

Negotiating the dual religiosity of African Indigenous Religion and Christianity among Bemba Catholics

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Abstract

The practice of dual religiosity of Christianity and Indigenous African Religion (AIR), among Bemba Catholics in the Muchinga Province of Zambia, is a lived reality. Bemba Catholics exist in a region where two different worldviews exist, which leads them to practise their faith through a combination of different beliefs and practices while encountering difficulties when their Christian faith faces challenges from their indigenous practices and cultural traditions. Therefore, the study examines how this dual religiosity is negotiated. The study used a hermeneutic phenomenological approach to study 20 Bemba Catholics who formed the sample size from Chilonga and Ilondola. Bemba Catholics blend AIR elements with Catholicism through integration, syncretism, adaptation, contextualisation and juxtapositioning. They create new rituals that combine both traditions, selectively adopting AIR beliefs, interpreting them through a Christian lens, and maintaining their Christian identity. They establish their Catholic identity by practicing Catholicism through their traditional African rituals. Some maintain clear boundaries, whereas others embrace hybridity. These strategies show that religious negotiation has changed throughout history, while participating in dual religiosity and cultural identity, and maintaining indigenous beliefs under Christian influence results in insufficient support by religious organisations and limits interfaith dialogue opportunities.

Keywords: Indigenous African Religion, Catholicism, Dual religiosity, Multiple Religious Belonging, Syncretism, Juxtaposition, Integration.

Abstrak

Praktik religiusitas ganda antara Kekristenan dan Agama Asli Afrika (AIR) di kalangan umat Katolik Bemba di Provinsi Muchinga, Zambia, merupakan realitas yang nyata. Umat Katolik Bemba hidup di wilayah di mana terdapat dua pandangan dunia yang berbeda, yang menyebabkan mereka mempraktikkan iman mereka melalui kombinasi kepercayaan dan praktik yang berbeda, sambil menghadapi kesulitan ketika iman Kristen mereka menghadapi tantangan dari praktik dan tradisi budaya asli mereka. Oleh karena itu, penelitian ini mengkaji bagaimana religiusitas ganda ini dinegosiasikan. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan fenomenologi hermeneutik untuk mempelajari 20 umat Katolik Bemba yang membentuk ukuran sampel dari Chilonga dan Ilondola. Umat Katolik Bemba memadukan unsur-unsur AIR dengan Katolik melalui integrasi, sinkretisme, adaptasi, kontekstualisasi, dan penjajaran. Mereka menciptakan ritual baru yang menggabungkan kedua tradisi tersebut, secara selektif mengadopsi kepercayaan AIR, menafsirkannya melalui lensa Kristen, dan mempertahankan identitas Kristen mereka. Mereka membangun identitas Katolik mereka dengan mempraktikkan Katolik melalui ritual tradisional Afrika mereka. Beberapa mempertahankan batasan yang jelas, sementara yang lain merangkul hibriditas. Strategi-strategi ini menunjukkan bahwa negosiasi keagamaan telah berubah sepanjang sejarah, sementara partisipasi dalam religiusitas ganda dan identitas budaya, serta mempertahankan kepercayaan asli di bawah pengaruh Kristen mengakibatkan kurangnya dukungan dari organisasi keagamaan dan membatasi peluang dialog antaragama.

Kata Kunci: komunikasi antarbudaya, Generasi Z, media sosial, literasi budaya, pendidikan multicultural

Introduction

Dual religiosity in Africa is seen as living with both Christian and African indigenous religious worldviews and cosmologies, involving active engagement with AIR. Moral, social and spiritual principles of Christianity are practised alongside those culture. Uncertainties of life, fortunes, and misfortunes motivate many Africans to revert to AIR beliefs and practices, which are often viewed by Christianity as pagan and irreconcilable with Christian values. Mbiti (1991) identified several areas where conflicts arise concerning traditional African rituals, such as offerings for the departed, initiation rites, marriage customs, and the role of sorcery, evil magic, and witchcraft in addressing disease, misfortune, and suffering. In Fuller's (2001) contention, traditional religious beliefs and practices have deeply permeated the church within African communities, often blurring the boundaries between Christian doctrine and indigenous worldview and creating tension.

The church in Africa has made strides to discourage dual religiosity. Despite church efforts to discourage involvement with AIR elements, such as imposing Western Christian liturgies that inadequately align with local symbolic systems, research consistently shows many African Christians maintain credence in both Christianity and indigenous traditions (Havelka, 2024). For example, African Christians engage in indigenous healing practices, a pragmatic mixing of Christianity and traditional healing that is not merely a matter of inconsistency but an intentional effort to construct a spiritual identity that meets existential needs. This raises critical questions

about the purity and authenticity of Christian practice, as elements from other religions are often uncritically integrated, potentially watering down or contaminating Christianity (Chidili, 1997).

The coexistence of AIR and Christianity often occurs because both religions share commonalities, such as the belief in one God and similar socio-cultural backgrounds (Mokhoathi, 2019). This mingling can lead to an identity crisis for adherents, as they navigate between two worlds that are both culturally and spiritually significant. Mokhoathi (2019) argues that since Africans perceive God as a singular, all-encompassing being manifesting through both systems, there is perceived harmony rather than contradiction. Many African Christians perceive AIR as tolerant and accommodating of other religions, an attitude that contrasts sharply with Western religious perspectives that often condemn such blending. In this context, Mbiti (1991) emphasises that the traditional African religious worldview does not necessarily carry the negative connotations that Western religious discourses attach to this blending, leading to a more permissive and integrative religious environment. This partly explains why many African Christians do not perceive the blending of Christianity and AIR as problematic. The PCID (1993) also propagates the notion that gospel heralds should respect traditional religions and cultures that accompany Christianity in indigenous societies. It argues that Christianity should influence all aspects of life, aiming for a holistic and integrated person rather than nurturing a fragmented life divided between the secular and sacred (PCID, 1993). Yet, this approach overlooks the complexities and contradictions involved; it risks legitimising practices that may contradict core Christian doctrines, leading to theological distortions and ambiguities.

Individuals who integrate AIR and Christianity often struggle to reconcile their Christian faith with their cultural and religious heritage, facing societal pressures to conform to a single religious identity. Such pressures can marginalise practitioners of dual religiosity, causing guilt, confusion, or internal conflict over their spiritual practices (Agbiji & Swart, 2015). These tensions are particularly evident in marital contexts, where societal expectations, especially in Nigeria, emphasise adherence to customary marriage rites alongside church weddings, thus reinforcing the tension between cultural tradition and religious institution (Ezenwa and Nganwuchu, 2025a). The ongoing presence of AIR and Christianity in Africa creates a challenging religious situation which requires advanced understanding to study groups such as the Bemba Catholics. Chanda & Cheyeka (2024) argue that the Bemba Catholics participation in Bemba cosmology and worldview influences their Catholic faith positively and negatively. These studies show how African people use their beliefs to shape their identity and cultural practices.

Multiple Religious Belonging (MRB)

Multiple Religious Belonging (MRB) is basically the situation where people maintain and live multiple religious identities at the same time or at different times (Cornille, 2013; 2021). MRB denotes the ever-increasing religious pluralism and diversity in modern times, in which people no longer belong only to one tradition but find meaning, value, and significance in various forms of religious practices and beliefs. Meanwhile, Phan's (2003) definition of MRB as the adoption and practice of beliefs, moral rules, rituals, and practices from religious traditions other than one's primary religion sticks close to how dual religiosity has been defined in this study. Accordingly,

religious dualism is used in the social sciences to describe how two religious systems may relate, noting that dualism better describes the reality of simultaneous adherence to distinct, segmented religious traditions than terms like 'syncretism' or 'acculturation' (Seitz, 2015). Some people may shift their expression of religion if there is a cultural, social, or personal need, for example, performing some rites for ancestors during family rituals while attending church on Sundays or interpreting Biblical narratives using indigenous cosmologies.

The major characteristics of MRB include: Dual or Multiple Affiliations: These categories include individuals who identify with more than one religion or have mixed religious practices from different traditions. Fluid Religious Identity: MRB allows for flexible religious identities that change over time according to personal experiences, social contexts, or spiritual needs. Most often, MRB is found within societies with many religious frames in which personal and social navigation across complicated social, cultural, and spiritual environments takes place. Cornille (2013) accounts for different types of multiple religious belonging, including those associated with cultural identity (for example, Chinese and Japanese religious life), family identity (interfaith marriages), and situational identity (need-based identification and popular religiosity). Dual religious belonging is viewed differently, ranging from a negative perception, such as Christopaganism and syncretism, in conservative missiological literature to a potentially neutral or inherent process of identity formation in a dual religious context. MRB is thus the ideal prism through which to view African indigenous religion and Christianity as a changing, lived experience of dual religious identities.

Dual religiosity presents a unique challenge in the lives of those who practise it. Erroneous conclusions have been made regarding their beliefs. The absence of the study on dual religiosity among Bemba Catholics and how they negotiate the duality has led to insufficient support by religious organisations and lost opportunities for interfaith dialogue. The study contributes to religious studies, presenting dual religiosity from an African perspective and methodology advancement on the study of the phenomenon through hermeneutic phenomenological approach. Therefore, this study is aimed at examining the strategies used by Bemba Catholics to negotiate living with AIR and Christianity; Catholicism within the context of the post-centenary of Catholic faith in Muchinga Province of Zambia.

Methods

This study utilised a qualitative approach and Heideggerian interpretive phenomenological approach. 20 Bemba Catholic participants from Chilonga and Ilondola communities were purposively sampled to provide insights into the prevalence and influence of dual religiosity. Data collection involved semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions, employing note-taking and audio recordings to ensure comprehensive analysis. The research emphasised transparency, flexibility, and participant involvement, with credibility, dependability, and authentic validation prioritised. Ethical considerations included informed consent, privacy, and respect for cultural norms, with measures taken to guarantee participant anonymity and demonstrate cultural sensitivity. This study employed an interpretive phenomenological approach based on Heidegger's 'Being and Time' framework, expanded by Van

Manen's (1997) four thematic areas of lived experience, space, body, time, and relations. It systematically explored the lived experiences of Bemba Catholics negotiating their dual religiosity of Christianity and AIR in Muchinga Province, using data collection methods such as interviews and focus groups. Thematic analysis was conducted to identify core themes, capturing participants' feelings, thoughts, behaviours, and attitudes in real-life contexts. The process involved continuous reflection and rewriting to accurately represent participants' experiences and align with research questions, with ongoing validation to ensure broader contextual credibility of the findings.

Finding and Discussion

Finding

Bemba Catholics' Negotiation of Dual Religiosity

Research themes emerged around how Bemba Catholics negotiate the dual religiosity of Catholicism and AIR in their daily lives within the Muchinga Province. The first theme is integration and syncretism, which includes the integration of the Catholic faith with elements of AIR and the syncretism that involves the combination of AIR components with the Catholic faith. The second theme is selective adoption and adaptation. It emphasises the selective adoption of specific AIR practices and beliefs, reinterpreting AIR concepts through a Christian lens, and utilising AIR practices for particular purposes while retaining Christianity as a primary identity. The third theme is contextualisation and juxtaposition, which focuses on contextualising Catholic teachings and AIR and vice versa. It also involves the juxtaposition of faiths, cultures and cultural-religious appropriation. The fourth theme is negotiation and switching, the practice of moving between AIR and Christian spiritual practices according to need or circumstance, switching between Catholic and AIR practices based on context, and participating in both traditions simultaneously. The last theme is the revitalisation and creation of new meanings. This theme reveals the revival of AIR cultural practices alongside a Christian identity, the creation of new meanings, the incorporation of AIR elements into their lives, and the combination of moral teachings from both traditions.

Integration and Syncretism

Bemba Catholics negotiated dual religiosity by integrating the Catholic faith with elements of AIR. This gave rise to new practices and beliefs that combined elements from both traditions. Bemba Catholics negotiated living with both Catholic and indigenous belief systems by integrating them, as well as through creating a new breed of faith and practice.

Integration of the Christian Faith and AIR Elements

Participants indicated integrating the AIR principles with the Christian faith. For instance, P11 stated, "I mix my Christian faith with Indigenous knowledge, imagination, and reflection." P1 noted that the combination of AIR and Catholic spiritualities helped him express his beliefs more fully. Participants articulated that aligning with both Indigenous traditions and

Catholic beliefs increased understanding of Christian teachings. For example, P14 remarked, “Living with both my traditions and Catholicism deepens my understanding of Christian teaching and provides a more meaningful, culturally relevant relationship with my faith.” The researcher observed that the amalgamation of traditions was evident in worship and liturgical experiences. P17 observed, “Traditional music and dance naturally intertwine with Catholic liturgy, which makes worship lively and connected to my cultural heritage.” For most participants, this integration made the worship experience more relatable and accessible to local parishioners, connecting faith with cultural background and identity.

Syncretism

Participants in the FGD expressed integrating various elements of AIR with the Catholic faith, which resulted in an inimitable merger of beliefs and practices. P18 observed that this fusion illustrated a deep cultural connection, wherein traditional rituals, values, and spiritual ideas from AIR easily intertwined with the teachings of Catholicism. It has created a more lively and meaningful way for people to express their faith. P2 stated thus: “I combine my traditional spiritual beliefs with Christian teachings.” Likewise, P5 furthered, “I build my spiritual identity by combining my cultural background and Catholic faith.” In addition, the participants have observed that Bemba Catholics are presenting new rituals and practices that are exclusive to their joining of AIR components with their current Christian practices.

Adoption, Adaptation and Specific Purposes

Some Bemba Catholics have adopted and adapted certain AIR practices and beliefs into their Christian worldview. This enabled them to still identify as Catholics while incorporating elements of traditional belief. AIR practices were for certain ends, like healing or protection, while maintaining the major pillars of Catholicism. This integration indicates the complexity of religious identity among the Bemba.

Adoption: Selective Acceptance of Specific AIR Practices and Beliefs

Bemba Catholics engage in a selective adoption of specific AIR practices and beliefs. P12 illuminated this, stating, “I choose to adopt indigenous practices and beliefs that connect strongly with my Christian faith.” This thoughtful approach was further supported by P4, who demonstrated her remarkable ability to integrate certain indigenous practices into Christian observances. P7 elaborated on this process, revealing: “I carefully assess the cultural and spiritual elements around me, embracing only those that align harmoniously with my Catholic beliefs while thoughtfully rejecting those that do not resonate; these include reverence to my ancestors as to Catholic saints.” This reflective perspective was further echoed by P17, who noted, “I consider the significance, relevance and moral implications of each practice or belief, ensuring that they are compatible with the teachings of the Catholic Church.” Participants collectively acknowledged that by embracing specific practices that resonated with values and beliefs, they cultivated a distinctive expression of faith that reflected cultural heritage while reinforcing commitment to Catholicism.

Adaptation: Reinterpreting AIR Beliefs and Practices through a Christian Lens

The process of dual engagement reveals how individuals ingeniously adapt traditional beliefs and practices by interpreting them through a Christian lens. P3 articulated her reinterpretation strategy, stating, “I look at my traditional beliefs and cultural practices through a Christian lens.” Additionally, P13 emphasised a reflective process, saying, “I examine my traditional spirituality, consider its elements and adjust them to align with my Christian teachings.” P8 highlighted a careful evaluation process, stating, “I carefully assess rituals, ceremonies and stories from my traditional beliefs to use them in my Catholic faith.” P3 elaborated on a more comparative approach, stating, “I look for what is common and what is different to decide which parts of my indigenous faith I can keep, change, or interpret in new ways to fit with the Catholic faith.” These findings were ascertained through the FGD, in which Bemba Catholics emphasised reinterpretation of indigenous elements through a Christian lens. The meaning of the Christian lens in all the discussions remained subjective to participants’ interpretation.

AIR Practices for Specific Purposes

Bemba Catholics use AIR practices for specific purposes while maintaining Catholicism as their primary religious identity. P17 articulated the intentionality behind integrating AIR practices into spiritual life, stating, “I participate in cultural and traditional practices with clear goals, such as helping me with healing and offering spiritual support, while honouring my identity as Catholic.” Participants collectively communicated that the harmonious hybridisation of diverse practices empowered them to address physical and spiritual needs in ways that reverberated with cultural backgrounds. They alleged that this integration not only fulfilled spiritual obligations but also reinforced cultural identity, creating a rich faith experience. P2 shared his journey of navigating the complexities of dual religiosity by stating, “I manage my religious identity by combining elements from both faiths into my daily life.” Whether this practice was beneficial to them, P6 elaborated:

“Combining my cultural beliefs with Catholic teachings helps me meet my spiritual and cultural needs. This combination strengthens my ability to cope during uncertain times and allows me to find meaning and solutions to my problems more easily”

Participants stressed that the hybridisation of AIR practices and Christian beliefs allowed them to tackle unmet spiritual needs effectively.

Contextualisation, Juxtaposition and Appropriation

The participants adapted Christian teachings to fit their cultural context. They also compared their indigenous beliefs with those of the Catholic faith and fused elements of culture into religious practices. This process of cultural-religious appropriation was a key aspect of how the Bemba Catholics practised their faith.

Contextualisation and Juxtaposition of Faiths and Culture

The discussion included the participants’ experiences and insights into how they tailored elements of the Bemba Catholic culture to harmonise with the core tenets of Catholic teachings.

In this exercise, local traditions and values were integrated into Catholic practices, producing versions of the faith that mirrored identity and heritage. P19 offered the following perspective, stating that they find a balance between their Indigenous beliefs and their Catholic teachings, while also connecting their cultural heritage with the fundamental principles of Catholicism. Bemba Catholics juxtaposed Catholic faith and culture as demonstrated through the experiences shared by participants. P1 expressed a profound commitment to integrating Catholic faith and cultural practices, stating, “I accept my Catholic faith and my cultural practices and beliefs.” P14 described a profound journey of exploration, which emphasised the elaborate weave of traditional customs, values, and social norms alongside the teachings and rituals of Catholicism. Although P5 recognised the cultural heritage inherent in the negotiation, she noted that there was difficulty in balancing it with spiritual beliefs.

Cultural and Religious Appropriation

Bemba Catholics appropriated cultural and indigenous religious beliefs and practices into their daily lives as Catholics. Participants attested to incorporating and adapting these beliefs into their everyday lives. For P17, this integration reflected a lively connection between traditional customs and religious practices. Participants highlighted their engagement in rituals, symbols, and community activities that developed because of this appropriation, which revealed the challenges of identity and spirituality among the Bemba Catholics. For example, P11 noted: “In our church services, we usually introduce dances and music from our traditional ceremonies to help us honour our ancestors while worshipping God.” P2 shared, “Traditional rituals like special prayers or symbolic elements in our religious practices link our past and present spiritual lives.’ Some participants highlighted the importance of community-based traditions.” For example, P16 said, “In my village, some festivals are celebrated with Catholic prayers alongside our customary rituals.”

Navigation and Switching

Bemba Catholics embraced a fluid and dynamic understanding of spirituality, moving between traditional practices and Catholic liturgies in response to varying needs and specific circumstances. This participation demonstrated a multidimensional understanding of spirituality, whereby they alternated between the two belief systems as they moved through their lives. The Bemba Catholics’ capacity to fuse various, often contradicting, spiritual traditions into religious beliefs and practices was a testimony to their adaptability and resilience.

Moving Between AIR and Catholicism Based on Need and Circumstance

Bemba Catholics alternate between AIR and Catholic religious beliefs and practices based on needs and circumstances. Participants demonstrated a fluid engagement between AIR and Christian spiritual traditions, adjusting to the needs and circumstances presented in their lives. Participants engaged with Catholic and AIR flexibly. As noted by the researcher, this flexibility reflects a multi-layered understanding of spirituality among Bemba Catholics. P2 exemplified this by stating, “I attend Catholic Mass on Sundays, fulfilling my obligations as a Catholic, but still

believe in my traditions.” P5 remarked, “During traditional ceremonies and cultural events, I ‘seamlessly’ fit into indigenous rituals and practices.” For most participants, this dynamic interaction between religious beliefs validated the ability to honour and maintain cultural identity while simultaneously participating fully in the Catholic community.

Parallel Participation

Bemba Catholics took part in both the AIR and Catholic belief systems on their own. P11 said, “I have a unique way of practicing my Catholic faith as a Bemba person.” When talking about being involved in both, P13 explained, “I take part in both Catholic and local rituals, ceremonies, and practices on my own.” They described how they engage with these two sets of beliefs as mostly separate from each other. Most participants conveyed a tendency to maintain distinct spiritual activities. They described how they engage with these two sets of beliefs as mostly separate from each other. P14 illustrated this point, stating, “I practice both Catholic and indigenous traditions separately.” Similarly, P18 remarked, “I keep my Catholic and ancestral practices separate by maintaining separate spaces for each tradition.” How this was done was rather a difficult question to answer. However, P17 confirmed this separation, stating, “I participate in Catholic liturgical services like Sunday Mass and engage in devotional practices such as prayer and rosary recitation.” Conversely, some participants displayed a more fluid approach to spirituality, such as P12, who noted, “I am open-minded and adaptable in my spiritual practices between my ancestral spirituality and Catholicism.”

Establishment of New Interpretations and Merging of Moral Teachings

The participants have indicated that Bemba Catholics incorporated traditional cultural practices into Catholic identity. This combination of cultural and religious elements allowed them to create new meanings and interpretations of beliefs while maintaining a strong sense of cultural heritage.

Creating New Meanings

Participants indicated the creation of new meanings of Catholic and indigenous faiths through dual engagement. For instance, P10 expressed, “Besides my indigenous practices, I have fresh understandings and interpretations of Catholic teachings. While P1 echoed this sentiment, stating, “I have created a unique spiritual identity by mixing my cultural background with my faith.” P13 articulated the importance of this fusion, stating, “I combine my Christian faith with my ancestral traditions to create a spiritual practice that reflects my personal experiences and community values.” P4 elaborated on this integration, noting, “Merging cultural and Catholic beliefs allows me to reinterpret customs like ancestor veneration and initiation rites in a Catholic context, giving them new meanings.” While P9 emphasised incorporating cultural elements within worship practices, stating, “I incorporate cultural symbols into my worship to enhance my spiritual connection and cultural heritage.” P7 articulated the importance of preserving cultural identity, stating, “I preserve Bemba culture for future generations.”

Merging Moral Teachings

The participants were committed to merging moral teachings from AIR and the IKS alongside the Catholic faith. For example, P2 said, "I am proud to combine AIR's moral principles with Catholicism." This integration is further acknowledged by P2, who noted that it has greatly affected his daily life and decision-making. P11 emphasised the benefits of this combination, stating, "Combining my cultural background and Catholic spiritual beliefs helps me handle life situations." Furthermore, P4 highlighted the community aspect of the combination, noting, "This mixture of my cultural and Catholic teachings strengthens my moral values and creates a sense of community and identity among us practitioners." P8 added, "I use traditional moral values from our culture in my Catholic practice. These values guide how I live and make choices." P14 echoed that the integration of the two moral frameworks helps them navigate challenges, make informed choices, and find purpose in life. Additionally, P17 remarked, "In our community, combining our culture and faith strengthens our relationships, keeps our cultural heritage alive, and helps us create a distinct identity." P3 suggested that this combination process contributed to personal development, stating, "Combining moral teachings from both my traditions and Catholic teachings helps me understand right and wrong better, build empathy, and support my personal growth and change." P2 reiterated the significance of this practice, stating, "This incorporation of these moral sources greatly affects my experiences as a Bemba Catholic."

Discussion

Strategies Employed by Bemba Catholics in Negotiating Dual Religiosity

An examination of how Bemba Catholics reconcile their AIR beliefs and practices with Catholicism while living with both worldviews reveals a complex negotiation process. Bemba Catholics blend AIR elements with Catholicism through integration, syncretism, adaptation, contextualisation, juxtaposition, and revitalisation. They create new rituals that combine both traditions, selectively adopt AIR beliefs, interpret them through a Christian lens, and maintain their Christian identity. Bemba Catholics engage in contextualisation and juxtaposition, blending teachings from both traditions. They revitalise AIR cultural practices by incorporating them into their Catholic lifestyles and blending moral teachings. Some maintain clear boundaries, whereas others embrace hybridity to reflect diverse spiritual experiences. These strategies highlight the evolving nature of religious negotiation and contribute to discussions about syncretism, cultural identity, and the resilience of indigenous beliefs in a Christian context.

Integration and Syncretism

Bemba Catholics negotiate their dual religiosity by integrating their Catholic faith with elements of AIR without presenting new religious and spiritual beliefs and practices. This integration is done at the personal, community, and church levels. Through this integration, Bemba Catholics developed distinct religious practices that honour their cultural heritage while also reflecting their Christian faith. This integration sometimes leads to the formation of new religious and spiritual beliefs and practices, resulting in syncretism.

Integration of the Catholic Faith and AIR Elements

Bemba Catholics negotiate their dual religiosity by integrating their Christian faith with elements of AIR, cultivating practices that honour their cultural heritage while not obstructing but reflecting their commitment to Christianity. As an indication of integration, traditional music and dance are used during Catholic liturgies to strengthen worship and connect people to their cultural heritage. The incorporation of AIR symbols and rituals into Catholic traditions yields a distinct expression of faith that values both beliefs and cultural identity. This reflects the vibrant nature of spirituality and the importance of cultural contexts in religious expression. Bemba Catholics mix their Christian faith with indigenous knowledge, imagination, and reflection, indicating that believers are co-authors of their spiritual expression. This action-driven approach allows them to construct a faith that genuinely embodies their cultural heritage and develops ownership of their religious journey. This demonstrates how aesthetic adaptations have linked faith and identity, strengthened community bonds, and made worship more accessible, affirming indigenous expressions among Bemba Catholics. Notably, this study shows that the fusion of symbols and rituals emphasises celebrating the dual legacy of faith and culture, honouring both identities. This approach challenges the division often imposed between indigenous beliefs and Christianity, advocating for a contextualised religiosity that recognises their complementary nature. Bemba Catholics reconfigure practices from both traditions into a personalised and culturally resonant spirituality. However, Fuller (2001) argued that traditional African religious beliefs have influenced Christianity in African communities, leading to uncertainty about their identity. This has further helped the persistence of dual religious identity in Igboland, where many Christians augment official church practice with indigenous rites surrounding burial (Ugwu 2021).

Syncretism of AIR and Catholicism

The Bemba Catholics' combination of components from both AIR and Catholic traditions presents new practices and beliefs that harmonise both traditions. As a result, novel rituals have emerged, reflecting this synthesis, cultivating distinctive religious expressions that honour their cultural heritage while affirming Catholic commitment. This process of display gives rise to innovative practices and expressions of spirituality. However, recognised as a significant aspect of contemporary African identities, this form of religious syncretism challenges the notion of one faith contaminating another (Masombuka, 2025). This syncretism constructs an integrated spiritual identity that honours both the cultural and religious heritage of the Bemba Catholics. For instance, the coexistence of traditional and Christian burial practices in Bemba Catholic communities has shown how communities have adapted to Christian influences while maintaining their cultural identity. The crafting of new rituals is an effort to preserve distinctiveness within Catholicism, which redefines the boundaries between religion and culture. However, the researcher observed the dangers of syncretism brought about by dual religiosity and its implications for faith development and the integrity of Catholicism. Re-echoing the dangers of syncretism, Chidili (1997) states that incorporating elements from other religions dilutes Christianity. Nevertheless, Gehman (2001) argues that the amalgamation of these elements unites the indigenous Christian believers. These differing findings emphasise the continuing discussion

among African scholars concerning the nature of syncretism and its consequences for both practitioners and Christianity.

Appropriation, Adaptation and Specific Application

This study has established that Bemba Catholics adopt, adapt, and selectively apply certain AIR practices and beliefs in their lives to align them with their Catholic worldview. This approach enables them to preserve their identity as Catholics and Bemba people. They employ AIR practices for specific purposes, such as healing or protection, all while upholding the fundamental tenets of Catholicism. These strategies of negotiating dual religiosity illustrate the difficult and evolving nature of religious identity among the Bemba people.

Appropriation of Specific AIR Practices and Beliefs

Bemba Catholics selectively adopt certain AIR practices and beliefs, adapting them to fit within their Christian framework. This approach allows them to maintain their Catholic identity while also incorporating traditional beliefs into their daily lives. They assess cultural and spiritual elements, incorporating only those that align with their Catholic beliefs and rejecting those that do not. Participants argued for the steady consideration of the significance and moral implications of each practice, ensuring compatibility with Christian teachings. Bemba Catholics engage in a conscious process of cultural negotiation, respecting both indigenous heritage and Catholic doctrine. This reflects a discerning attitude toward cultural practices among Bemba Catholics. These Catholics cultivate an exceptional expression of faith that reflects a local cultural form of Christianity by embracing practices that are consistent with their beliefs. Hefner (1993) observes that indigenous religious practices often continue within Christian communities through selective adaptation. However, this raises critical issues concerning the boundaries and authenticity of this appropriation. What criteria determine which indigenous practices can be harmoniously included without compromising Catholic doctrine?

Reinterpreting and Adapting AIR Elements through a Christian Lens

Bemba Catholics ingeniously engage in duality, walking the narrow path between indigenous beliefs and Catholic doctrine through reinterpretation and adaptation of elements through a Christian lens. They evaluate their traditional beliefs and practices and adjust them to reflect Christian teachings. To preserve their culture and unite their beliefs, they consciously combine their traditional practices with the principles of Catholicism. They further examine traditional spirituality, consider its elements and adjust them to align with their Christian teachings. Bemba Catholics' examination of indigenous rituals, ceremonies, and stories against Catholic doctrine suggests a stance of critical analysis, where Bemba Catholics assess the theological compatibility of their practices. Such strategies, Indigenous converts have a mix of religious identities that show a difficult struggle, so traditional beliefs must be understood again and included in Christianity (Mokhoathi, 2020a), promoting a religio-cultural amalgamation that preserves identity during religious change. However, this adaptation raises questions about limits and legitimacy: how much these reinterpretations maintain the purity of Church teachings, or if

they dilute central Catholic principles. These Catholics engage in a creative process of reinterpreting and adapting indigenous beliefs to Catholicism using reflective, analytical, and comparative methods. Indigenous converts have a mix of religious identities, reflecting a difficult struggle, so traditional beliefs must be understood repeatedly and incorporated into Christianity (Mokhoathi, 2020b).

Using AIR Beliefs and Practices for a Specific Purpose

Bemba Catholics use AIR practices for specific purposes, such as healing or protection, while adhering to core Christian teachings such as belief in the power of prayer. This interweaving of practices allows them to address specific physical and spiritual needs that they believe the church fails to solve, in culturally relevant ways. They intentionally harmonise Indigenous practices with Catholicism, which influences their spiritual lives. They engage in cultural and traditional practices with clear goals, such as healing and spiritual support. For them, religious practices are evolving and pragmatic, encompassing both physical and spiritual dimensions. The cardinal benefits of this integration are empowerment and resilience. Using these Indigenous and Christian belief systems in this practical manner provides strength in dealing with daily challenges. As a result, pluralistic applications provide adaptability and promote social integration, capability, and psychocultural resilience among communities (Hefner, 1993). The study found this act to be a conscious strategy used to address existential and cultural needs, considering both faith experiences. The findings from this study match the results from MRB research, which shows that people change their religious expression practices depending on their cultural background, their social environment and their personal belief systems. An example of this is when someone practices ancestral traditions during family events while also attending church services on Sundays or when they interpret Biblical stories through indigenous cosmologies.

Contextualisation and Juxtaposition

The study has established that Bemba Catholics modify Catholic teachings to suit their cultural background. They examine their indigenous elements in comparison to those taught by Catholicism, slowly incorporating their culture into their lives. This kind of cultural-religious contextualisation and juxtaposition is a fundamental aspect of the Bemba Catholics' practice of their faith. Through the cultural contextualisation of their faith, they integrate aspects of their culture into their Catholic faith. They compare AIR and Catholicism, examining their differences and similarities before deciding which one will have the greatest impact on their lives.

Contextualisation of Christian Teachings to AIR and Vis-à-vis

Bemba Catholics maintain a delicate balance between their cultural heritage and universal Christian principles. The strategy entails incorporating local traditions and values into Christianity while also connecting Christian teachings to their culture and traditions. This adaptive journey illustrates the living relationship between Indigenous systems of belief and established religious tenets. This allows the expression of indigenous religious understanding

together with the minimisation of cultural alienation. For instance, the Bemba people contextualise herbal medicine and traditional healing through expressions like *'Kwimba kati kusansha na Lesa'* (preparation of herbal medicine requires God's involvement). This extends to the use and application of medicine. Similarly, the memorial mass has been incorporated into *Icita* (traditional memorial for the dead). This negotiation honours indigenous heritage and maintains doctrinal integrity, nurturing a vibrant, growing faith. It embraces local cultures while staying true to Christian principles. However, this contextualisation raises significant theological questions bordering on the interpretation of this contextualisation and its theological connotations. Bemba Catholics' contextualisation of cultural elements and Catholic elements demonstrates the difficulty of balancing cultural adaptation and theological adherence. Moreover, Chanda & Cheyeka (2024) contend that involvement in the belief and practice of AIR elements influences Bemba Catholics' faith. This, therefore, necessitates a careful blending of local practices with the church's established practices.

Promoting a Juxtaposition of Faith and Culture

An examination of dual religiosity uncovered the Bemba Catholics' unique approach to living their faith and culture, which shapes their identities. Bemba Catholics juxtapose their Catholic faith with traditional customs, values, and social norms. Bemba Catholics compare AIR and Catholicism, noting both their differences and similarities. In this practice, Bemba Catholics do not integrate Catholicism and traditional Bemba spirituality, but they coexist naturally. This entails living alongside elements of these traditions. This demonstrates how faith and culture interact and influence one another in everyday life. Participants expressed a mindful acceptance of this juxtaposition, embracing both their Catholic faith and cultural practices. This dual expression is believed to promote a sense of local rooting within a broader Christian context.

According to Mokhoathi (2019), the juxtaposition of AIR and Christianity in Africa is the result of blending various beliefs and practices that improve their lived religious experiences. Mokhoathi argues that the connection between AIR, culture, and Christianity stems from a shared belief in one God and similar socio-cultural backgrounds. Balancing Catholic beliefs with indigenous spiritual practices raises issues of identity, resulting in a divided identity. This raises further questions about how Bemba Catholics maintain a unified identity while dealing with AIR and Catholic elements separately. As this study reveals, Bemba Catholics navigate the complexities of juxtaposition by providing equal respect for both traditions. Mbiti (1991) emphasises that because Africans believe God is singular, it is not contradictory to see this belief reflected in both religions, allowing for diverse interpretations of God's manifestation.

Transitioning and Parallel Participation

This study has revealed that Bemba Catholics engage in a fluid and dynamic spiritual practice, seamlessly transitioning between AIR practices and Catholic rituals based on their specific needs or circumstances. They also observe AIR and Catholic beliefs and practices independently. The negotiation strategies of Bemba Catholics reflect a complex and multidimensional approach to spirituality, in which people use both belief systems to navigate

their daily lives.

Transitioning between AIR and Christian Practices Based on Needs and Circumstances

The dual religiosity among Bemba Catholics exemplifies the fluid nature of their spiritual practices, as they navigate between AIR and Catholic beliefs and practices. Their participation in these practices varies based on the specific needs, circumstances, and contexts they encounter in their daily lives. They draw upon the strengths and resources of both faith systems to allow them to address personal and communal issues. Relevance and practicality are valued over strict orthodoxy in this negotiation framework. Participation in these practices varies based on specific personal and communal needs. While they commonly attend Catholic Mass on Sundays, they seamlessly participate in AIR rituals during traditional ceremonies, cultural events and religious symbols. Bemba Catholic spirituality is context-dependent. The switching between indigenous AIR and Catholic practices, adjusted to the circumstances they face, offers a pragmatic and resilient form of religiosity. Bemba Catholics participate in traditional healing rituals for health or financial concerns, as well as Christian activities such as prayer groups for financial breakthroughs, healing, and social connections. They also honour their heritage through ancestor veneration and deepen their spiritual connection through Christian devotional practices. This fluid engagement strengthens their resilience and encourages cultural preservation. The findings support MRB because they indicate that people change their religious expressions because of their cultural background, social environment and personal beliefs (Cornille, 2013).

Parallel Participation

Bemba Catholics participate in both Catholic and AIR rituals, ceremonies, and traditions, but they usually observe these traditions separately. Their practices include attending Catholic liturgical services such as daily and Sunday Mass, prayers, rosary recitations, and *Novenas*, as well as AIR rituals, ceremonies, and practices like traditional healing ceremonies, ancestor veneration, and initiation rites. They keep separate spaces for each tradition, preserving the integrity of both religious systems. This approach acknowledges the exclusive history, beliefs, and practices of Catholicism and AIR. This separation helps prevent the perceived dilution of Catholic rites and preserves indigenous beliefs, cultural and religious heritage, while also encouraging spiritual diversity and plurality. Personal meaning-making and contextual realities influence religiosity among Bemba Catholics, demonstrating the personal and individualised nature of faith. Research has noted again and again the complication of many African Christians such as the Igbo Christians, committing themselves to both Christianity and their indigenous traditions (Havelka 2024).

Establishment of New Interpretations and Merging of Moral Teachings

The study found that Bemba Catholics revitalise and give new meaning to their faith by combining traditional cultural beliefs and practices with their Christian identity. New meanings and interpretations of their beliefs are generated by the dual religiosity of AIR and Catholicism. The study found that dual religiosity is a complex negotiation of personal, religious, and cultural

identities, demonstrating how such beliefs and practices are revived and adapted in modern contexts.

Creating New Meanings

Bemba Catholics create new meanings and interpretations of Catholic teachings and AIR beliefs and practices as a strategy of negotiating their dual religiosity. They have developed a distinct spiritual identity that reflects their cultural heritage and faith by integrating the AIR and Catholic frameworks. This fusion enables them to navigate their beliefs in ways that are consistent with their personal experiences and communal values, resulting in a spirituality that honours both their Christian faith and ancestral traditions. They incorporate cultural symbols into worship, believing it increases their spiritual connection and preserves their culture for future generations. Participants' reflections reveal efforts to interpret and reshape religious teachings, considering individual and communal experiences. Creating new meanings illustrates the reflexive nature of this spiritual duality and shows that Bemba Catholics are reconstructing their beliefs according to their cultural identities. These Catholics view practices like ancestor veneration and initiation rites through Christian equivalents such as veneration of the saints, sacraments of baptism and confirmation, leading to new meanings. This negotiation strategy has modernised traditional practices by incorporating them into a Christian framework, thus keeping them alive and relevant. Combining Christian faith and ancestral traditions results in a spiritual practice that reflects personal and community values, personalises spirituality, and strengthens ties based on shared heritage. This fusion is what Nweke (2023b) claims has really been a survival mechanism that allows believers to put together coherent spiritualities. It is a deliberate attempt to come up with a coherent spirituality that addresses the existential needs of life.

Combining AIR and Catholic Moral Teachings

Bemba Catholics integrate moral teachings from AIR with Catholicism, which significantly influences their daily lives and decision-making. Among Bemba Catholics, moral teachings from the Catholic Church and those from the AIR inform their daily lives and decisions. It enables them to strike a balance in the worst of life's situations from the vantage point of cultural heritage and spiritual conviction. It represents the foundation of their values, the formation of a community, and the ability to face challenges with informed decision-making. This blending also holds cultural integrity while building ethical understanding, developing empathy, and catalysing self-improvement and change, influencing their lived experience. This is the moral basis on which Bemba Catholics have formulated a moral platform reconciling their religious and cultural values, thus dealing with ethical decision-making.

Among Bemba Catholics, morality is an understanding deeply rooted in community and cultural settings. Transformation becomes the most significant reflection of the two moral systems combined, as it affects personal growth. Thus, bringing together both traditions and Catholic teachings further enlightens what is right and wrong while also enhancing moral quality regarding their life's challenges. Integrating the moral systems significantly contributes to heightening the moral vision and emotional intelligence. This combination of moral principles for

self-betterment, social unity, and cultural endurance serves to mark morality as a lived experience, formed by numerous influences over time into a valuable existence. The contending scholarship within Igbo could also argue that such duality is less irreconcilable than practical synthesis according to local realities (Chukwudebelu, 2024).

Conclusion

Assessing how Bemba Catholics negotiate the dual religiosity of Catholicism and AIR in their daily lives within Muchinga Province revealed that they employed various strategies. Among these were integration and syncretism, which involved merging the Catholic faith with elements of AIR and combining AIR components with Catholic teachings. This included the selective adoption of specific AIR practices and beliefs, reinterpretation of AIR concepts through a Christian lens, and the utilisation of AIR practices for particular purposes. Bemba Catholics navigate and switch between the two worldviews, moving between AIR and Christian spiritual practices according to need or circumstance. They revived AIR cultural practices alongside a Catholic identity, creating new meanings and combining moral teachings from both traditions. The study indicates that Bemba Catholics have developed strategies to manage their dual worldviews of AIR and Catholicism, such as juxtaposition, adaptation, parallel participation, and syncretism. Bemba Catholics lead complicated lives, incorporating elements of AIR along with their Catholicism into a distinct religious identity. The mosaic of belief systems that characterises religious life among Bemba Catholics leads them to perceive the AIR and Catholic traditions as interacting. Adhering to Bemba customary beliefs, however, results in complications, often accompanied by social stigma, discrimination, and censure from the Church. The study argues that negotiating dual religiosity among Bemba Catholics requires a balance between faith, culture, and identity, as individuals seek authenticity, belonging, and identity within their religious community. The study indicates that further research is necessary to explore the effects of dual religiosity on the identity of practitioners.

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