

# Problematic Museum Heritage in a Postcolonial Context: The Case of the Moto Moto Museum Chisungu Collection

## DCNtR Debate #3. The Post/Colonial Museum

### Introduction

*Chisungu* is a female puberty initiation ceremony practiced by most ethnic groups in Zambia, but predominantly by the Bemba of Northern Zambia. While these rites are still practiced in some form today, their nature and conduct is significantly different from which was observed and recorded by anthropologists and missionaries during the colonial period.<sup>[1]</sup> During that time, *chisungu* dealt with the transition from girlhood to womanhood in society, and involved public and secret rites that formalised the entry of girls who had come of age into womanhood, and solemnizing their right to marriage and reproduction. Unlike similar ceremonies in other parts of Africa, *chisungu* did not involve circumcision or virginity testing. In a month-long secluded ceremony, elderly specialised women called *banacimbusa* used songs, dances, performances, floor and wall paintings, and most importantly, moulded pottery emblems – collectively called *mbusa* – to impart esoteric knowledge to the initiates. This knowledge embraced a range of practices and beliefs including religion, sexuality, sex education and marital relations, childbirth and childrearing, as well as family and social obligations. Women, exclusively, held the authority in this important rite, the ramifications of which embraced the health and well-being not only of the individual but also of the lineage and the entire social body. Consequently, the significance of *chisungu* went beyond ensuring the transition from girlhood to womanhood. Indeed, it was at the heart of ensuring the health and progress of society, and defining differences between different generations of women, between men and women, and between initiated and uninitiated women.

The British anthropologist Audrey Richards observed this ceremony in June 1933, and in 1956 she produced one of her most outstanding works describing and analysing this ceremony based on this participant-observation (Richards 1956). Jean Jacques Corbeil, a priest of the Catholic Church belonging to the order of the Missionaries of Africa, also studied the *chisungu* after Richards. Although not well known in scholarly circles, perhaps owing to the fact that he was an amateur ethnographer as opposed to a professional one, Corbeil's work was significant because it led to the collection of hundreds of objects and texts on *chisungu*. These included more than 200 clay objects (*mbusa*), wall and floor emblems and songs and other oral texts. Corbeil collected these objects as a result of five decades of ethnographic work among the people of northern Zambia, with whom he worked as a Catholic priest from 1943 to 1989. These *chisungu* objects, together with thousands of other objects, came to make up the Moto Moto Museum, which is today one of Zambia's five national museums. Corbeil's work also led to the publication of a book on the ceremony (Corbeil 1982).

In this paper, I focus on the body of *chisungu* objects that Corbeil collected, and pose questions around the status of the objects during a) the colonial period when Corbeil started the collection and constituted the Moto Moto Museum, and b) in the postcolonial period, discussing what has become of the objects now. I demonstrate that the collection of the *chisungu* objects by Corbeil was done within a broader context of epistemic violence and cultural appropriation. Through processes such as enculturation, missionaries prohibited and changed cultural practices in order to make the work of Christianization of indigenous communities possible. These processes of cultural appropriation corresponded with ethnographic studies conducted on indigenous societies by the missionaries. One result of these studies was the collection of cultural objects and the establishment of the Moto Moto Museum. These collections and their representation in the museum's permanent exhibition and storage rooms remain problematic, in terms of the static and primitivised ways in which they represent people and practices. Despite this, the

Moto Moto Museum, through its public programs, has formed partnerships with members of the community. These involve revisiting the *chisungu* collection, reinvesting it with new meanings and using the collection for public programs and education in which contemporary problems such as HIV/AIDS, gender-based violence, and child sexual abuse and early marriages are addressed. The dynamic and innovative ways in which this collection is used demonstrates how collections with problematic histories can begin to transcend such problematic legacies in so far as they are used productively by communities

### **Missionaries, Ethnography, and the History of the Moto Moto Museum**

»Ignorance of African customs and beliefs on the part of the missionary could certainly result in a lack of understanding of his flock and their manner of reasoning with the consequent stifling of his apostolic work.«<sup>[2]</sup>

The history of the Moto Moto Museum and the foundation of the *chisungu* collection is encapsulated in the history of the establishment of the Catholic Church in Northern Zambia by an order of mostly French priests called the Missionaries of Africa, popularly known as the White Fathers.<sup>[3]</sup> The White Fathers' missionary work was hinged on the appropriation of local customs and practices with the result that ethnography and evangelisation were parallel processes. The formation of the museum was part of a long history of the production of indigenous ethnographic texts and heritage by the White Fathers. Because of the centrality of this background to understanding Corbeil's work and the nature of the foundations of the Moto Moto Museum, I will focus on this background in more detail in the foregoing sections.

The White Fathers arrived in Northern Zambia in 1886. Although their work of conversion focused on different groups of people in Northern Zambia such as the Mambwe, Lungu, Namwanga and Bisa, their main interest was in the Bemba, who were the most dominant group, and whom Indian (Arab) Slave traders and early colonial administrators depicted as superstitious and heathen. In 1889, with the help

of Bishop Joseph Dupont, the British South African Company occupied Bembaland, paving the way not only for formal colonisation by the company on behalf of Britain, but also for the Catholic church to declare this portion of Northern Zambia as its »sphere of influence« (Roberts 1976: 3; Rotberg 1965; Hinferlaar 2004: 49).

From the beginning, the production of the ethnographic heritage of the Bemba and other groups was a core part of the White Fathers' proselytising work and was done to make the work of Christian evangelism possible. Missionaries needed to understand African languages and customs to translate the Christian message in order to make converts. Missionary work and converting Africans to Christianity was premised on prohibiting competing African religious practices and customs. Despite this prohibition of certain indigenous practices, the missionaries took a strong stance of salvaging such practices and cultures. The intention was to legitimise their ethnographic work and eventually position themselves as the protectors of, and experts on, African culture.

As early as 1910, priests such as Frs. Jan Van Sambeek, Eugene Welfele, François Tanguy, Louis Guillerme and Eduard Labreque wrote extensively on the religious practices and customs of the Bemba and surrounding peoples such as the Bisa, Mambwe, Lungu, Shila and others.<sup>[4]</sup> The range of themes covered was vast and included the whole spectrum of Bemba life, religious, social, political, and economic systems. Notable themes were the religious practices and beliefs, female initiation and marriage systems, natural environment, clan systems, witchcraft and sorcery, death rituals and rituals related to sexuality and reproduction, as well as political systems. Eduard Labreque for example studied and wrote on the *chisungu* ceremonies from as early as 1912. In the 1930s, he published several accounts in international journals such as *Anthropos* and *Africa* (Labreque 1931).

Between 1920 and 1960, the White Fathers introduced a series of readers on the Bemba for use in schools for literacy classes. One of the most famous of these were

the *Ifya Bukaya* (of familiar things) readers, which were, in essence, ethnographic texts (Oger 1994: 127). These readers were also evangelical tools, as the sections on customs commented on customs that were considered negative and unchristian, such as ancestral worship.<sup>[5]</sup>

In 1947, the General Chapter of the White Fathers had appealed to older missionaries to edit everything that had been compiled and written on African history and customs. It also expressly asked the bishops and heads of missions to organise a methodical study of African customs and ways of life, following a pre-established ethnological plan of enquiry.<sup>[6]</sup>

White Father publications such as *Imyendele Isuma* (rightful living) were also used to arbitrate behaviour, customs, and lifestyle. They dispensed instructions on rightful living in terms of family life, and proper behaviours for husbands and wives in different situations (Hinfelaar 2015: 66). The White Fathers' ethnographies and Bemba-readers crystallised centuries-old, but dynamic, oral histories in ways that were fixed and bounded. Derek Peterson notes: »through these and other documentary practices the routines of human life were lifted out of the dynamic real world, placed outside the reach of change and innovation, and rendered anachronistic at the moment of publication« (Petersen 2015: 1f.)

### **Policy of Inculturation**

Beginning around the late 1940s, the Roman Catholic Church adopted a new set of policies concerning the Church's relationship with non-Western cultures. This was the Church's response to challenges that resulted from the social, political, cultural and technological developments of the post-war period which were characterised by liberalism, the increasing recognition of the autonomy of formerly subjugated societies and the growth of nationalism globally. Both as a response to these changes and as a result thereof, the church convened the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965), which sought to usher the Roman Catholic Church into the modern era. An important part of this post-war reformation was the opening of dialogue with the

contemporary world and other cultures and religions. In Africa, this led to what has generally been perceived as more accepting attitude to African cultural practices, through processes that have broadly become known as inculturation.<sup>[7]</sup>

The key position of inculturation was cultural adaptation in which non-Western and non-Christian cultures and their customs were allowed to practice Catholicism within the boundaries of their culture. What this meant in practice, especially for the church in Africa, is that African customs were subjected to scrutiny and sieved of elements that were deemed negative and intolerable. These were given a Christian facelift, adopted and re-codified as African customs. These processes bear significant similarities with the new modes of colonial governance through the policy of indirect rule that Mamdani describes insofar as the Church claimed not just to acknowledge difference but also to shape it (Mamdani 2012: 2). As with the language of indirect rule, the language of inculturation was benign. Inculturation was presented as »partnership«, »mutual exchange«, and »dialogue of cultures« (Ott 2006: 25).

Significantly, the language of inculturation and the ethnographic work and collection of cultural objects that made it possible was posited as benevolent. It was a language of protection and preservation of indigenous custom, which missionaries saw as increasingly defiled by modernity and undesirable Western influences, and which were prone to extinction. It is this stance of salvation that Corbeil used as a justification for his *chisungu* collection (Corbeil 1982). The paradigm of salvation generally legitimated racist representations of indigenous communities and the conversion of indigenous practices, even sacred ones such as *chisungu*, into an object of spectacle.

Inculturation worked in several ways. One example is a process which Steven Kaplan terms assimilation, in which Christian missionaries incorporated aspects from a non-Christian setting into an already existing Christian ritual (Kaplan 1994: 19). Another was Christianization, in which missionaries sought to »create Christian versions of

traditional African rites and practices« (ibid.: 16). These processes had begun even before the Second Vatican Council. In 1957, the General Chapter of the White Fathers decided upon the opening of centres for the study of African languages and customs. In Northern Rhodesia's Chinsali District, the Ilondola Language and Culture Study Centre was opened in 1958.<sup>[8]</sup>

In Northern Rhodesia, the White Fathers began adapting Christian practices to local customs beginning in the late 1940s, a period which correspondingly witnessed more deliberate approaches to the study and collection of Bemba customs and what has generally been presented as tolerant attitudes to these customs. This was also an enhanced ordering of knowledge on indigenous people. In this later period, the White Fathers' headquarters in Rome requested their missionaries posted in different territories to send detailed ethnographies of indigenous people.<sup>[9]</sup>

### **The Moto Moto Museum**

The Moto Moto is located in a rural district called Mbala, at the northernmost tip of Northern Zambia, 1000 miles from the capital Lusaka. It was officially opened as a National Museum on 17th April 1974, joining the Copperbelt Museum and the Livingstone Museum as national museums in the sense of being owned and managed by the state. Until then, the collection was managed by the Diocese of Mbala and owned by Jean Jacques Corbeil.

The museum has its beginnings in 1956, when Corbeil, a French-Canadian priest, began collecting cultural artefacts from among the people of Northern Zambia.<sup>[10]</sup> His first posting later that year was in Northern Rhodesia, at Mulilansolo Mission in Chinsali District, in the heart of Bemba territory. He spent six months at the Language and Customs Study Centre there, before being posted to Katibunga Mission where he was to spend ten years as parish priest. Remote and far-removed from other European settlements, Katibunga mission would have given Corbeil further opportunity to immerse himself in the learning of the local languages and

culture.

In 1954, after a year's home leave in Canada, Corbeil was transferred back to Mulinlansolo mission. As part of the processes of inculturation described earlier, Corbeil, together with another priest, was entrusted with the adaptation to Bemba of Catholic liturgy, which until then had been conducted in Latin. By 1956, this enhanced engagement with African culture led Corbeil to start collecting artefacts. The structure of Catholic evangelism helped him in this regard. Bemba territory was vast but sparsely populated. This, coupled with an inadequate number of priests, made the church adopt a system whereby one priest used a rota to visit his congregants, camping at one location for approximately two weeks. Living among the local people, away from conventions of mission stations and white settlements, helped him to participate in the local ways of life and cultural practices. With the help of mostly male mission-educated catechists, Corbeil collected artefacts that he stored in the respective mission stations.<sup>[1]</sup>

The early history of the collection reflects Corbeil's missionary career – it was a collection in motion. The collection moved from place to place as Corbeil was moved from one mission station to another. He carried several objects with him and would make additions wherever he went. The collection was at Chinsali, Isoka, then Kayambi missions between 1956 to 1964, and then Serenje from 1964 to 1970 when Corbeil transferred, along with the collection, back to Isoka and ultimately to Mbala in 1973. The Bishop of Mbala donated a former carpentry workshop to house the collection, a huge building which was part of a complex of Catholic institutions located in the Catholic settlements of St Paul's and St Mary's villages. It included a primary school, a chapel, the Bishop's house, the Catholic cemetery and a skills training centre. The carpentry workshop was fitted with shelves on which the hundreds of objects that Corbeil had collected were assembled, thematically displayed and hand-captioned. This former carpentry workshop has been the museum's main gallery ever since, and is today the ethnography gallery.<sup>[2]</sup>



## Collecting Female Initiation Secrets and Objects



Fig. 1: Example of *chisungu* object collected by Corbeil. Photo: Moto Moto Museum.

Until 1960, Corbeil had been unable to observe and collect *chisungu* initiation objects due to their sensitive nature and due to the secrecy with which the ceremony was conducted. In 1960, Helena Mubanga, a Bemba royal princess of Mubanga village in Chinsali District (the same district where Audrey Richards had conducted her *chisungu* research in 1933) left the Catholic Church to join the Lumpa Church, a flourishing Africanist church that was one of the most significant challenges to Catholicism and colonial rule at the time. Perhaps as a result of the success of the Catholic Church's attempts to win back the thousands of converts that they had lost

to the Lumpa church and fearing punishment from the Catholic priests, Helena requested to be readmitted to the Catholic Church at Mulilansolo Mission. Corbeil, who at that time was stationed at the Mission, ascended to this request on the condition that Helena be punished for leaving the Catholic Church by revealing to Corbeil the secrets of the *chisungu* ceremony. Alarmed at this unusual request, Helena refused to divulge the details of the ceremony. Not only was Corbeil male and white and therefore prohibited from knowing the details of the ceremony as an uninitiated person and outsider, the Catholic Church was known for its negative attitude towards African practices such as *chisungu*. Corbeil, however, went on to convince her: »If it is a bad ceremony, I should know about it as a priest who is responsible for souls. If it is a good ceremony, why not reveal it to me?«<sup>[13]</sup> After much hesitation, Helena agreed to secretly sing some of the initiation ceremony songs to Corbeil and his clerk who recorded them under the cover of night. When the community members realised what was happening, they forbade further revelation of the secret knowledge of the ceremony. Using the same argument, namely that missionaries had the right to knowledge about these practices, Corbeil convinced the elderly women who were in charge of the ceremony to reveal further details (Carey 2002: 1–7). In time, Corbeil was given access to all aspects of the ceremony. The midwives re-enacted the ceremony for Corbeil at the missionaries' house, while another priest, Charles Van Rijhoven, operated the tape recorder and two male African catechists/teachers acted as interpreters. Corbeil observed the actual ceremonies in the community, including the secret aspects that took place in enclosed spaces in the village and in the bush. These and subsequent encounters led to the collection of more than 100 songs and, as of 1968, more than 200 sacred objects used during the secret rituals, which included clay models and floor as well as wall models and paintings.<sup>[14]</sup> It is clear from this instance of collection of such sensitive cultural objects that missionaries such as Corbeil abused their positions of authority and thus collected from positions of power.

The collection of *chisungu* objects became the biggest curiosity and attraction in

Corbeil's collection of African artefacts. Helena Mubanga remained one of Corbeil's chief informants at the ceremony. Accession registers held in the Moto Moto Museum show that she continued supplying Corbeil with objects and information on the ceremony as late as 1976.<sup>[15]</sup> In 1982, Corbeil published *Mbusa: Sacred Emblems of the Bemba*, detailing the conduct of the ceremony and the teachings and songs of the objects. The interpretation of the *chisungu* teaching in this book was sanitised of the deeper cultural meanings and especially the teachings regarding intimacy and sexual matters. The book was instead modelled on the Catholic Church's teachings on marriage, sexuality and family life. One reviewer of the book bemoaned the fact that through the book and the *chisungu* displays at Corbeil's museum, practices whose significance lay in their secret and symbolic nature were exposed and diminished through such processes of ethnographic study, collecting and public display (Musambacime 1983). These processes of studying and controlling female initiation are part of the broader discourses on how the colonial and even postcolonial governments attempted to control black women's bodies and sexuality, and undermined women's authority in very significant ways (Thomas 2003; Hayes 2006).

The Christianised interpretation of *chisungu* in the book mirrors the processes by which the Catholic Church introduced Christian versions of the initiation rites. Their teachings were codified by appointed lay organisations within the church who were tasked with conducting these Christian versions, in many cases attended by the missionaries. Specifically, aspects that were removed included some forms of ancestral veneration or ancestral worship which were significant to the rituals; teachings on sex, the use of indigenous medicines and charms purposed to make the initiates sexually attractive; dances and songs that were perceived to be sexualised, like beer brewing and drinking etc.<sup>[16]</sup> These processes of sanitisation of meaning are also reflected by the way in which Corbeil presented the *chisungu* objects in the museum. The implications of these racialized discourses have been commented on by numerous scholars. Central to the practice of colonial ethnography/social anthropology and related fields, these racialized notions enabled a temporalisation

and spatialisation of time, a »denial of coevalness« to other people which Johannes Fabian defines as »a persistent and systematic tendency to place the referent(s) of anthropology in a time other than the present of the producer of anthropological discourse« (Fabian 1982: 31). The result was hierarchical classification of societies, with non-Western societies at the bottom of the ladder. With these processes, the epistemic agency of the owners of the practices and knowledge was compromised. It is the legacy of epistemic violence, in collections such as this, with which we need to contend.

### **The *chisungu* Permanent Exhibitions in Recent Years**

Between 2007 and 2016, the Moto Moto Museum embarked on a project of refurbishing the old exhibition, which had not significantly changed since Corbeil's times. A detailed discussion of this permanent exhibition is beyond the scope of this current paper. Suffice to say, it perpetuates the problematic representations in ways that signify why so many ethnographic collections with colonial foundations continue to be sites of debate and contestation. In summary, about 30 *chisungu* objects that were collected by Corbeil and some models made from his original collections, as well as ten photographs from Richards' 1931 study of the ceremony, were enlarged and displayed on the boards behind, and on the sides, to compliment the object display. The exhibits and photographs are accompanied by texts, which mirror those from Richards' and Corbeil's publications. This representation perpetuates a construction of the *chisungu* ceremony as an »authentic« and »timeless traditional«, thereby sustaining the problematic epistemic conditions of its creation. Consequently, the museum's current *chisungu* permanent exhibition presents a static representation of the ceremony, the knowledge of which was produced within specific historical contexts and practices. These representations are also ahistorical, devoid of a historicised narrative, which would locate the ritual, related issues of womanhood and the collection within a broader historic frame of social and political changes and contexts.

## **The Museum as a Place of Knowledge Transitions – The Chisungu Collection and Community Engagement**

Despite these limitations, the museum, through its public programs run by the education department, has developed engaging and productive ways in which, through partnerships with community members, the *chisungu* collection is used to address issues affecting society, such as HIV/AIDS, gender-based violence, reproductive health and so on. Karp and Kratz develop the idea of museum friction in recognition of the museum as a »varied and often changing set of practices, processes and interactions« (Karp/Kratz 2006: 2). Drawing on experiences from the District Six Museum in Cape Town, Rassool also suggests that the museum should not be seen as a place or a collection, but should be viewed as a »space for conversation and debate«, and as a place for »knowledge transactions« involving different actors and their respective agency (Rassool 2006: 296). This idea engages the ways in which different actors mediate the processes of meaning-making and knowledge production and its representation at different stages of museum processes. I want to apply this notion of the museum as a »space of knowledge transactions« to the ways in which the *chisungu* collection at the Moto Moto Museum has been reconstituted through the contributions and relationships between different actors like the ethnographers, museum curators, exhibition experts and *chisungu* traditional experts drawn from the community.



Fig. 2: Chisungu counsellors from the community carrying out museum programs. Photo: Moto Moto Museum.

In 1996, the museum constituted the *mbusa* group, which was composed of and driven by members of the community who were considered experts in *chisungu* initiation rites. The *mbusa* group members were part of the Museum's Education Department and could come up with their own programs. One collaborative success between the museum and the community members has been that of documenting and interpreting the *chisungu* objects. Corbeil did not adequately document individual objects, and when he did, the interpretations were sanitised as alluded to earlier. By collaborating between the museum professionals and local experts in knowledge production, a form of co-authoring in interpreting the indigenous knowledge embedded in the *chisungu* objects is enabled. When I joined the museum in 2006, I had a basic idea of the meanings of the different *chisungu* objects and the

significance of the *chisungu* rites. Through years of interacting with the *chisungu* experts I acquired a significant understanding of the workings of *chisungu* and a renewed appreciation of their significance. The community members have also been integrated into museum processes such as exhibition-making and interpretations, with their guidance, allowing for a culturally sensitive way of engaging with the objects. In this way, the spiritual and cultural values that the community attaches to the objects and related practices are respected through museum-community collaborations.

Significantly, the collaboration between the museum curators and community members led to processes through which the *chisungu* objects were reinvested with new meanings and interpretations in the service of addressing contemporary problems faced by society. As the *chisungu* female initiation rites deal with issues of reproductive health, these practices have long since been seen to be important sites through which reproductive health issues and education could be addressed. In the initial stages of the HIV/AIDS pandemic, practices like *chisungu* were seen to be negative and were generally thought to contribute to the spread of the disease as it was thought that they encouraged unsafe behaviours such as early marriages, unsafe sexual practices and a subservient role of women which negatively affected their reproductive health. While some of this was true, it has since been recognised that indigenous practices like *chisungu* have knowledge that is relevant and useful in addressing problems of sexual, gender and reproductive health.

The partnership between the museum and the community members led to the successful implementation of programs in which traditional *chisungu* experts from communities carry on a dialogue on how the female initiations are done and how they could be used as tools for education. Through the museum-community partnership, various local and international agencies like the Ministry of Health of the Republic of Zambia, Irish Aid, and the United States President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR) funded different projects in which *chisungu* traditional

experts were engaged to include education on HIV/AIDS, gender-based violence and reproductive health in their cultural practices. The museum was used as a forum through which community experts and museum staff received formal training in these areas via workshops and other formats. Dialogues over practices of *chisungu* and the implications of the different teachings over reproductive health and gender relations were part of these conversations. The museum education team and the *chisungu* experts then went into the communities, especially in the rural areas, to engage other *chisungu* counsellors on how *chisungu* teachings could be an intervention and educational platform for issues related to HIV/AIDS, gender relations and reproductive health. Programs were developed targeting different demographic groups, where culturally appropriate conversations occurred. In typical *chisungu* teachings, women were taught to be subservient to men, to the extent that women were expected to tolerate male infidelity, while male infidelity and having multiple sexual partners was usually considered a sign of virility. The *chisungu* experts are encouraged to tackle such attitudes during premarital and marriage counselling. For younger audiences, dialogues involved issues appropriate to them. For example, early marriage remains a problem in many communities today. The *chisungu* experts were encouraged to include these issues in their teachings and to enter into dialogues with traditional leaders, guardians and young people on the laws and organisations that protect young people from child marriages. The range of themes to which the *chisungu* practices could be used is wide. As a result of these collaborations, the museum and the *chisungu* experts produced two booklets that exemplify how selected *chisungu* objects have been reinvested with new meanings. One, written in ChiBemba is *Imbusa Sha CiBemba Ishafwa Ukusalanga Ubulwele Bwa HIV/AIDS* (»*chisungu* teachings that help to spread HIV/AIDS«) was produced by the *chisungu* experts in 2007. Another, specifically targeting young people was produced in 2013 (Phiri/Mateke 2013).





Fig. 3: Museum staff (the two gentlemen, and author in black skirt) with the Mbusa club members during a museum outreach program for the commemoration of World AIDS day, December 2006. Photo: Mary Mbewe.

This validation, however, is not without its problems. The museum-community collaboration works by encouraging the inclusion of these and other positive social teachings in *chisungu* practice while discouraging *chisungu* teachings that are thought to be negative. This perpetuates notions that indigenous practices – especially those dealing with women and their sexuality – are seen as sites of potentially negative practices and need to be ordered, normalised and validated by formal institutions such as the museum, the NGOs involved in the processes, and the Ministry of Health. When I interviewed the former Education Officer of the Moto Moto Museum, I wondered why the title of the *chisungu* book that the Mbusa Club and the museum education department produced, implicitly posited the *chisungu*

teachings as helping in spreading HIV/AIDS. He explained that the initial concept for the book was to emphasise the positive aspects of *chisungu* teachings but that the concept of the book had to change because the NGO that funded its production was at that point focusing on dissuading indigenous practices that were thought to be contributing to the spread of HIV/AIDS. Hence, the theme of the book had to conform to the objectives of the funding project.<sup>[7]</sup> My raising this critique is not intended to undermine the efforts of the collaborations the museum has made and the meaningful ways that the *chisungu* is used, but to point to some of the problems that have been brought about by such collaborations.

## Conclusion

Collections that have their foundations in colonial knowledge projects remain sites of contestations and debate today. These collections, such as the Moto Moto Museum collection, were results of cultural appropriation and epistemic violence on indigenous communities. And yet, these collections retain indigenous knowledge that is still relevant and useful to the indigenous communities. Despite its troubled history, the *chisungu* collection at Moto Moto Museum has been reinvested with new meanings through collaborative work between the museum and members of the community. Through these initiatives, the *chisungu* collection has been used to address contemporary issues such as HIV/AIDS. This case study demonstrates that collections like the *chisungu* collection, which have their foundations in problematic histories of cultural appropriation, can be reinvested with new meanings and used to serve the community. Despite some of the problems involved with this particular collaboration, this example of a postcolonial museum practice, within these specific contexts highlights the potential of collections with problematic legacies.

*This article has undergone a double-blind peer-review.*

The print version of this text is published in the *Zeitschrift für Kulturwissenschaften*, issue “*The Post/Colonial Museum*”, 2022, p. 61-76. In order to make the issue “*The*

*Post/Colonial Museum*” available to a wide readership, specifically on the African continent, we decided to use the long standing collaboration between [boasblogs](#) and [the Zeitschrift für Kulturwissenschaften](#) to successively publish all contributions in print and online (as DCNtR debate). We thank the editorial boards of both, the [Zeitschrift für Kulturwissenschaften](#) and the [boasblogs](#), as much as the publishing house transcript for embarking on this project together. Furthermore, our thanks go to the participants of the conference on Museum Collections in Motion, which was generously supported by the [Global South Studies Center, University of Cologne](#), the research platform “[Worlds of Contradictions](#)”, [University of Bremen](#), the [Museumsgesellschaft of the Rautenstrauch-Joest-Museum](#) and the Foreign Office of the Federal Republic of Germany. Most of all, we thank the contributors to this debate for four years of exchange, debate and intellectual companionship.

---

## Footnotes

[1] Contemporary *chisungu* rituals are devoid of many aspects of the rituals that were practiced in the colonial period, such as the intricate rituals that took place in the forests as described by Audrey Richards and Jean Jacques Corbeil. During the colonial period, when formal education for girls was not widespread, women married a few years after puberty. Consequently, *chisungu* was associated with preparing girls for marriage and motherhood. *Chisungu*, as observed at puberty, is no longer associated with marriage or marital relations; hence teachings on marital relations are no longer part of the puberty rites, although *chisungu* is still stereotyped as a place of sexual education. The widespread adoption of Christianity during the colonial period and its continued growth in the post-colonial period also led to changes in *chisungu* and other cultural practices, resulting in Christianised versions of these practices. Today, there is great variety of ways in which *chisungu* is

conducted, based on socio-economic status, beliefs and so on. Many families no longer practice *chisungu* rites at puberty. These are included in traditional teachings just before a woman marries in what has become generally known as kitchen practices, a formal bridal shower in which a bride is also taught traditional marital lessons and given gifts to start her new home. Where some form of *chisungu* is held at puberty, it is significantly shorter and less elaborate. For details, see Rasing (2001).

[2] White Fathers Archive (hereafter WFA), Lusaka, I-M-C 66, Tanguy Francois, his notes in view of a booklet for students at the Language Centre.

[3] The museum was named after Bishop Joseph Dupont, a French pioneer missionary of the White Fathers. His biography and role in the Catholicization of Northern Zambia are central to the construction of Catholic heritage in the region. He was nicknamed *Bwana Moto Moto*, which can be translated as fire fire, allegedly because of his fiery temper and his habit of pipe smoking for which he habitually demanded an open flame.

[4] WFA, Various documents (Oger 1991: 127).

[5] WFA, 3-P-Sc16, White Fathers Chilubula, Ifya Bukaya (second Bemba Reader 1931: 16).

[6] WFA, circular letter Durrieu, 1948, Chapters decisions, 48 (referenced in Oger 1991:128).

[7] Although couched as a more liberal and accommodating attitude towards African cultural practice than the earlier labelling of African culture as pagan, inculturation was a more pervasive and repressive form of cultural control and appropriation. This enabled the Catholic missionaries – usually male and white – to become adjudicators of African culture. This is most clear in how the Catholic Church created a Christianised version of the female initiation ceremony and replaced other cultural practices that they deemed unchristian and pagan with what was perceived to be more Christian and thus a more acceptable form of the practice.

[8] WFA, Circular Letter Volker (1958: 78).

[9] WFA, I-M-C 07 Etienne Louis: Answer in the name of the Vicariate of Kasama to »enquetes sur les costumes indigenes: Tribu des Babemba (N. Rhodesia)«, asked by

the generalate of the White Fathers in Rome, in the 1950s. 63 pages. French.; I-M-C 10 »Table d'enquete sur les moeurs et coutumes africaines, par le generalat des w.f. responses par le P. Tanguy«.

[10] Corbeil had recently been ordained in Montreal under the Missionaries of Africa in 1943.

[11] A documentary on the Moto Moto Museum and Corbeil gives a picture of his collection work. See Owens 2014 and <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zdqnrfdk5o>.

[12] For a video documentary on the exhibitions see Owens 2014.

[13] Roan Selection Trust 1969: 8–12; Corbeil 1982.

[14] This story is narrated by Corbeil in many unpublished and some published texts. See for example Roan Selection Trust (1969: 8–12).

[15] Mbala, Moto Moto Museum collection and accession registers 1960 to 1976.

[16] A well-known example of the introduction of Christianized versions of *chisungu* was done by the famous missionary to Central Africa Mable Shaw (Morroe 1986). See General Missionary Conference of Northern Rhodesia (1939).

[17] Interview with Mr. Chanda Mutale, Mbala, December 2019.

---

## References

Carey, Margret (2003): »Missionaries in Zambia«. In: *Journal of Museum Ethnography* 15, 1–7.

Corbeil, Jean Jacques (1982): *Mbusa: Sacred Emblems of the Bemba, Mbala*, London: Moto Moto Museum, Ethnographica Publishers.

Fabian, Johannes (1982): *Time and Other: How Anthropology Makes its Object*, New York: Columbia University Press.

General Missionary Conference of Northern Rhodesia (1939): *Report of*

Proceedings of the Eighth Conference held at Lusaka, August 5th to August 8th 1939, Lovedale Press,  
[http://www.historicalpapers.wits.ac.za/inventories/inv\\_pdfo/AD1715/AD1715-15-8-8-001-jpeg.pdf](http://www.historicalpapers.wits.ac.za/inventories/inv_pdfo/AD1715/AD1715-15-8-8-001-jpeg.pdf) (01.11.2020).

Hayes, Patricia (2006): »Efundula and History: Female Initiation in Pre-colonial and Colonial Northern Namibia«. In: Towards New Perspectives of African History: Women, Gender and Feminism, ed. by Tominaga Chizuka/Nagahra, Yoko/Osaka: National Museum of Ethnology Japan, 27–48.

Hinfelaar, Hugo (2015): History of the Catholic Church in Zambia: 1885–1995, Lusaka: Fenza Publications.

Kaplan, Steven (ed.) (1994): Indigenous Responses to Western Christianity, New York: New York University Press.

Kratz, Corrine A./Karp, Ivan (2006): »Introduction: Museum Frictions: Public Cultures/ Global Transformations«. In: Museum Frictions: Public Cultures/Global Transformations, ed. by Ivan Karp/Corinne A. Kratz/Lyn Szwaja/Thomas Ybarra-Frausto, Durham, London: Duke University Press, 1–34.

Labreque, Eduard (1931): »Le mariage chez les Babemba«. In: Africa 4: 2, 209–221.

Mamdani, Mahmood (2012): Define and Rule: Native as Political Identity, Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Morroe, Sean (1986): »No Girl Leaves the School Unmarried: Mabel Shaw and the Education of Girls at Mbereshi, Northern Rhodesia, 1915–1940«. In: The International Journal of African Historical Studies 19: 4, 601–635.

Musambacime, Mwelwa (1983): Review of Mbusa Sacred Emblems of the Bemba,

Zambia Museums Journal.

Oger, Louis (1991): *Where a Scattered Flock Gathered Ilondola 1934–1984: A Catholic Mission in a Protestant Area*, Lusaka: Missionaries of Africa.

Ott, Martin (2006): *African Theology in Images*, Lilongwe: Kachere Series.

Owens, David (2014): *Moto Moto Museum*, documentary,  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zdqnrfdk5o&t=569s> (20.11.2020).

Petersen, Derek (2015): »Introduction: Heritage Management in Colonial and Contemporary Africa«. In: *Politics of Heritage in Africa: Economies, Histories, and Infrastructures*, ed. by Derek Petersen/Kodzo Gavua/Ciraj Rassool, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1–36.

Phiri, Victoria/Mateke, Clare (2013): *Vilengo and Mbusa: Towards an HIV/AIDS Free Youth in Zambia*,  
[https://www.academia.edu/38969309/Vilengo\\_and\\_Mbusa\\_Towards\\_an\\_Hiv\\_Aids\\_Free\\_Youth\\_in\\_Zambia](https://www.academia.edu/38969309/Vilengo_and_Mbusa_Towards_an_Hiv_Aids_Free_Youth_in_Zambia)  
(02.07.21).

Rasing, Thera (2001): *The Bush Burnt, the Stones Remain: Female Initiation Rites in Urban Zambia*, Leiden: African Studies Centre.

Rassool, Ciraj (2006): »Community Museums, Memory Politics, and Social Transformations in South Africa: Histories, Possibilities, and Limits«. In: *Museum Frictions: Public Cultures/Global Transformations*, ed. by Ivan Karp/Corinne A. Kratz/Lyn Szwaja/Thomas Ybarra-Frausto, Durham, London: Duke University Press, 286–321.

Roan Selection Trust (1969): *Horizon* January 1969.

Richards, Audrey Isabel (1956): *Chisungu: A Girls' Initiation Ceremony among the*

Bemba of Northern Rhodesia, London: Faber and Faber.

Roberts, Andrew (1976): A History of Zambia, London: Heinemann.

Rotberg, Robert Irwin (1965): Christian Missionaries and the Creation of Northern Rhodesia, Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Thomas, Lynn (2003): The Politics of the Womb: Women, Reproduction and the State in Kenya, Berkeley: University of California Press.

**Mary Mbewe** is a doctoral student in the Department of History at the University of Western Cape, Cape Town, where she also obtained her Masters in Museum and Heritage Studies and Postgraduate Diploma in Museum and Heritage Studies under the African Programme in Museum and Heritage Studies (APHMS). She was curator at the Moto Moto Museum in Zambia from 2006 to 2016 and now teaches History at Mulungushi University in Zambia. Mary is the 2018 Recipient of the Ivan Karp Doctoral Research Award.