowledge and fails to explain an illness experience, people often invoke the power and will of God, saying that, “It is in God’s hands. God is in control.” As an explanatory system, this perspective is boundless and potentially all-inclusive, because God Himself is those things and more. He is omnipotent, omniscient, and omnipresent, and everything under the sun, including various forms of mortality or morbidity, can be accounted
this framework, the search for truth through science was conducted outside of the sacred authority of the Bible. With their biomedicine, the first generation of Christian missionaries brought to northern Malawi a model of the human body as organic machine, a model that could not explain matters of the human soul, but which did provide the most reliable means of healing intervention. In so doing, these early agents of medical missionization introduced a dualist paradigm that asserted both a separation of religion from science, and more fundamentally, a separation of body from spirit.

Both sides of this dualism were framed in opposition to the unitary model of body-spirit fusion that was indigenous to the Tumbuka, Ngoni, and other peoples and tribes of northern Malawi. As has already been described in previous chapters, there have been a range of responses to this oppositional model among the residents of northern Malawi, as elsewhere in sub-Saharan Africa. Especially within the pulpits and pews of African Instituted Churches, many have rejected the oppositional logic of the early Western missions, and instead sought out ways to creatively fuse both Christianity and biomedicine with the symbols and assumptions of pre-missionary religious culture and custom. Hybrid religious phenomenon, like the contemporary Vimbuza ritual, have been among the products of this supplemental syncretism.

It seems that Dada Mkandawire, however, was unable or unwilling to embrace such hybrid schemes. Rather, he found himself caught within the oppositional model outlined by missionary teachings, and perpetuated within both the Seventh Day and Presbyterian religious cultures to which he was broadly exposed. Both mission and African medicines had failed him. In the process, by their lack of efficacy, both medical traditions had failed, in his judgement at least, to

for by acknowledging His dominion over the world. As such, while the limits of scientific knowledge confront one with a degree of mystery, faith and trust in God can provide a meaningful answer to misfortune and evil. Regarding illness, a person was supposed to embrace biomedicine as their primary etiological model, and to situate it within a larger religious world view which acknowledged Divine control over all matters.
account for the root causes of his bodily ailment. The result was to leave him unsure whether the sources of his affliction lay in the world of social relationships and magic, or in the world of natural disease and Divine providence. Within a vernacular pre-mission religious culture, the condition of the body was a reflection of one’s spiritual and social personhood. Personal conduct, ancestral agency, acts of bewitchment, and bodily illness were often drawn together into relationships of correspondence and causality. In Dada Mkandawire’s case, what did his illness mean? If it was caused by magic, if someone had bewitched him, was he in someway morally accountable? Had the spirits, if they were there, withdrawn their protection from him because of his own conduct? Was he being punished by God, or perhaps by the ancestors, whose existence he had disclaimed and whose customary laws he had violated? Dada Mkandawire did not raise these questions with me directly, and as such my framing of them is a matter of speculation on my part. But I engage in this speculation because it raises pertinent questions about the place of both Western missionary and pre-Mission African religious and therapeutic cultures in Dada Mkandawire’s life, and about the reasons why he was unable to achieve a resolution between them throughout his indeterminate illness experience. On this deathbed, Dada Mkandawire found himself unable to place faith in either magic or biomedicine, and also unable to visualize and affirm the spiritual trajectory of his soul. At this profound ontological and eschatological moment, he was a man caught at the crossroads of different religious and therapeutic cultures, and caught by his own inability to find a location for his faith.

Postscript: After his death

499 More broadly, it raises interesting questions about the extent to which conceptual schemas concerning different facets of life – in this case the medical and the religious – might be correlated, with change in one produces change in the other. It also raises questions about whether people tend to abandon novel syncretic elements and fall back on established pre-syncretic models and schemas during times of crisis.
The day after Dada Mkandawire’s death, a wake was held at his home in which fellow hospital employees and other station residents, along with fellow church congregants and other members of the Embangweni community, stopped by his house to sit and pay respects. Two days later a funeral was held near his home village in northern Mzimba Disctrict, where Dada Mkandawire was buried next to the body of his first wife. The Elder from the Embangweni SDA church conducted the funeral service, and along with Nya Nyirongo, relatives of both his first and second wives were in attendance. At one point during the service, members of his first wife’s family were invited to come to the grave and acknowledge their bond to the recently deceased. Then it was announced that the members of his second wife’s family who were present would not be allowed to approach the grave. Instead Nya Nyirongo was invited to come forward, which she did, crying and wailing, and eventually falling to her knees at the grave, shouting out the question of why this had happened.

It was only later that I was told by some that Dada Mkandawire had married and divorced a second wife before marrying Nya Nyirongo. He had never mentioned her existence to me. Others eventually told me that he and many others believed his second wife, out of jealousy, had bewitched his first wife and caused her death. Members of his first wife’s family still believed this, and Dada Mkandawire had gone to his grave thinking the same. He also passed away knowing that conflict was brewing between his current wife and his eldest son, and that his recent efforts to guarantee a legal process were not certain to prevail. Conflict did erupt after his death, as his son made efforts, for the most part successful, to secure all of his father’s material wealth, including his pension benefits, despite his father’s will and his step-mother’s efforts to secure them for herself and her children. While I argue above that Dada Mkandawire’s disquiet in the days before his death was in part motivated by the existential crisis of his illness and spiritual incertitude, it was also derived in large part from his foreboding sense that he left behind him a
legacy of conflict and struggle. Dada Mkandawire was not a man at peace in his final days, and his story shows both pointedly and poignantly each person’s struggle to build coherence, both in their life and in their heart.
CONCLUSION

Crossroads of Culture: Religion, Therapy, and Personhood in Northwestern Malawi

An exotic Christianity will never take vital root in the life of the natives.

- Yesaya Zerenji Mwasi
  *Essential and Paramount Reasons for Working Independently*
  1933

The pre-Livingstonia religious history of northwestern Malawi was characterized by dramatic changes in the years directly preceding the missionary arrival, as resident Tumbuka populations, as had the Tonga to their east, encountered an invading Ngoni society that sought to undermine their social and religious practices. Ngoni practices of bridewealth and patrilineal inheritance were imposed, and novel political structures of authority were established by Ngoni chiefs. Shrines devoted to regional territorial spirits were sacked, and novel spiritual agents derived from Ngoni, Karanga, Senga, Bemba, and other tribes, clans, and lineages were introduced. A spirit movement of resistance to Ngoni rule arose through widespread spirit possessions by *vipili* spirits, whom encouraged resident Tumbukas, Tongas, and others to challenge Ngoni dominance.

Into this contested and changing religious and social scenario the first Livingstonia missionaries introduced a novel social, cultural, medical, and religious schema, one backed by finances from Scotland and a growing colonial interest in the region. These new religious agents were bearers of a modernist Christian culture, one steeped in a Reformed theological tradition and the dualist philosophical assumptions of the Enlightenment era. They were also bearers of Victorian era notions of propriety and self-discipline. They set out to build a network of mission stations, and associated commercial enterprises, throughout the northern regions of Nyasaland, with the goal of fundamentally transforming the economic, social, religious, and therapeutic culture
of the region. Their mission stations were built up around three primary institutional types—hospitals, schools, and churches—a three-part institutional motif that reflected the post-Enlightenment, and specifically Protestant, model of the person as a composite of body, mind, and spirit.

As was described in Chapter Two, this tripartite framework emerged out of a Christian theological tradition that had increasingly polarized body and soul as dual but separate constituents of being. Corresponding with an emergent scientific rationalism, the sixteenth century Protestant Reformation further located the mind as the focus of both philosophical and theological reflection, and as the seat of the soul, that which uniquely makes humanity in the image of God.

Despite being participant to this literary and doctrinal trend towards intellectualism in faith, the modern version of late nineteenth century Christianity that Presbyterian missionaries introduced to northern Nyasaland retained within it fundamental elements residual from the early Christian church and its premodern assumptions, elements that represented a more holistic concern with the embodied dimensions of spiritual life. Among these were its ritual acts of baptism and communion, both of which engaged and acted upon the body through their symbolic and kinesic forms, the first through ritual cleansing, and the latter via ritual consumption. Livingstonia missionaries also emphasized the proper robing of the body as part of their Christian witness, introducing and enforcing standards of modesty and ecclesiastical garb. Women were instructed to cover their breasts, and men were encouraged to adopt a Western style of dress that included trousers, collared shirts, suits, and ties. New converts who attended catechumen classes were clothed in long white cassocks, to mark their entry into a new life and personhood through Christian faith. Likewise, monogamous marriage was asserted as the only moral and sacred form of sexual union between a man and a woman. Polygamy and premarital sex were both judged as sinful and outside of God’s will for a person. In all of these ways, Livingstonia missionaries
articulated models of the body that carried moral, and therefore spiritual, implications and consequences.

Yet, in their formal theology, as preached from Sunday morning pulpits, and taught in schools and catechumen classes, the early Livingstonia missionaries were bearers of an alternate ontological schema, one that shared with Aquinas and Descartes an overriding dualism of the body and soul, and a hierarchy of soul over body as the core facet of being and determinant of personhood. This foundational schema emerged out of an earlier theory of body-soul fusion, in which body was fundamental to personal identity, and instead became a theory of a psychic soul that is distinct from and superior to body. From this compartmentalized schema emerged a subsequent emphasis on the mind and intellect as the true seat of knowledge and right faith, one that became incorporated into the Reformed, including Presbyterian, theology that emerged in the sixteenth century and guided the later Livingstonia missionaries in their nineteenth century project.

Likewise, the Livingstonia missionaries were confident bearers of an emergent scientific tradition that also affirmed a dualist framework of body and soul, one that differentiated between the natural world of mechanical and organic processes, and the spiritual world of individual soulfulness and Divine agency. The medical missionaries among them, in particular, were advocates of a biological model of nature and the body, and saw it as consistent with and companion to an ultimate validation of God as the creative and sustaining force of the universe.

In the missionary medical logic, the organic body was not completely cut-off from spiritual events. The missionaries were, after all, religious people who believed in the omnipotence and omnipresence of God, a God who could and did intervene in the world of human health and experience as He saw fit; a God capable of bringing either illness or health. Yet, within their medical practice, the body was treated as a mechanical and biological organism, one subject to knowledge through systems of anatomy and physiology, and subject to healing through processes
of surgical and pharmaceutical intervention. Like the Aquinian and Cartesian dualism that shaped the Protestant theological tradition, this scientific schema also rested in a core distinction between the bodily and spiritual dimensions of life.

In summary, the Livingstonia missionaries introduced two foundational cultural schemas from Protestant Europe when they established their three-part educational, medical, and evangelical mission in northern Nyasaland in the late nineteenth century. The first schema, derived from Cartesian philosophy and their Protestant Reformed tradition, held that the soul, self, and personal identity were all composed of and by mind. It thereby defined salvific faith in terms of knowledge and understanding. The second schema, derived from the post-Renaissance scientific medical tradition, asserted that nature, including the human body, could be understood in materialist terms, as an organic object subject to empirical knowledge and intervention. Both schemas shared an overarching framework that posited a distinction between body and soul as facets of being and personhood, a foundational dualism that guided the Livingstonia missionaries, and many other Western missionaries in Africa and elsewhere, in their missionary project.

And what of this missionary project? Has it succeeded? Have Tumbukas, Ngonis, and others living in Embangweni embraced the Reformed model of Christian faith as, at its core, a matter of right belief and conviction? Have they adopted the biomedical model of the body as an organic object subject to illness and health via material and mechanical causes? Have they, in both cases, put aside the spiritual and therapeutic assumptions that guided their religious societies in the years preceding missionization? After more than a century of Christian educational, evangelical, and medical practice, has a new foundational schema -- one that posits a core distinction between body and soul -- been successfully institutionalized within the culture and cosmology of northwestern Malawi? Has this dualist framework been incorporated into people’s ways of knowing and being in the region? Were the missionaries, then, successful agents of hegemony?
These questions can, of course, only be addressed by first inquiring into the religious and therapeutic traditions prevalent among Tumbukas and Ngonis prior to their encounter with Western missionaries. Missionary theology and logic has not been inscribed on a blank cultural slate. The syncretic Tumbuka-Ngoni religious culture that emerged in the years before and during the early Livingstonia presence was, despite its ethnic heterogeneity, a religious hybrid with roots in a broadly distributed religious schema, one shared with variation among Tumbukas, Ngonis, Bembas, Karangas, Chewas and other populations of the region. It was grounded in a knowledge of the fundamental unity of bodily and spiritual experience, and of the ancestral spiritual agency and magical forces that shape and govern the world of experience. This was a unified, monistic schema of personal ontology and experience, one reminiscent of pre-modern Christianity, but in stark contrast to the modernist schismogenesis, to use Bateson’s term, between Christianity and science.

It was into such a cosmological framework that the early Livingstonia missionaries sought to, in their language, “plant the seed” of the gospel message, and discipline and guide its development as a new church body within the larger Christian family. In so doing, they sought to expand the “communion of saints” described in The Apostle’s Creed, and in the process, to assert the civilizing and saving nature of their missionary project. They also sought to establish the veracity of scientific knowledge, and to assert the efficacy of its practical forms.

As I have hoped to demonstrate in the preceding chapters, the Livingstonia missionaries did succeed in dramatically transforming patterns of religious identity and behavior in northern Malawi. They also were successful in introducing new understandings of illness and patterns of therapy-seeking behavior. Yet, in the domains of both religion and medicine, they did not fundamentally undermine or eliminate the cultural logics and practices of the region that preceded missionization. It is to that regional and global narrative of response and resistance, and to my
accompanying summary analysis, that I now turn.

**Education, Independency, and Renewal**

The Livingstonia Mission arrived in northern Malawi with a wealth of resources at its disposal, resources that fundamentally shaped its subsequent relationship with resident peoples of the region. Though the Mission constantly struggled to secure more funding as it sought to expand operations, it nevertheless managed to introduce a whole new economy to the region. This was, of course, part of its initial explicit agenda. Livingstone himself had called for the introduction of alternative commerce as one means to fight and end the trade in human slaves. From the start, the Mission helped facilitate the operations of the Africa Lakes Company, a commercial vendor that was the only major supplier for the mission during its first decades. In addition to facilitating the influx of new consumer goods, the Mission also transformed the local economy through its employment practices, as it held open the promise of regular wage employment for those who committed themselves to participate in the mission community and its practices. These wages could be used to purchase exclusive new commodity goods supplied to the mission by the affiliated African Lakes Company. Mission schools, in particular, held out promise as sites where young Tongas, Tumbukas, and Ngonis could seek to gain some mastery over the new institutional and economic order being established among them. In the process, many hoped to find a means of advancement within this order, especially as it became successively more established through British colonial rule.

From among the first generation of converts there arose a Mission-educated class of African leadership, many of whom grew increasingly frustrated with the Mission’s unwillingness

---

500 For the missionaries, the schools were sites of literacy, doctrinal, scientific, and industrial training, where young converts could be directed towards increasing prosperity through an informed, responsible, and disciplined work ethic, and towards the further evangelization of the region through a doctrinally sound knowledge of the Bible and the Christian faith.
to grant them equal status and authority within the institutions of the Mission. By the 1920's and 30's, several of these African leaders had seceded from and/or been disciplined by the Mission and had gone on to establish their own churches, African Instituted Churches, thereby initiating a novel branch of Christianity within the region. This new Christian branch embraced the cosmological framework outlined in the Bible, but remained sympathetic, in practice and at times argument, to the assumptions and practices of an antecedent ancestral spiritualism.

While the independency movement of the 1920's and 30's among Mission-educated African leaders was motivated in large part by their frustrations with a reified missionary domination of the Mission, there were also theological and cultural factors that shaped the movement. Many AIC leaders resisted the missionary effort to construct an oppositional model between Christian morality and theology, and the customary practices of marriage, kinship, and ancestral spiritualism predominant in the region. One way they did so was by opening their doors to polygamous members, and to the spirit possessed, welcoming both as members in good standing. In so doing, they provided a way to integrate and fuse Christianity with vernacular forms of religious expression, and helped set the stage for a long history of juxtaposing and fusing elements from both traditions in other religious settings.

Likewise, in later years, voices of resistance to the missionary oppositional model emerged from within the Presbyterian church leadership, as Reverends such as Stephen Kauta Msiska questioned the Mission’s sweeping condemnation of African spirituality and culture as incommensurable with Christianity. In the process, they argued for a further grounding of Christianity in African cultures, anticipating and helping create the move towards a process of inculturation in many of the first-wave mission churches, in particular the Roman Catholic and Anglican churches.

By the middle decades of the twentieth century, a new Christian evangelical missionary
project emerged in southeastern Africa, as in other parts of the world, as the growing Western Pentecostal movement established churches and pastoral colleges throughout its mission fields of action. In part from this charismatic initiative, a broader “Born Again” movement emerged in Malawi, one characterized by absolute faith in the Christian God, ultimate surrender to his authority and grace, loud condemnation of other claims to spiritual authority, moral conduct in accordance with strict ethical standards, and a progressive-minded entrepreneurial spirit. Importantly, the movement is also characterized by its expressive and ecstatic worship services, and its prevalent ritual focus on the body as the site of spiritual happenings.

Predictably, at the time of my arrival in Embangweni in mid-1999, the religious culture of the area was highly diversified. Though local religious culture had assumed a predominantly Christian character in terms of people’s formal identity, it included within this generalized Christian rubric a broad range of expressions of that identity and its accompanying implications. Likewise, Christian ecclesiastical life was not the only important domain of collective religious experience, as the Vimbuza possession complex continued to be a prevalent and vital presence in area villages.

Not surprisingly, this diversity has engendered contestation among local religious leaders, and in my sixteen months of fieldwork, I encountered numerous church pastors and village prophets who, when asked about their church policies, justified their particular forms of religious practice, and at times criticized those of others.501 In my conversations and interviews with church leaders, in particular, I encountered many who sought to justify the particular forms of their

---

501 It should be noted that these leaders varied in the extent to which they criticized other church traditions in their attempt to validate their own church practices and theology. Nevertheless, I encountered a generalized tendency among church leaders from all of the local denominations to frame their own church’s righteousness through negative critiques of other churches. The one insistent exception was the pastor of the Restored Christian Community Church, who articulated an inclusive model of all churches as part of Christ’s Church.
ecclesiastical life and teachings as distinctively consistent with the Bible and the will of God.\textsuperscript{502}

\textbf{An Ethnography of Religious and Therapeutic Practice}

Within this contested Christian culture in Embangweni, several different points of debate emerged. Many revolved around the question of how best to define the relationship between Christianity and the vernacular customs and cosmology of the region. In its most simplified form, the debate has been between those who frame a fundamental opposition between local religious culture and Christianity, and those who identify consistencies and analogies between them. Members and leaders from AICs generally argued for a complementary relationship between the ancestors and God, and suggested that the ancestors often act as agents of God on behalf of their living kin. Leaders and members from the Presbyterian church, by contrast, often articulated a model of incommensurability between God and the ancestors, and argued that God possesses people through the agency of the Holy Spirit alone. Members of local Pentecostal congregations were even more consistent in arguing for a qualitative and moral distinction between God and the ancestors, and suggested that the ancestors act as agents of the devil. In this ongoing debate among the churches of Embangweni, a few key arenas of religious action have emerged as important sites of contestation. Among them is the therapeutic complex known as Vimbuza.

\textbf{Vimbuza}

As a ritual and dance complex, Vimbuza is grounded in a long-standing set of religious assumptions and practices that antecede the arrival of Christianity in northern Malawi. Among the

\textsuperscript{502} It is important to note that this debate about religious practice has become framed in literary terms. The vast majority of my church informants referenced the Bible to support their positions and practices, including those AIC members who affirmed a model of body-spirit fusion, and acknowledged the authoritative benevolence of their possessing ancestors. Even as they affirmed the body as a site of spiritual experience and personal transformation, they constructed their argument through a textual account of ultimate matters and eternal salvation. This represents an important trend in the process of intellectualizing faith.
most basic of these assumptions is the knowledge that the spirits of the deceased remain engaged with the world of the living. In Vimbuza, patients who are afflicted by one or more possessing spirits engage in dance and sacrificial consumption in order to communicate with and appease those spirits. Some of these spirits may be of ecological or foreign heritage, like those of \textit{vimbuza}, \textit{virombo}, or \textit{vyanusi}, which lie deep in the blood, while others, specifically the ancestral \textit{mizimu}, are more immediate. According to local telling, within the past two generations among the living, possession by \textit{mizimu} spirits has been growing in prevalence, and by the time of my research, the majority of local Vimbuza events were directed at communicating with and honoring the \textit{mizimu}.

The leadership, and to a lesser extent membership, of the Presbyterian church in Embangweni, generally framed a model of opposition between Christianity and ancestral spiritualism.\footnote{The opposition was also framed in practical and moral terms. When asked to compare their churches with AICs, first-wave mission church leaders tended to emphasize the contrast among conduct codes, and characterized AICs as being overly tolerant of polygamy, beer consumption, loose sexual morality, and other breeches of good Christian conduct.} In this model, the God of the Bible is the sole legitimate spiritual authority in the world, for all Christians, and for all of humanity. Christians are those who submit themselves to His sacred authority and will, and who acknowledge and embrace the living sacrifice of Jesus Christ, who died on the cross for their sins. In terms of possession, this model affirms possession by the Holy Spirit, and recognizes Its agency as the only valid possessor of a person’s soul. In this model, paraphrasing a metaphor used by one young Presbyterian pastor-in-training during a conversation about spirit possession, “there is only so much space in one’s heart, and it is up to each person to close the door of entry to any spirit but the Holy Spirit.” Because of this model of Divine exclusivity, many of my Presbyterian informants repeated the injunction that both consultations with \textit{nchimis} and involvement in Vimbuza were counter to a good Christian life, and should be avoided.\footnote{The male Presbyterian leadership, in particular, voiced insistence that people should give no}
Many of my church informants, however, especially women, but also some men, from three local AICs (the Last Church, Chipangano, and Zion Prophecy Church) participated in Vimbuza and through it actively engaged with the possessing spirits in their lives. In my conversations and interviews with them, they often justified that participation as both necessary and appropriate by pointing to the crisis of their affliction and the need to seek remedial action. In addition, particularly in reference to possessing mizimu spirits, they validated the authority of those spirits by suggesting that they were acting as agents of Divine will. In doing so, they ascribed a sacred identity and role to the ancestors, and framed their participation in Vimbuza as consistent with their Christian identity and life, thereby rejecting an assumed moral inconsistency between them.

In engaging so directly with possessing spirits, contemporary participants to Vimbuza stand outside of the Mission tradition of Christianity that was first introduced in the region in the late nineteen hundreds.\textsuperscript{505} Whereas the Mission judged the possession complex as pagan and/or demonic, and attempted to suppress it, participants in Vimbuza, many of them now professing Christians, have instead continued to turn to its movements, forms, and assumptions to confront both crisis and affliction. In so doing, they have acted as agents of resistance to the missionary oppositional model and its underlying dualist logic.

bearing to the attempted interventions of the ancestral spirits. Among women leaders, however, I encountered greater reluctance to condemn those who were afflicted by possessing spirits, and a greater openness to the idea of seeking occasional therapy through dance.\textsuperscript{505} Members of first-wave mission churches, including the CCAP, also turn to Vimbuza therapy when confronted with illness. In contrast to most AIC members, however, they have generally attempted to keep their Vimbuza activities infrequent and below the radar of explicit public discourse for fear of disciplinary action from their churches. Though I spoke with several CCAP members who claimed spirit possession by ancestral spirits, they generally insisted that they were not active participants in Vimbuza rituals for fear of recrimination by their church. One prominent Roman Catholic woman, who was also an employee of the CCAP’s Embangweni Hospital, was more public about her possession status and her participation in Vimbuza dancing. Nevertheless, she was also careful to insist that she participated only as a patient, and was not herself in line to assume therapeutic powers.
The introduction of Christian sacredness into Vimbuza has occurred through various aesthetic, linguistic, and symbolic means, including the incorporation of Bibles and Bible verses, Christian crosses, white cassocks, and prayers to God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. These Christian elements have been added to the Vimbuza symbolic and ritual repertoire through processes of both supplementary and substitutive syncretism, having been added to and sometimes replaced pre-Christian ritual forms. In either case, the schematization of Christian elements into Vimbuza was realized through the recognition and use of analogies between Christian symbolism and that of ancestral spiritualism. Just as white ufumu flour had been spread on bodies and faces in pre-Mission Vimbuza ceremonies to indicate the move towards health and purity, so now white cassocks and headbands were worn to represent the same. Just as crosses had been used to teach about the crossing rivers of life and death, so now the Christian cross was adorned to demonstrate the core gospel message of death, resurrection, and life everlasting. Just as the color red represented both danger and life in the vernacular pre-Christian Bantu cultures of northern Malawi, so too the medical red cross was invoked to represent the danger of affliction and the promise of renewed health. Just as they bow and honor their ancestral fathers and mothers, so too they now honor and beseech their heavenly father through his son.

As suggested by Shore and others, such processes of analogic reasoning, and in this case, analogic ritual, provide one means by which cultural agents change and adapt themselves to ever-changing life circumstances. In the case of northern Malawi after the arrival of the Livingstonia missionaries, resident Tumbukas, Ngonis, Tongas, and others found themselves juxtaposed between two religious traditions. Through analogies of symbol and form, they and their descendants have found ways to incorporate Christianity into the preceding ancestral spiritualism of the region.

At the same time, however, Livingstonia missionaries in northern Malawi introduced
Christian symbols and rituals that carried their own distinct meanings and associations, about the sacrificial death of Jesus, about a masculine Trinitarian God, and about denominational codes of conduct and doctrine. To some extent, new symbolic practices and meanings have replaced facets of pre-Mission religious culture in the region, acting as substitutions for previous symbolic forms. In Vimbuza, elaborate bird feather costumes have been replaced by white cassocks, just as headscarves and cassocks have in part displaced the use of *ufu* powder as a medium of whiteness.

With respect to the overall religious framing of the Vimbuza ceremony, it is likewise not a simple case of either supplementation or substitution. While the Vimbuza ceremony remains at its core a ritual and cosmology derived out of ancestral spiritualism, it has also been absorbed into an overarching Christian model of divinity and history. Many previous ecologically-based references to God as creator have been replaced by textually-based references to the Trinitarian God.

Yet, at the same time, the chiTumbuka word chosen to represent the Christian God of the Bible was “chiuta”, meaning “great bow” and used to reference a rainbow in the sky. This word choice derived from a clear analogy between the missionary idea of God as supreme power and creator, and the Tumbuka notion of God as the creative and sustaining life force. As such, every time a pastor references the name of God from his Sunday morning pulpit, he is also naming a Tumbuka ecological symbol of rain and the blessings of good harvest and health. Thus, there has been a substantial, though not complete, substitution of Christian divinity for the pre-Mission notion of God. This substitution was both facilitated by and, to some extent, limited by the analogic relationship between the Christian model of God and that of the existing Tumbuka-Ngoni cosmology.

The schematic integration of the Christian cosmological framework into the Vimbuza complex is particularly notable, because the process has likewise involved its inverse -- the incorporation of Vimbuza into the Christian cosmology writ large. This is a substitutive process,
but not one so simple as substituting white cassocks for *ufu*. Rather it represents a scale of substitution that implies a fundamental change in the organizing logic of the cosmology. As a cosmology of spirit, ancestral spiritualism is alive and well in northern Malawi, yet it has been changed through its incorporation into Christianity, as the ancestors are now themselves governed by a supreme Trinitarian God, as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

In summary, the integration of Christian elements into Vimbuza shows how both complementary and substitutive syncretism work, as the Christian cross, Bible, white cassock, and other Christian elements have been added as both supplements and substitutes within the aesthetics, choreography, and symbolism of Vimbuza. Likewise, the integration of ancestral spiritualism and Christianity shows the role of analogic reasoning and ritual in facilitating the transportability of symbols and meanings across religious traditions, and in the process creating new hybrid religious cultures. In the process, it evidences a process of dual inculturation, wherein the organizing frameworks of both ancestral spiritualism and Christianity were mutually incorporated.

As suggested by my ethnographic data, this analogic relationship between Christianity and ancestral spiritualism has been institutionalized in a variety of both conceptual and expressive forms. As suggested by Shore, religious culture leads a double life, taking form and salience in individual hearts and minds, as well as finding expression in the multitude of human behavioral, symbolic, and technological forms. In the process, a new hybrid religious culture - both Christian and vernacular - has emerged, one that is analogic, structural, and syncretic. It exists as a part of people’s individual knowledge and beliefs, as well as in the shared public and institutional forms of their daily and ritual lives. To the extent that the Christian cosmology has become dominant in northern Malawi, the Livingstonia missionary project in the region has been successful in its evangelical effort. Yet, the vitality of Vimbuza as a religious practice among Embangweni residents today demonstrates the extent to which both the first and second waves of Western
missions failed to substantially undermine the logic and practices of ancestral spiritualism. The integration of Christianity into Vimbuza evidences a prominent pattern of rejecting the missionary oppositional model between Christian and vernacular forms of religious knowledge, belief, and expression. In the process, it evidences an important trend in the religious history of the northern Malawi region: the resilience of vernacular forms of religious practice and the foundational schemas that underlie and organize them in the face of a hegemonic Christian missionary project.

Kapoka’s Case Study

The case study of George Kapoka’s illness experience and his steps to remedy it demonstrated an active case of analogic syncretism, as Kapoka invoked conjunctions between his own affliction and that of Jesus, and between the regional tradition of ancestral veneration and the biblical injunction to honor one’s parents. In doing so, he opened a way towards both a growing engagement with his ancestral spirit possessors, as well as an emergent incorporation of the sacred personhood of Jesus Christ, achieved in part through recounting his highly personalized vision and embodiment of Jesus’ crucifixion. In comparing his own suffering to that of Jesus, Kapoka established a potentially analogic relationship between his own religio-therapeutic role as a soon-to-be nchimi, and the redeeming role of Jesus as the ultimate healer and savior of the world and soul. Kapoka himself told me that he felt his mission was expanding from a singular concern with his own suffering state to a broader mission of healing in the region. Like Jesus, Kapoka would embody a form of sacred possession, and through its power provide remedy to those afflicted. Though Jesus embodied the Divine spirit as the physical heir of God, Kapoka would embody it through possession by the ancestral spirits. In this model, though God the Father wields ultimate authority, His will can also be accomplished in part through the agency of his ambassadors to the world of the living, the ancestral spirits, whom also possess authority as bearers of God’s will and purpose for humanity.
The early Livingstonia missionaries who introduced Christianity into northern Malawi taught and preached against this interpretation of Divine and ancestral co-agency. In their logic, the ancestors were bearers of a pagan, perhaps demonic, authority that contradicted the revealed message and will of the Biblical God. For Tumbukas, Ngonis, Tongas, and other residents of the northern region who felt convicted to resist this oppositional model, there began an effort to construct an alternative model, one that forged a complementary relationship between the ancestors and God. Through practices of analogic syncretism, like that of Vimbuza, local Tumbukas and Ngonis in Embangweni, as elsewhere in Africa, forged an alliance between God and the ancestors, and created a hybrid religious culture that allows individuals to embrace their possession experiences and make them their own.506

This was choice Kapoka seemed to be making about his own ancestral spirit possession. Over the course of the ten months that I followed his case, he expressed a growing desire and will to obey his ancestors, and to follow their will for his life. Rather than resist their calling, he instead engaged in the challenge of integrating his life history as a Presbyterian and hospital employee into his emerging profession as an nchimi. As witnessed by his self-ascribed mental anguish, he was not finding the task an easy one, as he struggled to resist a lifetime of inculturation into the Presbyterian oppositional model. This cosmological struggle was, of course, augmented by real and basic concerns over his likely loss of employment and high church status. Yet resisting he was, and doing so by finding ways – some already established by previous example – of fusing the ancestral and the Christian. In the process, he was gradually recreating himself as a different kind...

506 In this model, the ancestors are bound to God by their common benevolence for humanity. The difference, of course, lies in the scope of spiritual benevolence, as within pre-Mission spirituality, the ancestral spirits confine their benevolence to their biological kin, by virtue of their common affection and lineage ties, whereby in the Christian model God’s benevolence is manifest towards all humanity. For AIC church members, as for some other Christians, the two sources of benevolence converge in a hybrid model of ancestral and Divine interagency.
of person, one professing a new calling in both of his professional lives.

Kapoka accomplished this syncretic integration of Christianity and ancestral spiritualism in part through symbolic means, as he integrated narratives, images, symbols, and colors from Christianity into his own emergent engagement with the ancestral spirits, and his submission to their divination calling. The crucified Christ, the red cross of crisis and healing, and the sky blue color of the Livingstonia Mission/Synod flag – all were to be incorporated into Kapoka’s therapeutic aesthetic and repertoire. In the process, he not only boosted his own potential authority as a diviner, but also seemed to settle on a path towards improving his own mental health and sense of being in the world. Kapoka’s case provides a compelling example of transitional syncretism, of a person who imagined creative ways to build a sense of coherence when confronted with multiple, at times contradictory, cultural models and practices.

Importantly, Kapoka found his way towards a syncretic integration of Christianity with ancestral spiritualism by taking a turn towards the body as the site of spiritual experience. Through dance, Kapoka, like others who dance Vimbuza, heightens the spiritual presence within him by focusing awareness on the rhythm of the drums, the clapping of the therapeutic community, and his own moving body. In the process, he shifts consciousness away from the reflective and intellectual mode of thinking and towards an embodied awareness of sensation and feeling, and towards a mind that listens for voices of guidance and counsel from the body. In so doing, he immerses himself in a new world of spiritual interpretation, instruction, and enactment.

Through participation in Vimbuza dance and ritual, and through the very act of acknowledging his own possession, Kapoka was rejecting the model of a despiritualized body that had been part of his biomedical training and experience. Likewise, he was also rejecting a model of disembodied spirit, like that which predominated within the intellectualized Reformed church tradition in which he had worshiped since a child. This is a profound turn for any person to take,
and I am not surprised that Kapoka’s mental health suffered throughout this ordeal. Yet, from the standpoint of individual empowerment, his turn back into the customary world of ancestral spiritualism opened up new room for what could become personal growth. That is, of course, for Kapoka to decide and realize. Whatever the outcome, Kapoka’s analogic integration of Christianity with ancestral spiritualism has opened up a new pathway in the world for himself, a pathway that traverses and bridges both Christian and ancestral fields of action and assumption.507

The anthropologist James Fernandez has written extensively about the use of metaphors and other tropes as imaginative and performative mechanisms of transformation within expressive culture (1986, 1991). He suggests that the “mission of metaphor” is to help people move through processes of personal conversion from inchoate and inappropriate states of being to ones that embody more identifiable, optimum, and holistic states of experience. He suggests that metaphors and metonyms have the power to move people, to relocate them within and among frames of social reference, and to situate them within courses of ritual action that will enable them to further realize the achievement of a more coherent sense of self and others.

In many respects, the case study of Kapoka’s journey of analogic self-transformation is a vivid demonstration of Fernandez’s argument. Two analogies invoked by Kapoka, in particular, serve to move him from a questionable and indeterminate moral state to one that stands with more solid footing. In invoking a comparison of his own possession suffering with that of the crucified Christ, Kapoka cloaks himself in a new kind of sacred personhood, one that affirms his possession state and also ties him to the foundational Christian narrative of God’s love, sacrifice, and healing power. Likewise, in invoking the Christian mandate to honor one’s parents, Kapoka inserts himself into a normative relationship of authority and subservience, one validated by both Christian and

507 I plan to reconnect with Kapoka upon my future return to Malawi in order to follow up on his story and case.
vernacular models of moral personhood, in which he cannot be questioned for fulfilling his obligations as a good son and faithful servant. As suffering yet obedient son, Kapoka offers a persuasive new model of himself as one who is living in right relationship with both the ancestors and God, and who will perform a new profession as healer that serves the will of both.

Baptism

Baptism, as it is practiced in Embangweni, is clearly a Christian practice. From what I observed, previous forms of initiation into moral adulthood, such as girls’ and boys’ initiation rites, have in large part been supplanted by baptism. If they do occur, it is less frequently and away from public view, as I encountered neither during my fieldwork in Embangweni. In this respect, baptism has likely been a substitutive addition to local religious life, replacing other rituals of social and spiritual advancement. Yet, at the same time, baptism has not become the only ritual of spiritual cleansing and transformation in the Embangweni area. Rather, it has been institutionalized alongside the Vimbuza ceremony, a kind of ecclesiastical correlary to a village-based rite of passage. Just as baptism has become a regular part of local ecclesiastical life and a marker of entrance into a new Christian personhood, Vimbuza continues to be practiced on a large scale in the area, to function as a potent ritual of cleansing and personal transformation, and to propel a selection of its afflicted members into new professions as healers.

In my interviews and conversations about baptism with leaders from across the ecclesiastical spectrum of Embangweni, I encountered a highly diversified religious culture, consisting of various ways of modeling the relationship between the body and spirit, and by extension, between ritual and ontology. Members of AICs, in particular, resisted the Western

---

508 Baptism has not substituted itself for previous rites of passage on its own. Other rites of passage, like participation in formal schooling or in the wage job market, have also served to provide novel avenues of social transformation and self-creation. Like baptism, they also provide the means to change one’s public identity, and claim a new form of personhood.
model of a highly intellectualized faith, one bound not only to repentance, but also to doctrinal knowledge and competence. Instead, they placed emphasis on the emotional act of repentance as the sufficient marker of personal transformation, and on the living out of a Christian life as the measure of a new Christian’s status and being. Likewise, in their modeling of the ritual act itself, AIC informants emphasized the embodied nature of the experience. For these reasons, baptism should be immediate and by immersion.

In this respect, the modeling of the baptismal ritual among AIC leaders in Embangweni is consistent with what is known about the pre-Mission religious culture of the area. Within their customary cultures, Tumbukas, Ngonis, and other local African peoples, modeled the person as a dynamic unity of body and spirit, and understood it to be this body-spirit unity that experienced and was transformed by ritual and therapeutic action. Theirs was a fundamentally embodied notion of spirit, and of life itself, and they emphasized, to use Turner’s terms, both the orectic and normative dimensions of ritual participation. The highly intellectualized model of Christian faith presented by the Livingstonia Mission, one derived from a broader European Protestant emphasis on faith through knowledge, did not resonate among these northern Nyasa residents. Instead, it clashed with their emphasis on the embodied nature of experience, including symbolic and cosmological experience. One of the results of this disjunction was that the newly emergent AICs of the early twentieth century embraced a different model of baptism from that of the Livingstonia Mission, embracing the New Testament’s examples of Jesus’ own baptism rather than those of apostolic baptism by sprinkling. In doing so, AIC leaders immersed the baptism ritual within a broader pool of embodied logic, one derived from pre-Mission religio-therapeutic culture and custom. This is a form of incorporative syncretism, wherein a substitutive form (baptism) is incorporated into a more encompassing and enduring cultural schema (body-spirit unity and ritual transformation) that is, in itself, not undermined or supplanted by the incorporation. In retaining a monistic model of body-
spirit unity, the AIC church leaders with whom I spoke, articulated a rejection of the missionary effort to institutionalize dualistic, compartmentalized model of an intellectualized soul and separate body.

For the AICs that emerged in the early 1900's, their divergence from missionary Christianity reflected, in part, an effort to honor the long-established ancestral spiritualism of the region, and the AIC informants with whom I spoke in Embangweni echoed this broader trend. In opening their church doors to the spiritually possessed, and not judging those possessed members as living in sin because of their possession, they opened the way for integrating spirit possession into church life, and into the broader Christian cosmology. In so doing, they also created a form of Christianity that continues to engage meaningfully with the experience and implications of spiritual embodiment. This is a model of ritual as potentially key process of spiritual transformation, not merely events of demonstrative function. In this model, both ritual and dance have the power to effect change, both ontological and eschatological, in their participants.

Chapters Ten and Eleven also showed a fast-growing Pentecostal and Born Again movement that also offers a Christianity that incorporates the embodied and emotional facets of religious experience. Like AIC members, Pentecostals also affirmed the importance of the body in ritual experience, and embraced the full-bodied experience of spirit through ecstatic worship and song, a resonance with vernacular forms of ancestral spiritualism that may in part account for the movement’s growth. In this respect, they also stand in some contrast to the intellectualist Reformed tradition of the established Presbyterian church, though they shared with the CCAP a classically Protestant affirmation of repentance alone as the marker of salvation. Despite its similarities with AIC Christianity, however, the Pentecostal perspective in Embangweni diverged dramatically from it with reference to ancestral spirits, which it condemns as evil and demonic. In doing so, local Pentecostals and Born Agains became new flag-bearers in the effort to uphold the
traditional Mission oppositional model between Christianity and ancestral spiritualism. In so doing, they added new vigor to the ongoing religious debate within Embangweni about how best to define the Christian faith and its core principles, including within their local cultural practice. The Mission oppositional model, in particular, remains at the center of this debate, as it is regularly invoked in commentary by its critics, supporters, and the undecided alike. This last group of people, the undecided, are those who find themselves in some way “caught” between the Western and African religious traditions of their upbringing and life. As was seen in Chapter Eight, Kapoka was such a man, who for some time felt himself caught in this crossroad of culture, and by extension feared for his own mental health. Yet, as he progressed through his therapeutic journey during the time that I knew him, he seemed to be finding at least partial resolution of his mental stress through his integration of both African and Western cultural schemas. Unfortunately, the same cannot be said of Dada Mkandawire, the elderly Tumbuka man who was the subject of Chapter Twelve.

Mkandawire Case Study

From the circumstances of his case of which I am aware, and based only on my conversations with him in the days before he died, I believe Dada Mkandawire went to his death with substantial doubt about the fate of his spirit in the afterlife. He seemed, in fact, to lack what Christians call “blessed assurance”, a confidence of conviction in core truths and principles that should bring peace of mind to any believer confronting death.

One could argue that Dada Mkandawire was a man of weak faith. Other members of his church with whom I spoke in the months after his death said that of him. Yet for me, the question is not so much the strength of his faith, but rather its definition. Based on his life history, he had been exposed to the worlds of magic and spiritualism since a young boy, when he apprenticed at the side of his grandmother. Through his educational and professional lives, he had also been trained in
biomedicine, and exposed to the resourceful and widespread ecclesiastical cultures of the SDA and CCAP. The former was the church of his youthful education and his adult ecclesiastical life. The latter was the dominant religious ethic in the northern region where he grew up, and was at the time of his death, his employer. Both church traditions taught and preached the first-wave mission oppositional model, distinguishing between vernacular ancestral spiritualism and Western Christianity, as well as between magic and medicine, in morally and ontologically exclusive terms. All of these experiences and exposures undoubtedly played a role in shaping the man he had become, and in shaping his assumptions of faith and knowledge.

In my brief case study of his life and death, I have reached only a few, partial conclusions about the definitions of his faith in his final days, as he faced the existential crossroads of life and death. A broader and deeper narrative of his life and death is far beyond my knowledge. Nevertheless, I would like to suggest that Dada Mkandawire’s case suggests something important about religious conversion, as a general process, and about the religious culture that has emerged in northern Malawi in the years since missionization began. Many northern Malawians, Dada Mkandawire among them, have not constructed a fully coherent and integrated relationship between their vernacular magico-religious culture and the Christianity and biomedicine introduced by the Livingstonia Mission and subsequent missionary movements. While the chapters on Vimbuza and baptism, and the Kapoka case study, provide examples of people integrating Christianity and ancestral spiritualism, this does not mean that all people participate equally in this syncretic process, or even that those so engaged manage to do so fully. Though Kapoka was, so it seems, managing to integrate his Christianity with his ancestral spiritualism through analogic reasoning and moralizing, it was not an easy process. Rather, he was a deeply troubled man who demonstrated struggle and uncertainty through the process, even as he found a way to bridge his dual religio-therapeutic inheritances through analogic syncretism and creative symbolization. Each
of his religious and therapeutic heritages became a source of potential empowerment as he transitioned into a new public personhood and profession. For Dada Mkandawire, however, the struggle seemed even greater, as his indecision and confusion regarding both the state of his body and that of his soul had led him into an indeterminate state where neither religio-therapeutic tradition provided him with comfort or coherence.

For Dada Mkandawire, of course, it was not only a matter of understanding the relationship between the spirits and God. It was also a matter of understanding the role that witchcraft had played in his life, and whether or not he was going to his grave through the magical ill-will of another person. Based on his own comments to me, his distress might also have been grounded in having to confront his own life decisions, and the legacy of conflict he was leaving behind within his family.

In Dada Mkandawire’s case, he encountered disappointment and failure in the spiritualities and sciences of both sides of the African/Western cultural encounter, as he moved unsuccessfully between hospital and village medicines and frameworks. This failure left him facing a set of ontological and eschatological questions that were clearly disquieting to him. In view of the larger questions framing this dissertation, about religious change and personal transformation, Dada Mkandawire’s case suggests not so much a man who had experienced religious conversion, as one who found himself caught in much larger conversation and contest that had, in the end, become his own.

Based on my hearing and reading of his life story, I find both irony and tragedy in Dada Mkandawire’s case, as the faith that was supposed to bring him blessed assurance did not. Instead, as he struggled to articulate an understanding of reality, in particular his own pressing medical crisis, Dada Mkandawire found himself caught in the crosswires of the Mission oppositional model, a model that demanded of its adherents a classically categorical “either/or” logic vis-a-vis
Christianity and the vernacular world of magic and ancestral possession.

Crisis and Creativity at the Crossroads of Culture

As was suggested in the introduction of this dissertation, people in northern Malawi today confront crisis on many fronts, in the form of poverty, uncertain harvests, personal debt, rising consumer costs, and a range of deadly diseases, including HIV/AIDS, tuberculosis, and malaria. People respond to the challenge posed by these crises in many ways. They struggle to find educational opportunities for themselves and their children to further their occupational prospects. They seek out employment and commercial opportunities to provide cash income for their families, for food, medicine, and other basics. They consult both biomedical and village-based therapeutic facilities in search of cure for their illnesses. In all of these ways, they take action to prevent or resolve the numerous realities of crisis that pervade much of life in the region, as elsewhere in Africa and the world. In addition, however, people also turn to their religious and spiritual traditions in the face of crisis. As things fall apart, religion and spirituality become places of refuge, places to seek answers and resolutions, and often places to find healing.

This turn towards religion in circumstances of crisis can take original and creative forms, as moments of crisis are also moments that call for creativity. This is especially true for the twentieth century history of northern Malawi, where, since the introduction of Christianity and biomedicine, people’s turn towards religion has been complicated by the juxtaposition of two radically different religio-therapeutic systems. The Mission demanded of its pupils, converts, and employees that they adopt an unambiguous oppositional model between Christianity and ancestral spiritualism. Some did, but many chose instead to pursue a more complicated path of integrating the two religious systems.

Participants to the Vimbuza possession complex, in particular, are among those who have spearheaded new and creative ways to manage the coexistence of ancestral spiritualism and
Christianity. That creative process remains ongoing in Embangweni today, as people continue to develop syncretic and analogic methods whereby the two religious systems can be coherently juxtaposed, integrated, and made meaningful within the changing circumstances of life. In the process, multiple forms of syncretic logic and practice have emerged through people’s participation in religious therapeutics. In Chapter Eight, I described cases of both substitutive and complementary syncretism in the incorporation of Christian elements in Vimbuza. At the same time, I also noted the incorporation of Vimbuza into the broader Christian framework, and argued that the relationship between ancestral spiritualism and Christianity has been characterized by processes of dual inculturation.

In Chapter Nine, I referred to the case of George Kapoka as one of both analogic syncretism and transitional syncretism. By the former term, I mean the processes of analogic reasoning whereby Kapoka identified conjunctions and consistencies between his Christianity and his engagement with his ancestral spirits. Through analogies of color (his white, red, and blue Vimbuza costume), consumption (his vision of consuming the sacrificial cross of Jesus), and respect (citing the biblical injunction to honor one’s parents in defense of his engagement with the ancestral spirits), Kapoka created a hybrid religious logic that derived its meanings, symbols, and forms from both Christianity and ancestral spiritualism. Through the dynamic and transformative effects of his analogic quest for healing and well-being, Kapoka’s case exemplifies transitional syncretism, a process of syncretic integration that facilitated his efforts to change his life trajectory as a religious man with a therapeutic calling.

All of these forms of syncretic logic -- substitutive, complementary, analogic, and transitional -- are evidenced in the religio-therapeutic culture of Embangweni. Taken together they suggest a highly pluralistic culture, where multiple strategies of integration and opposition between ancestral spiritualism and Christianity are in evidence. In the domain of the religious
therapeutics of Vimbuza, in particular, they show a pattern of people rejecting the Mission’s oppositional model between the two systems, as well as its overarching dualist and tripartite religious, therapeutic, and cultural schemas.

Efforts to syncretize are not, however, always successful. In the case study from Chapter Twelve, I suggested that Dada Mkandawire’s existential crisis in the days before his death was an example of a failed syncretism. Here was a man caught between religio-therapeutic systems, unable to fuse them into a single coherent whole, and unable to locate his faith in either one or the other as he approached his impending passage into the afterlife.

**God and the Ancestors: Syncretism and Hegemony**

Two religious traditions have coexisted in northern Malawi for over a century now, ever since the native ancestral spiritualism of the region was confronted by an aggressive European Christianity that sought to establish its order and cosmology, including an attempt to institutional a new foundational schema of personal ontology that posited a radical separation of body from soul. This Mission Christianity asserted an almost exclusive claim to truth, and asserted a definitive opposition between itself and the vernacular spirituality of the region. Thus, the Tonga, Tumbuka, Ngoni, and other residents of the region found themselves juxtaposed between two distinct religious traditions, their own ancestral spiritualism and a foreign but powerful Christianity.

The resulting religious history is one of varied responses and counter-responses to Mission Christianity, for even as Christianity spread to become the predominant religious identity in the region, it was not a uniform Christianity that emerged, but rather one characterized by a diversity of interpretations and initiatives. In particular, the establishment of AICs represented a novel and creative initiative to counter the effort to impose a European Christianity in the region. In part through their integration of the spirit possessed into their congregations, these AICs also provided a refuge for ancestral spiritualism within the emergent Christian culture of the region, despite the
Livingstonia Mission’s efforts to suppress and fully supplant it. In more recent years, Pentecostal churches have added a new articulation of the Christian faith to the mix, introducing an embodied Christianity that once again asserts a fundamental opposition between Christianity and ancestral spiritualism. As such, the people of Embangweni today live within a diverse religious society, in which there exist multiple models, and at times substantial disagreements, about the nature of spiritual reality and the forms of Divine agency in the world.

This religious diversity is reflected in the therapeutic culture and practice of the Embanweni area, which is also diverse and at times contested, as patterns of therapeutic resort in the face of bodily affliction and illness vary dramatically. For known symptom-sets in particular, like those associated with tuberculosis or malaria, many people seek out cure at the Embangweni Hospital or one of its clinics, placing their hopes in its physical and pharmaceutical modes of intervention. Many people, Presbyterians among them, also turn to their Christian church congregations for prayer, support, and the cleansing rituals of baptism and communion, cloaking themselves in the power, authority, and grace of the trinitarian God. Both of these trends indicate the transformative effect the Livingstonia Mission has had on local religious and therapeutic culture and practice.

Yet, at the same time, this Mission effect has been limited by the enduring appeal and influence of village-based practitioners of the healing arts, including herbalists and diviners. Many people continue to turn first towards village-based ng’angas and their repertoires of herbal remedies in search of remedies. Among them, some consult further with nchimis and enter into processes of spiritual therapeutics, participating in Vimbuza dances and rituals, and acknowledging the power and authority of the ancestral spirits in their lives. With such a distributed pattern of therapeutic resources and behavior, in churches, villages, and the hospital, no single pattern of therapeutics can be defined as dominant in the Embangweni area.
Based on my conversations with informants from across the spectrum of therapeutic settings, it can also be said that no single cultural model or schema of affliction and healing fully dominates the others. Instead, I encountered diverse cultural schemas in play, as people referenced therapeutic logics derived from both vernacular and missionary sources. On the one hand, I encountered people who understood and accepted biomedical explanations for illness, including malaria, tuberculosis, and HIV/AIDS, and with them a model of the human body as an organic machine. For these people, the Western scientific model of the despiritualized body had gained some currency. On the other hand, however, and even more consistently, I encountered many who attributed spiritual causes to bodily affliction and illness, and who articulated a more unitary model of bodily and spiritual health. Among these were those, Born Agains in particular, who emphasized that both God and the Devil have the power to affect health and well-being, and who associated Vimbuza and mizimu spirits with the agency of the latter.

More importantly, for the purposes of this thesis at least, were the large number of those informants, from African Instituted Church in particular, who affirmed the dynamic power of spiritual agents, including the ancestors, to affect people’s lives through processes of possession, illness, and healing. In this model, those possessed experience a fusion of body, subjective spirit, and ancestral spirits, a unity of body and spirits that constitutes the basis for all of life’s experiences, including both well-being and affliction. This logic of ancestral spiritualism rests on an ontological schema that recognizes a fundamental participation between the material and spiritual worlds. In this respect, the conventional AIC position stands in strong opposition to the Western dualist model that the Livingstonia Missionaries attempted to establish as the dominant ontological schema in the region.

This observation returns us to the Comaroffs and their concern with the hegemonic effects of Christian missions in southern Africa. I agree with them that the Western missionary project
was by and large hegemonic in intent. I would also agree that it has dramatically transformed patterns of exchange, architecture, and aesthetics, among other domains of life, via its powerful institutional presence throughout southern Africa and elsewhere. In the case of the missionary project in northern Nyasaland, however, the Livingstonia missionaries failed in their effort to institutionalize new religious and therapeutic hegemonies among the Tumbuka and Ngoni populations of northwestern Malawi. Still today, within local religious and therapeutic behavior, when bodily crisis strikes, most people in the region continue to invoke and enact models of body-spirit relations that, though often highly syncretized with Christianity, are nevertheless grounded in foundational schemas of African, not European, derivation. In short, neither the Mission’s hospitals or churches have come to dominate the patterns of therapeutic and religious practice in the region. Within the arenas of religion and therapeutics, then, it seems the Mission’s effect cannot be judged hegemonic.

Yet, the Mission’s influence has been powerful. Many, if not most, of Embangweni’s residents have come to embrace the core message of Christianity, that God acted to provide a fully redemptive sacrifice through the life, death, and resurrection of his son Jesus. Among the range of my informants, from across the spectrum of local Christian churches, people articulated this view of the unique status of Jesus and the biblical narration of salvation through Christ. As self-proclaimed Christians, who publically congregate with other self-identified Christians in area churches, these people can, in some important sense, be defined as converts to Christianity. Yet, I would argue that self-ascription and public identity as Christian, and participation in patterns of Christian discourse, do not constitute a full definition of “conversion”. Instead, I would argue that other facets of religious experience and awareness also be considered within any definition of the term.

In the case of many of Embangweni’s residents, for example, has conversion to Christian
identity meant the abandonment of antecedent forms of religion and spirituality? Likewise, has it involved conversion to the specific type of European Christianity that was introduced by the Presbyterian Scottish missionaries? Has it meant the adoption of the Livingstonia Mission’s markedly intellectual model of Christian faith through doctrinal competence?

In Embangweni, at least, the answer to these three questions is “no.” Many local residents have not converted to the kind of post-Enlightenment European Christianity that was introduced by the Livingstonia Mission, even as they have embraced a Christian identity and practice. Many have refused to abandon their native religious forms and its underlying participatory logic of magic and ancestral spiritualism. They continue to dance Vimbuza and consult village divination. For those who have gravitated towards African Instituted Churches, they have affirmed a model of Christian faith embodied in ritual, song, dance, and life practice, and rejected the Reformed model of an intellectualized faith most importantly characterized by doctrinal knowledge and literacy.

I cannot characterize from these conclusions that there is a basic or modal religious personality among Tumbuka-speakers in Embangweni. The range of my accounts and case studies are too limited to venture such an ambitious conclusion. Nevertheless, it does seem clear from the data that many among Embangweni’s residents, especially among AICs, are embracing a model of Christian personhood that remains deeply rooted in vernacular models of ancestral agency and possession. In the process, I would argue, they are maintaining adherence to a monistic foundational schema that is grounded in their pre-Mission religious culture and custom, one that asserts that bodies and spirits move through the world of action and experience, and of time and space, in ongoing mutual participation.

As such, and invoking T.O. Beidelman’s notion of the “moral imagination,” I want to suggest that, at least for some of Embangweni’s residents, their moral imaginings about the relationship between body and spirit suggest an ontology of personhood and being that has not
been colonized by Western missionaries. Despite the Livingstonia Mission’s efforts to the contrary, many local residents, even as they claim Christian identity and faith, continue to acknowledge and honor the agency of the ancestors and their accompanying moral authority. While the movement of most Tumbukas and Ngonis into a Christian identity, faith and practice does evidence the effective power of the Scottish Presbyterian missionary project, it has not evidenced a full-scale conversion into the guiding logic and assumptive framework that characterizes the European Protestant model of sacred personhood. Rather, their voices and practices suggest a profound resistance to the idea of modeling moral personhood, and with it sacred personhood, in terms of an individual’s adherence and commitment to a particular church’s body of knowledge.

The Comaroffs may in time turn out to be right in attributing a hegemonic effect to the missionary project. Patterns of quotidian life, both private and public, have been dramatically transformed because of missionization, and even semi-rural residents like those of Embangweni are increasingly enmeshed in the forms of global capitalism and the nation-state. Likewise, many among Embangweni’s residents hold assumptions, about what it means to be a Christian and about what it means to be modern, that often go unsaid in public discourse, including in conversation or interview with a foreign anthropologist. In both of these ways, I suspect the Comaroffs’ conclusions from their work among the Tswana find parallel among Tumbuka-speakers. There are almost certainly arenas of inchoate awareness and often unconscious assumption among Embangweni’s Tumbuka-speakers about their religious society and their individual places in it. Things taken-for-granted. Things unquestioned. Many of these are products of the Christian missionary movement. For most, there is a God, and He is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. These assumptions are in addition to the novel patterns of sacred worship, music, liturgy, dress, and stewardship that have emerged since missionization began over a century ago. In this respect, the
Christian missionary movement, and the colonial project that followed it, have succeeded in institutionalizing, in both thought and practice, core facets of a new religious ontology, including its tripartite construction of God. Likewise, the rise of Pentecostalism portends a shift back into Western Christian orthodoxy, a shift made even more powerful because of the expressive and emotional content of its church life. And yet, as long as many of the core assumptions of ancestral spiritualism continue to resonate among local residents in Embangweni, as elsewhere in the region, any Western hegemonic project will remain incomplete.
Bibliography

Reports and Reference Books


2002 Malawi Fact Sheet: Market Information and Analysis Unit, Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade.

Books and Articles

Anderson, Benedict

Anderson, Allan

Arens, W. and Ivan Karp, eds.

Asad, Talal
Barnett, Homer G.

Bartelt, Guillermo

Bateson, Gregory

Beidelman, T.O.

Berger, Peter

Berglund, A.I.

Bloch, Maurice

Bosch, David

Bourguignon, Erika

Braukamper, Ulrich

Bynum, Caroline Walker

Chavula, S.W.D.

Chibambo, Y.M

Chilivumbo, A.B.

Comaroff, Jean

Comaroff, Jean and John

Comaroff, John L. and Jean

D’Andrade, Roy G.

D'Andrade, Roy G. and Claudia Strauss

Delavignette, Robert

Devisch, Rene


Droogers, André and Sidney M. Greenfield

Dumont, Louis
1965   The individual in two kinds of society. Contributions to Indian Sociology 8:7-61.

Edmonson, Munro S.

Elmslie, W.A.

Ewing, Katherine


Fernandez, James

Fiedler, Klaus

Fisher, George P.

Fisher, Humphrey J.

Forster, Peter G.

Fortes, Meyer

Fraser, Agnes
Fraser, Donald
  1922 (1914) Winning a Primitive People. London.


Friedson, Steven M.

Gaventa, Beverly R.

Geertz, Clifford

Gelfand, Michael

Gorski, John F.

Gray, Richard

Griffith, Colleen M.

Gyekye, Kwame

Hefner, Robert W.

Herskovits, Melville J.
Hetherwick  

Holland, Dorothy and Naomi Quinn, ed.  

Horton, Robin  
—  
—  

Ifeka-Moller, Caroline  

Ikenga-Metuh, Emefie  

Isichei, Elizabeth  
—  

Jack, James W.  

Jackson, Michael  

Jackson, Michael and Ivan Karp, ed.  

Jacobson-Widding, Anita  
1990   The Shadow as an Expression of Individuality in Congolese Conceptions of Personhood. In Personhood and Agency: The Experience of Self and Other in African


Kriel, J.R.

Lakoff, George

Langworthy, Harry W.

LeVine, Robert

Lienhardt, Godfrey

Linden, Ian

—

Livingstone, W.P.

MacDonald, Roderick J.

MacGaffey, Wyatt

Mackay, John A.
Mbunge, Jacob C.F.

McCracken, John

—

McIntosh, Hamish

Mkandawire, Austin C.

Msiska, Stephen Kauta

Msiska, Mpalive-Hangson

Mwasi, Yeseya Zerenji

Ncozana, Silas S.

Nelson, Jack E.

Nock, Arthur D.

Nyasani, Joseph M.
Oliver, Roland  

Paarup-Laursen, Bjarke  

Pachai, Bridglal, ed.  

Phiri, D.D.  

Piaget, Jean  

Pye, Michael  

Quinn, Anne-Lise  

Ragsdale, John P.  

Ranger, Terence O.  

Read, Margaret

Reisman, Paul


Ross, Kenneth R., ed.

Ross, Kenneth R.

Sahlins, Marshall

Salamone, Frank

Saler, Benson


Sangree, Walter

Schneller, Peter

Schoffeleers, Matthew


Schoffeleers, Matthew, ed.
Mambo Press.


Thompson, T. Jackson
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Author</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Publisher</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
Wilson, Monica

—

Winick, Charles

Young, T. Cullen

—

—

—