

SYNCRETISM/CONTEXTUALIZATION  
IN WORSHIP LIFE IN LCCA-MALAWI

BY

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## INTRODUCTION: CHOP, CHISEL OR CHIP?

Never in the history of Malawi has there been a warrior to match Ng'ozza the Great. Ng'ozza was a man. With biceps bulging like swollen baobabs, skin of burnt honey and the courage of a lion Ng'ozza was able to take his pick of the women he wanted. And pick he did, up to 13 wives. But because Ng'ozza was a mass of twisted steel and sex appeal he never found a woman to satisfy him. No one met his expectations, no matter how hard they tried.

So Ng'ozza got himself some massive elephant tusks. Out of the creamy ivory he fashioned for himself a beautiful woman, the woman of his dreams. He shaped her just the way he wanted her, powerful child bearing hips, full breasts and eyes fierce and proud. Even in his mind Ng'ozza thought about her personality and character. When he finished Ng'ozza took his masterpiece to the witchdoctor. Ng'ozza threatened to feed the guts of the witchdoctor to the jackals if he didn't put life into his dream woman.

Hours later the trembling little witchdoctor emerged from his hut. After him came the most beautiful woman to ever walk the Dark Continent. Ng'ozza thanked the witchdoctor, got married to his fantasy lady and lived happily ever after.

Wow, what a legend! You can see why that one is still passed on today. How many of us at one time or another haven't thought about custom designing a wife, or a child, or a native, or an Executive Committee? How many of us wouldn't want a clean piece of ivory to carve for ourselves someone who is exactly how we want them to be? Wouldn't life be great? Wouldn't relationships go smoothly?

To an ever growing majority of Malawians today Christ is a lot like Ng'ozza's tusks. Jesus is to be chopped, chiseled and chipped until he better fits their culture and conceptions of what Christianity is. The new buzzword or should I say carveword among Malawian theologians is "inculturation." Syncretism and contextualization are, as one Catholic father put it to me, "outdated words that smack of prejudice and paternalism." Indeed "inculturation" with its open-ended tolerance is to change the whole scope of mission work in the near future.

"This openness and acceptance of other people's religious traditions is an asset that African Christians can contribute toward a global acceptance of one another as children of the same God, regardless of our different religious experiences of the same God. This would call for different mission strategies in which

mission work would be perceived more as the sharing of our experiences with God." (1)

#### DEFINING WITH DISCERNMENT: INCULTURATION, SYNCRETISM AND CONTEXTUALIZATION

In Malawi and in most of Africa theologians are defining inculturation as something totally different from syncretism or contextualization. Inculturation is the belief that God was active in every culture long before the written Word arrived on the scene and certainly before any missionary came. God was active through "each culture's history, tribal migrations, and celebrations of life and death," as Father Claude Boucher of the Catholic station at Muwa put it. This means as missionaries we can't pretend to have a monopoly on revelation or the truth. This is to doubt God's power to save people in or through their culture. A missionaries job then is not just to expound God's Word but to discover how God was active among the people before he got there.

After a missionary has gained insights into how God was communicating to the people through nature, history, the spirit world, etc. he is to incorporate these insights into his presentaion of the Gospel. To a missionary of "inculturation" true conversion is not at the level of substitution of the so called pagan rituals by Christian ones. True conversion takes place when you have discovered God's previous activity among the people and cooperate with that activity. One of the fundamental beliefs of inculturation is that God has many channels for saving people. Western Christianity, however, recognizes only one of these channels--the Bible.

I think we can safely say that inculturation, defined as above, is syncretism. Syncretism is simply the mixing of Christian truth with elements of ancient traditional religions. Marie-Louise Martin gives some clear examples:

"In many independent religious movements in Africa we find a great deal of syncretism. Hardly any distinction is made in certain Zionist groups between possession with ancestral spirits and with the Holy Spirit. Baptism becomes a rite of purification which is repeated. Christian symbols like the cross become amulets or fetishes." (2)

The advocates of inculturation whom I interviewed seemed to think that contextualization doesn't allow for cultural differences. One simply learns the native language and dumps the truth of the Bible on the nationals. This, however, is

not true contextualization. Dr. E.R. Wendland in his paper Who Do People Say I Am? defines contextualization as the attempt to present the gospel in a Scripturally accurate way, and yet at the same time culturally appropriate way. "The communicator must therefore be both honest (i.e. faithful to the source text) and empathetic (i.e. appreciative of the receptor context)." (3)

True contextualization then is what we want in our worship services in the LCCA. Every message and form of worship we use must distinctively declare the truth of Scripture and yet be as culturally conformed as possible. As Deverson Carson explains it:

"The messenger must attempt to fuse his own understanding of the text; having done that, he must attempt to bridge the gap between his own horizon of understanding, as it has been instructed by the biblical text, and the horizon of understanding of the person or people to whom he is ministering." (4)

The problem, however, with contextualization is that many times India-paper thin is the difference between culture and compromise. For example, in our graveside exhortation liturgy we have a section which allows the called worker to take some soil from the grave and toss it on the casket with the words, "dirt to dirt, dust to dust." Perhaps some ministers do the same in the states. But then one of the men presents a hoofful of dirt to each person sitting around the grave site. Many take handfuls of dirt and toss them to the ground. Why?

We would like to think that they are reminding themselves that God created man from dirt and to dirt he returns until the resurrection. But traditional Chewa belief teaches that the spirit of the deceased sort of hovers at the gravesite during the crucial time of burial. By throwing dirt, which is of the earth, people can drive the spirit away from the body so that it re-enters the spirit life of the community in the village.

I'm convinced many of our LCCA Christians are throwing dirt to drive away a spirit. Many have told me so. I'm also convinced that many are throwing dirt simply to remind themselves of their own mortality and need for the resurrection from the dead. Again many have told me so. So what would you do as a missionary? Inculturation would say let the custom continue since God used this as part of his salvific activity before you got there. Contextualization, however, means deciding whether the custom

is culture or compromise and teaching appropriately.

#### MALAWI: COMPOST PILE FOR SYNCRETISM AND UNIVERSALISM

An old Chewa proverb states: "Ndakulapa n'kulinga utayenda naye." Roughly translated the proverb means, "I have repented because I have walked with you." The proverb teaches us that in order to really bond and relate with someone you have to spend time with them on their turf. In order for you to appreciate then what missionaries in the LCCA have done and need to do to contextualize the gospel in Malawi you need a brief summary of the situation in Malawi today. Then after you have walked with us you can tell us whether we need to repent or not!

Malawi is as fertile as potting soil for syncretism and universalism for several reasons. First of all Africa as a whole has come of age, and is proud to let the world know it. "Now the temptation is to magnify all that is African, especially in cultural and religious heritage." (5) Many a Malawian believes that as the west boasts of modern technology, Africa can boast of a long-standing history. Africa has its OWN religious heritage. This thinking tends toward universalism.

The second fertile factor for syncretism in Malawi is the Malawian himself. Successful Americans are take charge efficient people who get things done. The quality that makes a Malawian great is kucheza or the ability to visit. Their world view is vastly different than ours. Malawians love loud noise, large families, and crowds. That everyone is on his way to heaven despite the little differences we have fits right into his way of thinking. "We're all brothers and sisters going the same way so let's not pick theological lint."

Thirdly political winds of change are sweeping over Malawi and Africa as a whole. New nations are being born overnight. With all of Africa's tribalism and poverty no leader in his right mind would do anything to promote disunity. Unity is to be maintained at any cost. Universalism and syncretism promote unity. To say the Catholic church has the truth and the Muslims and Lutherans are out to lunch is political genocide. God fearing, stand-up-for-the-truth men in Africa are considered odd balls and possibly political insurrectionists. They are also as common as short necked giraffes.

Finally Malawi and much of Africa is ripe for universalism and syncretism because liberals and interdenominational churches are better at mission work than we are. The WELS is not very mission minded. Pentecostals, Ecumenicals, non-denominational groups and the Catholics are

leading the way in world mission work. More and more these leaders in mission work are sowing the seeds of universalism and syncretism. Like produces like.

#### POSITIVE STEPS OF CONTEXTUALIZATION BY THE LCCA

Contextualization begins by mastering the language of the people you are serving. The Bible, liturgies, hymnals, teaching materials, etc. must be put into the language of the people. Perhaps this seems redundant and rather obvious to many of you but of the 12 missionaries I know in the Southern region only two of them can speak Chi-Chewa. The rest do all of their work through an interpreter. Even in the business world the importance of mastering people's languages is only beginning to be understood. When General Motors first marketed its compact Nova in Latin America, the automaker didn't realize that no va in Spanish translates as "it doesn't go." A computer manufacturer was mortified to see "software" translated as "underwear" throughout its manual. And Pepsi Cola's slogan, "Come alive with the Pepsi generation," was billboarded across Taiwan as, "Pepsi will bring your ancestors back from the dead."

Thankfully missionaries in the LCCA, due largely to the efforts of Pastor John Kurth, are taught the importance of learning the language of the natives from the beginning. Over the years missionaries have translated the page 5 page 15 liturgies into Chi-Chewa or the Bantu language of their region. We have sound theological instruction books, Bible class aids, catechisms, hymnals, and Sunday School materials written and translated into the language of the people. To this day Dr. E.R. Wendland together with his father Prof. E.H. Wendland are constantly upgrading and redoing our resources into more modern Chi-Chewa. Recently a hymnal committee has been formed under the direction of Pastor Daison Mabedi to write a Chewa song liturgy and upgrade the Chewa in many of our hymns. These are all positive steps of contextualization. Bringing God's message to the people in their own language immediately puts their culture ahead of your culture. You become the learner. They become the experts. This deliberate step of humility by the missionary then offers him the opportunity to present the pure gospel in the receptor's culture.

All members received into the LCCA are taught the six chief parts of the Catechism in their own language. The Apostles Creed, the Lord's Prayer, the Ten Commandments, and a short section of what the Lord's Supper is have all been translated into Chewa and are required memorization for anyone wanting to be received. It would be easy for someone to say we have taken western creeds and shoved them down African throats. But the truths of the commandments and

creeds are not western or African but divine. Whether or not we did it on purpose I'm not sure but we have been very smart to hammer away at teaching the six chief parts of Luther's Catechism in Malawi. By doing this we have avoided the "syncretism syndrome" I spoke of above. Although we are perhaps the youngest mission in Malawi people know what we stand for.

#### SOFT SPOTS OF SYNCRETISM IN THE LCCA

Having said those glowing things about the LCCA it is not to say that we don't have syncretism in our worship or that we can't do better contextualizing the gospel. As Pastor Lauersdorf stated so well in his paper "Contextualization of the Gospel What are the Implications for our Work?": "Proper contextualization is an ongoing process..." (6) This is especially true in Africa since an African's religious heritage forms the heart and core of his culture. Everything that happens in any given day to an African is related to the spirit world. There is no such thing as raw chance to him and he is nowhere near as fact oriented as Americans are.

According to traditional belief when a Malawian is born into the world he or she is not a person but a thing. Life to village people is a process of stages. The stages have been explained to me in different ways but the three basic ways are thing to child, hot to cold, or fragile to less fragile. God gives the right of fertility to parents through the spirits of previous ancestors so parents can produce this thing. It's up to the parents to show appreciation to the spirit world by seeing to it that their thing becomes a child.

Parents keep the spirits happy by following the regulations of kufunditsa mwana (to warm the child) or chikuta as it is sometimes called near the lake. From birth up until 3 months the parents cannot copulate. This is because sex causes them to become hot while the thing given to them is cold. When a cold thing is placed on a hot thing it breaks. In the earlier days when many more people followed the traditional beliefs many mothers would refuse to go to hospitals for fear that some "hot" nurse, who had had sex within the last 48 hours, would touch their cold thing at birth and the child would die (ndula).

At the end of the three month period the parents help their thing pass from cold to hot or fragile to less fragile by passing the child over a candle or small bush fire. Then the mother must lay motionless as the father has sex with her while both of them are looking at the child. Through this part of the ceremony the child, by the help of the spirits, will receive some of the character traits of his father.

At the completion of this rite the child is given his name and now has become a person with a personality of his own. If the child dies before this time he is given only a brief funeral service and buried in a very shallow grave. He or she is buried this way because they are not really burying a distinct person but merely an extension of the mother, an extension that never matured.

All village Malawians, whether they are LCCA Christians or not, approach the sacrament of baptism fully aware of these beliefs. Syncretism is very much alive in our rite of baptism because of these traditional beliefs. The majority of children brought to be baptized are wearing charms for protection. Even though most children are out of the cold stage by the time they are brought to baptism they are still considered fragile. As they grow in life they become less fragile. The charms provide a means for good spirits to protect the child from evil spirits during this fragile time.

The charms usually come in two forms. The chitumwa is medicine taken from the witchdoctor or an herbalist, wrapped in string and tied on the ankles, wrists, waists or necks of the children. The mphinjiri is much the same but usually consists of some kind of root rather than medicine. The mphinjiri can also be the hair of some animal which has passed through the appropriate weather. The zithumwa (pl.) and mphinjiri protect children during their fragile periods in many ways. They supposedly prevent evil spirits from bringing eye infections, and mauka (diarrhoea). The charms also help the bones on the top of the skull grow shut.

When I say syncretism is alive in our rite of baptism it is not by our choice. Missionaries have been teaching against and cutting off charms for years. If you were to give Pastor Cox a dollar for all the charms he cut off in his years in Africa he would be a wealthy man. But nonetheless the custom continues. LCCA babies are being baptized and receiving the blessings of baptism with a heathen charm tied around their waist. It is very sad because superstition cultivates insecurity and fear. Superstition enslaves. The very reason Christ came was to set us free. One of the magnificent ways he does this is through the sacrament of baptism and yet we have failed to eliminate syncretism in this beautiful act. I was especially grieved to discover that at the Catholic station at Muwa (strong supporters of inculturation) priests are encouraging Malawians to bring their children to baptism with charms. The charms they claim call attention to God's power and grace since Malawians know that God is the one who gives any herb power to resist spirits.

Since this paper is to be a mini-essay I will only touch on one other example of syncretism in our church which is



currently undergoing a resurgence in Malawi thanks to the prophets of inculturation. This second example is not as widespread as the practice of charms but is even more deadly.

Gule Wamkulu, literally meaning 'the big dance,' is the most popular and most talked about dance among the Chewa and Ngoni of the Central Region and the Chewa and Mang'anja of the Southern Region of Malawi. Gule Wamkulu is not only a dance, but an expression of Malawians deepest religious and emotional feelings. Gule Wamkulu or Nyau, as it is sometimes called, was supposedly originated by a man named Nyanda who became chief of the Phiri clan. He began performing dances with various animal masks during a time of great famine. Because he danced so well he was often given food at the end of his performances. When people saw that Nyanda was getting food because of his dances they too wanted to dance. One thing snowballed into another until soon they formed a secret society of Nyau dancers. This society was very secretive with initiation fees, secret vocabulary and secret meeting places.

Today Gule Wamkulu continues to be a secret society which provides very well for its members. Their dances are danced at funerals, weddings and initiation ceremonies for young men and girls. Gule Wamkulu promotes spirit worship and belief in reincarnation. The men wear the various masks during the dances to convince people that they are spirits or people who have come back in the form of animals. According to traditional Chewa belief the ultimate goal of any Malawian is Mzimu or spirit. To get to become a spirit a person must go through various stages of community life in a good manner. The various stages of community life are birth, initiation, puberty, death and spirit. Gule Wamkulu is the key to good communication to the spirit world. Offend Gule Wamkulu and you have offended the spirits and ultimately God since God comes to man through the spirits. At funerals members of Gule Wamkulu can be especially comforted by knowing that the various dances will placate the evil spirits.

Gule Wamkulu is what I would call "raw" syncretism. It is very obvious that it stands against what God's will is for our lives. Gule Wamkulu is not something that has slowly integrated itself with Christian beliefs. The society was continued in direct opposition of the early Catholic fathers who were teaching village children Christian principals. And yet a good number of our members are involved in Gule Wamkulu. Other members of our church who aren't members of the secret society see no problem with cooking for the dancers or attending the dances. Gule Wamkulu as I said earlier promotes spirit worship. It also promotes superstition, adultery, degradation of the body, and unnecessary cruelty.

New members who are to be initiated into Gule Wamkulu are blindfolded and led into a secret courtyard in the bush. Once inside the bwalo (courtyard) they are beaten with sticks and buffalo beans are often shoved into their shorts. These beans cause the skin to itch like hell. The initiate is sometimes led around the courtyard with a string tied around his testicles as the various members mock him. Later the initiate is let into a structure called a mkwala where another member already inside beats him again. The beatings are never to leave permanent damage on a member.

After this initial stage the initiate is instructed on various Nyau taboos, adult sexual life, secret vocabulary, and customs and traditions of the society. In some areas the initiate is given a drink called mbiliwidzi which is to prevent dizziness when he dances. Mbiliwidzi is made from a small water beetle found in streams. Some initiates are also given capilapila which is a relish of some sort. Evil Mpunga (leader of the initiation) sometimes mix pig excrement or human excrement in the capilapila. No initiate can refuse any medicine given to him.

Once initiates have been received into the society they are taught the various masks and dances. The funeral dances normally last 6 to 7 days. The first 3 days of dancing bring the spirit of the deceased out and the last 3 or 4 days placate the spirit. In the central region it has happened on occasion where are people will be conducting a Lutheran funeral and all of a sudden Gule Wamkulu will show up. Gule Wamkulu usually proceeds to take over the whole funeral service. The refugees whom I have begun to work with in the south tell me that the dancers often times end their rituals with plenty of beer. They then dawn their masks and proceed to raid and terrify various villages. Gule Wamkulu to me is nothing but heathen superstition that does anything but call attention to Jesus as our Savior or our bodies as the temple of the Holy Spirit. But again students of inculturation are making strong efforts to see to it that these traditions continue and even receive funding from the church.

#### DOING A BETTER JOB AT CONTEXTUALIZATION

When I became a missionary I immediately made the mistake of thinking that once I could speak the language I would know the culture. All of Pastor Kurth's tutoring fell on deaf ears. But there is more to culture than language. To properly contextualize the gospel in a culture one must take into account what Edward Hall calls the "silent language of the culture." He observes that language is but one of the ten primary message systems that are found in every culture.

"The others are temporality (attitude

toward time, routine, and schedule), territoriality (space, property), exploitation (the methods of control, the use and sharing of resources), association (family, kin, community), subsistence (work, division of labor), bisexuality (differing modes of speech, dress, conduct), learning (observation, modeling, instruction), play (humor, games), and defense (health procedures, social conflicts, beliefs)." (7)

It is in the silent language areas of bisexuality and learning that a missionary most often finds himself struggling. It is also in these two areas that I feel the LCCA can do a better job of contextualizing the Gospel.

Malawians have a rich history of oral tradition as is evidenced by their many proverbs, riddles, dramatic narratives, ceremonial initiation instructions, dilemma tales and songs of all sorts. Established custom and tradition carry a lot of weight to a Malawian. It would be unwise to ignore not only the words but the ways the elders used to present their wisdom to the people. All of the above forms of oral tradition are extremely participatory in presentation. In other words, the audience doesn't just sit and listen, but gets involved. Another common denominator in their forms of oral tradition is the emphasis of only one theme or main point. And yet we have simply taken and taught them the intellectual approach of the west to liturgies, Bible classes and sermonizing. Allow me to give you some examples.

In our sermons our workers are taught and follow very faithfully the idea of theme and two parts. The result among my workers is often a stilted wooden presentation that might even get an A in one of our homiletics courses at seminary. But if you have a mid-week service where the worker has had no time to prepare a sermon from the sermon book and select hymns you will hear a sermon! The man will more often than not come alive before your very eyes with one theme and the people now singing their own hymns will even come in with a rush of singing whenever they feel the speaker has really grabbed them. By the way in my two short years of preaching in the bush only once have the people interrupted my sermon with singing and chanting. Doesn't say much for my contextualizing of the gospel.

The readings and seasons of the church year provide other examples. We are currently emphasizing teaching the seasons of the church year in our sermon books. One month every sermon started out. Today is the 1st Sunday in Lent. Today is the 2nd Sunday in Lent. Today is the 3rd Sunday in

Lent and so on. I told my worker if he ever started a sermon like that again I would have him removed. Seasons of the church year can be taught with color and plays and songs if we will only be creative and energetic enough to do it. At Kasongo Lutheran Evangelist Miteke has taught the people responses (tili tonse, ululations, laughter) during the reading of the Epistle Lesson. And if the Gospel Lesson is a parable told by Jesus he never reads the section but closes the Bible and tells the story often with spontaneous clapping and encouragement from the crowd.

There are also many examples of rites performed in everyday village life which could be brought into our services. These everyday rituals are in no way connected to the spirit world and would do an excellent job of emphasizing some key religious truths. In the village when a boy has reached puberty and been accepted into the village there is always the rite of kumeta (shaving). The boys head is usually shaved symbolizing to the community that the boy has promised to leave behind childishness and assume the responsibility of manhood. The elders at Hebu Lutheran have asked me if we could begin doing this on confirmation day since the confirmands are saying to people they are now real men in faith.

Two other village rituals which could perhaps be integrated into our liturgy are the rite of n'kulanga (correction) and kuzinga (to slit the throat). N'kulanga takes place when elders or chiefs are enthroned and also at some initiation ceremonies for young people. The elders being installed into their positions are called to the front. Then a man with a small basket stands before them. Anyone with strong advice for these men comes forward, puts money in the basket, and then gives his advice to the elders. We do much the same thing at the ordination of a pastor with the laying on of hands. But we get to give advice for free.

Kuzinga comes about when two members in a family have a disagreement which can't be settled. The family members are finally all called together and in front of the family the two in disagreement must come to terms. After they have reached a settlement, which they must, a white chicken is slaughtered. The white chicken symbolizes reconciliation. Once the chicken has been slaughtered no one is ever permitted to bring the argument up again. The Catholics have begun to use kuzinga when they celebrate the Feast of the Eucharist in many village churches. I also noticed a very ornate Easter banner in the Zomba diocese with the white chicken of kuzinga being slaughtered.

These and many more examples could be cited on how we could better contextualize the joy of sins forgiven in our worship forms. It was wise for us to come to this country

and take western creeds and liturgies, translate them into Chewa, and teach them for 27 years. Perhaps we did fail a little at contextualizing the Gospel but we didn't sacrifice the truth. Now the time has come for us to wrap the same message in a better package. Strong national leaders are emerging in our church. We must encourage these people born in the culture to step forward and give us more culturally conformed forms of worship.

#### CONCLUDING REMARKS: CHRISTIANS ARE TO BE DISTINCTIVE

If there is one distinguishing quality of the man of God it is that of being DISTINCTIVE. We are to be different. God's message from Genesis to Revelation rings out loud and clear: "Stop being heterogeneously yoked with unbelievers." "Don't plow with an ox and a donkey harnessed together" (Dt 22:10). "You are the light of the world" (Mt 5:14). "Get rid of the old yeast that you may be a new batch without yeast-as you really are" (I Cor 5:7). "But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light" (I Pe 2:9).

Mixture is the lifestyle of Malawi for the 20th century. Missing are the religious leaders who have a passion for principle. Many a pastor is like the man Longfellow wrote about long ago: "He doesn't allow his principles to take root, but pulls them up every now and then, as a little boy does the flowers he has planted, to see if they are growing." These strong supporters of inculturation are leading the majority of Malawians down compromise road. Compromise in Scriptural truth is like a row of dominoes. Knock one over, and they all go down.

More than ever the LCCA in Malawi needs NATIONAL leaders who can contextualize the Gospel without compromise. This is the hour for men who will live on the square of Scripture. We need Elijahs and Daniels who dare to be distinctive. Missionaries then must leave behind leaders who measure everything they do by the yardstick of Scripture and stick by it. If we fail to mold, shape and leave behind national leaders we will fail to culturally contextualize the Gospel to the utmost in Malawi. As an old leadership proverb states: "He that thinketh he leadeth, and leaveth no legacy of leaders, is only taking a WALK."

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