

## Negotiating Dual Religiosity of African Indigenous Religion and Christianity: Challenges, Tensions and Prospects among Bemba Catholics in Muchinga Province, Zambia

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### Abstract

Although the coexistence of Catholicism and African Indigenous Religion (AIR) among Bemba Catholics in Muchinga Province, Zambia, remains underexplored, it often produces religious friction, identity tensions, and frustration in lived religious experience. This study examined the challenges, tensions, and prospects involved in negotiating the dual religiosity of Bemba Catholics who practice Catholicism alongside AIR. Using a qualitative design grounded in hermeneutic phenomenology, the study involved 20 Bemba Catholic participants and drew data from in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, and observations. The data were analyzed using Van Manen's thematic reflection approach. The findings reveal that negotiating dual religiosity presents multiple challenges, including conflicting beliefs, social stigma, excommunication and disciplinary pressures, and tensions between Christian faith and ethno-religious identity. The study also identified inadequate integration of faith and culture, misconceptions and misinterpretations of Bemba traditional beliefs and practices, and resistance to change within the church as key sources of tension. At the same time, the findings indicate prospects for constructive dialogue with the church and

personal development among adherents. This study contributes a contextualized understanding of dual religiosity by foregrounding local cultural complexities in the interpretation of religious identity and practice. It concludes that open discussion is necessary to address the tensions surrounding dual religiosity and recommends that the church develop programs to educate both clergy and laity on the cultural relevance of indigenous beliefs and practices.

**Keywords:** African Indigenous Religion; Bemba Catholics; Dual Religiosity; Ethno-Religious Identity; Hermeneutic Phenomenology

## INTRODUCTION

Dual religiosity in Africa is, in a sense, the expression of African indigenous religious (AIR) ethical, social and spiritual tenets lived alongside Christianity. AIR religious elements are borrowed and fused into their lives. This is an attempt to reconcile those elements that do not agree. Despite its potential, dual faith is not without its own set of long-term challenges. Differences between traditional and Christian doctrines frequently result in interpersonal conflict or tension between opposing practices. For example, certain religions routinely forbid the use of traditional healing practices, which creates concerns among many followers who rely on alternative healing methods for survival and overall well-being. Furthermore, the community could ostracise someone for being dual in their religious affiliation, hence causing feelings of guilt or confusion around preferred rituals (Agbiji and Swart, 2015). Dual religiosity creates a lifestyle whereby both AIR and Christian beliefs coexist, intermingle, and conflict. The life consternations endured, as well as the fortunes and misfortunes of an African, drive people to return to AIR beliefs and practices, which their new home Church, Christianity, considers pagan and irreconcilable.

African Christianity has been deeply shaped by colonial encounters and Western missionary efforts which historically regarded (AIR) as demonic and backward (Asamoah & Kpalam, 2023). The negative depiction of African cultures created obstacles that prevented the successful establishment of Christianity in African communities, while creating a continuing problem of theological misrepresentation that affects present-day religious practice. Western Christian standards have created a situation where people view Christianity as European instead of its actual African origins, which causes a separation between religious belief and native African cultural practices (Nweke, 2023). The integration of Christian

teachings with African cultural traditions presents a major challenge for Christian communities. Many African Christians find Christian rituals and doctrines insufficient in addressing their traditional spiritual requirements, which include rites of passage, communal ceremonies and healing. Traditional African perspectives on life and death, as well as ethical behaviour and societal obligations, clash with doctrinal ideas, necessitating a complex negotiation process between the two parties.

Scholars like Okoye & Ugwu (2024) and Aluede & Ikhidero (2024) highlight how communities adapt through dual religiosity, which combines traditional and Christian practices to maintain their cultural identity while accepting Christianity. For instance, the ethical challenges of marriage and burial customs present African Christians with intense moral problems. The Igbo community faces conflicts between their traditional family and community obligations and Christian teachings, which leads to disputes over wedding and marriage practices (Nweke, 2023; Okoye & Ugwu, 2024). Traditional burial traditions are important components of cultural identity and must be handled with sensitivity. The Esan community uses syncretic methods for burial practices by combining Christian elements with traditional customs, which help them maintain their cultural heritage while upholding their religious beliefs (Aluede, & Ikhidero, 2024). The two examples show how cultural negotiation functions as a vital element which helps people maintain their religious beliefs and their cultural traditions.

The use of traditional medicine and spiritual practices, which come from AIR teachings, creates ongoing problems for Christians who want to follow their faith. African Christians face a dilemma between following their religious beliefs about healing and morality and utilising traditional medicines, which are common in their communities. Ademiluka (2024) and Adarigho (2023), traditional medicine is used as a non-offensive practice that allows them to connect with Christian values by creating spaces that enable them to practice medicine without conflicting with their faith. The negotiation process demonstrates how religions function as cultural practices people experience in their daily lives, instead of existing as conflicts between two opposing sides. African Christians face difficulties when they try to combine different beliefs about the end of the world. The followers of both Christianity and AIR developed distinct beliefs about the afterlife and moral principles and social customs which share certain elements but contain fundamental doctrine differences (Ekeke & Ekpenyong, 2024). The existence of these two worldviews demands that believers

study theological pathways which enable them to unite their different beliefs about life after death.

The negotiation process extends to social matters like witchcraft and spiritual warfare and religious pluralism, which put Christian salvation at risk while endangering the mission work of Christian churches (Luka, 2023; Adarigho, 2023). African Christian identities develop through a combination of Eastern Christian traditions and ethnic heritage, resulting in people balancing their religious beliefs with their cultural background (Guglielmi, 2022). The current issues create additional difficulties for the existing situation. The exclusivity of Christianity faces challenges from religious pluralism and syncretism, which also bring problems to its mission operations (Adarigho, 2023). The Christian moral standards that African Christians must follow create conflicts with their cultural obligations to their communities and families, which are deeply rooted in their traditional African values (Okoye & Ugwu, 2024). Modern African Christians then must negotiate between their two identities and demand that others respect their cultural practices and their Christian values. The combination of traditional customs with Christian beliefs enables communities to maintain their cultural identity while observing their religious principles. For instance, the Esan people have established a cultural system which combines their traditional practices with their Christian beliefs (Aluede & Ikhidero 2024). It can therefore be argued that traditional symbols hold the power to create connections between biblical contexts through their use in indigenous healing rituals and communal rites, which promotes a Christian faith that stays true to both local cultural practices and genuine spiritual experiences.

Often, Indigenous people who adopt Christianity find it necessary to reconcile the two, wherein they pit one against the other rather than fully entering into either one (Mokhoathi, 2020). Dual religiosity can be beneficial, but it also has certain drawbacks. Many of these underlying challenges stem from the conflict between traditional beliefs and Christian ideas, as well as differences over behaviours. Typical church groups may reject traditional healing methods, for instance, thus making the very followers who rely on these methods for their health feel sad. Furthermore, social pressure to maintain a single religious identity ends up alienating people who embrace dualism, leading to shame or misunderstanding about their spiritual activities (Agbiji and Swart, 2015). The Giriama elders of Kenya, for example, exemplify scenarios where traditional practices coexist with Christianity and Islam, but tend to have geographical recognition issues in eventually being incorporated as a religion (Meinema, 2021).

African Christians face three additional challenges of basically identifying obstacles, particularly in discerning some elements of AIR. Undoubtedly, the encyclical Pope John Paul II, *Ecclesia in Africa* (1995), encourages friendly conversation, which will benefit African traditional religion in two ways: it keeps Catholics from negative influences, which are afflicting many of their lives and encourage them to accept certain positive values. These include belief in a Supreme Being, the eternal one, the creator, the one that provides, and the one that is a just judge; values that seem to fit in with Catholic belief easily. Christian experiencers are thus considered to be juxtaposed beings, another group of Christians who are “here or there,” and thus were labelled as nominal. Such dual religiosity creates an identity crisis triggered by the juxtaposition between Christianity and AIR. Their sociocultural system, however, accepts both. First, the dual conversion calls for monotheism as the belief common to these two religions. Mokhoathi (2019) reiterates that since God for Africans is perceived as one, there is no harm in believing how he manifests himself in both religions, as an African may conceptualise it.

Many African Christians find AIR very all-embracing regarding other religions while nurturing syncretistic tendencies. Though the negative connotation of dual religiosity in other religions, most especially in the West, does not find its place in the traditional African religious worldview (Mbiti, 1990). This explains why the majority of African Christians would see little difficulty in blending Christianity with AIR. Indigenous people who embrace Christianity find themselves wrestling with how to unite their faith with their cultural and religious heritage. This frequently leads to tension between the two types of worldviews to the exclusion of the other (Mokhoathi, 2020). Jarvis (2009) argues that the notion that the only way for indigenous Africans to assimilate into Christianity is to abandon their cultural heritage poses significant challenges because of the conflict between these beliefs and gospel values.

### **Identity-Reference Group Formation and Dual Religiosity**

The question about identity development arises in the understanding of dual religiosity and the challenges and projects that arise with it among Bemba Catholics living with both Christianity and AIR. Sociologist Robert Hefner (1993:25) opined that ‘conversion is an identity transformation process’ and relates it to a process of identity development known as reference-group formation. This reference group provides individuals with a basis for their own self-definition and identification relating to the context of acknowledgement

of human beings. It gives individuals knowledge of who they are, relating to other people. This holds good in terms of their capacity to negotiate the space, obligations, and entitlements of their identity. Reference group theory asserts that self-identification involves 'all choices, matters of self-interest, myriad conflicts and solidarities of human life.'

According to Hefner, the most important aspect of self-identity is whether that self-identity can connect with others and be responsive. Thus, their individuality is recognised, and their existence affirmed. Thereby, such individuals are deemed to be accorded space and status within a group. Such duality of religiosity leaves queries as to the extent to which such converts feel that they are fully identified with Christianity as being Bemba Catholics. Do they feel their individuality, plus Africanness? Are these dimensions recognised and affirmed in their new home, Christianity? Reference group orientation is a continual process at different levels of affirming human value; it does not start and finish with one becoming a member of a reference group. It is an ongoing process of revisiting beliefs and values previously held based on social, cultural, and religious dynamics. Group membership does not necessarily entail that people share the "group's outlook on reality in its entirety" (Hefner 1993:26). This creates a very powerful place in the indigenous concept of conversion among the Bemba Catholics. People can and do make conscious decisions and choices regarding the paths that their lives take. Some 'look elsewhere than their community of origin for alternative notions of self and self-worth' (Hefner, 1993:26), such as the Bemba Catholics who look back to AIR for meaning and answers to their unending questions concerning life. Hence, "conversion implies the acceptance of a new locus of self-definition, a new, though not necessarily exclusive, reference point for one's identity" (Hefner, 1993:17). Conversion is not exclusive but just a point of reference for convenience identity.

This study aims to examine the challenges and navigation of dual religiosity among Bemba Catholics in Muchinga Province of Zambia. The studies respond to the following research questions: What are the challenges of dual religious practice for Bemba Catholics who negotiate living with AIR and Christianity? What are the prospects for dual religiosity among Bemba Catholics? The study contributes to the discourse around syncretism by providing a contextualised view that considers local cultural complexities in the implications of religious identity. Encourage open discussions within parishes to address the challenges of dual religiosity and build mutual understanding among community members. In addition, developing programmes that educate the clergy and laity about the cultural relevance of indigenous practices is an effective way to address dual religiosity at local levels.

## METHODS

The study focused on dual religiosity and the difficulty of negotiating it among Bemba Catholics, using a qualitative method and interpretative phenomenology. Muchinga Province was specifically chosen for this research because of its significance to the Bemba cultural heritage and the Catholic presence of 125 years. The study included 20 individuals from the Bemba Catholic community, providing insight into the prevalence and impact that dual religiosity has on people's lives. Interviews with Bemba Catholics were performed using semi-structured outreach methods, focus group discussions, and observations, with notes and audio recordings for analysis. This study used interviews, focus group discussions and observation to collect data, and allowed for some openness and flexibility. The credibility of the findings was demonstrated through the presentation of unbiased research results and cross-checking with participants to ensure authenticity. The research process aimed to produce credible results while adhering to ethical guidelines such as informed consent, privacy, and confidentiality, and allowing participants to withdraw. Participants were well informed about the research process, and the researcher demonstrated empathy, objectivity, and respect for Bemba cultural norms. Private and anonymous environments were maintained, and the study was approved by the Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee (HSSREC) at the University of Zambia.

An interpretive phenomenological approach was employed. This approach follows Heidegger's model of 'being and time' that was further developed by Van Manen's (1997) into four (4) reflective thematic areas of lived experience: 'space,' 'body,' 'time,' and 'relations,' which. Van Manen's model of phenomenology further developed the application of Heidegger's four reflective themes to lived experiences. The study employed van Manen's Thematic Reflection to analyse data. The methodological approach of Van Manen, as emphasised in this study, emphasised a systematic exploration of lived experiences where the reflection on the phenomenon under discussion begins. This method was used to identify key themes that explained Bemba Catholics' dual religious practices, as well as to investigate how people experience their lived experiences by first understanding their real-life experiences. The study used interviews and focus groups to investigate how people experience their daily lives by gathering firsthand information on how Bemba Catholics demonstrate dual religiosity. Thematic analysis was used to identify the main themes of the phenomenon by reviewing recorded interviews and observations that revealed the participants' life experiences. The writing and rewriting process was used to convey the

participants' feelings about their thoughts, behaviours, and attitudes while remaining consistent with the research questions. The researchers interpreted emerging patterns within the research themes and continued with the evaluation of data analysis results by employing precise verification methods that tested the findings against larger research frameworks.

## **RESULTS**

### **Challenges, Tensions and Prospects of Negotiating Dual Religiosity among Bemba Catholics**

The exploration of the challenges associated with negotiating dual religiosity among Bemba Catholics in Muchinga Province has revealed several issues that indicate that although some challenges and tensions come with living with two religions, there are prospects for Bemba Catholics that accompany these challenges. These challenges and prospects are intertwined, hence studied as such. Negotiating dual religiosity presented several challenges, including conflicting beliefs, social stigma, excommunication and discipline, faith conflicts, an ethno-religious identity crisis, a lack of effective integration of faith and culture, misconceptions and misinterpretations of Bemba traditional beliefs and practices, and church resistance to change. The challenges also indicated prospects for negotiating dual religiosity among Bemba Catholics.

#### **Conflicting Belief Systems**

Bemba Catholics face challenges navigating the intersection between traditional cultural beliefs and Christian teachings. P15 expressed, "As a Bemba Catholic, I struggle to balance my traditional beliefs with Christian teachings." This struggle is also echoed by P14, who stated, "I feel conflicted and confused trying to combine the two belief systems." P5 elaborated on the sources of this difficulty, noting, "The difficulty of balancing two belief systems arises from cultural differences, conflicting interpretations of Scripture, and societal expectations." P8 added, "I struggle to combine my cultural heritage with my Christian faith." Recognising the complexity of the situation, P10 emphasised the importance of seeking support, stating, "I need help to navigate complexities arising from balancing the two worldviews." P18 stated, "I balance my spiritual practices and cultural identity." While P3 noted, "I try to balance my traditional beliefs with Catholic teachings." Although this was a hard claim to explain by the two participants. However, P12 expressed the dilemma involved

in balancing the two traditions, stating, “I often face difficulties seeking social acceptance and community support while engaging in AIR alongside my Catholic practice.”

### **Social Stigma, Excommunication and Discipline**

The interviews demonstrated how difficult dual allegiance among the Bemba Catholics was and its significant social consequences. P2 expressed the personal impact of this challenge, stating, “Unfortunately, I face judgement and criticism from my peers and the church community when I engage in our cultural practices.” This judgement leads to severe social repercussions, explained P6. P1 reported, “People see me as someone who does not fully practice Christianity because of this belief they have about my faith.” He stated that this belief causes him to be excluded from certain essential events and social interactions, which he experiences during his daily activities. While P9 highlighted the emotional toll of this situation, remarking, “The stigma and discrimination accompanying living with two worldviews has a significant impact on my mental health and overall well-being.” Citing a personal experience, P9 added, “I feel unsupported and disconnected from my community.” The challenges extend further to the consequences of this turning to traditional practices, as stated by P11, “When we turn to traditional practices during uncertain times, we face severe consequences, such as excommunication or disciplinary actions from the Church.” P14 confirmed this feeling by stating, “The cultural activities we perform in our lives have a strong impact on us because we feel more separated from our religious community. P17 declared, “The outcomes of these activities result in people losing their belief in the Church while they become disappointed with its teachings, which produces harmful effects on their personal spiritual health.”

### **The Conflict Between Faith and Culture**

The interviews have highlighted the challenges individuals face when navigating the intersection of Bemba cultural heritage and the Catholic faith. P4 stated, “I must balance my Bemba cultural background with my Catholic faith, which is often difficult. The Church wants me to embrace Catholicism and abandon my traditional beliefs. However, this creates a conflict within me.” This internal struggle was also echoed by P8, who mentioned, “I struggle to find a balance between honouring my cultural background and the teachings of my Catholic faith. This leads to confusion and uncertainty as I try to reconcile these two aspects of my identity.” Furthermore, P13 emphasised the need for greater understanding within the Church, stating, “The Church needs to recognise our cultural diversity in

indigenous Catholic communities because this recognition would help me to feel more accepted and understood by others.”

### **Ethno-Religious Identity Crisis**

A complex relationship between cultural heritage and religious identity among Bemba Catholics exists, presenting a challenge in negotiating dual religiosity. Although many negotiated this duality like P1, who expressed, “I am a Bemba Catholic, and I navigate my identity by unifying my cultural and religious backgrounds.” The negotiation produced a conflict in the sense of belonging. P3 noted this conflict, stating, “I face the challenge of finding a balance between honouring my cultural heritage and adhering to the tenets of my Catholic faith.” P3 further elaborated, “I struggle to reconcile my cultural and religious identities, which makes me confused and conflicted.” This struggle often manifests in daily life, as explained by P9: “The conflict appears in the practice of traditional practices and rituals that conflict with my Christian beliefs.” P7 provided a personal example of the conflict, stating, “Participating in traditional ceremonies incompatible with Catholic teachings produces an inner conflict for me.” The pressure to conform exacerbates this dilemma, as described by P13: “The pressure to conform to societal expectations while upholding my Christian values leads to dissonance in my identity.”

P16 reflected on this duality, noting, “Honouring both my Bemba cultural and Catholic identities sometimes makes me feel isolated from both my cultural and religious communities.” This was also echoed by P15, who shared, “I feel misunderstood by fellow Bemba people for my firm Christian beliefs, while facing criticism from Catholics for my adherence to certain cultural practices.” The P19 student expressed their experience through the statement that their dual identity creates difficulties within their religious and cultural environment. “Although I intend to balance my cultural background with my religious beliefs in a way that feels true to who I am.” P4 added to this effort by stating, “I think I require deep introspection and self-awareness to find harmony within my dual identity.” P15 articulated her personal conflict, stating, “I feel torn between two identities, one rooted in my cultural heritage and the other shaped by my religious affiliation.”

### **Lack of Efficient Integration of Faith and Culture**

Bemba Catholics face challenges in harmonising cultural customs with the Christian faith. P14 identified a significant obstacle, stating that a primary difficulty for them as Bemba Catholics is “finding ways to harmonise cultural customs and beliefs with the core principles

of Catholicism.” P6 emphasised the difficulty of this endeavour, noting, “This is no simple exploit; it involves finding a way to integrate deep-seated cultural traditions into a religious framework that has its own set of doctrines and beliefs.” P5 added to this discussion by explaining that achieving a harmonious balance between these two worlds was a challenging and often daunting task, as it required a deep understanding of both Bemba culture and the teachings of the Catholic Church. P1 shared devotion to this undertaking, viewing it as “an essential component of self-identity to fully embrace faith while respecting the cultural legacy of my ancestors.”

### **Misconceptions and Misinterpretations of Indigenous Beliefs and Practices**

Both lay participants and priests observed that Bemba Catholics’ engagement with Indigenous elements often carried the risk of being misinterpreted or misrepresented by those outside the faith community, including critics and observers. P1 indicated that the coexistence of AIR and Christianity sometimes led to misunderstandings and misinterpretations of traditional practices within the church. This sentiment was shared by P18, who argued, “The lack of recognition and acceptance of Bemba cultural contributions results in cultural insensitivity and exclusion within the church and community.” To counter these issues, P11 proposed a proactive approach: “To stop cultural erosion and encourage inclusivity, the Church should understand and respect different cultures where it is found.” Building on this foundation, P2 suggested practical strategies, asserting that the church could:

Encourage respect and appreciation for cultural diversity by teaching church members about African traditions. Include some of these practices in church services and promote discussions between church leaders and Bemba Catholic communities.

P3 emphasised the potential consequences of inaction by the church, stating, “It is failure to address these cultural issues that leads Bemba Catholics to feel disconnected from the church.” P17 highlighted communal complexities, stating that community subtleties complicated negotiations because members held different views on incorporating AIR in Catholic rituals. Priest A alleged, “This misrepresentation can stem from a lack of understanding of the subtlety involved in combining various religious practices and beliefs.” As a result, asserted Priest B, “The Church’s inculturation activities face major misinterpretations about their actual goals.’ Priest D explained that inculturation serves to create connections between different cultural traditions and the teachings of the Church and practices harmoniously.” Priest A argued that it was such misinterpretations that often led to

unfounded assumptions about the Church's motives and the potential impact of these efforts on both the faithful and the broader society. Most participants were puzzled at why the church incorporated certain cultural elements in its practice while refraining from its members from doing the same in their personal lives. P20 argued, "The church does not bother to understand the essence of culture in our lives, hence misinterpreting our actions as 'Icisenshi' [pagan]." P16 argued, "Our indigenous beliefs and practices make us who we are as Bemba people; they are Imbela sha Cibemba (our traditions). Unfortunately, they are misjudged and misrepresented by the clergy and the church at large."

### **Resistance to Change from the Church**

The Church has expressed resistance to the change in perception towards dual religiosity. P6 indicated that "integrating Bemba culture into Catholicism has been a matter of debate among church leaders and individual Catholics." This debate reflects a divide within the church and community; P1 noted, "While some individuals welcome the idea, others express resistance to cultural mixing." This was especially observed in the differing accommodation levels of the AIR elements among the priests. P8 elaborated on the impact of this resistance, indicating that "This resistance affects efforts to challenge religious labelling and create a more accepting and culturally aware religious environment." P7 recognised the pressures they faced, stating, "Some church leaders emphasise strict adherence to Catholic teachings, which creates challenges when I try to include traditional elements in my life."

Furthermore, P20 emphasised the implications of this resistance for faith engagement, asserting that "The Church and some Bemba Catholics hesitate to accept cultural practices and beliefs. This reluctance makes it harder for Catholicism to appeal to some people who feel disconnected from cultural identity." P3 stated:

Some people in communities today feel that Catholicism is a foreign religion to them. This is partly because they see it as unwilling to bend on its practices in favour of indigenous ways of life and spirituality, or reflect local culture and is very selective when it chooses to adapt some cultural practices.

Considering these challenges, P4 stressed the importance of nurturing inclusivity, stating, "It is crucial to recognise the need for an inclusive and more culturally conscious religious environment that respects and integrates Bemba culture." To address these issues,

P6 suggested, “The Church must build good relations with communities and support a more genuine and meaningful expression of Catholicism founded in Bemba culture.”

## **DISCUSSION**

### **Challenges, Tensions and Prospects of Negotiating Dual Religiosity among Bemba Catholics**

The study has established that Bemba Catholics face several challenges and tensions as they negotiate dual religiosity. These challenges include social stigma and discrimination for practising AIR elements, which leads to isolation and potential excommunication from the Church. The conflict between faith and culture causes dissonance as Bemba Catholics negotiate expectations from their traditional communities and the Church. The Church’s resistance to integrating certain indigenous cultural expressions hinders Bemba Catholics from fully embracing their heritage and Catholic faith. Negotiating dual religiosity in ‘Bemba Catholicism’ requires a delicate balance of faith, culture, and identity. The conflict between traditional beliefs and Christian teachings has resulted in disagreements over practices perceived as pagan and primitive, such as traditional healing methods, ancestral veneration, belief in supernatural powers, and so on. But this negotiation also indicates prospects for the Bemba Catholics that include enriched faith experience, cultural revitalisation, identity discernment among others. This raises the question of who should decide which AIR elements can be incorporated into Bemba Catholics’ lives: the church or the Bemba Catholics themselves?

#### **Conflicting Beliefs Systems**

The study discovered that in their negotiation of dual religiosity, Bemba Catholics often grapple with the challenge of harmonising these two belief systems. This leads to feelings of internal conflict and confusion. Cultural differences, conflicting interpretations of scripture, and societal expectations all make it difficult to balance the two belief systems. Bemba Catholics find it difficult to reconcile their cultural heritage with their Catholic faith and often require support in navigating the intricacies of these two worldviews. This balancing act often leads to difficulties in seeking social acceptance and community support. Like many Indigenous people who have embraced Christianity, they struggle to fully integrate their Christian beliefs with traditional practices, often leading to a situation where the two exist side-by-side rather than being fully merged (Mokhoathi, 2020). For example, the Igbo

community experiences tensions between their customary family and community responsibilities and Christian doctrines, resulting in disagreements regarding wedding and marriage traditions (Nweke, 2023; Okoye & Ugwu, 2024). Mokhoathi (2020) contends that this often results in a dichotomy between the two differing worldviews, leading to the marginalisation of one over the other.

### **Social Stigma, Excommunication and Discipline**

Bemba Catholics who practice dual religiosity face judgment and criticism from their peers and the church community. This results in social stigma and ostracism, which prevents them from fully embracing the church. These individuals are perceived as not fully committed to their Catholic faith because of their engagement in AIR elements, which results in exclusion from important events and rituals, resulting in social isolation. This impacts their mental health and overall well-being, as individuals feel unsupported and disconnected from their community and church. Turning to traditional practices during uncertain times leads to severe consequences, such as excommunication or disciplinary actions from the Church. This further alienates individuals and causes disillusionment with the Church's teachings. Such actions threaten spiritual well-being and reflect tensions between traditional cultural practices and Christian faith, further undermining social unity and mental health. Social consequences include judgment, exclusion, and disciplinary measures. These consequences illustrate institutional and community pressures to conform and suppress alternative expressions of faith within the culture. This study argues that enforcement of strict orthodoxy often undermines inclusive spiritual environments, pushing members into a deprived religious identity and affecting mental health. There is a need for more inclusive pastoral engagement that recognises the interaction between faith, culture, and mental health. This situation is also reflected among the Giriama elders in Kenya, whose ancestral beliefs and practices are facing challenges in acquiring their recognition as a legitimate religion (Meinema, 2021). This exemplifies the nature of coexistence between traditional practices and Christianity.

### **Faith Versus Culture Controversy**

Bemba Catholics who negotiate their ethno-Christian identity through religious dualism face a cultural identity crisis characterised by emotional and psychological difficulties in reconciling their Bemba heritage with Catholic practice. This illustrates the struggle for cultural and religious legitimacy within this plural context. The challenge lies in balancing the

honouring of their cultural heritage with adherence to Catholic tenets. Bemba Catholics struggle to harmonise their cultural and religious identities, resulting in confusion and conflict. The Catholic Church encourages its local members to fully embrace Catholicism and abandon perceived pagan beliefs, often placing Bemba Catholics in a difficult position. Consequently, this creates a conflict within them, illustrating the hurdles put across as the Bemba Catholics integrate their culture into their lives. This struggle was explicitly affirmed by P8, who attested to his struggle to find a balance between honouring his cultural background and the teachings of the Catholic faith, which led to confusion and uncertainty as he tried to reconcile these two aspects of his identity. This revealed an internal conflict between cultural identity and religious dogma. Culture is marginalised in religious settings because it is believed to conflict with religion, which raises concerns. Evidently, the P8's statements reflect confusion and uncertainty, indicating the need for a pastoral response that considers cultural traditions as legitimate expressions of faith within the Catholic context. According to Jarvis (2009), the notion that the only way for indigenous Africans to assimilate into Christianity is to abandon their cultural heritage poses significant challenges because of the conflict between these beliefs and gospel values. Adherents of both Christianity and AIR have created unique ideas on the afterlife, as well as moral norms and social activities that, although sharing certain parallels, nevertheless represent fundamental theological differences (Ekeke & Ekpenyong, 2024). This leads to reflections on how faith and culture can harmoniously coexist, given the complexities observed in this study.

### **Ethno-Religious Identity Crisis**

Bemba Catholics negotiating their ethno-Christian identity through dual religiosity experience an ethnic and religious identity crisis as they struggle to balance their cultural heritage with their Christian faith. This conflict leads to confusion, uncertainty, and tension. Their struggle manifests itself in their practice of traditional rituals, ceremonies and customs that allegedly challenge Catholic teachings. Ethno-religious identity crisis is a question of who I am: Bemba or Catholic, or both. Furthermore, the pressure to conform to societal expectations while maintaining Christian values results in dissonance and confusion in their identities. The interaction between Bemba cultural identity and Catholic identity evokes feelings of isolation and alienation within Bemba and Catholic communities. Many Bemba Catholics believe they are misunderstood because of their strong Christian beliefs, and other Catholics are sceptical and critical of their practice of certain cultural elements. The tension created by the commitment to cultural rituals and religious integrity makes it difficult to

manage traditional practices alongside Catholic teachings. This implies that the struggle is both internal and social, affecting one's sense of belonging in cultural and religious communities. Bemba Catholics advocated for inclusive discussions that acknowledge diverse cultural expressions, urging religious leaders to adopt culturally sensitive approaches that affirm traditional practices as compatible rather than erroneous. Consequently, societal pressures to conform to a singular religious identity alienate individuals with multiple beliefs, leading to feelings of guilt or uncertainty about their spirituality (Agbiji and Swart, 2015). These struggles compel a re-evaluation of how religious identity in a multicultural context is negotiated.

### **Inefficient Integration of Faith and Culture**

A significant obstacle for Bemba Catholics is finding ways to harmonise their cultural customs and beliefs with Catholic principles efficiently. This task involves integrating cultural traditions into a Catholic framework, which has its own doctrines. Achieving a harmonious balance between these two worldviews or belief systems is complex and often daunting. It requires a profound understanding of both Bemba culture and the teachings of the Catholic Church. Many Bemba Catholics are devoted to this undertaking, viewing it as essential to fully embrace their faith and respect their ancestors' cultural legacy. Cultural practices are deep-rooted among the Bemba Catholics, necessitating a reconciliation process that requires intellectual, emotional, and spiritual commitment. For many Bemba Catholics, achieving this balance is a complex task. This ongoing conflict reflects a broader issue confronting many indigenous communities as they navigate the intersection of tradition and religion. Finding the balance is intricate and dynamic, and requires continuous dialogue for cultural-religious integration. However, this process is often inefficient. Recognising this problem, Elazar (2018) contends that the church seeks to establish a 'pristine Christian religion' while opposing what it sees as 'untrue or nominal Christian faith.' According to Elazar, labelling persons with differing orientations to faith causes conflict since what is tertiary to foreign Christians is important to certain Indigenous converts, who regard cultural preservation and freedom as major motivations for choosing Christianity.

### **Misconceptions and Misinterpretations of Indigenous Beliefs and Practices**

The study established that Bemba Catholics' engagement in Indigenous elements often carries the risk of being misinterpreted or misrepresented by spectators, including the church, clergy, critics, and observers. Church practices are sometimes misunderstood and

misinterpreted because of the coexistence of AIR and Christianity. The Bemba people's cultural contributions to morality and spirituality are not always acknowledged or embraced, leading to cultural insensitivity and exclusion within both the church and the wider community. This was exemplified in P20's argument that the church did not bother to understand the essence of culture in their lives, hence misinterpreting their actions as 'Icisenshi' [pagan]. While P16 reaffirmed the place of culture and traditions in Bemba people's hearts and how they are misjudged and misrepresented, stating, "Our indigenous beliefs and practices make us who we are as Bemba people; they are 'Imbela sha Cibemba' (our culture and traditions). Unfortunately, they are misjudged and misrepresented by the clergy and the church at large." This misrepresentation stems from a lack of understanding of the subtleties involved in integrating various religious practices and beliefs. Misinterpretations often lead to unfounded assumptions about the Church's motives and the potential impact of these efforts on both the faithful and the broader society. Community subtleties also complicate negotiations because members hold different views on incorporating AIR and Catholic elements. Furthermore, the church's incorporation of certain cultural elements into its practice, while cautioning its members against doing the same in their personal lives without due diligence, created mistrust and further confusion. To counter these issues, the church needs to re-evaluate its inclusivity, cultural sensitivity and understanding of the Bemba culture and traditions. This misconception and misinterpretation might be leading the Bemba Catholics to revert to their indigenous identity as shown by Hefner's (1993) Identity-reference group formation.

### **Resistance to Change from the Church**

This study established that integrating Bemba culture into Catholicism has been a matter of debate and resistance among church leaders and individual Catholics. This resistance profoundly affected efforts to challenge religious labelling and promote a more accepting and culturally aware religious climate. The Church's unwillingness, as well as that of some of the Bemba Catholics, to adopt certain cultural practices in the church limits the appeal of Christianity to those who feel estranged from their Bemba heritage and identity. This contributes to the perception that Christianity is foreign in these communities, as a religion more concerned with adaptation than with becoming part of the local culture. Both priests and Bemba Catholic participants asserted deep-rooted tensions in the church surrounding the integration of Bemba culture into Catholicism, indicating that reconciliation must be rooted in discussions about cultural authenticity and the expression of faith. This

resistance to integration significantly affects efforts to create a culturally aware environment, making it challenging to view Christianity as truly local and relevant to the local people. As noted by Agbiji and Swart (2015), local and faith communities could ostracise someone for being dual in their religious affiliation, hence causing feelings of guilt or confusion around preferred rituals. This is the reason Bemba Catholics' call for inclusivity indicates that, without active efforts to bridge cultural divides, Christianity may be perceived as imposed on the locals.

## CONCLUSION

The Bemba Catholics face multiple complex issues that extend beyond simple conflicts between two opposing sides, with challenges that affect every aspect of their culture and social life, their ethical values, and their religious beliefs. Indigenous contexts need to be understood in detail because they require inculturation through dialogue, which should replace rejection as the preferred response. African cultural elements that matter to the African community will become part of Christianity through their incorporation, helping create authentic African expressions of faith that blend local customs with global Christian traditions. According to research findings, Bemba Catholics encounter multiple problems that create tensions between their dual religious practices. Practitioners of AIR elements face social stigma and discrimination, resulting in isolation within the Church and the risk of excommunication. Bemba Catholics experience internal conflict because their faith requirements and community and Church cultural traditions create opposing demands. Bemba Catholics possess the ability to navigate their identity space through their freedom of identity expression. This aligns with the reference group theory, which holds that people choose their identity through all their personal interests and every human relationship, including conflicts with others and bonds of solidarity. Bemba Catholics face obstacles to their complete acceptance of their indigenous heritage and Catholic faith because the Church opposes their native cultural practices.

The practice of dual religiosity arguably requires Bemba Catholics to find an equal balance among three aspects: their faith, their cultural heritage, and their personal identity. The Christian faith and traditional beliefs cause tension around traditional healing methods, ancestral worship, and supernatural powers, which the Church considers pagan and primitive practices. They experience identity confusion and social discrimination, and they face a

struggle between their ancestral traditions and Church doctrines. Spiritual experiences become more meaningful through belief system reconciliation, yet this practice also generates problems that create conflict between different belief systems. The study further demonstrates that Bemba Catholics achieve three prospects in their dual religious practice: managing their faith, cultural heritage, and personal identity, all of which they pursue on their spiritual journey. Bemba Catholics maintain a dual religious practice between AIR and Catholic traditions. The Church must build mutual respect and understanding by encouraging discussions that recognise both AIR and Catholicism as valid belief systems. The development of educational programmes about indigenous cultural values for both clergy and laity may help create a more inclusive religious experience, which decreases existing challenges and tensions. The study recommends that future studies investigate dual religiosity and its related challenges within Bemba communities as a longitudinal study. The future study can also focus on implications of the challenges faced during the negotiation process of christianity and culture for the church and the Bemba Catholics.

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