

The Untold Story of the Religious History of the Imilangu of Kalabo and Sikongo Districts of Western Zambia

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ABSTRACT

This article is a discussion of the religious organisation of the *Imilangu* of Kalabo and Sikongo Districts of Western Zambia. The research has established that the *Imilangu* believed in three gods, namely, *Nyambi*, *Shamutumwa Nyambi* and the ancestral spirits. These gods were worshiped through a process called *kuyamba* or *kupailela* (chanting). When going to chant, the *Imilangu* carried offerings which they gave to their gods. Different types of offerings were given during worship depending on the gods they were directed to, or according to the reason for their worshipping. For example, if the *Imilangu* were directing their prayers to an ancestor who used to drink beer or smoke tobacco, beer or tobacco respectively would be given as offering. The reason for giving an offering also determined the kind of an offering one gave. For instance, if people were praying for a good hunting expedition, the tools used for hunting were offered as offerings so that the gods could bless them. Finally, the changes that have taken place in the religious organisation of the *Imilangu* have been examined.

Keywords: Imilangu, religion, offering, worship, god, belief

INTRODUCTION

Parrinder observes that many books have been written about cults and rituals in restricted areas, but few attempts have been made till now to consider the religions of Africa as a whole.¹ He adds that, “in the present century many books have been written on the traditional religions of Africa, and in the main they are careful and impartial studies, but they are written by outsiders who have no experience of these religions as their own faith.”²

Parrinder’s observations fit well in the history of the *Imilangu*. To start with, despite many scholars having made some attempts to document the history of the *Imilangu*, a very big gap has been left out because none of them has documented a comprehensive history of the *Imilangu*. Moreover, in spite of scholars from Kalabo District like Mainga having documented the history of the *Luyana* of Kalabo in which he covered a lot about the history of the *Imilangu*, she did not write anything about their religion. Non availability in literature of the religious history of the *Imilangu* was the motivation for writing this article.

Traditional African religion was underrated and despised by many Europeans. It was given many names that were associated with darkness and primitive man. According to Mbiti, the fact remains that African religions and philosophy have been subjected to a great deal of misinterpretation, misrepresentation and misunderstanding. They have been despised, mocked and dismissed as primitive and underdeveloped.³ Despite being labeled as an evil and barbaric religious system, the *Imilangu* held it in high esteem.

METHODOLOGY

This study was conducted using various methods and sources in order to come up with the necessary data. Purposive sampling procedure was employed during data collection. The study used qualitative data collection

¹ Geoffrey Parrinder, *Religion in Africa* (London: Penguin Books, 1969), p. 7.

² Parrinder, *Religion in Africa*, p. 7.

³ John, S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (Nairobi: East African Educational Publishers Ltd., 2015), pp. 9-10.

method. Primary data was collected from oral sources who had vital information on the religion of the *Imilangu*. Eleven oral sources (10 males and 1 female) were interviewed. These were selected from different villages within *Imilangu* and even some towns like Itezhi-tezhi based on recommendations from people who knew them to be rich sources of oral information on the history of *Imilangu*. Secondary data was collected from different written literature at Kwame Nkrumah University and the University of Zambia (UNZA) libraries. National Archives of Zambia (NAZ) was of help in provision of more primary data. Moreover, internet sources were of great help during data collection.

The gods and their role

The *Imilangu*, just like other ethnic groups in Barotseland, had a well organised religious system in which they believed in the existence of some beings that controlled people's lives and the entire world. Most of the interviewees admitted that there were some gods somewhere who were in charge of guiding the activities of the world. According to Richard Namenda, "there was no way this world could have come into existence without someone making it. Moreover, there must be someone coordinating what happens in the world."⁴ The belief in God is common among all African ethnic groups. Ngulube argues that:

The belief that there is a god has always existed in ... societies. The form, nature and function of this god might differ from tribe to tribe but ... all are agreed they believe in the existence of a god. This religious belief necessitated different modes of worship and thanksgiving in different societies.⁵

Parrinder confirmed that missionaries easily proved that Africans believed in the existence of God when he pointed out that:

Most, if not all, African peoples have had a belief in a Supreme Being as an integral part of their world view and practiced religion. Missionaries have found, often to their surprise, that they did not need to argue for the existence of God, or faith in a life after death, for both these fundamentals of world religion are deeply rooted in Africa. It has been seen that African myths express many beliefs about God....⁶

The *Imilangu* believed in three gods namely, *Nyambi*, *Shamutumwa Nyambi* and the ancestral spirits (the living-dead). Of these gods, *Nyambi* was considered to be superior, followed by *Shamutumwa Nyambi* and then the ancestral spirits came last. The three were known as *alimu* (gods) and it was to them that all prayers were directed. *Nyambi* is an *Imilangu* word which refers to the God who was believed to be spirit and the creator of all things. Mbiti outlines that:

... God is said to be the creator of all things. This belief is common everywhere in Africa. For that reason, there are many names which describe him as Creator, Creator of all things, Moulder, Begetter, Bearer, Maker, Potter, Fashioner, Architect, Carpenter, Originator, Constructor, and so on.⁷

To confirm the role of creation the *Imilangu* attached to God, other than just calling him *Nyambi*, the other name used was *mubupi* – meaning creator. The *Imilangu* knew that the world did not come from nowhere but that it was created by God.

According to Kalabo District Note Book, the religion of the people of Lukona District is of course the same as all Barotse. They believe in one god whom they call "*Nyambe*".⁸ *Nyambe* is Lozi for *Nyambi*. *Nyambi* was believed to be the author and protector of life. According to Moses Mutuso, "the one who gives us life and everything we need is God who is in heaven."⁹ Despite Moses Mutuso noting that *Nyambi* is in heaven, other

⁴ Interview with Richard Namenda on 17th June, 2018.

⁵ Naboth, M. J. Ngulube, *Some Aspects of Growing in Zambia* (Lusaka: Nalinga Consultancy, Sol Consultancy A/S Limited, 1989), pp. 22-23.

⁶ Parrinder, *Religion in Africa*, p. 39.

⁷ Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religion*, p. 49.

⁸ NAZ, KSH 2/1, Kalabo District Note Book, Vol. I., 1906-1913.

⁹ Interview with Moses Mutuso (Headman Muhongo) on 30th November, 2016.

interviewees however stated that they believed in the existence of *Nyambi* but they did not know where he was found. Richard Namenda explained that he knew that there was God who created everything in the world but he did not know where he was found.¹⁰

Being above all other gods, *Nyambi* was worshipped with a lot of respect. It was believed that if other gods were unable to respond to people's prayers, *Nyambi* was to be approached with prayers accompanied with songs and offerings. It must be noted that *Nyambi* was only approached if the other two gods seemed not to answer people's prayers. Mbiti confirms the aspect of *Nyambi* being the God above all other gods by asserting that the Barotse address their God as the great King to whom no man can be compared, and who shows compassion and innumerable favour to His servants.¹¹ Ngulube adds that:

Traditional religious worship was reserved only to the spirit of spirits-the rain maker, the provider, the perpetuator of life and the decider of all human fate. It was to this high spirit the community would look to if they wanted game meat after failing for some time to kill any of the animals. People could pray to this god (spirit) who after he provided them with animals (through mysterious arrivals of animals even in villages) they thanked him by special offerings including some shares of the actual commodity they got from him.¹²

Next to *Nyambi* was *Shamutumwa Nyambi* who was also worshipped and highly revered among the *Imilangu*. According to Namukulo, "*Shamutumwa Nyambi* refers to Jesus Christ. This is because the word '*Shamutumwa*' is *Imilangu* meaning one who was sent."¹³ Therefore, *Shamutumwa Nyambi* refers to Jesus who was sent on earth by God. When asked to find out when and why *Shamutumwa Nyambi* was sent by God, Nalishuwa Namushi and Muyemisa Namushi stated that they did not know the time and the reason he was sent by his father to come on earth.¹⁴ Just like *Nyambi*, *Shamutumwa Nyambi* was believed to live in heaven. Despite some respondents like Simushi confirming that *Shamutumwa Nyambi* was found in heaven, some like Nalishuwa Namushi stated that no one knew where *he* was found.¹⁵

Shamutumwa Nyambi was followed by the ancestral spirits (*afu*). *Afu* simply means the dead. Instead of directing their prayers direct to *Nyambi* or *Shamutumwa Nyambi*, the *Imilangu* prayed through the ancestral spirits. According to McVeigh, Africans conceive of God as far away and remote, and this concept has its influence on their worship life. In general they do not go to God directly.¹⁶ It was for this reason that people directed their prayers to the ancestral spirits. When praying through the ancestral spirits, people mentioned names of their deceased relatives. In most cases only names of people who were considered great by their families were mentioned during prayers. The following prayer given when someone was about to undertake a journey brings out names of dead people who were valued and respected while still living:

Owe O Mulilo, Nasilele na Mwalye, Mulilo, Nasilele and Mwalye, twamilomba Mutuyanjulele liwilu pelo, we ask you to open the heavens for us today, kuli tuende wino. So that we can travel well. Wakatulokwisha bula, Don't allow us to be socked by rains, mwaka tutumbeka limwi do not scotch us with the sun. Mulilo Otuyube pelo. Mulilo listen to our petition.

In the above prayer, names like Mulilo, Nasilele and Mwalye come out prominently because the people praying attached a lot of respect to them. According to Mundia Muyenga, a relative who was a drunkard, prostitute or thief could not be used as an intermediary during prayers because it was believed that such a one could only give bad luck to the people.¹⁷

¹⁰ Interview with Richard Namenda on 2nd December, 2016.

¹¹ Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, p. 61.

¹² Ngulube, *Some Aspects of Growing in Zambia*, p. 24.

¹³ Interview with Kennedy Namukulo Sitali on 3rd December, 2016.

¹⁴ Interview with Nalishuwa Namushi and Muyemisa Namushi on 28th November, 2016.

¹⁵ Interview with Simushi Namakau on 3rd December, 2016.

¹⁶ Malcolm J. McVeigh, *God in Africa: Concepts of God in African Traditional Religion and Christianity* (Massachusetts: Claude Stark, Inc., 1974), p.

¹⁷ Interview with Mundia Muyemisa on 18th June, 2018.

The *Imilangu* believed in the existence of the ancestral spirits because there was a belief that when a person died, his/her spirit remained fully operational in the community. McVeigh stipulates that:

The ancestors are subject to the same emotions as the living members of the community, and their moods are no more constant. Since they may be jealous or fickle, the living must be careful not to offend them. If the ancestors are neglected, they most assuredly will be angry and will seek to demonstrate their feelings by some vindictive action.¹⁸

To justify the assertion that ancestral spirits lived within the community and that when they were offended they could inflict problems on the people, Simasiku Lukupa stated that, “if there is anything scaring in life is to offend the dead because the only time you come to realise that you have offended them is after you have suffered their punishment. Offending a living person is better because you can easily resolve the matter.”¹⁹

The *Imilangu* believed that the dead or the spirits of the dead were very cardinal as they helped them in many aspects of life. To start with, the living-dead (ancestral spirits) helped people in times of need. McVeigh outlines that:

As for the living, they needed the help of the departed in their fight against the evils of life which seem to threaten on every hand. The dead are both more knowing and more powerful than the living. Therefore, they are uniquely able to provide succor in times of need.²⁰

Moreover, the living-dead provided people with their daily needs in life. According to Richard Namenda, a good harvest, good rains, a successful hunt and other good things in life were all a manifestations that the living-dead were happy.²¹ Clay adds that people traced all good to the power and intercession of the spirit of some departed chief or forefather.²² Mbiti complements that:

Among the spiritual beings who are believed to help people in their approach to God are divinities, some spirits, especially of former national leaders and heroes, and those of the dead who are still remembered in the family. They sometimes address members of their families who died recently. For national or communal needs, the people may address departed kings, chiefs, clan founders, or the divinity or spirit of the area.²³

It was also believed that the ancestral spirits had a big task of blessing the living. In short, all good things were believed to come through blessings from the ancestral spirits. According to Nalishuwa Namushi, anything good that one experiences in life was as a result of blessings from the ancestral spirits.²⁴ McVeigh supports this idea by outlining that:

The main role of the ancestors is to bless, not to curse. They are concerned about the family and the community and are dedicated basically to its well-being. Even when they inflict harm on the living, it is to warn them that they are not properly obeying the taboos which are necessary for the proper functioning of society.²⁵

Apart from blessing, the spirits could bring problems on the people if they (spirits) were not happy with the people. Gehman expands this view by positing that, “since ancestral spirits may be the cause of trouble among

¹⁸ McVeigh, *God in Africa*, p. 29.

¹⁹ Interview with Simasiku Lukupa on 22nd April, 2017.

²⁰ McVeigh, *God in Africa*, p. 29.

²¹ Interview with Richard Namenda on 2nd December, 2016.

²² Gervas Clay, *Your Friend Lewanika: The Life and Times of Lubosi Lewanika Litunga of Barotseland 1842 to 1916* (London: Chatto and Windus Ltd, 1968), p. 32.

²³ Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religion*, p. 68.

²⁴ Interview with Nalishuwa Namushi (Former Chief Namulimbwa) on 28th November, 2016.

²⁵ McVeigh, *God in Africa*, p. 29.

the living because of some offence, requests and offerings are often made to the living-dead.”²⁶ Among the *Imilangu*, if a child got sick, chickens were dying, or there was any other problem that could not easily be explained, people automatically knew that the spirits could have been offended and therefore chanting was done to mitigate and then end the problem.

The ancestral spirits were considered to be the preservers of life, property and everything in the community. According to McVeigh, African attention was centred on the ancestors who were looked up to as the guardians of individuals, families and the community as a whole.²⁷ Simasiku expanded this view by stressing that, “human and animal life is preserved by the ancestral spirits. As soon as the ancestors decide not to safeguard someone’s life, he/she instantly dies. In the same manner, death of an animal or a bird was an indication that the ancestors had allowed it to happen.”²⁸

System of worship

The *Imilangu*, just like other ethnic groups in Africa, had an organised system of worship. According to Mbiti,

In many and various ways, African peoples respond to their spiritual worlds of which they are sharply aware. This response generally takes on the form of worship which is eternalised in different acts and sayings. These acts may be formal or informal, regular or extempore, communal or individual, ritual or unceremonial, through words or deeds.²⁹

As mentioned in the abstract, the *Imilangu* worshipped their gods through a process known as *kuyamba* or *kupailela* (chanting). Chanting was only done by elderly men and women who were proven to be in good terms with the spirits because whenever they prayed their prayers were answered. Mbiti supports the view that *kupailela* was done by adults by stating that, “it is also customary for the Barotse to pray every day, which old men do”³⁰ Chiefs, *indunas* and headmen were in most cases the ones that approached the gods on behalf of the people because it was believed that to be in their political positions was proof enough that they had good relations with the gods. Richard Namenda noted that:

There is no one who is not connected to the gods who can be in a political position for a long period of time. For a person to serve as a king, chief or *induna* it means that the gods have approved him to be in such a position. If he is not approved, he can die within a short period of time.³¹

Mbiti supports the idea of political leaders praying for their people by stating that, “political leaders like kings and chiefs prayed for others.”³² He adds that most of these prayers were recited by people in their official capacities as priests, diviners, medicine-men, ritual and family elders, and heads of family or other social groups (e.g. hunters).³³ From the positions mentioned above, it clearly comes out that only influential people prayed to the gods. No young people among the *Imilangu* were allowed to chant or even come closer to a place where chanting was done.

Just like other religions that had specified places of worship, the *Imilangu* also had a special place where worshipping was done. Unlike Christians who worship in buildings, among the *Imilangu* *kuyamba* or *kupailela* was done by sitting under a *muyombo* tree which had been planted during the installation of a chief or headman. The time of *kuyamba* was taken seriously because it was believed to be the time when people talked to their gods. An altar (*utala*) was made under the *muyombo* tree and white sand (*lishabati likenu*) was put beneath and

²⁶ Richard, J. Gehman, *African Traditional Religion in Biblical Perspectives* (Nairobi: East African Educational Publishers Ltd., 2000), p. 141.

²⁷ McVeigh, *God in Africa*, p. 103.

²⁸ Interview with Simasiku Lukupa on 22nd April, 2017.

²⁹ Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, p. 57.

³⁰ Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, p. 61.

³¹ Interview with Richard Namenda on 25th November, 2016.

³² Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religion*, p. 61.

³³ John, S. Mbiti, *The Prayers of African Religion* (London: The Camel Press Ltd., 1975), p. 2.

around the altar. When asked why *muyombo* was used and not any other tree, Headman Muhongo stated that *muyombo* is a soft tree – meaning when it is used the hearts of the ancestral spirits become soft and easily accept the prayers offered.³⁴ White sand was a sign of purity – meaning the ancestors gave people pure things following people’s requests. Moreover, the white sand also meant that the gods were supposed to be worshipped in a dignified manner. Tick Namaya added that, “when praying people knelt around the altar with a white plate of seeds which they placed on the altar. Having knelt down, they started praying to their gods who in turn provided them with what they needed.”³⁵ The aspect of kneeling down was a sign of respect to the gods. Mbiti adds that:

Before they start sowing their fields the Lozi assemble at sunrise, under the leadership of their local headman who erects an altar of sticks and clay. A dish is placed on this altar into which every household puts some seeds, hoes and axes. The headman kneels before the altar and, facing east, puts his hands together, bows down, looks up and stretches out his hands.³⁶

During chanting the worshippers took with them offerings in form of food, tobacco, beer, mealie meal, beads and other items to give to their gods. Clay states that:

When the Barotse went to pray they made offerings to the spirits of their forefathers under a tree, bush, or grove planted for this purpose and the offering was great or small according to the measure of their request. Beer was poured upon the ground, cloth tied to a horn stuck in the ground and if an ox was slaughtered the blood was poured over this horn.³⁷

Mbiti expands Clay’s point by suggesting that the practice of making sacrifices and offerings is found all over Africa. By this practice material or physical things are given to God and other spiritual beings. This act marks the point where the visible and invisible worlds meet³⁸

Moreover, the aspect of giving offerings was a sign of love and respect to the gods. If someone approached the gods, especially the ancestral spirits, and he/she deliberately did not give them an offering, it was an indication that he did not value them because offerings made people to be in harmony with their gods. Mbiti observes that:

... the departed, whether parents, brothers, sisters or children, form part of the family, and must therefore be kept in touch with their surviving relatives. Libation and the giving of food to the departed are tokens of fellowship, hospitality and respect; the drink and food so given are symbols of family continuity and contact.³⁹

The choice of an offering to give to the gods was determined by two main things. Firstly, the ancestors to whom the prayers were directed to needed to be known. For instance, if one was directing his/her prayers to an ancestor who used to like beer and tobacco, the one praying had to carry beer and tobacco for such an ancestor. It was believed that as soon as the dead were given what they liked most when they were still living, they would respond to people’s prayers quickly. Nalishuwa Namushi added that, “only that which the ancestors liked when they were still living can make them happy when it is offered as an offering.”⁴⁰

Secondly, the reason for worshipping also determined the type of offering to be given. For instance, if people were praying for a good harvest, they carried with them seeds which were put under the *muyombo* tree. Chanting was done and then the seeds were left there for a night. The following day the seeds were given to the people to plant. By so doing, it was believed that the harvest was going to be good because the ancestors would have blessed the seed. In the same manner, before going for hunting or fishing, spears were put under the *muyombo*

³⁴ Interview with Moses Mutuso (Headman Muhongo) on 25th November, 2016.

³⁵ Interview with Tick Namaya on 5th December, 2016.

³⁶ Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, p. 62.

³⁷ Clay, *Your Friend Lewanika*, p. 33.

³⁸ Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religion*, p. 63.

³⁹ Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, p. 8.

⁴⁰ Interview with Nalishuwa Namushi on 18th November, 2016.

tree. Just as it was with seeds, chanting was done and then the spears were left there for a night. Chanting continued the following morning before sunrise and then the tools were given to the hunters or fishermen as they went hunting or fishing respectively. If chanting was done by the rightful people and in the rightful manner, people always received a positive response from the gods. According to Moses Mutuso, “as long as chanting was correctly done, the hunter never spent a long period of time in the bush. Within a short period of time he would be seen coming home with an animal.”⁴¹

Kuyamba could be done individually or by a group of people. According to Mbiti, prayer is the commonest method of approaching God. It is found in all African societies. People may pray privately, as individuals, or as heads of their families. Other prayers are made communally, at public meetings and for public needs.⁴² Individually, a person could go under a *muyombo* tree to chant if, for example, he dreamed that his dead relatives were complaining that he was not feeding them well. In such a situation, such a person had to carry food and whatever the ancestors needed and then went under the *muyombo* tree to chant. During the process of chanting, the person chanting had to first apologise to the ancestors for failing to take care of them. Having apologised, he/she then went on to give them what he had carried for them. He/she then asked for whatever he/she wanted from them.

Apart from doing it individually, people could go to chant in groups if there was a problem like drought, poor harvests, sicknesses, etc. that affected many people. Just as it was when going to chant alone, when going to chant in a group people carried different kinds of offerings to give to their gods. As they reached at the altar, they all knelt down and started chanting by telling their gods whatever they needed from them. According to Raymond Kangondo, chanting in a group was very effective compared to individual chanting because such prayers were easily answered.⁴³ When asked to give a reason why such prayers were easily answered than individual ones, Raymond said *paili pawa, oyu kulya, oyu kubuma* – meaning it is better to be two than being alone.⁴⁴ When asked to further explain the meaning of *paili pawa, oyu kulya, oyu kubuma* in relation to group prayers, Raymond stated that an individual’s prayer could not be answered if he/she was not in good terms with the gods. However, when people were praying in a group their prayers could be answered even if there were people within the group who were not in good terms with the gods.⁴⁵

The following was an example of a common chant done before a hunting expedition as narrated by Headman Muhongo:

<i>Owe Shamutumwa Nyambi,</i>	<i>Dear Jesus,</i>
<i>Shiyama sho limbundambunda,</i>	<i>A naked animal,</i>
<i>Kututuke kumane, peunja shiya kume,</i>	<i>No matter what, tomorrow it has to be here,</i>
<i>Aka shi pae.</i>	<i>They should kill it,</i>
<i>Cikelekete cimane, ndumbelo kaha ca ng’umba,</i>	<i>No matter what happens,</i>
<i>Peunja eshiyama sho limbunda mbunda shiya kume.</i>	<i>A naked animal has to come tomorrow.</i> ⁴⁶

In the above chant, an animal was described as being naked (*limbundambunda*) to show that it was a must that with the guidance of the living-dead an animal had to be killed because animals do not reason. As earlier mentioned, when chanting in readiness for a hunting expedition was over, the tools to be used for hunting like spears, traps, guns, and others were left under the *muyombo* tree until the following morning.

⁴¹ Interview with Moses Mutuso (Headman Muhongo) on 23rd March, 2017.

⁴² Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religion*, p. 61.

⁴³ Interview with Raymond Kangondo on 22nd July, 2017.

⁴⁴ Interview with Raymond Kangondo on 22nd July, 2017.

⁴⁵ Interview with Raymond Kangondo on 22nd July, 2017.

⁴⁶ Interview with Moses Mutuso on 24th April, 2017.

Chanting done before a hunting expedition was not only done by the *Imilangu*. Other ethnic groups in Africa also did it. Mbiti gives the following chant done by the *Ila* on a hunting expedition if they did not kill anything:

*O Mutalabala, Eternal One ... We Pray Thee, Let us kill today before sunset. O Chief, today let us kill!*⁴⁷

Just like the *Imilangu*, the *Ila* of Southern Zambia also believed that God was the one who provided them with a successful hunting expedition. This was the reason they prayed if they discovered that they could not kill an animal. The *Ila* clearly knew that by asking from their god they would be given an animal. This was common among most African ethnic groups, not only among the *Ila* and the *Imilangu*.

Gehman outlines that:

Before the people of *Thongaland* go fishing, someone must spit into the water, saying, "let fish abound: let them not hide in the mud! Let there be enough of them to satisfy everyone." Elsewhere the spirits are invoked by throwing beer and tobacco into the water. Similar offerings and prayers made to the ancestral spirits are made before a hunt.⁴⁸

The gods were very cardinal in the religious life of the *Imilangu* and other ethnic groups in Barotseland because people asked for a lot of things from them. The *Imilangu* asked for good health, rains, fish, animals, and other things from their gods.⁴⁹ They also asked for protection from dangerous animals and snakes, especially when they were going on a hunting expedition. If there were no rains or in case there was hunger in the area, people went under a *muyombo* tree and asked from their gods for intervention. Through the gods' intervention, people were able to receive what they asked for. The gods helped the blind to walk on their own. According to Simushi Namakau, Muzingila, a blind man from Shipwele village, was able to walk long distances alone because the gods guided him.⁵⁰ If a pregnant woman failed to deliver, people would turn to the gods for help. As soon as the gods responded, the pregnant woman delivered.

Unlike other tribes like the Ashanti of Ghana and Ivory Coast who worshipped on Saturday, the *Imilangu* had no specific day of worship. The *Imilangu* could worship on any day and at any time when there was need. They worshipped if there was a problem that required intervention from their gods. The *Imilangu* could go to worship if they were about to start farming or when a hunter was going out for hunting. The essence of praying when it was time to start planting or when a hunter was going out for a hunting expedition was to ask for blessings. Apart from not having a specific day of worship, the *Imilangu* did not have scriptures or special books where they got their prayers from. According to Parrinder, "since traditional religion was preliterate, it had no scriptures of its own, no ancient texts and no old expressions of faith which could reveal what it was like to belong to such a religion in the past."⁵¹

The other aspect worthy mentioning in the religion of the *Imilangu* was that in the process of worshipping, saliva (*mate*) was tendered on the altar where the offering was put. McVeigh justifies the tendering of saliva by stating that, "saliva is tendered not because it is needed by the spirits but because it represents a giving of oneself to renew the bond of relationship between the worshippers and the worshipped."⁵² Other than creating a new relationship between the worshippers and the worshipped, spurring saliva was an indication of someone offering him/herself wholeheartedly to the gods because there was power in the saliva. For example, it was common among the *Imilangu* for someone to tender saliva on someone's head when he/she was blessing him/her because it was believed that saliva had the power to bless someone. On the other hand, saliva could be spurred on the ground when someone was cursing another person because it was believed that it had the power to curse. In short, saliva had the power to either bless or curse.

⁴⁷ Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, p. 61.

⁴⁸ Gehman, *African Traditional Religion in Biblical Perspectives* p. 144.

⁴⁹ Interview with Amos Muyemisa Namushi on 28th November, 2016.

⁵⁰ Interview with Simushi Namakau on 3rd December, 2016.

⁵¹ Parrinder, *Religion in Africa*, p. 8.

⁵² McVeigh, *God in Africa*, p. 105.

Changes in the order of worship

Unlike it was in the olden days, very few people still hold to the old religious practices in *Imilangu*. A lot of changes have been done in the manner of worship. For instance, some people no longer carry food, beer, tobacco or any other items to be given to the ancestors as offerings. Instead, they go to worship their gods with empty hands because they believe that their gods can answer them even without any offering. The other change in the manner people approach their gods is where they go with money when praying to their gods. This is a new change because no one in the old days offered money as offering to the gods. Other than stopping giving gifts to the gods, some people have changed the place of worship for the gods. Instead of worshipping under a *muyombo* tree, some people do it under any other tree or even in the house. Commenting on the changes in the manner of worship in *Imilangu*, Muyemisa Namushi outlined that, “people are now lost such that they no longer respect our beloved ancestors. Instead of giving beer, tobacco and other things we used to give to our ancestors, people go with empty hands or with money. Today’s worship doesn’t make any sense.”⁵³

When conducting this research, three reasons contributing to the change in the manner of worship came out strongly. Firstly, some of the respondents explained that the introduction of Christianity had downplayed their religion. According to Kennedy Namukulo Sitali,

The introduction of churches has greatly disturbed our order of worship in *Imilangu*. Majority of our people today do not believe that our ancestral spirits are able to help us in many ways of life. They say that the belief in the gods is fake because only the God in heaven should be worshipped. This is the reason today when you give herbs to some people when they are not feeling well they refuse.⁵⁴

As observed by Sitali, Christianity really changed the way people perceived religion of the *Imilangu*. With the introduction of churches in the area, the *Imilangu* were taught by Christians that their religious beliefs were associated with evil spirits. By so doing, they were encouraged to abandon their beliefs and follow the Christian beliefs. With this development, most of the *Imilangu* changed some of their religious practices to accommodate Christianity.

Secondly, the advancement in technology was yet another reason given to have led to some changes in the order of worship among the *Imilangu*. For example, the availability of modern medicines made people to stop believing in the existence of the gods. This is because people ran to hospitals where they had access to modern medical services unlike depending on prayers offered to their gods. For instance, The advancement in technology in most hospitals and clinics where modern medicines were introduced made people to prefer going to these health facilities for medical services than going for prayers at the shrines. Despite many people preferring hospitals to prayers, Kennedy Namukulo had a different view by outlining that:

Our society is today struggling with diseases that are believed to have no cure like Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (HIV) because of clinging to hospitals and modern medicines at the expense of our religion. If we were still praying to our ancestors in a normal way, HIV could have been a simple problem because our ancestors have no disease which they cannot cure.⁵⁵

The introduction of technology did not only affect changes in the order of worship in health related matters but also in hunting activities due to the introduction of guns. Instead of praying to the gods to give people a good hunt, with the aid of a modern gun, people were able to kill many animals within a short period of time. Mundia Mutuso amplified this point by stating that there was no need for a person today to sit under a *muyombo* tree speaking to the gods to ask for a good hunt because with or without such prayers, with the aid of guns, as soon as a hunter went in the bush he was able to kill a lot of animals.⁵⁶ Therefore, with the introduction of guns, the

⁵³ Interview with Muyemisa Namushi on 28th November, 2016.

⁵⁴ Interview with Kennedy Namukulo Sitali on 3rd December, 2016.

⁵⁵ Interview with Kennedy Namukulo Sitali on 3rd December, 2016.

⁵⁶ Interview with Richard Namenda on 2nd December, 2016.

order of worship was changed because hunters stopped praying to the gods for them to kill animals, instead, they depended on guns which enabled them to kill many animals.

Thirdly, formal or western education was highlighted as a factor that had made people to do away with their normal religious practices. Most of the respondents who were educated, whether Christians or not, despised the *Imilangu*'s traditional religious practices. This was due to the education people had acquired because they could not understand the link between the ancestral spirits and reality. Kebby Kabutu stressed that the belief in the ancestral spirits was unfounded because none of the people who believed in their existence could justify in a manner that made sense by proving that ancestral spirits existed and that they could help people.⁵⁷ Tick Namaya bemoaned the impact of western education on traditional religion by positing that, "Formal Education has made most of the young ones to become big headed such that they would tell an adult to prove how ancestral spirits could help people. The educated generation has led to the demise of our religion in *Imilangu*."⁵⁸

CONCLUSION

This article is an analysis of the religious organisation of the *Imilangu*. It has been observed that the *Imilangu* believed in three gods, namely, *Nyambi*, *Shamutumwa Nyambi* and the ancestral spirits (*afu*). Of the three, *Nyambi* was the senior most followed by *Shamutumwa Nyambi*, while the ancestral spirits came third. The three gods were worshipped through a process known as *kupailela*. It has been explained that during *kupailela*, people carried gifts and offerings which were given to their gods. The gifts and offerings that were offered were determined by the type of the gods they were given to and the purpose for giving those gifts and offerings. It has also been explained that the *Imilangu* offered their prayers under a *muyombo* tree where an altar was made. The gods provided the *Imilangu* with rains, animals, fish, and many more. The article has been concluded with a discussion on the changes that have taken place in the manner of worship among the *Imilangu*. Here, it has been observed that a lot of changes have taken place due to the introduction of Christianity, technology and formal education.

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⁵⁷ Interview with Kebby Kabutu on 24th June, 2017.

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