

7-2021

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Recommended Citation

Kaunda, Chammah J. and Hinfelaar, Marja (2021) "A Western Missionary Cooked in an African Pot': Religion, Gender and History in Zambia – Essays in Honour of Father Hugo F. Hinfelaar," *Zambia Social Science Journal*: Vol. 7 : No. 2 , Article 2.

Available at: <https://scholarship.law.cornell.edu/zssj/vol7/iss2/2>

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'A Western Missionary Cooked in an African Pot': Religion, Gender and History in Zambia – Essays in Honour of Father Hugo F. Hinfelaar

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Introduction

The concept of 'Cooked in African Pot' is inspired by Klaus Fiedler, Paul Gundani and Hilary Mijoga (1998) who argued that clay pots represent African cosmic views, traditions, anthropology and epistemology. It is these ingredients that would form and sharpen Father Hugo Hinfelaar's reinterpretation of Christian faith for Zambia. And it is this inspiring and honourable work and legacy that necessitated these two special issues dedicated to one of the distinguished missionary scholars of religion in Zambia. In what follows, we argue that Hinfelaar dedicated himself to what could be described as a soul search to deconstruct and recapture Christianity for the Zambian people on the margins.

A Journey of a Thousand Miles Begins with the Self

Hinfelaar was born in the Hague on the third of April 1933, the second child and first boy of Stephanus Leonardus Hinfelaar, a professional carpenter and cabinet maker, and Petronella Aleida Vermeulen. As Hugo related in his unpublished autobiography, in 1945 the choice of secondary schools was not great. The small number of grammar schools, called gymnasia and lycea in the Netherlands, were mostly occupied by children of the upper middle and professional class:

For the young men and women, who felt they 'had a vocation', who wanted to do something special with their lives and for this receive secondary education the main and often the only choice was service within the Church as priests or religious brothers and sisters. Moreover, the status of 'someone who went into religion' was very high and rendered a family respectable. Many parents prayed daily that one of their sons or daughters would become a priest, a religious sister or a brother (unpublished autobiography).

Hinfelaar was 12 when he started minor seminary, followed by major seminary and White Father training in both the Netherlands and the United Kingdom. He finalised his studies when he was 25 and was ordained in 1958. His motivation to become a missionary was mixed, and here we quote at length

to understand the historical and personal context of his choice:

The joyful example of men like Fr Nico Hendriks made me decide to become a missionary like him and to go out to exotic countries. I was never attracted to the more ritual and liturgical dimensions of the so-called 'secular priesthood' of the parish priests and their curates.... My experience of the [second world] war had made such an impression on me that my motivation could be regarded as serious, even at the tender age of twelve. The war had made our generation grow up quicker. I agree that my motivation might have been mixed. But does a pure motivation ever occur? My parents, especially my mother, who as a young girl had not been allowed to become a teacher, wanted her children, and in particular her eldest son, to be given the opportunity of social advancement. Entry into the seminary was certainly a sure way of achieving this. Personally, the tribal wars of continental Europe with its misery of exaggerated nationalism, followed by a joyful liberation by the Anglo-Saxon soldiers, made me vaguely aware that another world was possible, that human beings should unite whatever their religion, nationhood or ideology. Finally, the fact that I [...] wanted to move on and see what else life had to offer, might also have contributed to my saying farewell and leave home.

It was in his second year of formation at Scholasticate² in 's-Heerenberg in 1955 that he had an encounter with Father Piet de Ruijter who was serving as a missionary in Northern Rhodesia (present day, Zambia) in 1950. During his first visit to 's-Heerenberg Father de Ruijter, who had come straight from Africa, met with each Dutch student individually. Hinfelaar would confide in him about the severe challenges he faced studying in Scholasticate. He reassured Hinfelaar to "Push on. Africa is different. Once you are in the treadmill of mission work over there you will enjoy it!" this gave him enough impetus to keep going. He also listened to a series of discussions on life in Africa by the Superior Father Emile Geurts who had worked in Tanganyika (present day Tanzania), and later became the rector of the WF Scholasticate from 1947 until 1956. Hinfelaar was also inspired by thought-provoking stories of the White Fathers who would return from Africa for vacation. He reminisces "I could never get enough of them." (unpublished autobiography) At his ordination he received his appointment to the then Northern Rhodesia to serve in the diocese of Abercorn (current day Mbala), Northern Province (part of it transferred to form present-day Muchinga Province) of Zambia where he arrived in December 1958. He would work as a Dutch White Father missionary in both this province and Lusaka until he retired in 2014. He is admired as one of the most outstanding and long-lasting missionary-scholars (Hinfelaar and Macola, 2003). He recalls:

I have been in Zambia on and off for almost half a century. I have known the Catholic Church before and after the Second Vatican Council. I lived with all its subsequent tensions. I did not 'leave' or sit on the ecclesiastical fence but held out in one way or another. During these years I experienced change of status, from being sent by the parish community as a hero to being regarded as a remnant of old colonial furniture. (unpublished autobiography)

Hinfelaar's work in Zambia, which included not only practical ministry but would evolve into rigorous research in religious anthropology, is enormous. Hinfelaar's need for further studies arose from the belief of Father Louis Oger, the director of the Language Study Centre in Ilondola, Northern Province, that as time progressed the Centre would need more qualified lecturers. Father Oger asked Hinfelaar twice to go for further studies and then to come and teach at the Language Study Centre. Though reluctant at first, Hinfelaar studied for both a master's degree and a Doctor of Philosophy (Ph.D.) which he obtained from the University of London in 1989. This would empower him to make a more academic oriented contribution in religious anthropology. He engaged with various issues of religion and Roman Catholic Christianity in particular, which ranged from history, gender, politics, independent Christian movements and the impact of religious colonialization in Zambia. He also lectured at the Major Seminary of Lusaka and was the resource person for continuing lay formation in the Archdiocese of Lusaka. Hinfelaar witnessed the rise of nationalism, being based in the same area as future President Kenneth Kaunda and future Vice-President Simon Kapwepwe.

Hinfelaar was also an eyewitness to the rise and demise of the Lumpa movement founded by Prophetess Alice Lenshina. He visited her during the time of her house detention by former President Kaunda, following what is described as the 'Lumpa Uprising' – a resistance movement against earthly political authority shortly after Zambia's independence in 1964. It was this uprising that forced him to rethink the Western Christian thought that informed his religious imagination. He was surprised that "intelligent people, many of them with babies on their backs, would run into a hail of bullets rather than be instructed in the Christian faith as brought by the missionaries" (Hinfelaar, 1992, 193). He questioned, if "The Gospel was meant to be Good News why then were they so afraid of Christ on the cross? Why did they see mission-work as an imposition rather than as a liberation?" (Hinfelaar, 1992, 193). He refused to reduce Lumpa Church followers into mere objects of study by taking simplistic approaches from social science or socio-economic analysis. He would discover that "the cross of Christ had become a symbol of a religious cosmology" that reduced the

masses, especially women into docile obedience to a patriarchal bourgeoisie, it had taken their means of resistance against oppression and exploitation and eroded their moral and cultural empowerment (Hinfelaar, 1992, 195). Hinfelaar (2004) saw inculturation, the rooting of Christ's message among Zambians, as a weapon of resistance and emancipation for the marginalized and excluded. It is through inculturation that the Christian faith was to be liberated from the powerful and the rich. In this way, Hinfelaar (2004) perceives inculturation as not only the means of rooting Christian faith in Zambian cultures but a viable tool for liberation and promotion of justice-oriented articulation of the Gospel.

Hinfelaar moved to Lusaka in the early seventies where he founded the Matthias Mulumba Parish in Bauleni. He wrote a couple of influential works on Zambia. Most notably: *Bemba-Speaking Women of Zambia in a Century of Religious Change* (1994), a book based on his PhD; the article "Women's Revolt: The Lumpa Church of Lenshina Mulenga in the 1950s," published in the *Journal of Religion in Africa* (1991) and *History of the Catholic Church in Zambia, 1895-1995* (2004). These works were described by scholars as a collection of "African theology which does not come from desks only but from the experience of life and experience of God in people's lives" (Aguilar and de Aguilar, 1994, 139). Hinfelaar's search to Africanise the church is evident in the decorations of this parish with "Bemba motifs, such as the star motif from the girls' initiation and certain other symbols used by that tribe in its initiation rites, (which) have been used in creative ways" (Ott, 2000, 271).

Archbishop Emmanuel Milingo as an Eye Opener

It was during the time he was appointed as the secretary to Archbishop Emmanuel Milingo, former Archbishop of Lusaka, from 1971 until Milingo's exile from Zambia in 1981 that Hinfelaar's struggle for the creation of a locally shaped and informed Christianity in Zambia became consolidated. Hinfelaar was constantly present at Milingo's exorcism sessions, which he described as biblical. He assessed that "the ceremony consisted of a rite of healing which was based on the Bible" (1992, 173). Hinfelaar's interactions and personal observation of healing and exorcism sessions brought him to the conviction that Christianity without adequate cultural incarnation could not sufficiently respond to the people's deepest existential challenges and questions. Milingo forced him to question the very nature of the Christian faith as he knew it and began to see it as an imposition on Zambia. He writes, "as secretary to Archbishop Emmanuel Milingo in Lusaka and witness to his healing sessions, I became slowly convinced that somewhere something had gone amiss in the proper transmission of Christ's message of liberation" (1992, x). It was this gap that Milingo filled as he sought to engage with a spiritual ontology and cosmology which Western missionaries had

demonised but yet remained resilient in the religious practices of many Zambian people. Hinfelaar became convinced that Milingo sought to inculturate Christian faith “not as a mere practical convenience, but because he considered that” the African spiritual universe offered “valid perspectives for articulating Christian theological commitments” (Bediako, 2004, 86). However, for Hinfelaar, there was much more to Milingo’s Christianity than merely legitimising the African spiritual universe. Hinfelaar realised that missionary Christian discourses were embedded in bourgeois Christianity which Milingo’s spirituality resisted. Milingo represented the grievances and resistance to middle-class Christianity that undermined the masses, especially women. Hinfelaar lamented that:

Unfortunately, Milingo was surrounded by a mainly expatriate clergy who were overworked in the rapidly growing city of Lusaka. Many had come from overseas, ill-prepared for pastoral work among an uprooted people. Some were obviously prejudiced and ill-equipped to understand the linguistic, cultural, or religious backgrounds of the different peoples of Zambia. They had no guidelines by which to judge what was and what was not genuine inculturation. It is hardly surprising that Milingo found himself practically alone in his ministry (1992, 173).

As a pioneer in inculturation, Milingo was admired by the missionaries but was opposed fiercely by some Zambian priests who had internalised colonial missionary values and religious practices. They had become so deeply entrenched in the colonial thought system that they rejected their own history and traditions and found it difficult, if not impossible to accept any change (Hinfelaar, 2004). This could be expected because Milingo functioned in a complex spiritual universe that was impossible for a conceptually colonised mind to accept, but which the laypeople embraced in its various dimensions. Milingo constructed his theological ideas of healing, exorcism and pastoral care based on such “thought-patterns, perceptions of reality and the concepts of identity” (Bediako, 1995, 92). In speaking of Milingo’s ministry, Gerrie ter Haar (1992, 263) argued that recent developments within the churches were indicative that many Christians around the world had become aware of the need for a contextualised “Christian response to the problem of evil, whatever the form it may assume.” Hinfelaar (1992, 184) considered that Milingo’s exile³ to the Vatican in Rome, Italy, hindered the process of “genuine inculturation” of Zambian theology.

Women as the Soul of Emancipatory Christian Faith in Zambia

It was Hinfelaar’s gender-sensitive theology that forced him to defy missionary Christian discourses that deployed techniques that sought to paganise and

primitivise Zambian beliefs, rites, and institutions. His search for emancipation and liberation of Zambian women gave him only one option, to inculturate Christianity. He recalls, “many of the people who flocked to the Archbishop during the seventies were women who suffered all kinds of sickness and disease. They seemed to be plagued by an increasing array of evil spirits rather than to have been freed from captivity by the teaching of Jesus Christ” (1992, x). Despite being male, Hinfelaar had seen how Roman Catholic patriarchy with its wholesale rejection of traditional cultural values was destructive to the gendered Bemba religious system of thought. Hinfelaar, therefore, does not apologize when it comes to promoting Bemba-speaking women’s resistance against foreign religious domination and suppression. Looking at the time he was writing, it is safe to argue that Hinfelaar was among the first progressive male scholars to start charting theological gendered research which has the potential to promote gender justice and equality. Even among pioneering African male theologians, the experiences of women were neglected in their theologies of inculturation (Phiri, 1997a, 18; 1997b, 69; Njoroge, 1997, 80).

Without shame, Hinfelaar would engage from a religious perspective with the most private female initiation rites called *imbusa* which were heavily policed against outside intrusion. *Imbusa* forms the cultural foundations of Bemba philosophy. Hinfelaar believed that *imbusa* was a womb of many “‘Seeds of Revelation’ that were yet to be discovered as building stones for genuine African Christianity” in which women are a crucial and equal partner (1992, 192). He emphasised that by taking seriously the cosmic conviction embedded in *imbusa*, the church would do itself a favour. Hinfelaar’s vision is shared by the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians who have underlined that emancipation and liberation can only be achieved if women are included. As Mercy Oduyoye (1995, 202) argues, the household of God can only be experienced as emancipating when all are empowered, all are included, all are affirmed, all are recognized, and all are heard “as children in a parent’s home and around the one table”. Women must be empowered to “express their experience of God in affirming cultural beliefs and practices, while they feel called by God to denounce and to deconstruct oppressive ones” (Oduyoye, 1995, 202).

Conclusion: Mission as ‘Discovery of One’s True Identity’

As Hinfelaar started out with a mission to convert, he would awaken to a realization that the opposite was also true, he was being converted to becoming more human. It would become even more clear that he did not bring God to Zambia; it was God who brought him to learn that Christianity can only be ‘Good News’ to Zambians to the extent that it authentically and adequately established its African credentials within the local spiritual universe, traditions,

anthropology and epistemologies. Hinfelaar's subsequent search for viable inculturation missiology demonstrates that the Christian faith liberates both the missionary and the missionized people within the interstitial spaces of mutual acceptance, appreciation and affirmation of each other for what they are. Hinfelaar demonstrates that it is not just the gospel that is culturally translatable. Emancipatory missionaries are also translatable as divine tools that help the local people make Christian faith relevant and accessible through the host culture. The missionary is a critical space for the local people to make sense of the gospel within their historical and cultural context. Hinfelaar made himself vulnerable enough to enter the "ambivalent zones" (Hinfelaar, 1992, 53) of African cosmology to have a glimpse of what God was doing among the Zambian people. Thus, missionary work "is in itself the discovery of one's true identity. It will make us say openly, sometimes humbly, but always in all solidarity: "That is us" (Hinfelaar, 2004, 2).

Summary of Hugo Special Issue

This special issue brought together scholars from various disciplines to reflect on topics that Hinfelaar interrogated through his engagements with Zambian Bemba worldviews. Given the number of articles we have divided it in two issues. In the first issue, Anthony Tambatamba, Austin Cheyeka and Tomaida Milingo employ indigenisation theory to interrogate "The Withdrawal of Missionaries of Africa from Kasama and Mpika Dioceses in Zambia." They argue that while it appears that the White Fathers accomplished their mission, on the principle of the "three selfs" (the establishment of a self-propagating, self-sustaining and self-governing church), the self-sustaining has not been realised. The authors propose a re-engagement of the discourse of 'self-sustainability' which appears to be ignored, especially as the Catholic Church continues to Zambianise its clergy but struggles with resources.

Nelly Mwale and Joseph Chita are concerned with understanding how Zambian women are historically represented through the prism of patriarchy. They employed African feminist theory to explore the representation of the place of women in the religio-cultural history of Zambia to highlight Hinfelaar's contributions to the study of Zambian women. They argue that Hinfelaar represents women as pillars in the growth of the church and active players in religio-cultural heritage. Hinfelaar provided a gendered history that subverted the patriarchal representation of women in this church history in Zambia.

Thera Rasing's "Female initiation rites as part of gendered Bemba religion and culture," examines the resilience and transformations of female initiation rites in the past century from a religio-gendered perspective. She affirms

Hinfelaars' thesis that Bemba women lost their significant socio-religious position, and argues that the practices of female rites are means of exerting their power which is encouraged by the Catholic Church today.

In the second issue, Bernard Udelhoven builds on Hinfelaar's work to analyse "Domestic morality, 'traditional dogma', and Christianity in a rural Zambian community." He argues Christianity was quick to condemn traditional dogma but the void it left has not been filled by the Christian faith. He concludes that Hinfelaar's call for inculturation as a creative and critical dialogue between Christianity and traditional dogma has continued as slow process. Mutale Mulenga-Kaunda is concerned with the implications of cultural values that appear less applicable in the contemporary Zambian context that is increasing in patriarchal tendencies. She utilizes African feminist jurisprudence to critique the Bemba cultural value of "Children Belong to the Mother" as promoting male irresponsibility in the context of increasing numbers of absent fathers, feminisation of poverty and the growth in poverty rates among children. She argues that such cultural values should be regarded as obsolete in the modern context as it negates the calls that are promoting child maintenance rights in Zambia. Chammah Kaunda, Inshita (Time), seeks to open a discussion on the possibility of developing a Bemba philosophy and epistemology. He argues that the Bemba myth of origin presents time as a relational value deeply entrenched in human quest to manifest God's mutuality and solidarity in the world. Kaunda stresses that the Bemba concept of time is never conceived in terms of the past or the future, rather, as the locus of intercourse, a critical site of spiritual interaction, transaction, and exchange aimed at actualizing equilibrium in all relationships.

Endnotes

- ¹ Marja Hinfelaar is Father Hugo Hinfelaar's niece, who first visited him in Zambia in 1990 to do research in Chinsali District. She has a doctorate in African history and has been a permanent resident of Zambia since 1997.
- ² Before 1968, all formation of Missionary of Africa priests took place in theology seminaries called 'Scholasticates' (Missionaries of Africa White Fathers, 2018).
- ³ Milingo's approach to healing through exorcism was not well received by the church. It was perceived as heresy as the church at that time was against practices of deliverance as it did not believe in the existence of demons. He was accused of being a witchdoctor and after pleading the case with the Pope in 1983, was forced to resign as Archbishop of Lusaka in 1984 and was put into exile in Rome (Yandolino, 2016).

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