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Chakanza and Malawian Religions and Culture: An Intellectual Quest (Preface)

Louis Ndekha

The study of African religion and culture in Malawi and perhaps in Southern Africa is never complete without reference to Monsignor Professor Joseph Chakanza. Joseph Chaphadzika Chakanza was born in 1943 in the Lower Shire District of Nsanje, Traditional Authority Malemia, and Mchacha Village. Growing up in the village, he attended the local Catholic Church, which was then predominantly led by white Italian priests. Through the missionary work of the white Italian priests, young Joseph felt his call early in his primary school days, leading to his enrolment in priestly training. He was ordained into the priesthood in 1969. After a brief priestly service, Joseph Chakanza was offered a scholarship to study for a Master's degree at the University of Aberdeen. Upon his return from Scotland in 1977, he was appointed Lecturer in Religious Studies at Chancellor College, initially in the Department of Sociology, since there was, then, no Department of Theology and Religious Studies at the University of Malawi. Later, in the 1980s, Chakanza was accepted into a PhD program in Social Anthropology (also known as Cultural Anthropology) at the University of Oxford, from which he graduated in 1985. The need for a fully-fledged theology and religious studies degree in Malawi, the first of its kind, saw Prof. Chakanza being at the forefront of establishing the Theology and Religious Studies Department. To make the academic study of religion and culture in Malawi accessible to a larger audience, Chakanza pioneered local academic and popular publishing. Concerning academic publishing, Chakanza was also the founding editor of *Religion in Malawi*. This journal was for a long time instrumental in curating research on the study of religion and culture in Malawi. In addition, he was one of the pioneers of the *Kachere Series*, the publication arm of the Department of Theology and Religious Studies in the University of Malawi. To ensure wide accessibility of his religion and culture research,

Chakanza extensively published articles in local magazines and newspapers. His posthumous publication in 2023 chronicles a long series of articles that he published between 1995 and 2008 in *The Lamp*, a popular Catholic magazine, for which he was a member of the Editorial Board.

Although he was an accomplished academic, Chakanza remained not just a priest but a people's priest. At the University, he served as the patron of the Chancellor College Catholic Students Union. He was also available to serve within the Diocese of Zomba, where the University of Malawi is located. Yet beyond that, he remained a priest of the Chikwawa Diocese and Chilemba Parish in Bangula, in particular. His interest in religion and culture enabled him to be a down-to-earth priest. He interacted with the Catholic masses in a unique way such that every time he came back to his home parish in Chilemba, Bangula he would leave congregants talking about him. It was through his congregants at St Joseph Mukasa Magoti Catholic Church at Sorgin that I came to know him way before he became my professor. Catholic church members at Sorgin would always tell stories about him. I remember my late mum, a Catholic herself then, would always come home from church with memorable stories of our *Bambo Chakanza* (Rev Father Chakanza). She tell us how Bambo Chakanza would start local *nkhete-kete*¹ songs and dance together with the congregants during mass. She would tell how he connected with the people using folk tales and cultural metaphors, leaving them wondering what type of priest he was. Everyone thought of him as being extremely funny and intelligent at the same time.

Chakanza taught in the Department of Theology and Religious Studies at the University of Malawi for 31 years until his retirement in 2007. He then moved to the Catholic University of Malawi, where he was a member of the Department of Biblical and Religious Studies, as it was known then, in the Faculty of Education. Later, Chakanza went back to his diocese in Chikwawa. In recognition of his contribution to the Catholic Church, he was consecrated as a Monsignor in 2018. Joseph Chakanza died in 2019 and was buried in the Catholic Diocese of Chikwawa. There ended the illustrious biological life of a celebrated Catholic priest. Yet, Chakanza's academic legacy lives on and is bound to continue for decades to come.

¹ Nkhete-kete is a Sena folk dance.

African Religions, Culture and the Tales of Resilience

A unique aspect of Chakanza's academic life was his recognition that African Traditional Religions (ATRs) constitute a fundamental religious background for diverse African peoples. He demonstrates this recognition through his publications on religion and culture in Malawi. However, globalisation and modern technology have significantly changed African life experiences and conceptions of reality. Alongside technological and social changes, the growing influence of world religions such as Christianity and Islam in Africa raises the question of the continuing relevance of traditional African religions today. Nevertheless, one enduring feature of African Traditional Religions that has enabled them to survive centuries of theological onslaughts from Christianity and Islam is their adaptability (Schoffeleers, 2000). This adaptability involves either taking on features of the world religions or adopting contemporary social-cultural categories from their environment. For example, the emergence of 'Simon' and 'Maria' masquerades within the Gule Wamkulu repertoire nearly five decades ago represented an ATR attempt at contextualization and adaptation in the response to growing Christian influence among the Chewa of Malawi. The question then becomes, how have African Traditional Religions adapted to the world's social, economic and technological changes? What are the modern manifestations of African Traditional Religions? These questions, which belong to the broader context of the study of religions in the contemporary world, remain under-explored. In the African contexts specifically, the relationship between ATR and African culture, and how changes in the latter may affect the former, also need to be considered.

Analysing the relationship between ATRs and African culture is necessary because social change, and by implication, cultural change, is always constant. The quest to realise the nexus between ATRs and culture and to understand and explain this nexus was a passionate preoccupation of Prof. Joseph Chakanza. While his work was diverse, the enduring relationship between traditional religions, culture and society in Malawi was at the heart of his research. For examples, in his 2003 article, *Bribery and Corruption: Any Cultural Roots?* Chakanza demonstrates the cultural roots of corruption in Malawi. He argues that the practice of offering gifts as part of ancestral veneration culminated in the cultural practice of gift-giving to respectable personages such as chiefs or their representatives.

Thus, in the traditional Malawi religious context, you cannot go to the ancestors empty-handed; water, beer, or flour offerings were constant accompaniments to shrine visits. This understanding translated into the same practice with regard to village chiefs and their representatives. In the context of cultural change, whereby the idea of important personages has been transformed, giving gifts to anyone in authority becomes easy, especially where gaining of benefit or goodwill is expected. Thus, a thin line exists between cultural gift-giving in African culture and corrupt practices. By tracing the corruption problem to its cultural roots, Chakanza demonstrates, albeit subtly, the continuing influence of ATR in Malawi and Africa. The work also illustrates how ATR can provide an alternative approach to dealing with corruption in Africa. This is also explained in one chapter in this volume: “Exploring Ways of Utilising ATR in the fight against Corruption in Nigeria.”

It is also important to note that, while ATRs remain the bedrock on which African cultural values and practices are anchored, this religious tradition is not static. Social change in all its forms continues to significantly influence the practices and rituals within the indigenous religious tradition. In the edited work, *Initiation Rites for Boys in Lomwe Society in Malawi and Other Essays* (2005), Chakanza demonstrates how research in traditional religion in Malawi has shifted from broad ecological religions to communal rituals. One emphasis in the volume was the scrutiny of traditional rituals in connection with the study of the HIV/AIDS pandemic and the transmission of the virus. While most of the contributions in the volume were attempts to understand communal rituals in their various contexts, the broader narrative running through all of the submissions was how traditional communities in African contexts were adapting their cultural practices in response to social change. Given the enduring connection between rites of passage and religion in Africa, the volume demonstrates the continuing dynamics in ATRs. This emphasis not only confirmed but also extended Schoffeleer’s (2000) thesis on the adaptability of ATRs in the context of social change, including in response to the influence of other religions. The question of ritual change in African indigenous practices is a major issue in the study of ATR. Among the significant concerns in scholarship is how these new changes have implications for the sustainability of ATR (Oguntola-Laguda, 2022). Yet, as some contributions in this volume show, ritual change is an inevitable process for ATRs in contemporary society, where its adherents are constantly exposed to social and technological change. In fact, the ability to change its rituals needs to be

understood as ATR's inherent strength. It proves the religious traditions' resilience and abiding influence for the unforeseeable future.

While responding to social change is a hallmark of ATR, that trait is not its sole characteristic. ATR has also been characterised by resistance to change, especially in the face of the continuing influence of major religious traditions like Christianity and Islam. For example, in his 2006 book *African Ancestors Religion: Chipembedzo cha Makolo Achikuda*, Chakanza analyses an indigenous religious movement which epitomised religious-political resistance within ATR. The name of this religious movement as reflected in the subtitle of the book is translated literally as 'the religion of black ancestors'. In the work, Chakanza chronicles how the movement was founded in 1959, the same year when Dr Hasting Kamuzu Banda, the first president of Malawi, arrived in Malawi to lead the country to independence. At the heart of the movement, according to Chakanza, was the rejection of the foreign Christian God and religious texts of the whites, aiming to rediscover indigenous traditional religion, and galvanise Africans to struggle for a pan-Africanist, Afro-centric religious liberation that redeems their cultural traditions and self-determination. The nexus between the resurgence of the new religious movement and the significant political changes connected with the coming of Dr Banda in 1959 demonstrates the political nature of ATR and how the religious tradition can take on political features in specific circumstances. The political nature of ATR is well documented in the role of the Chimurenga uprising in Zimbabwe. The *Mwari* cult and the authority of spirit mediums in the first anti-colonial resistance movement played a critical role in the struggle against British rule in colonial Zimbabwe (1896-1897) (cf. Kaoma, 2016). The same was also true of the Mau Mau movement in Kenya, where traditional religious and cultural themes were useful in mobilising and motivating many combatants (Weigert, 1996). All this demonstrates the historical dynamics of ATR and its role in society. How the political dimensions of ATRs are worked out within the present democratic dispensation in Africa remains to be explored. Also fascinating will be an exploration of the role of spirit mediums in contemporary politics in Africa. It is apparent from the above discussion that African Traditional Religions and culture constituted an essential dimension of Chakanza's life work. This volume is both a celebration and a continuation of Prof. Chakanza's lifetime work. It aims to locate traditional African religions in the broader framework of social change in Africa and its implications for the practice

of traditional religions. The following chapters, coming from diverse geographic and cultural perspectives, analyse the dynamics within African indigenous religions.

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