Topography of a Zambian Storyland

Looking for cultural support patterns in the indigenous stories can help bolster the impartation of the Gospel in ways which aid believers in their own “journey” toward becoming better equipped disciples of the Lord Jesus Christ.

by Gary Burlington

Narrative as a method for general Bible teaching (Boomershine 1988) and cross-cultural evangelism (Steffen 1996) is a recent phenomenon. However, before we can tell the gospel story in any particular culture, it is helpful to examine indigenous narrative in its own context. Tom Steffen refers to this context as the storyland, a conceptual space of ideational as well as physical landmarks (1996).

In this article I present a translated narrative of the ancestry, birth, life, and death of Chilufya Chilondola, an early twentieth century Zambian woman. She is celebrated as queen mother (Hinfelaar 1994) of the Mutima Church, an African Independent Church founded and led by her son, Emilio Mulolani Chishimba. The Chilufya narrative is repeated each year in an annual celebration of her role in salvation history as understood by the Mutima. The Chilufya story is compelling for Mutima believers because it is grounded in their physical and ideational storyland.

The Mutima Church

The Mutima church arose in the late 1950s during Zambia’s struggle for independence. The church claims adherents in Zambia’s Northern Province, the Copperbelt Province, and along the line of rail from the Copperbelt to Lusaka, Zambia’s Capital. The vast majority of Mutima adherents are Bemba whose homeland is located in the northeast of Zambia.

The founder, Emilio Mulolani Chishimba, broke away from the Roman Catholic Church when he realized that it would not honor his key teachings. Among these is his belief that Mary is the savior of Africa, he is her official representative on earth, and God is essentially androgynous in nature and five (rather than three) in person. Jesus embodies God’s male nature and is the Savior for Europeans. Mary embodies God’s feminine nature in her role as Africa’s savior. At its high point in the mid 60s the Mutima Church claimed 15,000 followers, many of them from prominent Catholic families of Bemba ethnicity. Today the church has a core membership of about 5,000 Bemba people (Hinfelaar 1994).

Emilio calls all African peoples to repentance and salvation in Mary. When Africa has embraced its savior and renewed its spiritual life through the feminine nature of God fully realized in her, a millennium will be ushered in, and with it, a dramatic reversal of the fortunes of Africans and Europeans.

From a Mutima view point all of this is foreshadowed in the Old Testament story of Isaac, Rebekah, Jacob, and Esau (Genesis 25:19-34) and in Jesus’ enigmatic statement that the first will be the last and the last will be first (Matthew 20:16; Mark 10:31; Luke 13:33). Mutima adherents believe that Emilio’s mother, Chilufya Chilondola, is key to the fulfillment of these scriptures.

The Chilufya Chilondola Narrative

Beginning from the ancestors, the paramount chief [of the Bemba people], Chitimukulu Chinchinta, had a daughter, Chanda Fulobwendo, whose children went on to found entire lineages. This was a sign of the fecundity God gave her. She bore mostly sons, but they were numerous. Finally she give birth to a daughter who was her last born, Mwansa Mukulu.

Mwansa Mukulu bore Shi Chanda Mukala. Shi Chanda Mukala fathered Mwansa and Shi Masala. Shi Masala married Munnuga and fathered a daughter, Kabamba, and a son, Musonda, and then a daughter, Katongo. Kabamba was married to Chisala by whom she had a daughter, Chilufya, who was followed by five boys and one more girl.

Chilufya grew up possessing a fine body, a beautiful face, and large eyes.
At Kasama there was a Scot known as Stuart. In years past he had been a soldier and he received a pension which he invested in shops. He wore glasses and was therefore known as, “Mandala.” Now this Mandala saw the young woman, Chilufya. He fell in love with her and gave her employment. When she grew up the white man made his intentions toward her known to her parents, Chisala and Kabamba, who were living at Mafula’s village in Chief Mwamba’s area. When Chilufya’s parents heard this they rejected the idea, “How can you Europeans marry from among us Africans? This is impossible.”

But the white man really loved the young woman, Chilufya. He took note of her work habits, her dependability, and the fact that shown something but once she could do it immediately. The white man insisted on marrying her. He explained the matter in such a way that Chilufya’s parents understood and replied, “All right! We shall wed you.”

After they were married Chilufya gave birth to a female child known as Chanda Mandala. And later, she produced a boy, Mwansa Mandala, or Stuart.

When war broke out in 1914, the white man was called to fight. He was long absent until, in 1920-21, he returned to claim Chilufya and the child. Chilufya was married to a man named Anselm. This marriage did not last long as Anselm died and Chilufya was married to a man named Jim. They went to reside at Lubumbashi, taking along the white man’s son, Stuart Mandala. Chanda Mandala remained at Chilubula for schooling.

At Lubumbashi Jim worked in a butchery. One day a sliver of bone lodged in his eye, but did not damage it severely—it was a surface wound which nonetheless affected his sight. Jim, Chilufya, and Mwansa the younger went to Kalula’s village in Shimumbi Nsapaila’s area in Lubumbu. Now Chilufya had not conceived so Jim let her saying, “You are barren.” Chilufya remained unmarried. When visiting at Nsombo’s village, where her maternal uncle, L. Shatamuka, was teaching she met a man named G. Chituna, a child of the former Mwansakombe. They agreed to marry although the white man, Stuart Mandala, now residing in Malawi, sent word that Chilufya and the children were to join him; for Chilufya refused to go. Chanda Mandala also refused. She said, “I will stay with my Grandmother.” At the time she was at Chiluba.

It happened that her [Chilufya’s] father, Chisala died and he was blessed with salvation. As for the Lufyala Mulondoshi, Chilufya Chilondola, when she fell and died, her father sent her back, saying, “Child, go back. The time for you to die has not yet come.”

Well, she returned to the body and those who were mourning stopped and exclaimed, “She has revived, she has come back!”

She gave birth to two children, a boy, Bwinamusumba Chituna, and a girl, Bupambu Chituna, by the man G. Chituna. In the end Chilufya was living with her brother, Yumba, to the west of Ipusukilo at Lufubu. There she fell ill of body. They took her to the hospital at Ipusukilo and that’s where she died and was buried in the cemetery at Ipusukilo.

Chilufya demonstrated hospitality in love. She was loving and a willing worker. She rose early and worked with such vigor that when others awoke there was nothing left to do. That’s why she was also known as, “The one who is like a man in strength and vigor.” She brought joy to visitors and to those who suffered. She loved to worship. She loved the Mutimas and called them her children. She provided them with hospitality, especially when they were journeying. When the [Catholic] priests upbraided her saying, “Your child has a demon and is destroying all who follow him,” she would reply, “Had he been possessed [by evil spirits] I should have taken him to those with the insight to cast them out. But since what he says about the Mutima is exactly what you teach, and since you yourselves are priests, you pray for him and remove the demons.” When they were convicted and silenced she went outside and said, “These people are not good, they don’t know that my son is used by God.”

**Method of Analysis**

The topography of any storyland includes both physical and ideational landmarks. Ideational markers are historical events, cosmology, cultural meanings, and social structures. In addition to these there are important
sub-conscious features of a peoples’ storyland foundational schema (Shore 1996). In the analysis below I describe some of the features of the popular Zambian storyland which are either assumed or explicitly referred to in the Chilufya narrative. I will deal first with some of those features of the storyland of which people are consciously aware, then with the foundational schema which help to organize the story.

**Cosmology, Culture and Social Structure**

The Bible was introduced into Zambia about a century ago. It plays a key role in shaping cosmology. For example, most Bemba are Christians and they accept that the Christian God rules the seen and unseen worlds (cf. Maxwell 1983) as well as the notion that history is moving toward a God-directed goal. The Bible is so foundational to popular belief that a majority of the “traditional” practitioners, mediums, midwives, herbalists, and witchfinders to name a few, who make use of it in their trade whether or not they are members of any Christian church. The Chilufya story is also grounded in the Bible.

The first two paragraphs of the story sound very much like Bible genealogical texts. In particular they stress Chilufya’s royal ancestry. She is a descendant of a paramount chief, Chitimukulu Chinchinta, a historical figure (Roberts 1973) with whose story many Bemba are familiar.

Chilufya’s genealogy is powerful and plausible not only because it sounds like the Bible and mentions specific people and places, but for three other reasons as well. First, it shows continuity between the way God worked in the Bible and the way he is working to bring salvation to Africa. When this story is narrated one Bemba phrase is repeated again and again in explaining the significance of the story—“in accord with the principle of fairness (mulinganyafa) and good judgment (bupingishi busunakan).” The word “fairness” is particularly important here. It is rooted in the notion of equity in the distribution of resources among one’s dependents and the avoidance of favorites. Since the salvation history of Europeans began in the distant past and involved a royal lineage, the redemption of Africans must follow the same path.

The same key phrase, from another perspective, suggests balance and symmetry in an aesthetic sense. Not only is God ethically bound to provide for African salvation just as he has for that of Europeans, but the scheme of redemption also has a pleasing symmetry. The story of Jesus’ descent from a kingly line through Mary is to Europeans as Emilio’s own descent from a kingly line through Chilufya is to Africans. Ethics, aesthetics, and history are in a state of satisfying symmetry which also lends power to the story.

There is a third direction from which the genealogy derives power, the Bemba notion of ilyashi, which means narrative-history (cf. Cunnison 1959; Poewe 1981). Narrative-histories are associated with titled positions. When somebody does something of note the chief may reward him with a titled position. Chilufya is God’s instrument for bringing Emilio into the world to reveal the hidden female aspect of his nature and Mary’s role as Africa’s savior. Chilufya receives the title Lufyala Mulondoshi, literally Bearer of the Guide (i.e. Emilio). The annual recital of this ilyashi on her holy day not only honors her, but also confirms Emilio as the umwine (owner/guardian) of this ilyashi and his absolute right to run the affairs of the Church as the heir of his mother and the representative of Mary.

Other Biblical characters and themes are echoed throughout the Chilufya narrative. For example, paragraph one says that Chanda Fulobwendo received the blessing of fecundity from God and gave birth to numerous sons who went on to found lineages. This sounds very much like the story of Abraham who was promised numerous offspring and through whose grandson, Jacob, the twelve tribes of Israel were founded.

The most important role the Bible plays in Mutima thought is not explicitly mentioned in the Chilufya narrative, but it is always in the mind of Mutima hearers. The Bible provides a framework for working out the seeming cultural and economic disparity between Europeans and Africans by relating it to God’s administration of salvation history. This is accomplished by seeing Chilufya as the “New Rebekah” who fulfills the Old Testament story of Jacob and Esau.

Chilufya, like Rebekah, carried two nations in her womb. One is European (her children by Stuart), and the
other is African (Emilio, her child by Mulolani). Emilio’s birth signals the beginning of an incredible reversal of fortunes by which the history of redemption will see Europeans, formerly blessed and favored, superseded by Africans whose ascendance will also usher in the millennium. Mutima’s believe that Jesus himself referred to this when he said that the first will be last and the last will be first.

In Mutima discourse Europeans are known as the Esaus (BaEsau). They are referred to as “our elder brothers” (abakalamba besu). They are associated with maleness, aggressiveness and greed—all of which they succumb to in colonizing Africa. This results in the forfeiture of their birthright, that is, the cultural and material advantages they currently enjoy over Africans. Africans, meanwhile, are referred to as the Jacobs (BaYa- cobo). Jacob received help from his mother and, in Mutima thinking, he is associated with docility, the feminine and the domestic.

In turn, this appropriation of the Jacob and Esau narrative is supported by the cultural complex surrounding a woman’s last born child, the kasuli. The kasuli is thought of as a mother’s pet. It is allowed to suck at the breast longer before weaning than with other children. Even if it is a boy it may be allowed a closer connection with its mother and the domestic sphere than is generally thought appropriate for boys. In relation to Chilufya’s European children, Emilio is the kasuli. In relation to Europeans, whom Mutima believe to have created earlier than Africans, Africans are the kasuli. Their savior is Mary, their salvation lies in embracing her feminine qualities as over against those of European masculinity and their just reward is to supplant their elder brothers in the coming utopia.

The Bible not only provides the framework for understanding European and African relationships in terms of God’s administration of history, but it helps to make sense of Emilio himself. It is Emilio who is Mary’s representative to lead Africa into the promised millennium. The story tells us that Emilio was the source of conflict between Chilufya and Stuart. One of the typical complaints in Bemba society is that children fathered by another man are not treated well by step-fathers. Stuart’s behavior goes well beyond mistreatment. He wants to drown Emilio in Lake Bangweulu. We hear echoes of the Moses story in this account. Moses was saved by commitment to the waters of the Nile, but Emilio is saved from those of the lake when his mother fosters him to her mother to be cared for, like Moses, by his own people currently held hostage to European designs.

A number of non-Biblical features of the Zambian storyland also underwrite the power and plausibility of this narrative. Not the least are those dealing with occult powers. Consider what we are told about Stuart.

Stuart is a European shop owner in Kasama, the provincial capital. He is retired from the army. According to the local theory of maturation, an adult male who has successfully endured a competitive and hostile social environment such as the army has learned cleverness (ubucenjeshi) and magic (ubwanga). Many Bemba believe that Europeans stand outside of African magic, but that they nevertheless have a secret (inkama) which is just as magic and occult as its African counterpart. They frequently cite this as the reason Europeans discovered how to build automobiles and airplanes before Africans. Stuart is a man to be reckoned with.

One of the most persistent rumors in the Kasama district is that foreign shop owners are successful because of the powerful medicine (umutu) they possess. They collude with local people who roam the district in search of the unwary whom they capture and slaughter for their hearts. Shop owners buy these organs and concoct a powerful attracting medicine from them so that local people will come into their stores and spend their money.

From a local point of view the relationship between Stuart, the powerful, materialistic and worldly-wise European man, and Chilufya, the beautiful, intelligent, and innocent African maiden, is metaphoric of African-European relations in Africa from slavery through colonialism (cf. Fabian 1979). Like Stuart, Europeans have brought all their physical and occult power to bear in order to corrupt and subjugate local people.

God, however, is able to deliver even from occult powers. This point is made explicit in the narration. After Chilufya is finally abandoned by Stuart she marries Anselm who suffers a premature death. This may well have exposed her to charges of witchcraft since a husband’s death is thought to result from his wife’s magic.

Her next husband, Jim, carries her off to the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). The DRC and especially Lubumbashi are thought of as places where powerful witches and magicians live. Jim is injured on the job and Chilufya remains childless. The Zambian theory of witchcraft suggest that people who have jobs may be vulnerable to envious magical attack by those with lesser positions. Jim probably believes himself the victim of such an attack and he removes himself and Chilufya to Zambia. Maybe he saw Chilufya’s barrenness as related to such an attack. He points out her failure to conceive and abandons her.
But in the next episode Chilufya’s special place in God’s plan of salvation for Africa is confirmed by her return from the dead and her subsequent renewal of fertility.

According to Hinfelaar (1994), Chilufya’s story is modeled after the Bemba queen mother, Bwalya Makasa, a magical woman who fell from the sky. While Chilufya did not fall from the sky, she nevertheless went into the realm of the dead and returned. Her father, who died earlier, sent her back. The word used for her return from the dead is puputuka, to be revived. But in Mutima discourse this word also means to receive special spiritual insight and power. Wyatt MacGaffey (1986) argues that many Central African peoples, including Zambian peoples, believe that the ultimate source of power to act in this world comes from the realm of the dead.

Chilufya is eulogized for her holiness. In the Bemba text the word used here is ubuntuuntu. It refers to something which is whole, complete or intact. In Mutima thinking every individual human has both male and female natures since they are made in the image of an androgynous God. Each person is responsible to balance these influences in order to be whole. Chilufya’s eulogy points out how she accomplished this.

She more than fulfilled all that is expected of a Bemba woman. That is, she provides for the nurture of her family and guests. Guests are usually a woman’s own or her husband’s kin. The ideal Bemba wife is the woman who, without grumbling, is equally glad to provide food and hospitality to the husband’s kin as to her own.

In the Mutima church everyone is considered kin. One demonstrates the validity of one’s faith by providing food and shelter to any other Mutima who happens along, with or without notice. Chilufya’s attitude was that all Mutima’s are her children. And, indeed, she is the queen mother of the Mutima Church. She is the prototype for the role of all Mutima women.

However, true to Mutima thinking, she blends male and female qualities. She has the physical strength and mental wisdom generally associated with men. We are told that she worked so hard that by the time others awoke there was no further work to be done. We are also shown how she defeats the priests in argument by showing that her son, Emilio, is animated by the same spirit which empowers them. As her final reward she is received into the heavens as a person who is whole in that she has attained a perfect and final blending of male and female qualities.

In summary, I have shown that Biblical, cosmological, cultural, historical and social structural features of the contemporary Zambian storyland are woven throughout the Chilufya narrative. This is not a clever attempt to manipulate people, but an attempt to make sense out of life. It is rendered plausible because it thinks with and through the storyland.

**Foundational Schema**

Brad Shore (1996) suggests that culture is more than publicly recognized collective representations. It is carried about in peoples’ heads as sets of abstract schema he calls “foundational schema.” They are cultural models which organize the diverse systems of knowledge and belief that comprise a single culture. From the actor’s point of view foundational schema give the culture its feeling of sameness and continuity.

I see two foundational schema at work in the Chilufya narrative: balance/symmetry and journeying. I spelled out above how the Bemba concepts of fairness and good judgment are applied by the Mutima to salvation, history, ethics, and aesthetics. In other words, the discourse on fairness and good judgment is a concrete and public representation of the abstract foundational schema, balance and symmetry.

This same schema appears in Bemba thinking in terms of male-female relations. For the Bemba the entire cosmos is divided into male and female influences which must be kept in balance if order is to be kept in the social world. The Chilufya narrative implicitly invokes this foundational schema of balance and symmetry in male-female relations. For the Mutima, God himself is a perfect blending of male and female influences. The word Mutima means heart. Hinfelaar (1994) points out that for Emilio, the church founder, the heart is a perfect blend of male-female influences. In terms of history and salvation, it is an over emphasis on male-ness which leads Europeans to colonize and exploit Africans. This is answered with a reassertion of female influences in Africans which will eventually reestablish balance and symmetry and usher in the millennium.

Another important foundational schema in the Chilufya narrative is journeying. Sister Mary Frost (1977) points out that in many Bemba sto-
ries the hero resolves problems in the context of a journey into the hostile environment of the forest, returning home only after resolution is achieved.

The journey schema is built into the structure of Chilufya’s story as well. For example, she begins safely within the confines of her kin group under the care of her parents. In keeping with her times, however, the hostile environment into which she journeys is primarily urban, capitalist and European dominated. Chilufya moves out of the realm of kinship transactions and into the realm of a capitalist economy, that is, from an economy predicated on group interests and generalized reciprocity to one predicated on individual interests and negative reciprocity. Abandoned, reclaimed, and abandoned again by Stuart in this context of danger, she is taken by Jim into yet another dangerous and witch infested environment outside of Zambia where she suffers infertility. Returning to Zambia, she is now abandoned by Jim.

Eventually her son, Emilio, discovers his true calling in the world. Through his discovery the meaning and significance of Chilufya’s life is revealed. She returns to her own family (who are by now all Mutimas) and to renewed fecundity. She is received in the realm of the dead, sent back to live out her days, and eventually enters into salvation because of her good deeds. Finally, she is eulogized as the queen mother of the Mutima Church.

**Conclusion**

When people chose to join the Mutima Church they enter into a new set of social relations supported by unique set of cultural meanings. The Chilufya narrative plays a significant role in creating and maintaining these new relations and meanings. But its power to do so has nothing to do with a discursive and rational argument for becoming a Mutima. Instead, it helps to bring about these transformations by making use of the familiar. The physical and ideational topography of the contemporary Zambian storyland provide the structures on to which new relations and meanings are connected. Key foundational schema such as the balance and symmetry and journeying help to give the story a sense of sameness with other domains of experience. The power and plausibility of Chilufya’s story arise from the nearly seamless joining of the new and old.

**End Notes**

1. The official name of the church is Mutima Uwaloa Wa Makumbi, or the Sweet Heart of the Clouds. Members call themselves BaMutima, the Mutimas which is sometimes translated into English as “the Sacred Heart.” Hinfaelaar (1994) points out that the church founder, Emilio Mulolani Chimba, was inspired by a picture of Jesus commonly displayed in Catholic homes. It depicts him revealing his heart.

2. There are two published accounts of the Mutima in the scholarly literature (Garvey 1995; Hinfaelaar 1994). For a period of about 12 months spanning 1994 and 1995 I interviewed Mutima believers, participated in Mutima worship and other events, and interviewed Emilio. Much of the information in this article is drawn from Mutima literature, Hinfaelaar, and my own experiences with the Mutima.

3. The Chilufya narrative presented here is my translation of the text which is used at the annual celebration of Chilufya’s role in African salvation.

4. There are many more explicit and implicit references to the storyland in this narrative than can be discussed in this article. I have chosen some of the more important ones.

5. Many Christians who are members of the historical churches might feel that this story involves either the “imitation” of the Bible and/or “twisting” of Scripture. What needs to be kept in mind is that the Bible structures peoples’ thinking. Mutima believers do not set out to imitate or twist. Instead, they use biblical themes and events to try and make sense of their own times and places.

**References**


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