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## Seeing Witchcraft

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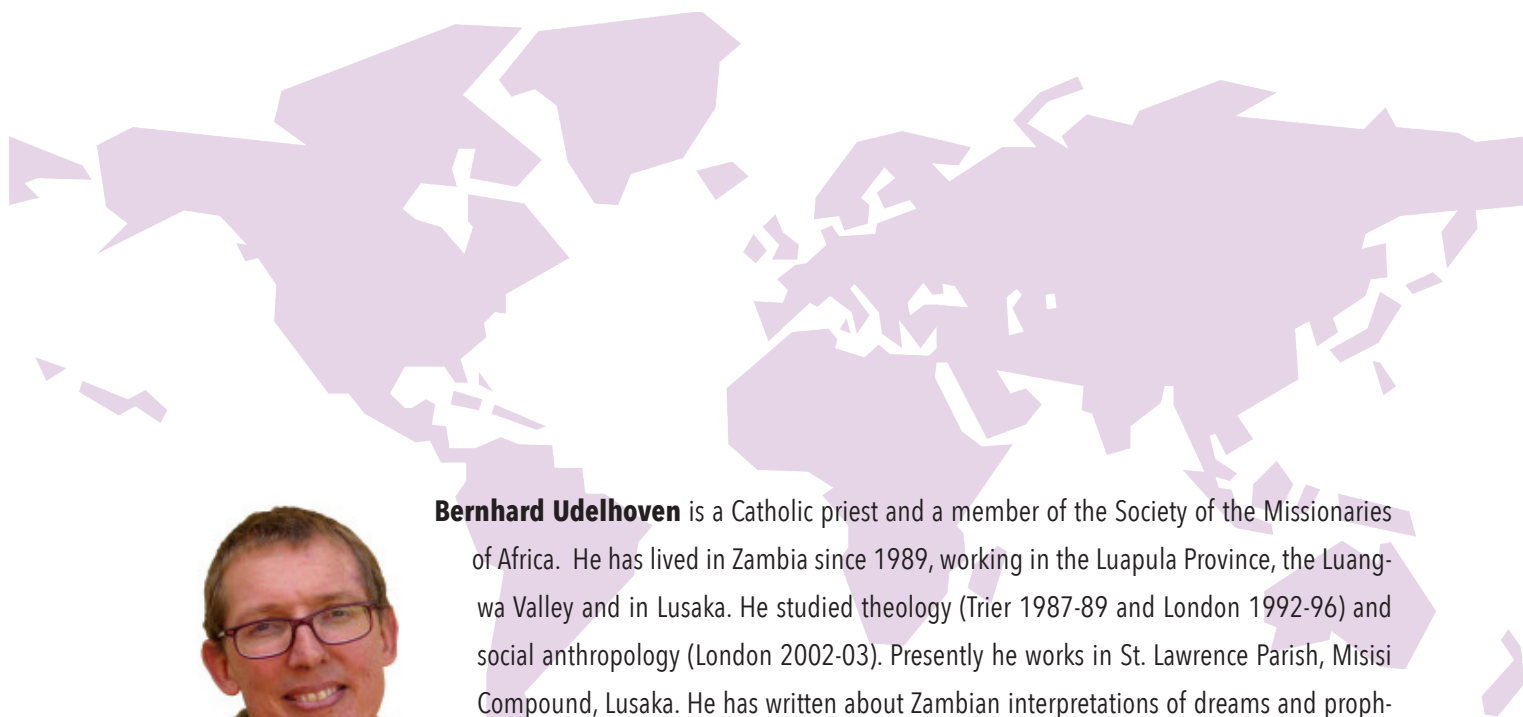
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BERNHARD UDELHOVEN

 ESSAYSeeing Witchcraft<sup>1</sup>

**Bernhard Udelhoven** is a Catholic priest and a member of the Society of the Missionaries of Africa. He has lived in Zambia since 1989, working in the Luapula Province, the Luangwa Valley and in Lusaka. He studied theology (Trier 1987-89 and London 1992-96) and social anthropology (London 2002-03). Presently he works in St. Lawrence Parish, Misisi Compound, Lusaka. He has written about Zambian interpretations of dreams and prophecies, challenges to the Christian faith in the Luangwa Valley, and the history of the Bena Kabende in Luapula Province.

**W**hen Christians in Zambia struggle with witchcraft, they also struggle with African cultural and religious concepts that deal with life's ambiguities and that require discernment. It is not by working against the cultural and religious heritage, but by working with it, as far as possible, that the pastor can identify the broken relationships towards which many witchcraft discourses point.

Pruning and testing cultural traits in view of a Christian worldview is part of Christian life. Not everything is helpful. However, before we place the concepts of witchcraft into the realm of superstition (as are the trends of mission Christianity) or the demonic (as are the trends of charismatic Christianity), the Church has the duty to look at the concepts, stay with them, reflect, and try to understand their meaning in view of the mysteries of life. This article is the result of such a reflection, and maybe can provoke other reflections in different styles and contexts.

## WITCHCRAFT

To be blissfully unaware of the hidden world around us conveys innocence but also ignorance. The ability to see this world can bring excitement and possibilities, but also threats and danger. Many ghosts are better left undisturbed. "It is terrifying to see what we see every day," one healer claimed, together with his wife. "We healers see so many things at night. You are lucky if you do not see those things. You can sleep in peace, we can't!"

In many Zambian languages, the practice of witchcraft is related to a verbal stem (*-lo*) that has to do with seeing, or facing into a certain direction so as to be able to see something hitherto unnoticed. In Bemba is known by the term *ubuloshi* (from the verb *kulowato* or bewitch). The term *ubuloshi* is related to the verb *kulosha*, which is the causative form of the verb *kulola*,<sup>2</sup> namely to look, to see, to face (in a certain direction). *Kulosha* means "to make somebody see." It also means to mourn at a funeral. The same stem *-lo* is found in

- 1 This piece is a slightly edited version of the chapter thirteen of Bernard Udelhoven, *Unseen Worlds: Dealing with Spirits, Witchcraft and Satanism* (Lusaka: FEZA Publications, 2015). The ebook is available for free download at [http://www.fenza.org/unseen\\_worlds.html](http://www.fenza.org/unseen_worlds.html).
- 2 It can also be the intensive form, though the verb *kumwenekesha* would usually be used then.

the word *kulota*, to dream, which is another way of seeing what one usually does not see. In a similar way, the Nyanja word *kulodza* (to bewitch) has affinities with *kulota* (to dream), *kulosa* (to divine, to foretell), and with *kuloza* (to point to, to face: *loza uko* — face that way, and see what is there). Witchcraft in both languages has something to do with seeing and with making somebody else see. “*Ukacimona!*” meaning, “You will see it!” (*udzaona*, in Nyanja, “You will see”) is understood as a direct threat of the use of witchcraft.

The inherent affinity of witchcraft with knowing and seeing creates an implicit distinction and boundary between those who know and see (like the witches but also the diviners), and others who do not. People who do not see and know about witchcraft need the protection from those who do. Many priests have been told, “You do not know!” so as to exclude them from participation in the discernment process; the blind should not lead the blind. The daily reflections about the activities of witches build up subtle political coalitions between the different players, those inside the discernment process and those who have to stay outside. Diviners, chiefs, headmen and family heads establish an alternative political space on the inside. The Church and the modern state apparatus with its schools and hospitals are excluded and placed on the outside. They may watch and see what is happening, or sometimes they may even stop the process of identifying the witches by calling in the police, but in principle, they do not know. The question posed to the Church is how to gain access to the discernment process, in other words how to become an insider, without becoming an actual witch oneself — since by knowing about witchcraft a person becomes a potential healer but also a potential witch.

In our approach, we become insiders not by knowing about witchcraft, but by knowing about the experience of suffering and loss. This is also an important dimension of “seeing.” Many priests (including myself) who have intervened in witch finding activities have been told: “Not your children are dying of witchcraft, but ours!” A church that is not touched by the suffering of people does not deserve to be inside the discernment processes of witchcraft. Where, however, the church is present to the pain of people and where the Christian makes himself/herself a neighbor to the suffering person, he/she has the right to be inside the discernment



process of witchcraft. “Seeing” then refers to being close to the experience of suffering and loss.

## DIVINING

In Zambia, people acknowledge that negative influences need to be divined or diagnosed, so they can be expelled. Few people would come to a modern hospital to be treated against bad luck, the inability to find a husband, to find a lost or stolen item or to have the name of the thief who stole it revealed. Traditional healers, in contrast, easily group such categories together with physical healing.<sup>3</sup> Sickness is understood in a much wider sense than in the Western medical discourses. Sickness, repeated failure, the absence of a promotion at work and general misfortune may share the same spiritual dimension constituting the hidden root cause that the healer claims to reveal: a curse, a spirit, a manipulated shadow or a spell.

In many Bantu languages, the healer and diviner who can deal with such hidden dimensions is known by the term *ng’anga*. The healer does not just follow human reasoning and investigation when he/she heals, though herbalists do know about the effects and side effects of countless roots and plants in respect to specific diseases. Sickness and death are terms whose meanings arise in the context of concrete relationships. The *ng’anga* needs spiritual help for a proper diagnosis.<sup>4</sup> Some healers who practice divination call on their ancestral spirits, others on nature spirits, but others on forces that are more sinister.<sup>5</sup>

Another term with the same root, *nyanga* stands for the horn or a charm. A horn is often associated with the practice of witchcraft, because that is where medicines were kept. It is used also in a much broader sense for tapping into mystical powers or life-forces. In Bemba, the term *ubwanga* (a general word for a powerful charm)

3 M. Schoffeleers, “Folk Christology in Africa: The Dialectics of the Nganga Paradigm,” *Journal of Religion in Africa* 19, no. 2 (1989): 157-83; and Schoffeleers, “Ritual Healing and Political Acquiescence: The Case of the Zionist Churches in Southern Africa,” *Africa* 61, no. 1 (1991): 1-25, writing for the Malawian context.

4 *Kubuka*, in Bemba, expresses the calling on the spirits for divination.

5 Along the Luapula River, some diviners are called *ng’anga sha mulopa* (“diviners of blood”), who are themselves associated with the practice of witchcraft. They are believed to be working with the aid of spirits of the dead whom they may have killed themselves.

received a negative connotation due to its association with the practice of witchcraft. The term itself also refers to a fascination with the hidden powers (mostly found in the forest/bush — *mu mpanga*) that one can manipulate with the help of an object, be it for legitimate purposes to protect society, or for the destructive purposes of an individual witch. The verb *ukwanga* expresses a joyful exclamation in fascination and excitement. While witchcraft is greatly feared, it also fascinates. This fascination is the other side of the coin of fear that witchcraft radiates.<sup>6</sup> The ng'anga is the person who is supposed to bring clarity because of his/her access to the hidden world, through special eyes, dreams, visions, gifts of telepathy, methods of divination or other means. Divining techniques differ greatly and are often personalized.<sup>7</sup>

The task of the healer and diviner, the ng'anga, to bring clarity into the diverse spiritual influences on the lives of individual people, is not foreign to the Christian faith. The entry-point into this discernment process, however, is a different one. As mentioned in chapter one, we do not call spiritual powers evil in our approach when they are experienced as painful, but when they derail a person from his/her life-orientation. The priest, pastor or the helper in a way has the same task as a ng'anga (diviner): helping an afflicted person to discern spiritual influences by placing them into a wider context and larger horizon, and provoking a response that corresponds with his/her faith and direction in life.<sup>8</sup>

## MEDICINE

In Zambia, the discourse on witchcraft belongs also into the wider discourse on medicines. People — especially in rural areas — have a vast knowledge of plants and their medicinal properties as well as other usages. Self-medication is widely practiced, and in many villages, there are specialists for various fields of treatment (for bone setting, women's diseases, children's diseases, treating swellings, snake-

6 Peter Geschiere, *The Modernity of Witchcraft: Politics and the Occult in Postcolonial Africa* (University Press of Virginia, 2000).

7 I have seen diviners shift objects in a cup or rub an axe over the soil to see when it gets stuck while rapidly asking many questions, which the diviners themselves answered with "yes" or "no," with utter approval of their clients.

8 The epilogue of chapter three, chapter seven and chapter twenty in Udelhoven, *Unseen Worlds*, address specifically the question about the challenges of divination to the Christian faith.

bites, impotence, etc.). Sometimes such practices are called herbalism and compared with Western concepts, where medicines are understood in connection with biology; they are supposed to have ingredients or chemicals, which are to provoke certain reactions in specific organs or microbes in the body. In Zambia, medicines are often understood in such a pragmatic way. However, concepts of medicine often go far beyond this level. Medicines relate not just to the substances that may be hidden in them, but also to the healing forces and specific powers that are tied to plants and animals that they seek to appropriate. As such, their meaning is found not only on a biological level. They become part of wider discourses that channel powers. The administering of medicines — through drink, inhalation, or rubbing into the body — is often accompanied by ritually dramatized gestures, performed at significant places.

Medicines can also restore harmonies. *Umuti* in Bemba refers to both medicines and trees. *Umuti* and its Chewa equivalent *munkhwala* have a positive connotation in relationship to healing. Medicines are often used for the pragmatic purpose of curing a specific illness. At other times, they are envisaged to have spiritual properties that can accelerate the healing process. Medicines can mediate between the seen and unseen worlds and can connect to positive and helpful life-forces, especially when an illness goes beyond the known and controllable symptoms. Underlying this concept of *umuti* or *munkhwala* is an awareness of the connectedness of the human person with the cosmos, and specifically with certain plants and animals that can mirror human conditions. One can appropriate their characteristics to enhance the inner powers of the human being, but also to manipulate others.

The borderline between healing and doing harm can be thin. *Umuti* can do harm if misappropriated. The moment that *umuti* is used to manipulate others, one has already moved into the shadow of practicing witchcraft. People who complain about being bewitched by others often themselves use medicines with the intention of manipulating others. In one particular workshop that we (the “Fingers of Thomas”) held in a rural area (Kaonde speaking), nearly all the women acknowledged that they were using medicines to keep their husbands faithful. “Here no man will stay with you, if you do not put medicines into his food or burn them over the bed!”

Women characterized such practices as a legitimate usage of medicines; the men, however, said that such women were practicing witchcraft. What is medicine for some may be witchcraft for others.

Umuti attains specific spiritual connotations when it is used with a *cishimba* (plural: *fishimba*). A *cishimba* (Nyanja: *chizimba*) can be an ingredient that is living or that is attached to life forms whose powers are channelled into the medicines. *Ifishimba* may be taken from certain insects, fishes and animals.<sup>9</sup> To treat a difficult sickness, but also to acquire a certain superhuman ability, the healer sometimes gives the patient (or his/her family) the task to find a *cishimba* that is rare and not easily found, for example the fat of a python, or a lion, the heart of a specific animal, etc. The administering of the *cishimba*, according to precise instructions, then goes hand in hand with a specific taboo (often a dietary taboo) that the patient subsequently may have to follow for the rest of his/her life. Upon being cured of his/her sickness, the person lives in an awareness that, by following the specific taboo, he/she maintains the link to the specific life-force that is helpful to him/her.<sup>10</sup>

When used together with a *cishimba*, medicine (*umuti*) can move more towards the ambivalent and potentially harmful side, especially when the *cishimba* is taken from the graveyard, or from items connected with the realm of the dead (grass from a funeral house, a piece of the tree on which a person hanged himself, etc.) *Ifishimba* can also refer to the energy or force gathered by committing an abomination like incest or murder. The most powerful *fishimba* come from human body parts; the witch attempts to channel the life-forces of the person he/she has killed into his/her ventures to enhance his/her own powers and influence.

To better see where Zambian concepts of medicines could meet with a Christian

9 A popular example is the *lisombwe* (Bemba) or *chizombwe* (Nyanja) a type of praying mantis, considered as a bad omen; its legs shake when walking forward. When used in protective magic, it is believed to take away the powers of an intruding witch or evil wisher. Another famous example of a *cishimba* is the electric catfish of Lake Tanganyika, *malapterurus electricus*, which is supposed to charge a charm and make it active.

10 Interview with Dr. Busaka Malama (Bauleni). I have given an example somewhere else (Gotthard Rosner and Bernhard Udelhoven, *Dreams: Where do Biblical, Western and Zambian Approaches Meet?* (Lusaka: FENZA, 2013), 55.)



discourse, I propose to look at medicines from (1) a medical or biological angle, (2) a symbolic angle through which a given medicine links together different realms of life, and (3) an expressed spiritual angle that connects it to the spiritual world, for example through the usage of fishimba.

Take for example the bitter root of a plant called in Nyanja *palibe kanthu* (*dicoma anomala*),<sup>11</sup> used in different areas in Zambia to conceal a crime or to protect a person from a negative judgment in court cases. The person who wants to affect a judgment places a tiny piece of the plant under his/her tongue. On a biological level, the root is known to affect the heartbeat and is used by people with heart palpitations. In rural areas, affected people sometimes wear a piece of the root on a necklace, placing it quickly under the tongue when the need arises, from where the chemicals are absorbed into the blood stream. When used during a court case, the person is said to appear calm and composed, as an effect of this medicine, thereby visibly demonstrating his/her innocence. He/she also talks less (because of the piece under the tongue) — “The less you speak to defend yourself, the more innocence you portray,” explained a healer. The medicinal properties would justify the choice of the palibe kanthu plant as a practical way to enhance an appearance of innocence. However, the root is taken not because of its medical, but because of its mystical components.

Mystical qualities are channelled through the symbolic layer. The root’s name translates, “There is no case,” “It does not matter,” or, “No problem!” Beyond the biological aspects, the user wants to appropriate for his/her court case the exonerating qualities of the plant that its name conveys. Of course, the user does not chew the plant in court because of its symbolic or medical properties. People use it simply because a trusted person told them that it works. But, the symbolic level helps the person to make it work also mentally. Because of the symbolic level, a person can relate to a plant or medicine, appropriate it for his/her own purposes and think about it in a personal way, and — for those inclined towards such possi-

11 In Bemba, Nsenga, Kaonde and other languages, the plant has similar names. I took the botanic name of this plant from Brian Morris, *Chewa Medical Botany: A Study of Herbalism in Southern Malawi* (Münster: LIT Verlag, 1996). All other botanic names in this article are taken from Adrian E. Storrs, *Know Your Trees*. (Regional Soil Conservation Unit, 1995), unless indicated otherwise.

bilities — channel mental or psychic energies into certain directions for intended purposes. Spiritual or mythical forces are experienced as being intrinsically tied to their symbols through which they are transmitted or accessed.

Underlying the popular symbolic usages of many medicines and charms is an awareness that human life is intrinsically connected with other life forms. Ants, birds and animals mirror human behavior for the person who has eyes to see this. They figure in a number of divining techniques but also in practices of witchcraft.<sup>12</sup> All over Zambia, in the past, ritual hunts were performed to divine the cause of a death, or the will of the ancestors. Humans were seen as intrinsically connected to the world of animals and plants — hence they could also be manipulated through this world.

On the third level (the spiritual level), different rituals may be followed in order to connect the palibe kanthu plant to the world of the spirits, and to manipulate the spirit world through the plant for one's own purposes. Here is an example from the Luapula Province:

My uncle is known for the medicines he gives to help people win a court case, and I know of two cases where it worked. So-and-so was caught by the game guards with an animal. In the fight, one man was killed. Before the court case, my uncle placed tiny leaves of the palibe kanthu plant into cotton together with pieces of the root of the *katenge* plant.<sup>13</sup> He gave it to a woman who has given birth to many children, asking her to

12 Examples: "A column of ants on one's path carrying food predicts a good reception in the village one is heading to." (Luangwa Valley) "Seeing animals copulate reveals to the hunter the adultery of his wife." (Luangwa Valley) "A fish that jumps by itself (*kusomoka*) into the boat of a fisherman can be used to produce a specific charm (*cisomo*) that makes a given person commit suicide." (Twingi) (Note that the charm called *cisomo* along the Luapula — a charm said to make the victim commit suicide — is not to be confused with the Nyanja charm of the same name, widely used in Lusaka, which is a love charm!)

13 The *katenge* plant (*dichrostachys cinerea*) is used to treat snakebites, and (together with the *kapempe* plant, *hymenocardia acida*) to appease babies seen as spiritually affected by the death of other children (*umuti wa katwi* in Bemba). The symbolism of its usage in court cases, however, seems to come (according to the healers of the KATEMBE research group) from its association with male strength. "It keeps the strength, water and blood in the body." It is also used as an aphrodisiac.

place it and keep it inside her vagina for a full week, only to remove it when going to the toilet. Each time she placed it inside, she said: “Those who are judging, we are all born of a woman [meaning, we should treat each other as relatives].” On the day of the court case, the woman tied the pieces on a string, which the culprit had to wear around the waist. Then he had to go to the graveyard to confess the truth to the dead, saying, “I committed the crime.” He took a piece of grass from the grave and kept it in his pocket during the hearing. In court, the person proclaimed his innocence and was freed.<sup>14</sup>

The fact that a man uses the most secret body part of a woman (not his wife) for this ritual, places it into the context of witchcraft. The episode on the graveyard brings the medicines explicitly in contact with the realm of the dead to whom the culprit confesses and whose help he/she employs. The power behind the medicine here is related either directly to the world of the spirits or to non-personal hidden forces that skilful people can enlist and use. The symbolic level is meant to work not only on the human mind, but to channel specific spiritual forces into intended outcomes.

Such medicines are used, of course, outside the Christian discourses. It is not compatible with the Christian faith to manipulate a judgment in court through medicines. Yet our approach makes it necessary to engage with this discourse since both the practice and the fear of witchcraft depend on the use of medicines for the purpose of channelling and mediating between different sets of powers.

The logic of this framework itself is not foreign to the Christian faith. The sacraments in Catholic theology are to provide a tangible and visible link between God and a human being within a symbolic setting. Anointing oil, for example, has beneficial medicinal properties on the physical level. On the symbolic level, it inserts the believer into the Biblical narratives where anointing plays a key role — pointing ultimately towards Christ, “the anointed one.” On the spiritual level, it is to become a channel of God’s grace for the sick person. The symbolic and medical angles facilitate and mediate the spiritual connection. This insight is important in

14 Interview with a member of the Justice & Peace Group of Kasamba Parish, who wished to stay anonymous.

our approach. Mainstream Christian approaches to witchcraft have often failed to be relevant because they denied the possibility of medicines to mediate with the spiritual world (superstitious thinking). And yet, Catholic theology of the sacraments rests on the same principles; Christian theology has used double standards. In our own approach, we do not negate the logic of the use of medicines, but we evaluate the moral and spiritual dimensions of concrete practices from the viewpoint of the Christian faith.

All mainstream churches have always maintained that practices on the third level, where people call explicitly or implicitly on different kinds of spirits (distinct from God) or on the dead and manipulate them for their own advantages, are not reconcilable with the Christian faith but belong in the realm of idolatry. A Christian believer cannot call upon a spiritual force in isolation from his/her faith in the one God without being idolatrous.<sup>15</sup>

In *Zambian traditions*, the process of channelling the help of spiritual powers by means of medicines is often accompanied by specific taboos through which a given person maintains his/her relationship with the spiritual power. In Christian traditions, this level is equally characterized by a relationship: a relationship with God who demands exclusive faith. Practices that seek to enlist the help from spirits outside the framework of an exclusive relationship with God are not compatible with the Christian faith.

The symbolic level, however, where medicines mediate between different realms of creation, acknowledging a unity and an interrelatedness of the cosmos, is not foreign to the Christian faith, which, after all, should help the believer to live a connected life. Recognizing the symbolic world of medicines is important. It is problematic, however, that medicines are easily employed to provide shortcuts that bypass the demanding efforts of working on human relationships. Many times, the usage of medicines and charms does not restore broken harmonies, but is intended

15 *The Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1993), [http://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/\\_INDEX.HTM](http://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/_INDEX.HTM) warns that certain popular Catholic practices surrounding the saints and sacred objects can border on idol worship, which the Church recognizes as an abuse (articles 2110-2114, and 2138).

to bend such harmonies towards the satisfaction of self-centred needs. The Christian challenge is about transforming or developing meaningful symbolic worlds that allow a believer to connect a crucial problem with the Christian spiritual world.

## WITCHCRAFT, HEART, SOUL, AND PERSONHOOD

Another crucial cluster of cultural notions through which the forces of witchcraft are appropriated concern the understanding of human selfhood. Working against such notions or apart from them (as mainstream Christian discourses have often done) will do violence to people's own experiences of life and to a long history of cultural values that build on these concepts. An understanding of selfhood has to do with notions such as the soul, the heart or the spirit of a person. When we use such terms (in any language) we speak in a way that is partly abstract, partly figurative and partly related to very personal experiences. Everybody understands something, but very few would be able to define such terms. Western secular thought equates the soul with a collection of diverse psychic or psychological phenomena. Christian thought — following ideas from Greek philosophy — often equates the soul with some immaterial, immortal, animating principles of life that can be separated from the body after death.<sup>16</sup> In early Hebrew thought, in contrast, the soul (*nephesh*) referred not to some immortal spiritual aspect of a person, but to the unity of the complete living organism, comprising body, mind and breath.<sup>17</sup>

Mainstream and Evangelical Christianity have developed different biblical approaches towards defining terms like “body,” “flesh,” “heart,” “soul,” “spirit,” etc. In Zambian traditions, different people will use different nuances when discussing such terms. Here I present two possible ways of looking at them in a Zambian

16 This applies especially to Platonism and Neo-Platonism that inspired Paul and Augustine.

17 About the understanding of *nephesh*, see for example Wendell Berry: “The formula given in Genesis 2:7 is not man equals body plus soul; the formula there is soul equals dust plus breath. According to this verse, God did not make a body and put a soul into it, like a letter into an envelope. He formed man of dust; then, by breathing His breath into it, He made the dust live. The dust, formed as man and made to live, did not embody a soul, it became a soul—that is, a whole creature. Humanity is thus presented to us, in Adam, not as a creature of two discrete parts temporarily glued together but as a single mystery.” (Wendell Berry, “Christianity and the Survival of Creation,” *Cross Currents* 43, no. 2 (Summer 1993): 149, <http://www.crosscurrents.org/berry.htm>).

perspective that we can invoke for a valid framework of healing. Obviously, it is subject to discussion and to differences in opinions.<sup>18</sup>

I start with an interesting interpretation of Bemba notions of selfhood, as proposed by Robert Badenberg, a theologian and missionary who worked in Zambia with the evangelical Liebenzeller Mission.<sup>19</sup> His interviewees located the organ for human feelings and emotions (love, anger, fear, etc.), for willpower, secret intentions and thought, in the heart (*mu mutima*), in the chest (*mu cifuba*) or in the womb (*mu nda*). The three terms can be used more or less synonymously. The terms — I will refer below just to the heart — point to the organ that shapes personal character. From the movements and actions of the heart, a person develops his/her own way of being and acting, namely his/her personal habits, both good and bad. This bodily organ also has a spiritual component, in Bemba called the *mupashi* (plural: *mipashi*). The *mupashi* has much in common with the English term soul, yet comes with important nuances. The Bemba term describes the immortal spiritual component of the person, but unlike the English term, it is closely linked to the realm of the ancestors, who are called by the same term. A person develops his/her own personal habits and ways of being (*imibele*), but the *mupashi* is pre-given to the person. Both heart and soul make up the human psyche: the heart as the locus of the person's own intentions and thoughts, and the pre-given soul through which the ancestors gain access to the person.

In the past, the *mupashi* was seen to be acquired through the naming ceremony (*ukwinika umwana ishina*). Through the name, an intrinsic relationship with a particular ancestor, but also with the ancestors in general, and indeed the spiritual world, is established. Only when it is capable of a spiritual life that can benefit the community, is the child truly human. (Children who died before the umbilical cord fell off were hardly mourned in public.) Traditional Bemba religion placed

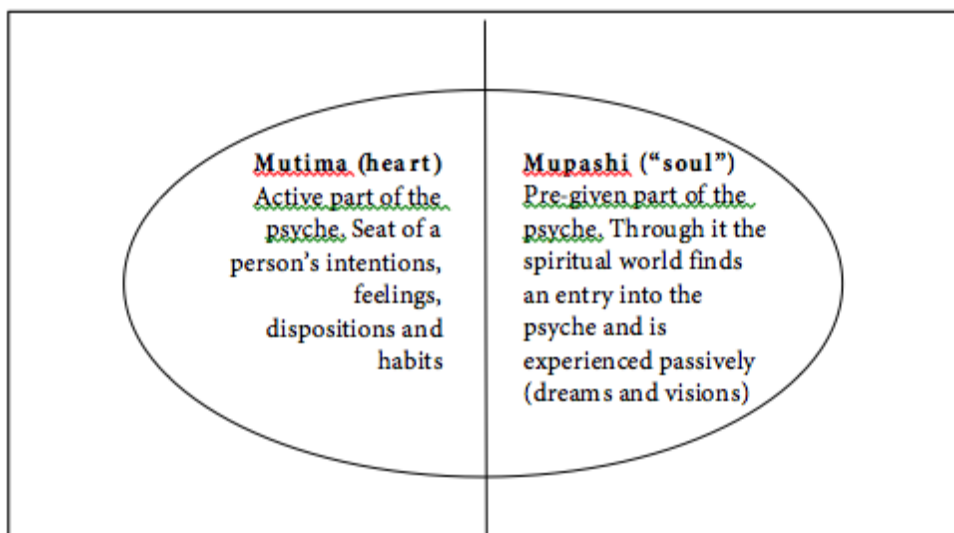
18 In this article, I focus on Bemba and Nyanja concepts. Each language offers its own nuances, differently explained by different people. Yet our group of healers (the KATEMBE research group) coming from various cultural backgrounds (Tumbuka, Nsenga, Lenje, Tonga, Kaonde, Lala and Bemba) testified to the comparability of the different concepts.

19 Robert Badenberg, *The Body, Soul and Spirit Concept of the Bemba in Zambia* (Bonn: Verlag für Kultur und Wissenschaft, 2002).



much emphasis on developing a relationship with the ancestral guardian spirit.<sup>20</sup> This process was accompanied by dangerous hazards in early life: things could go wrong on the journey to personhood.<sup>21</sup> If a person's heart was incompatible with the mupashi, a child — after being named — would be sick and uncomfortable; the name needed to be changed. Once the mupashi was accepted, however, a life-long journey began for this person of attuning oneself to the spiritual realm that had opened itself up through the name.

In the diagram of the psyche, I contrast the heart (*mutima*) with the soul (*mupashi*) though they belong intrinsically together and they co-author the inner life of a



20 See for example Nicolas Garrec, *The Lubemba of the years 1910-1920 as seen through the writings of Father N. Garrec*, ed. and trans. M. Gruffat, (Lusaka: FENZA, 1999), 8. "[A]s soon as the child begins to understand, the mother is very keen on teaching it by repeating time and time again: 'Child, never forget to invoke your "mboswa, your guardian," the spirit whose name you have been answering to ever since you were born. You must often invoke and pray your protecting spirit. You will see, it will protect you always and everywhere. It will keep you in good health. Whenever you show lack of interest in your "mupashi," you are sad and unhappy."

21 In many Zambian traditions, children who developed their upper teeth first (in Bemba called *ifinkula*) were killed or left to die; they were not truly human, and their (non-human?) soul was feared to become a negative spiritual influence in the community. Edouard Labrecque (1931) in his treatise on Bemba religion linked the concept of the *inkula* to the perilous journey of becoming a human person (see chapter fourteen). Labrecque, *Beliefs and Religious Practices of the Bemba and Neighbouring Tribes* (Language Centre Ilondola ed.), ed. L. Oger and trans. P. Boyd, Archives of the Missionaries of Africa (Lusaka: FENZA, [1931, 1934] 1982).

person.<sup>22</sup> How do a person's character, located in the heart, and the pre-given soul that comes from the spiritual world, act together? Badenberg answers this question by referring to the meaning of the term mupashi that is related to the verb *kupasha*, the causative form of *kupala*, meaning "to resemble, to look like." Kupasha here means "to make resemble." A *cipasho* is a likeness, a resemblance. The mupashi, the soul, is the spiritual force, coming from the world of the ancestors that should make the character traits (*imibele*) of the person resemble the character of the soul one has received.<sup>23</sup> *Imibele* (personal habits) are acquired during life and the person has the power to work on them; hence bad habits need to be corrected by the elders and good habits need to be fostered. Growing to maturity means to make the personal *mibele* resemble (*kupala*, *kupashanya*) the mupashi that one has inherited. Badenberg describes how each stage in life has its own challenges of making the personal *mibele* resemble the mupashi that the person received. It is, however, a privilege for the adults and elders (*abakalamba*) to be able to develop the full maturity to live in harmony with the world of the mupashi, where a person's *mibele* and mupashi are attuned and resemble each other. Here the person has developed his/her full potential. The spoiled person, in contrast, does not manage to come to a likeness with his/her mupashi. The mupashi turns sour. Instead of being a benevolent force and influence on the person, it may turn into a *cibanda* an alienated spiritual force that will create disharmony in the person, the family and society, or that is consumed by revenge. The person now becomes driven by an unhealthy and unbalanced spiritual force. A person who resorts to witchcraft has ultimately lost touch with the benevolent spiritual world.<sup>24</sup>

22 Badenberg locates the Bemba psyche in the heart (Badenberg, *The Body, Soul and Spirit Concept*, 115). Since the person is aware of the communications of the mupashi through dreams and in visions, I would describe the human psyche rather as a co-production of the *mutima* (heart) and the mupashi (soul).

23 Badenberg, *The Body, Soul and Spirit Concept*, 74-75.

24 While witches are usually the others (and not oneself), many people, including Christians, do admit that they themselves use medicines for manipulative purposes. This aspect has often been ignored and downplayed in mainstream Christianity. Priests and pastoral agents, entrenched in the "superstition paradigm," simply regard such people as being misguided. ("It does not work anyway and has no real consequences.") They miss the distorting and alienating effects of such practices (irrespective of whether they actually work) on the person's sense of selfhood, which becomes more and more disconnected from his/her spiritual source of life. Incidentally, Christian movements that offered extensive cleansing rituals for people who used manipulative medicines





Though in the past the mupashi was received during the naming ceremony of the child, it would be wrong to think of the soul only in relation to one specific ancestor. During a lifetime, a person inherits different social roles, public duties and also different mipashi. At any inheritance ceremony (*ubupyani*) the family will choose a person whose character is visibly similar to the character of the relative who died, to inherit the mupashi of the late. A headman or chief inherits all the mipashi of his predecessors. A life that starts with one given mupashi moves towards a life in tune with the family mipashi in the plural, representing ever-larger segments and public roles in society.

The concept of the soul as interacting with the spiritual world is not exhausted by the intrinsic link to the world of the ancestors. Nature spirits (in Bemba *ngulu* or *myela*) are also known as mipashi. The mipashi can stand for the spiritual world at large. They also stand in communion with God. Protestant Bibles translated the Holy Spirit as *Mupashi wa Mushilo*, the spirit set apart. The entire spiritual world, human and non-human, is related. The Bemba concept of the soul has multiple planes and levels that cannot be reduced to a modern Western understanding of one individual soul being hidden somewhere in one individual body understood in its singular, self-possessing and autarkic dimensions.

The Bemba idea that links the mupashi in the first instance with an individual ancestor is for many Christians (and non-Christians) in Zambia no longer meaningful. Today names are often given without any reference to the ancestors — though the very fact of naming still establishes an authority structure into which the child is integrated, while the names given today also bear a link with the parents. In our workshops, many people shared their belief that the soul refers to a God-given element in every human being. Traditional Bemba religion had linked the soul primarily to an ancestor and through the world of the ancestors indirectly also to God. Christian frameworks today have linked the soul directly to God. The logic, however, of conforming one's way of life to the pre-given soul remains intact; the same logic is acknowledged in Christian thought as being at the root of a Christian

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(the Lumpa Church mentioned in Udelhoven, *Unseen Worlds*, chapter two is but an example) seem to have connected better with people's spiritual sense of selfhood.

identity. Christian life, after all, is very much about the struggle to conform the desires of the heart and one's ways of being with this divine image, unique to each person, that needs to be accepted, cultivated and expressed in a person's lifetime.

A pastoral approach that builds on this insight will try to avoid isolated magical remedies against witchcraft attacks, but re-connect the affected person with his/her benevolent source of life (God, Jesus, the Holy Spirit). The affected person needs to find the "counter-medicines" against the attack in the divine image within the own soul. A proud witch will be overcome by the meekness of the Christian response, a jealous witch by an affirmative, upbuilding and appreciative response, and so on.

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Nyanja and Chewa notions are comparable with the Bemba ones, but come also with their own nuances. The Chewa term *mzimu* refers, similarly to the Bemba *mupashi*, to both the soul and to an ancestor who becomes re-embodied in the person who receives his/her name. The term may be related etilogically to the process of disappearing (into thin air — as expressed with the term *kuzizimira*). *Kuzima* describes the extinguishing of a fire. The soul vanishes from the body after death, disappearing into invisibility, no longer embodied.<sup>25</sup> *Kuzima* may also refer to the fires that are extinguished at the funerals and the association of the ancestors with the cold spheres of life: the forest and the sexually inactive periods. A human person after death is transformed into a *mzimu*.

The composite character of the soul can also be encountered in the Chewa and Nyanja notions. According to the anthropologist Arne Steinforth, in his research conducted in Southern Malawi, many ritual specialists distinguish between a pre-given soul that remains unchanging (*mzimu wa umulungu*) and the changing personal soul or spirit that grows with life (*mzimu wa umunthu*) and that is related to the human heart (*mtima*), not unlike the Bemba concepts as seen by Badenberg:

These two spirits do not conjoin, nor are they thought of as an integral whole, but they constitute separate categories... The *mzimu wa umulungu*, spirit of

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<sup>25</sup> Personal communication with Toon van Kessel.

divinity, represents the spark of life which is received during conception and which returns to the Supreme Being after death, and which is associated with the vital force (*moyo*) as well as the conscience of a person. ... It is utterly divine and unchanging, and — due to its strong bonds to body and blood — it only leaves the person at the point of his or her physical death. ... The *mzimu wa umunthu* or spirit of personhood is the faculty that controls a person's decision-making processes and voluntary actions. Sometimes referred to as shadow or image (*mtshunzi* and/or *chithunzi*) of a person, it represents personal fortune (*mwayi*) and character, and it is associated with the heart or *mtima*. The *mzimu wa umunthu* is a variable entity that changes throughout lifetime and grows by personal experience and age.<sup>26</sup>

This description brings out, apart from the composite character of the human soul and the person, the connection of the soul with the person's blood (given by the mother and tying a person to the matrilineal line) and the shadow. By growing through life, the soul will make other important connections through which it appropriates strength and life. The *mzimu wa umunthu* is vulnerable to witchcraft attacks, for example when the witch gains access to the shadow. Being tied to a person's conscious focus and willpower, the *mzimu wa umunthu* can leave a person during sleep and during dreams — hence the body is vulnerable to witchcraft especially at night. The *mzimu wa umunthu* is affected also by relationships and emotions, and is of a much less stable nature than the *mzimu wa umulungu*.

As mentioned above, terms like “soul” and “heart” attain different meanings for different people; an analysis of the Chewa or Bemba soul in terms of Steinforth's or Badenberg's descriptions should not be understood in timeless and abstract terms. However, they express an important insight, that many people feel who cope with witchcraft: a part of the soul and human psyche is pre-given, connecting a person with the ancestors or directly with God (especially in Christian Zambia), while another part develops throughout life and comes in different stages and with specific challenges. Through its intrinsic link of the soul with the spiritual world, however,

26 Arne Steinforth, *On the Cultural Construction of Mental Disorder and Normality in Southern Malawi* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2009). 122.

also evil forces can gain access into a person's life that are experienced passively, for example in dreams or visions. The cultural insights into the dynamics of heart and soul, the two parts of the human psyche, open up a specific and holistic way of healing: If these two parts come together to complement each other as intended, the person becomes strong. A Christian approach can build on this awareness. Both Nyanja and Bemba concepts affirm that a part of the soul cannot be bewitched and is beyond manipulation by human means. The Christian healer's task is to bring the focus of the patient, who is under witchcraft attacks, to the positive powers connected to the own soul that have been there since childhood and that makes a person who he/she is.

## THE VOLUNTARY AND INVOLUNTARY CHARACTER OF WITCHCRAFT

The double character of selfhood, active and passive at the same time, is mirrored by the double character of witchcraft, which is both active and passive. Some forms of witchcraft are learned and practiced voluntarily; the craft is supposed to make the witch rich or powerful, or to feed his/her passions for hatred and revenge. The Chewa term *mfiti ya nyanga* — “the witch of the horn” — refers to this type of witch. The *mfiti yenyeni* — “the real witch” — in contrast, can be a person without a proper motive for pursuing an individual act of witchcraft. The *mfiti yenyeni* is driven by an unstoppable addiction to practice witchcraft or eat human flesh. Such forms of witchcraft, in Zambian concepts, can be inherited through the family-line. In pre-colonial times, the bodies of convicted witches were often burned to prevent the spirit of witchcraft from coming back into the family. The name of a witch was not passed on to a newborn child. Beyond conscious individual motives, a person who inherits witchcraft has certain powers, invisible to others, that can bring harm to society by being channeled through the negative emotions of hatred, jealousy, a desire for revenge or greed. A person may not want to use these powers, but no human being is ever free from disruptive emotions.

In Zambia, the distinction between learned practices of witchcraft and inherited forms of witchcraft is fluid. Some people have confessed to the crimes of witchcraft: “I may have some powers whose origins I don't know.” Not only the invol-



untary forms, but also voluntary practices of witchcraft (sorcery) can easily get out of hand. People who acquire medicines for personal powers or wealth will often stand accused of allowing their powers to run havoc, unnoticed by themselves. An example is the *lilomba*, a familiar, a mythical snake intrinsically tied to the person and body of the witch, which gives powers and wealth to the witch but needs to be constantly fed on blood (often of close relatives); or else it goes around looking for food, bringing harm wherever it goes, without the owner's knowledge. Voluntary and involuntary modes of witchcraft easily flow into each other, leaving the boundaries blurred.

Such blurred understandings are again found in the modern images of Zambian Satanism. Many people claim to have been initiated involuntarily. "I did not know what was happening to me." At the same time, the person is said to make a covenant with the devil. The soul is experienced as autonomous (having individual agency) and simultaneously as bound up to other spiritual agents beyond the person's control. The soul is an open window through which other agents and forces enter into and relate to the body.

## THE COMMUNITARIAN SOUL

So far, we have looked at the soul in terms of its relationship to the spiritual world. This, however, is only half of the story. The other half concerns the person's relationships and sense of belonging to a visible family and a community. "To be" means "to be with." The ancestral aspect of Zambian religion was the other side of the coin of the communitarian aspect. The ultimate aim of the ancestors consisted in the unity of the family. By enhancing a sense of belonging to each other, one was also pleasing the ancestors and God. Witchcraft, understood as a crime against one's own family, was also the ultimate crime against the world of the ancestors, from which the witch excluded him/herself.

The relational soul is affected on a spiritual level not only by one's own deeds, but also by those of significant others. One cannot think about the self without thinking about the people to whom this self belongs and to whom it is fundamentally related. Here, I wish to draw out the point that the concept of a connected soul

has repercussions not only for experiences of witchcraft but also for the notion of responsibility: people who feel that their soul is easily affected by the deeds of others also easily see themselves as mere victims of witchcraft. People may also avoid taking responsibility for their own actions, since they are aware that something else or somebody else is driving them. In our approach, we cannot acknowledge the powers of witchcraft without also developing a sense of co-responsibility. This does not mean to propagate an image of selfhood as autarkic, individualist and independent, as Western thought sometimes does. We strive instead towards a position of healthy *interdependence*, believing it gives enough room for positive personal agency and input, without denying fundamental experiences of a relational soul. A person who is helped by our approach needs to be ready, if necessary, to move from the left side of the table to the right side:

dependence	interdependence
“They are responsible”	“We are responsible”
“I am the victim”	“I am part of the problem and of the solution”
“I am morally right and innocent”	“I have much scope for growth”

We acknowledge in our approach that the human soul is subject to many other influences other than the divine grace that makes it correspond to the divine image. Not all influences on the soul are positive and growth-enhancing. As much as other people try to manipulate our behavior, we also experience influences in the soul that alienate us from the image of God. We can call such forces witchcraft, if we wish, or link them to the realm of the demonic. The key question is about discerning the influences that help a person grow towards God’s image in the long run, and the negative forces that hinder this process.

While people who are attacked by witchcraft, or feel so, often construct piecemeal explanations about what is happening and about who is behind it all, the helper in our approach tries to connect the attack to a wider story, relating it to the person’s sense of selfhood, strengthening an awareness of interdependence and belonging but also of the responsibilities that arise from the Christian vocation.



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