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# Ancestor Worship, Dreams, and Visions: A Problem of Contextual Theology among the Chewa People of Eastern Zambia

## Introduction

Conversion from dreams and visions is still occurring among various people groups, requiring a contextual theology of mission to deal with it. This conversion from dreams and visions was noticed at one of the baptisms that occurred at the Sindamisale Seventh-day Adventist Church in the Vubwi Mission District of Eastern Zambia on 15 October 2022. While the baptism was taking place, Jason a thirty-one-year-old man and his wife Mary (not their real names) were watching the baptismal candidates going in and out of the pond to be baptized. Then the Holy Spirit seemed to have troubled Jason's heart so he asked the elders if they would allow him to speak to the pastors. The elders obliged and brought him to the place where I was standing and chatting with my colleague in ministry, Vincent Nkhoma. When Jason began telling his story, our hearts were moved with sorrow as we noticed tears streaming down his cheeks. Jason stated that he had seen in his dream a house of worship with people inside the church adorned in white garments worshipping and praising God. Jason had never gone to any church in his life before. Then Jason requested baptism and the church voted to baptize him then and there together with his wife.

However, Jason had a strong belief in venerating the ancestral spirits as well as a habit of obeying traditional authority who usually told people which church they could attend. In a Chewa community whatever an individual does affects the entire community and whatever the community

does affects each individual. In this case, when Jason and his wife joined the Adventist Church, it affected the entire community. This reminds me of John Mbiti's well known statement that says, "I am because we are and since we are therefore I am" (2008:109). This results in the members in this cultural context to have a high regard for community decisions in many aspects of their lives. Individuals cannot make any decision without consulting the leaders of the villages or their relatives.

Christ's Great Commission must motivate the church leaders to develop a contextual theology of mission that is cross-cultural and global in extent. Because of this cross-cultural and global nature of a contextual theology of mission, the Seventh-day Adventist Church has been able to reach Eastern Zambia with the everlasting gospel even if the church's mission work in Eastern Zambia has been very slow when compared to other mission territories in Zambia. Thus, this paper seeks to scrutinize ancestral worship, dreams, and visions which favor the propagation of the Islamic faith among the Chewa people in Eastern Zambia. It is statistically proven that much of the Adventist Church's mission work in this territory is slow because the Chewa people, who make up the majority in Eastern Zambia, are deeply rooted in the Chewa Traditional Religion belief system. Unfortunately, Adventists have not taken this fact seriously. The Seventh-day Adventist statistical report for the third quarter of 2022 shows a membership of 45,000 for the SDA Church in Eastern Zambia, with only 6,500 of them from the Chewa tribe. This represents a percentage of 14.4%.

Jesus Christ declared: "And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come" (Matt 24:14). He told his

disciples: "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore, go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely, I will be with you always, to the very end of the age" (Matt 28:18-20). Luke reports that Jesus Christ told his disciples: "But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8).

How could a contextual theology of mission be relevant to the Chewa people who venerate their ancestors much like the Muslims residing in their territory? It is cogently known that the Chewa people believe in the existence of ancestral spirits and value the dreams and visions received from them. The whole religious life of the Chewa, especially those who have not been affected by external religious influences, is centered on ancestor worship, dreams, and visions. The ancestral spirits play such a big role in the life of the Chewa that if things are not going well, it is almost

always suspected that the ancestral spirits are angry. The person who is experiencing problems is likely to go to seek help from the people in the village of origin. The people in the village will try to figure out who among the departed might be causing problems, and what they want from the affected person.

## Demography

The Joshua Project puts the current population of Zambia at 19,951,000, with 74 people groups and Christian adherents at 86.48 percent. The unreached population is 102,000. “Eastern Zambia is one of ten provinces in the Republic of Zambia. The province lies between the Luangwa River and borders Malawi to the east and Mozambique to the south, from Isoka in the northeast to the north of Luangwa in the south. Eastern province has an area of 51,476 km<sup>2</sup> (19,875sq mi), locally shares a border with three other provinces of the country, and is divided into fifteen districts. The fifteen districts are Chipata, Chadiza, Lundazi, Petauke, Katete Chasefu, Chipangali, Kasenengwa, Lumezi, Lusangazi, Mambwe, Nyimba, Sinda, Chama, and Vubwi. The provincial headquarters is Chipata.

As per the 2010 Zambian census, Eastern Province had a population of 1,592,661, accounting for 12.16% of the total Zambian population. The population for males was 784,680 and for females was 807, 981 (CSO 2012, 8). The Chewa-speaking people are the largest community in the region; therefore, all the schools in Eastern Zambia use the Chewa language.

## The Chewa of Eastern Zambia: Historical Background

The Chewa ethnic group is the largest among the ethnic groups in Eastern Zambia. “Originally, the Chewa migrated from Nigeria and Cameroon and settled in Zaire (today’s Democratic Republic of Congo) before coming to Malawi and Zambia in the 15th century” (theculturetrip.com). There are two theories about the origin of the Chewa of Eastern Zambia. The first theory posits that the Chewa of Eastern Zambia migrated from Luba country in the Democratic Republic of Congo (Zaire) (Mwale 1973:7). Other tribes that are known to have come from Luba country include the Bemba, Bisa, Lamba, Kunda, and others. There are two reasons why people think that the Chewa of Eastern Zambia came from Luba country.

The first reason has to do with the similarities in the area of marriage. For instance, both the Chewa and Bemba are matrilineal tribes. In matters of marriage, both tribes give more power to women than to men. The second reason has to do with the way they deal with chieftainship. Among the Chewa, Bemba, Bisa, and Kunda, the one who succeeds a chief after he

has passed is the nephew of the deceased. The chief's son has no authority in his father's family. Thus, when it comes to marriage and chieftainship, the woman has more authority than the man because she is the bearer of chiefs. This does not infer that the husband has no control over his wife and children. It simply means that when it comes to the inheritance of the chieftainship, the sister's line is followed. The point is that it is the woman who knows the father of the child. If the brother's line were to be followed, as is the case with the Ngoni, the Chewa would be ruled by a non-Chewa when a chief's wife plays a harlot. Among the Chewa, if a woman whose sons are eligible to become chiefs, gets married to say another ethnic group, she will bear a son who will still be regarded as a Chewa.

Based on these two examples, coupled with the initiation of girls (*chinamwali*), and worship through the intermediary of ancestral spirits, it has been concluded that the Chewa are similar to the tribes that lived in the Luba kingdom.

However, it should be noted that differences between the Chewa and the tribes that came from the Luba kingdom are there. For example, the language of the Bemba people in Northern Zambia is not similar to the language of the Chewa people. The languages that are quite similar to Bemba are Bisa, Kunda, Lamba, Lala, and Luyana (old Lozi). The roots of all Bantu languages are similar. But the Chewa themselves do not say that they came from the Luba Kingdom. They say that they came from Malawi. This saying is always observed during the Kulamba ceremony, which takes place every year in August, to remind the Chewa people how Kalonga Gawa Undi led them from Malawi to Mozambique and Zambia and eventually settled them in Mozambique and Zambia. The Chewa of Malawi and Mozambique travel to Zambia to pay homage to their Paramount Chief and celebrate their history with the Chewa people of Eastern Zambia.

Thus, the second theory is that the Chewa people of Eastern Zambia came from Malawi. The name of the country of Malawi came from Lake Malawi, which was so-called because of the shining of the sun when it is rising like flames of fire (Mwale 1973:8-9). The people who lived in this country called themselves the Maravi. But others called them the "Nyanja," because they lived near the lake.

There is a connection between the Chewa and the people who came from the Luba Kingdom. The king of the Luba kingdom was Mwatayamvu. The country of Malawi was on the eastern side of the Luba kingdom. Lake Tanzania separated the two countries. At first, the Maravi had freedom, but later they were defeated by Mwatayamvu. Thus, they were ruled by a foreign king for a long time. King Mwatayamvu was a Lunda. The Maravi had their chiefs with the senior-most chief being *kalonga*. The one who was

to become *kalonga* was called *undi*. Such a one was a son born from the oldest sister of the *kalonga*. Thus, *kalonga* and *undi* were very senior chiefs of Malawi. There were also junior chiefs such as *mwase*, *mkanda*, *chimfombo*, *cauwa*, *kambombo*, *kalindabwalo*, and *cifuka*.

### Social-Political Life

The Chewa people are a matrilineal tribe. This means that succession follows the woman's line. In other words, when a headman or chief dies, he is succeeded by either his nephew or niece. It is for this reason that in marriage the wife is given more authority than the husband. The children of the marriage belong to their mother and their uncles (the mother's brothers). The uncle has more say in issues involving his nephews and nieces than their father. When a young man wants to marry, he informs his uncle and not his father. When a young lady is getting married, either her uncle or her brother will be involved in the marriage negotiations. Sometimes the maternal grandfather or grandmother will be involved in the negotiations.

Several households form a village, which is run by a headman, who has advisers. The headman's messenger is usually a man from another village who has married in that village known as *mkomwene*. At times a messenger may be a man from the same village who has married the headman's niece. The headman's sisters whose husbands are living in the same village build their houses next to the headman's. If his sisters have gone to live in their husbands' villages, his nephews may build next to his house. His male children may also build next to him, but they are not generally counted as part of his family because they belong to their mother's family. If they decide to go and live in their mother's village, they are allowed to go. Interestingly since Chewa people are matrilineal, it could be expected that the mother's dreams will have more significance for the community than the dreams or visions of men, but that is not the case.

The headman is the leader and judge of the village. When there are social-related issues in the village, the headman must be informed about them. He is the custodian of Chewa. A group of villages is assigned to a group of headmen, who are usually the chief's *nduna* (advisors). This group of headmen work with other village headmen in matters involving the chiefdom. Each headman represents his fellow village headmen at the chief's court. He advises the chief on matters involving the villages under his jurisdiction. He participates in the adjudication of cases at the chief's court. He is responsible for the collection of money from the village headmen for developmental projects or for the *Kulamba* ceremony, which takes place in August every year.

Several groups of villages form a chiefdom. In Eastern Zambia, Chewa chiefdoms include Kazembe, Chitungulu, Mwanya, Kapichila, Mwase Nthembe (Lundazi), Zumwanda, Chikomeni, Mwasemphangwe (Lumezi), Chanje, Mkanda, Chinunda, Mafuta, Chikuwe, Pembamoyo, Mwangala, Zingalume, Mlolo, Kawaza, Kathumba and Mbang'ombe.

These chiefdoms, together with those in Malawi and Mozambique form the Chewa Kingdom (Chiefdom) led by Paramount Chief Kalonga Gawa Undi. The headquarters of the Chewa people is at Mkaika in the Katete district in Zambia. In order to show his presence in Chipata, which was mostly grabbed by Paramount Chief Mpezeni of the Ngoni people during the tribal wars, and to connect with the Chewa in the northern part of Eastern Zambia (those in Lumezi and Lundazi in particular), Kalonga Gawa Undi has another palace at Naviyombo in Chipata.

Generally, chiefs handle issues involving their subjects. However, difficult matters have to be referred to the Paramount Chief Kalonga Gawa Undi. Kalonga Gawa Undi has advisers known as *manduna*, who advise him on matters related to the running of the chiefdom. They also adjudicate in matters that go to the Paramount Chief's court. Kalonga Gawa Undi installs and removes chiefs. He is the one who distributed land to the Chewa people during the migrations. Even today, Kalonga Gawa Undi is the custodian of Chewa land. Even when the Zambian Government wants land for a developmental project in the Chewa chiefdom, Kalonga Gawa Undi has to be consulted, after which he consults with his territorial chiefs, and it is only when they agree to the intended development that land is given to the Government. Kalonga Gawa Undi is the overall custodian of the community's Traditional Religion. Once every year, in August, the Chewa from Malawi, Mozambique, and Zambia, gather at Mkaika to pay homage to their Paramount Chief, and to remember where they came from and how they settled in the places where they are today. The Chewa people take produce to their Paramount Chief. They also showcase their dances such as "*gule wamkulu*" *chinamwali*, *chiwoda*, *chintali*, and *mganda*. *Gule wamkulu* and *mganda* are performed by men, while *chinamwali*, *chiwoda*, and *chintali* are performed by women. These dances are religious dances since their function is to communicate with the ancestral world.

The Chewa people are generally peasant farmers. Maize is not only their main cash crop but also their staple food. They cultivate other crops in small quantities, which include; groundnuts, cowpeas, beans, cassava, sweet potatoes, and sunflower. Other cash crops they cultivate include soya beans, cotton, and tobacco. The Chewa people keep chickens, goats, and pigs. Some of the Chewa people keep cattle as well.

Generally, the Chewa people have not taken advantage of schools scattered here and there in their chiefdoms to ensure that their children receive an education. Thus, a good number of them are illiterate. There are

very few who have been motivated to go to school to acquire some education and after that have found themselves jobs and left the villages to live in towns and cities. Many of these have not gone back to their villages to encourage their relatives to also acquire some education. As a result, not many Chewa men and women hold high public offices. In Zambia, during the time of the UNIP Government (1964-1991), President Kenneth David Kaunda appointed a good number of the Chewa people to public offices despite having little education. Of course, the little education they had represented the best mission schools had provided to a few Chewa people who had taken advantage of their existence in Northern Rhodesia.

### Religious Aspects

The data from Zambia Religion indicates that “a 1996 amendment to the constitution declared the country a Christian nation while providing for freedom of religion in practice. The government requires the registration of all religious groups; however, all applications reportedly are approved without discrimination. An estimated 85% of the population professes some form of Christianity. Another 5% are Muslim; 5% subscribe to other faiths, including Hinduism, Baha’ism, and traditional indigenous religions; and 5% are atheist” (Zambia—Religions 2022:65, 66).

“The majority of Christians are either Roman Catholics or Protestants. Currently, there is also a surge in new Pentecostal churches, which have attracted many young followers. Muslims tend to be concentrated in parts of the country where Asians have settled along the railroad line from Lusaka to Livingstone, in Chipata, and the eastern province. Some members of the Muslim community have complained of discrimination since the country was declared a Christian nation. They claim they cannot freely teach and practice Islam; however, other Muslim organizations state they have not experienced any restrictions on their activities, *especially in Eastern Zambia*” (66 emphasis mine).

The religious background of Eastern Zambia reveals two distinct and diverse views as far as the religious practices in church and society are concerned. Mbiti alleges that Africans are notoriously religious with every community having its own religious system with a set of beliefs and practices (2008:1). “Religion is thus the ultimate component in traditional beliefs which exerts the ultimate influence upon the mind and living of the people in a particular society”(1).

The Chewa people are deeply religious. Even before Christianity and Islam came to Malawi and Zambia, the Chewa people were involved in regular worship. When they were hit by drought and inexplicable illnesses,

the Chewa people gathered together to petition the supreme deity (*Chiuta*). They certainly did not have houses of worship like Christians and Muslims do, but they had a way of acknowledging that there was a Being that brought them into existence, and who deserved to be worshipped.

### Reflection on Chewa Religious Life

My interest to carry out extensive study in this subject arose from my experience after living among the Chewa people of Eastern Zambia for twenty-three years. I am from the Bemba tribe from the northern part of Zambia. I believe that Chewa Traditional Religion and practices about ancestor worship, dreams, and visions are more highly valued by the Chewa people of Eastern Zambia than any other religious practice and any attempt to change the Chewa Tradition Religion and practices without providing contextual responses has met with very little success. I observed that the Christians who attended church programs once or twice a week on Saturday or Sunday are the same ones who are found practicing Chewa Traditional Religious rituals and ceremonies. This is because the Chewa Tradition Religion activities practiced daily in the various communities are not easily discarded by the people. This is supported by the data that suggests the Chewa people often are not very seriously rooted in Christian doctrine. I believe that a contextual theology that answers the needs of the Chewa culture while remaining biblically faithful is the answer.

### Ancestors Worship

In Chewa Traditional Religion, ancestors are considered vested with spiritual powers and authority over the living. They are believed to be “senior elders of the clan who are responsible for guarding the family traditions and life” (Gehman 2013:125). They can be traced back to the founders of the family lineage and are feared in most communities. In Chewa Traditional Religion, people claim that ancestors visit them through dreams and visions and it is believed that when “the living fail to follow the customs of the fathers, it becomes the duty of the living dead to correct their mistakes” (125). That is why they are honored by so many Chewa people in Eastern Zambia. For instance, in Chewa land, when a person dies far from their family, the body of the deceased is transferred to their home village so that the spirit remains close to the family home.

These spirits are believed to be closer to people than the deities so are thought of as intermediaries between the people and God, and since they are considered to have a better knowledge of God than the people, they can better communicate the will of the deities. Most people believe that no one can go straight to God without passing through these spirits. This is



similar to how the Chewa people approach their chiefs. People are afraid to approach them directly, so they do so through the sub-chiefs who act as mediators. In Chewa land, children do not approach their fathers directly without passing through the mother, especially when they are requesting something from them.

Ancestors are also consulted for assistance in times of need and trouble so that they can speak to God on behalf of the living (126). These practices offer some insight as to why people do not want to offend the spirits of the dead. When there is a disease in the family, the blame is put on the ancestral spirits who are said to be turning around in their graves. In order to keep the ancestral spirits happy they are venerated and honored by constructing extravagant tombstones on the gravesites and giving offerings like beer to appease them. In addition, ancestors are closely linked with the living family members since “the deceased person . . . shows interest in the well-being of the family” (Burnett 2005:60). The belief in ancestral spirits is real and strong and is reinforced by the ancestral spirits appearing in dreams, especially to diviners, priests, and medicine men, to give them information. “The warnings, advice, and guidance received in a dream are taken seriously” (Gehman 2005:224). If a man is admonished by the ancestors to take another woman as his wife, he will do so and claim that she is his spiritual wife because it was the spirits who instructed him to enter into such a marriage.

There are several similarities between the Chewa Traditional Religion and the Islamic faith regarding the veneration of ancestors in contrast to the teachings of some Christian churches. This could be one of the reasons why the Islamic faith has found fertile ground in propagating its faith among the Chewa people in Eastern Zambia. Chewa people, like Muslims, are content with their ancestral traditions even though many of them are evil. A verse in the Qur’an makes it clear that the spiritual attitude of the mind of the worshipper is not important, so it is alright to continue to imitate the ancestors. “When they are told to follow the (revelation) that Allah has sent down, they say: ‘Nay, we shall follow the ways that we found our fathers (following)’. What! Even if it is Satan beckoning them to the chastisement of the (blazing) fire?” (Qur’ān 31:21).

Scott Moreau suggests that “the cult of the ancestors has critical social functions such as maintaining order in society through sustaining respect for the elders and adherence to social roles” (2000:59). Visitation of the dead in a cemetery has traditionally been seen as a virtue in Islam since the practice was advocated and encouraged by the Prophet. Many of the sleep appearances suggest that the dead express their approval and appreciation of such visits, and in some instances, the departed take the opportunity to chastise their friends and relatives for not fulfilling this duty with more regularity (Smith 1980:224-236).

Kikuta Haruka (2011:30, 63-78) reports that the shared custom among Muslims in Central Asia is to hold a banquet that involves the sacrifice of animals to Allah and the dead. Towards the end of the banquet, chapters of the Qur'an are recited to bring comfort to the spirits of the deceased and prayers are specifically dedicated to those spirits. Note the following prayer: "May the spirit of (person's name) be content?"

The banquet functions as a means that allows people to make contact with the *ruh* (the Arabic word for the spirit or soul) and many people ask the *ruh* for protection or happiness. "When a dead relative appears in a dream, this is interpreted as a sign of the *ruh* demanding the ritual or warning of impending dangers" (63). It is important to understand that Islamic religious folk practices such as the invocation of ancestors and the visitation of holy shrines are traditional practices in Central Asian Islam as well as in Eastern Zambia and are therefore accepted by the majority of citizens in all Central Asian countries and Africa. These practices are accepted as a part of their Islamic beliefs (Lenz-Raymann 2014:109-114).

### The Bible and Ancestors

Since ancestors can be traced back along one's family lineage, Chewa people need to understand how the Bible addresses this subject. The Bible suggests that God will visit the iniquity of the fathers on the children and the iniquity of the children on their fathers. Such punishment applies to those rejecting the commandments of God (Exod 20:5-6, 34:6-7; Num 14:18; Lev 26:39; Jer 16:10-12) and also indicates that family practices and propensities are passed along to the children so that they continue the evil activities they grew up with. There is also a strong biblical teaching in Jeremiah 31:30 and Ezekiel 18:20 where God is depicted as focusing his punishment on whoever sins as an individual. "Sons [shall not] be put to death for their fathers and fathers shall not be put to death for the sins of their sons" (Deut 24:16).

The Bible also depicts Jesus Christ as the elder brother, the ancestor, of all those who believe in him. They are connected to his bloodline and "in Him . . . have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins, according to the riches of His grace" (Eph 1:7). With this connection Chewa people should begin asking themselves questions and reflect seriously on the counsel in the following Scripture. "How much more, then, will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself unblemished to God, cleanse our consciences from acts that lead to death, so that we may serve the living God" (Heb 9:14).

The Old Testament also offers insight in the issue of how to approach God. "The Israelites brought sacrifices to God and not to the ancestors"

(Mlenga 2016:276). People can have direct access to God and do not need intermediaries. God is also clear that he is against consulting the dead on behalf of the living (Isa 8:19; Deut 18:9-13). Even though the Bible refers to ancestors, there is no evidence that the descendants were offering sacrifices to appease them.

In the New Testament, Paul wrote that “there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus” (1 Tim 2:5). “There is salvation in no one else! God has given no other name under heaven by which we must be saved” apart from the name of Jesus Christ the stone which was and still is rejected by the advocates of Chewa Traditional Religion (Acts 4:12).

It is important for the Chewa people of Eastern Zambia who worship their ancestors for personal benefit to understand that Jesus Christ died to save all humankind (1 John 4:14) while ancestors worship is believed to be beneficial only for one’s family lineage. Ancestors are considered as the living dead while Jesus Christ rose from the dead and is alive (Heb. 9:11-10:12). However, ancestors are not the living dead, they are just dead. The devil seeks to prove that the ancestors are living by sending dreams and visions where it appears that messages are being sent from the ancestors.

The Bible offers better guides than the devil masquerading as dead ancestors. When Jesus was about to return to heaven he promised his disciples a living Comforter—the Holy Spirit. “But when He, the Spirit of truth, comes, He will guide you into all the truth; for He will not speak on His initiative, but whatever He hears, He will speak; and He will disclose to you what is to come” (John 16:13). The Holy Spirit is present in the lives of believers to guide them so that they no longer need to seek guided from dead ancestors.

Ancestors are tools used by the devil to cause dissention, confusion, and fear, while Jesus Christ came to unite people, show the truth, and bring peace. Jesus’ death has universal application and is not limited to one tribe (John 3:16). When Jesus Christ was resurrected, he was seen by many (1 Cor 15:6), while ancestors usually only reveal themselves at night to those who knew them. According to the Bible, no person has immortality, thus the ancestors are dead. The devil is the one appearing at night in dreams and visions.

### Dreams and Visions

In Chewa Traditional Religion, dreams and visions are never mentioned in isolation from the ancestors. Usually, there are claims by many people affirming that a deceased relative spoke to them in a dream and gave them warnings of what will happen in their lives. Some affirm that

when they had an ailment they were instructed on what to do and the ailment left them. That is why Robert Cook (1985:45-46) suggests that “when a man claims that an ancestor spoke to him in a dream, this is no more than to say that he dreamed that an ancestor spoke to him.”

We must keep in mind that in cultures where people take dreams seriously like in Chewa context, God can and does use dreams and visions to reach out to them. In cultures where manifestations of power are seen as God’s actions in delivering people, God does show himself in extraordinary ways. It is important to remember that God’s ways are not our ways so we must be careful not to restrict God’s communication to ways familiar to us (Hiebert, Shaw, and Tienou 1999:190).

God is still speaking to his people through dreams and visions. Dreams usually give people direction or reveal some part of God’s plan for their lives, while visions reveal God’s divinity and humanity to people. In the Old Testament, God says that he speaks to people through dreams and makes himself known in a vision (Num 12:6). He uses both dreams and visions to draw people into a saving relationship. It is noteworthy that dreams coming from God are not only given to committed believers. There are many examples of significant dreams given by God to unbelievers in the Scriptures. In Genesis 20:3, Abimelech was warned by God through a dream not to sleep with Sarah. In Genesis 31:24, God spoke to Laban through a dream and warned him to be careful how he spoke to Jacob. In Genesis 40:5 Pharaoh’s butler and baker had both had a dream and in Genesis 41:1, 5 Pharaoh had two dreams. In Judges 7:13-14 God influenced the mind of a Midian man who was not a believer to interpret the dream of his Midian companion who was also not a believer. The revelatory experience of this dream served several purposes. “First, it revealed a promise—that God had delivered the Midianites into Gideon’s hands. Second, it predicted the future victory for Gideon and his men. Third, it gave Gideon the courage to follow through with God’s command. Fourth, it inspired Gideon to worship the Lord” (Goll and Goll 1998:174). In Daniel 2:1, 4, 36 Nebuchadnezzar had a dream to predict the future, which he could not interpret.

In the New Testament, there are examples of dreams given to unbelievers, such as the wise men from the east and Pilate’s wife (Matt 2:12, 27:19). God is not willing for people to perish but that they all should come to repentance (2 Pet 3:9). That is one reason why he sends them dreams and visions so that they will turn their hearts toward him. James and Michal Goll postulate that “God has an awesome plan for our life and He wants to use dream language to speak to us. He wants to place the spirit of revelation upon our life and use us to bless and build up other believers. God wants to reveal Himself, His purposes, and His ways. Our goal as

believers is to live in Christ and to release the fragrance of His presence wherever we go” (2006:30).

It is also important to note that for years Christians around the world have been praying for God to visit the unreached including the Chewa people of Eastern Zambia who are strongly tied to their Traditional Religion to come to Jesus through a means deemed fit by God. Chewa people hold a strong belief in dreams and visions just like the

“Muslims hold a strong belief in the power of dreams. Jesus appeared in all these dreams. As a result of this supernatural encounter, these Muslims came to faith in Christ. Sometimes God gives dreams and visions to turn people from darkness and error to truth and light. His purpose is to deliver their souls from hell because, as Ezekiel 33:11 says, God takes “no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but rather that the wicked turn from his way and live” and He “desires all men to be saved, and to come to the knowledge of the truth” (1 Tim. 2:4). Part of God’s last days’ great purpose is to release conviction in the human spirit through revelatory graces. (Goll and Goll 1998:174)

It is amazing that more and more in these last days God is sending dreams and visions to reveal himself to people who have very little chance to learn of him through traditional ways of hearing the Good News. Dreams are also often sent to those seeking to know what to do or what to believe.

### Contextual Theology

Contextual theology is a process of communicating the gospel that involves a retrospection of the Bible and the cultural practice. In cultures where people take dreams and visions seriously, like in Chewa land, God will use dreams and visions to reach out to them. A contextual theology of mission is the presentation of the gospel in a culturally relevant way. The lack of a contextual theological approach has been a problem among the Chewa people of Eastern Zambia and is most likely one of the reasons why there has been little penetration of the gospel among them.

Contextual theology looks at the relationship between the Bible and the various cultural practices. It is important to look at every cultural practice to see if there are aspects that can be maintained, or if some aspect can be reinterpreted, or if the practice must be discarded. Too often in the past Christian missionaries rejected everything in a culture, telling the people that their culture was pagan. Missionaries then gave the local people their dress, their language, their culture, believing that their Western ways were Christian. “Doing theology or contextualization attempts to communicate

the gospel in words and deeds that make sense to people within their local cultural context. The aim is to present Christianity in a way that meets people's deepest needs and penetrates their worldview. This allows them to follow Christ while remaining within their own culture" (Whiteman 1997:2). "Contextualization must incorporate such things as preaching, music, discipleship, leadership selection, and development, conflict resolution, sources of authority and maintain discipline and order, rituals, symbols, art and so on" (Moreau 2012:233).

Christianity should permeate all the areas of life since it is important for unchurched people to be able to see the image of God in believers. Dean Gilliland (2005:493-519) opines that critical contextualization calls us to take seriously the deep-level beliefs and practices of the Chewa Traditional Religion and to understand the meanings they convey. Then and only then can Christians engage in the critical process of modifying the old forms to come up with new forms that never go against biblical principles.

Darrel Whiteman notes that "contextualization is not something we pursue motivated by an agenda of pragmatic efficiency. Rather, it must be followed because of our faithfulness to God, who sent God's son as a servant to die so that we all may live" (1997:23). Whiteman's explanation stresses that contextualization is about being faithful to God and meaningful to a given culture. God is a God of every culture and he values cultural diversity while calling the people and communities to be transformed into the moral and mental likeness of his Son.

John Mark Terry and J. D. Payne (2013:148) add that contextualization comprises understanding the people well enough to effectively communicate the good news about Jesus Christ to them. It is not easy to understand people within a short period. Thus "contextualization is an ongoing process. It is not something that takes place at the point of the introduction of the gospel to culture and then achieves its goal" (Coheen 2014:283).

Although the Bible as a whole does not endorse any particular culture or even dictate a full set of customs (as Chewa authorities and Islam traditionally have), a biblically shaped worldview does inculcate particular values, and Jesus offers the power of the Holy Spirit to actualize those values in the lives of his disciples (Whiteman 1997:2). These biblical values should be taken into account by believers before they engage in controversial disputes about worship. Many worship wars are more about personal preferences than fighting over biblical principles. Thus, biblical values should also be embraced by church leaders, while displaying postures of humility and servanthood to ensure that the forms and practices they fight against really do go against biblical principles.

Contextualization will assist in developing a missiological transformation model that can assist leaders in handling issues of religious conflicts

such as ancestral worship, dreams, and visions. They also positively influence God's people to worship God both in spirit and truth to fulfill God's universal mission. To successfully contextualize theology within a given culture today, worldviews from the Word of God, as well as the contemporary culture, must be understood by both theologians and Bible students (Ngewa, Shaw, and Tienou 1998:20). Biblical authors wrote from within their own cultures, using their local languages and thought patterns. Between Genesis and Revelation, a vast range of cultural variations is exhibited, illustrating how true believers serve God faithfully in different cultural ways (Doss 2015:7).

When Christianity, which is perceived as a Western religion by the Chewa people moves into Chewa land by the means of evangelistic campaigns, there is a danger that its foreign forms, music, dress, and architecture will become barriers for Chewa people to even give it a hearing. The type of sermons preached at a typical evangelistic campaign is usually not contextualized to address what affects the Chewa people but instead present the 28 fundamental beliefs of Adventism from the context of Western culture. Take for example, a lesson like "who is God?" This lesson can speak to the issues atheists raise who are mainly found in Western cultures; however, in Chewa Traditional Religion no one has issues with who God is because everyone knows about the most exalted Being-God, the Creator of the universe. Preachers need to understand that the gospel must be proclaimed to address the traditional religious core value and its dominant influence upon people in culturally understandable ways. This requires preachers of the gospel to meaningfully connect biblical revelation to specific cultural issues affecting the people so they can truly worship God in truth and spirit. In this aspect, it is important to note that doing public evangelistic campaigns among Chewa people in Eastern Zambia has not effectively worked in a very positive way as compared to other regions in Zambia. Few converts have joined the churches from traditional types of sermons. It seems that Adventism has not presented the Good News in a way that it really was good news.

To make contextual theology a success it is noteworthy to reflect on what Ellen White said in *The Ministry of Healing*. Christ's method alone will bring true success rather than relying on sermonizing. She goes on to summarize the five steps of Christ's method: mingling with people—to really understand them, desiring their good—being understanding of where people are coming from, showing sympathy—taking time to understand the stresses and challenges people face, ministered to their needs—needs that include physical, mental, emotional, and not just spiritual needs; and winning their confidence—becoming friends with people. These five steps require a lot of time and effort before inviting people to follow Jesus (White 1905:73).

## Conclusion

God is revealing himself through dreams and visions to people who are often not free to worship because of the fear of ancestors and pressure from the headmen in their communities. This requires a contextual theology of mission that speaks to the cultural challenges and issues believers in the Chewa society face. God in both the Old and New Testaments revealed himself to non-believers as well as believers through dreams and visions as a demonstration of his love for all people. That is why the Father sent our mediator Jesus Christ to be our older brother and who is greater than any family ancestor feared by the Chewa people of Eastern Zambia.

Any contextual theology of the mission used by the Adventist Church must be rooted in the principles of the gospel and the Word of God. God is passionate about his mission and encourages every believer to preach the everlasting gospel to every nation, tribe, language, and people in the context of Revelation 14:6. God's intention is to bring back fallen humanity including the Chewa people into a saving relationship with him. That is why he uses various understandable ways to draw people to him. However, I concur with Fred Askren's observation that if the dead are feared, given honor, consulted, or concretized into daily life, then the awe, honor, knowledge, and presence of God can be compromised" (2003:183, 184). This confirms why many Chewa people in Eastern Zambia are not fully committed to God's mission.

The challenge is for God's people to do the hard work of presenting the truths of Scripture in understandable ways. There are biblical answers to fear of ancestors, to fear of witchcraft, to fear of headmen. Jesus promised people that he would be with them always (Matt 28:20). He often told people not to fear, that he would protect and care for them. This is the message Chewa people need to hear, and when coupled with the dreams and visions God is sending them to help them on their journey of faith, there will be a greater turning to Christ among the Chewa.



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