

JESUIT MISSIONARY TYPES AND NSENGA RESPONSES IN DOMINIC MULAISHO'S *THE TONGUE OF THE DUMB*

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Abstract

Although Dominic Mulaisho's The Tongue of the Dumb (1971) was arguably the first post-colonial Zambian novel to gain any measure of international recognition, it has not yet been the subject of noteworthy scholarly enquiry. In this work, Mulaisho challenges categorical generalisations about Christian missionaries which had become a Leitmotiv in the fiction of Mongo Beti, Ferdinand Oyo, and many other novelists elsewhere in Africa by creating a varied gallery of Jesuits at a conventional station in eastern Zambia. These characters, though perhaps overdrawn in their differences, embody a broad spectrum of attitudes towards indigenous Nsenga culture and types of Christian spirituality. The contours of their diversity as purveyors of the Gospel are especially illuminated through Mulaisho's treatment of their interaction with Nsenga beliefs and practices regarding divination, witchcraft, marriage, healing and other dimensions of indigenous culture which have challenged missionaries throughout much of Africa.

As Michael R. Ward pointed out in 1986, "Zambian literature is one of the smallest national literatures in anglophone Africa".¹ Within this microcosm, Dominic Mulaisho's *The Tongue of the Dumb*² occupies a special niche. This novel was the first Zambian contribution to Heinemann's internationally acclaimed African Series, which in the wake of decolonisation in much of Africa provided opportunities for dozens of that continent's novelists, poets, and *littérateurs* in other genres to present their work to readers across national borders far and near. Moreover, along with Andrey Masiye's *Before Dawn* (1971) and Gideon Phiri's *Ticklish Sensation* (1971), *The Tongue of the Dumb* was one of the first Zambian novels to roll from the presses in any country. Beyond these objective, chronological distinctions, Mulaisho's debut work arguably attained a higher niveau of literary quality than any other Zambian novel during the first 20 years following independence in 1964, a standard not

1 Michael R. Ward, "Zambia", in Albert S. Gérard (ed.), *European-Language Writing in Sub-Saharan Africa* (Budapest, Akadémiai Kiadó, 1986), 972.

2 Dominic Mulaisho, *The Tongue of the Dumb* (London, Heinemann Educational Books, 1971). All references in the present article are to this edition.

upheld in his only other published novel, *The Smoke That Thunders*.³ Nevertheless, *The Tongue of the Dumb*, like literally hundreds of other African novels written since the 1950s, has received only the scantiest scholarly notice. This neglect is especially regrettable because Mulaisho's reconstruction of relations between Nsenga and European colonial cultures, particularly with regard to religious matters, provides unique insight into this aspect of central African history during the waning years of the British empire and at a time of waxing African nationalism. In the present article I take steps towards filling this *lacuna* in international scholarship by examining this Roman Catholic layman's portrayal of Jesuit missionaries in the then Northern Rhodesian field, paying particular attention to his varying evaluations of four types of missionaries and the reaction of indigenous Nsengas to their attitudes and behaviour in an environment of colonialism and cultural clashes.

Mulaisho's religious and cultural perspectives appear to have influenced strongly his depiction of missionary endeavours in *The Tongue of the Dumb*. He was born at Feira in 1933 and raised a Roman Catholic, a spiritual identity which he still maintained while writing his debut novel in his late thirties. Mulaisho received his secondary education leading to a teaching diploma at Chalimbana College before taking a bachelor's degree at what was then the University College of Rhodesia and Nyasaland. He taught briefly but by 1965, while still in his early twenties, had become a personal assistant to President Kenneth Kaunda. Before the end of the 1960s he held the title of permanent secretary in the Ministry of Education, and in 1970 was appointed executive chairman of the Mining Development Corporation.⁴ It was as a Catholic who had drunk deeply at the wells of Christianity, Western civilisation, educational administration, and corporate business that he took up the pen to begin his literary career. The fictional world Mulaisho constructs mirrors what he observed near the town of his birth when he was a young teenager but can most profitably be read with his ascent in the world of post-colonial politics and economics in mind.

PLOT SUMMARY

Because *The Tongue of the Dumb* remains largely unknown both in Africa and elsewhere, a brief recapitulation of its plot is essential for an understanding of the themes we shall explore. It all unfolds in the valley

3 (London, Heinemann Educational Books, 1979).

4 "Mulaisho, Dominic (Chola) 1933", *Contemporary Authors*, Vols. 97-100 (Detroit, Gale Research Company, 1981), 387-388; John Reed, "Mulaisho, Dominic", in Eugene Benaon and L. W. Conolly (eds.), *Encyclopedia of Post-colonial Literatures in English II* (London, Routledge, 1994), 1052-1053.

of the Kaunga River of south-eastern present-day Zambia, almost due east of Lusaka, immediately west of the Mozambican border and only a few kilometres north of that of what are now Zimbabwe and the town of Luangwa. The brief chronological span is 1948 and 1949. This region is inhabited by Nsenga people whose orientation is primarily towards their villages from which most appear not to have travelled any noteworthy distance. Few, for example, have seen Lusaka. Not surprisingly, xenophobia is the order of the day. The burghers of Mpona tolerate their counterparts from villages nearby but are suspicious of people from farther afield and, of course, of Europeans. Maize and goats form the basis of subsistence agriculture in an environment which is prone to drought and ensuing famines. Electrical current and motorised public transport are largely unknown in this insular area, although there are a few lorries and motorcycles. Illiteracy is the norm, as mission schools have only recently been established in some of the villages. Most of the Nsenga characters are firmly committed to the beliefs and practices of their traditional religion, which emphasises *inter alia* the veneration of ancestral spirits, zoological and other natural omens, and the observation of festivals in harmony with the rhythms of nature. In this mainly patriarchal, polygamous society, male characters occasionally insult one another by calling them women.

The village of Mpona, ruled by a polygamous chief of the same name who is also the titular king of the region with its other hamlets, is one of the two principal venues. Aspiring to power is his councillor and the village medicine man, Lubinda, a lascivious and totally unscrupulous man who has his sights set not only on his sovereign's throne but also the wife of a young friend, Dulani. Indeed, he has been sexually intimate with her several years earlier, at the behest of Dulani, who, convinced of his own infertility, requested him to impregnate this Natombi, who hails from another village within walking distance of Mpona. Her one child, however, a mute boy called Mwape, is in fact Dulani's son, contrary to his father's belief that the tryst between Lubinda and Natombi launched her pregnancy. During an evening of revelry to celebrate the marriage of one of Chief Mpona's daughters to an elderly man, Mwape wanders off. Dulani goes in search of him but is caught in a flash flood of the Kaunga River and is killed.

This is the first in a string of tribulations which the village experiences. Locusts eradicate the maize crop. More people contract leprosy. A whirlwind destroys part of the village. Colonial officials appear to collect taxes. An ancient rifle explodes when fired, injuring its bearer. The once stable if economically marginal social fabric of the community gradually unravels. Chief Mpona's suggestion that these woes are signs that ancestral spirits are displeased with waning adherence to tribal traditions does not

find general acceptance; instead, the view which Lubinda and others advance, namely that furtive witchcraft in the village is to blame, gains widening support. Eventually Lubinda summons a diviner, or *kamcape*, who confirms that witches are present. Rather than identifying them, however, he gives them a month to mend their ways. Lubinda uses this opportunity to use every rhetorical trick he can think of to direct suspicion at Chief Mpona and, after she spurns his advances, Natombi. Increasingly, local suspicion is directed not only at these two but also at Nyalutula, a dedicated Christian teacher from Petauke, whom the Jesuits at the Katondwe Mission some 30 kilometres away have recently commissioned to establish a school in the village of Mpona. This lay missionary and his wife flee the village and take refuge in his home town. Natombi and her dumb son are also hounded out of Mpona.

Lubinda's intrigues continue to bedevil that town, and within months nearly all the principal characters are either conniving against each other in a power struggle or are suspected of practising witchcraft. Owing to a crop failure, famine ravishes Mpona. Nyalutula leads a delegation of Christians who approach it with parcels of food but, believing that these victuals are being offered from the hands of bewitched people with ulterior motives, the starving villagers refuse to accept them. The teacher returns to re-open his school, but Lubinda and his cohorts burn him severely in his home, forcing him again to quit Mpona and settle at the Katondwe Mission, where he almost dies.

Interwoven with Mulaisho's narrative of events in Mpona is his account of Katondwe Mission, focussing on the attitudes and personalities of, and relations between, its expatriate personnel. Heading the mission is the seasoned and quiet Father Superior Gongazo, who is assisted by Father Paul Oliver, a relative newcomer whose scholarly credentials are matched by impatience and an authoritarian bearing towards his colleagues and the Africans alike, and a layman named Arrupe, who has considerable experience in Africa and harmonises well with both its people and fauna. Apart from exchanging often hostile criticisms of each other's approaches to missionary endeavours and debating the moral fibre (or, alternatively, allegedly uncivilised state of the Nsengas), these three do little that is remarkable at Katondwe. As we shall see shortly, however, Mulaisho employs his Jesuit characters masterfully in their interaction with each other and with the indigenous people to whom they are ministering to convey his perceptions of how missionary endeavours can either reap fruits among, or merely alienate, evangelised peoples.

In the closing chapters, Lubinda continues his campaign to replace Chief Mpona and rid the village of its leader as well as the teacher and Natombi. He has based part of his case against them on the mute condition of Natombi's son Mwape, which is generally believed to be a sign that he

has been bewitched, and the co-operation of the three accused with the missionaries, who have arranged corrective surgery to be performed on that youth. Belatedly, the *kamcape* returns and, perhaps operating in league with Lubinda, announces that the chief, as has been widely suspected, is a witch. An angry crowd binds and leads away Mpona, Natombi, and Nyalutula, the latter two of whom are equally despised. The *kamcape* is reluctant to pour into the chief the *mwabvi* to confirm his judgement, however, fearing severe reprisals by the colonial administration if this baneful potion kills the accused. Lubinda is about to administer it to Mpona when, *mirabile dictu*, Natombi's son is brought back from Lusaka able to speak. The healing which has obviously taken place immediately undermines Lubinda's credibility; he flees in the company of the similarly discredited *kamcape* and is killed by a leopard. In the meantime Arrupe has been killed by a lion at Katondwe, and Father Gonzago and Father Oliver have been reconciled there immediately before the death of the Father Superior. Father Oliver continues the ministry to the village of Mpona in a spirit of greater cultural toleration and experiences the results of his intervention in young Mwape's life by hearing him speak. The boy's healing reminds him of Isaiah 35:5-6: "Then shall blind men's eyes be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped. Then shall the lame man leap like a deer and the tongue of the dumb shout aloud."

FATHER PAUL OLIVER: EVANGELISATION VIA CONFRONTATION

Mulaisho devotes more space to describing the imperious Father Paul Oliver, whom the Nsengas for some reason call "Chiphwanya", than any of the other missionaries. His portrait of this authoritarian European is arguably an overdrawn caricature who represents a type more than is a credible character who merely embodies attitudes and behaviour which Mulaisho finds repulsive and counterproductive in the mission field.

Father Oliver's ethnic background is unclear. Despite his surname, which could of course be British and is certainly not Slavic, he expresses homesickness in a letter accompanying a card to his sister Anatolia in Cracow and remembers nostalgically the chiming of bells there on Christmas but also, quite uncharacteristic for Poland, turkey dinners on that holiday. Moreover, this prelate recalls using his oratorical skills while celebrating midnight Mass on Christmas "before a packed congregation of dignitaries" (p. 33). Finally, he has earned at least one of his two doctorates at the University of Cracow. Is Father Oliver a Pole? Apart from these references to the historic city in southern Poland, there is no compelling reason to believe that he is.

Regardless of his provenance, this relatively young Jesuit and "scientist of world renown" (p. 39) in Mulaisho's unbridled description

has brought to the Northern Rhodesian mission field an enormous amount of cultural intolerance and anti-African attitudes which call into question his suitability for this kind of vocation. These underlying facts are established from the outset. In the previously mentioned letter to his sister, whom he regards as his "only window upon the world", suggesting that to him Africa does not count as part of such, Father Oliver laments that he has nothing to look forward to on Christmas "except the hordes of half-naked unwashed natives begging for presents" (p. 32). In a conversation with Father Gonzago, he continues along the same path by declaring of the local indigenes that "all of them" are beggars (p. 34). Negative signs in Mulaisho's description of his physical appearance reinforce the impression of Father Oliver as a blustery man:

He was tall and roughly built, and he had a stormy temper. His white cassock was tightly filled out, tattered, and patched. He had bushy eyebrows and a face clouded with the grimness of thunder about to explode (p. 38).

Readers soon learn that Father Oliver does not confine his condescending remarks about the populace to letters and conversations with his colleagues. Riding a motorcycle from Katondwe to Mpona, he becomes agitated when people on the road do not give way. Upon seeing that they were bearing a corpse to a burial, he asks curtly, "A Christian?" and upon receiving a negative reply shouts "A pagan!" and criticises the mourners for not requesting him to perform an emergency baptism. Opening the theme of relations between missionaries and colonial authorities in Northern Rhodesia, Father Oliver warns the crowd, "If you don't bring your sick to the mission, I will tell the D[istrict] C[ommissioner] to imprison you" (p. 41).

Father Oliver resents being commissioned to Katondwe after serving as private secretary to a prelate in Lusaka but nevertheless believes that he has a purpose in the rural field, namely to use whatever means proved necessary to bring civilisation to the indigenes and them to Christianity. In his perception, the Nsengas are physically, mentally, spiritually and culturally sick:

To him the work was clear. It did not consist simply in baptizing people, but also in curing them. Curing them of their bodily diseases as well as the ills of their minds. The natives had to be forced into becoming Christians. They also had to be forced to abandon superstition. He was appalled by the Father Superior, who would rather have let the natives go on living as they had always done. He was appalled by the District Commissioner at the Boma, who seemed to do nothing to force the people to change their ways (p. 40).

Education is to provide the principal bridgehead for the assault on Nsenga paganism. It is Father Oliver who has sent Nyalutilla to establish a

school for the children of Mpona. When his Father Superior informs him that the teacher is living under threat in the wake of the initial tribulation in the village and could fall victim to ritual murder, the young missionary is incensed that the despised Africans would "do that to a Christian" and, in another appeal to secular authority, vows, "I will have them arrested and charged under the Witchcraft Ordinance" (p. 35). He never actually follows through on this threat, but during his visit to Mpona he makes analogous ones during his conversation with the chief and inadvertently gives Lubinda's accusations about the malevolence of the missionaries credence in the minds of the villagers:

Mpona, I want to hear from you. The school opens tomorrow or else I will tell the D.C. about it. If you do not allow the teacher to teach religion, I will punish you. This village will have plague. The fire of God will descend upon it . . . School tomorrow. And anyone who does not send his child to school will hear from the Boma (p. 44).

What is particularly ironic about Father Oliver's oft-repeated threats to invoke the colonial authorities is the fact that through his conduct he has also alienated them. He appeals in writing to James Coates, the District Commissioner in Feira (present-day Luangwa), to alleviate the suffering which famine has caused in the area. Mulaisho does not present the text of that letter but only Coates's sarcastic reply, in which he rejects what he regards as a gratuitous request and declares that

the physical welfare of the natives in N. Rhodesia is the responsibility of His Majesty's Government and that your action in appealing for assistance on behalf of these natives constitutes grave and unwarranted interference and is calculated to cause dissension and disaffection among these primitive people . . . (p. 141).

After completing this reply, Coates ponders "this uncouth young man of a Father Oliver who seemed to have an unfailing knack of annoying everyone, including the natives . . ." (p. 142).

On an orientation course at what Mulaisho calls the School of Oriental Studies (presumably meant is the renowned School of Oriental and African Studies) in London, a lecturer who had been a District Officer in Kenya had implored Father Oliver and other prospective missionaries, "Always be firm with the native" (p. 44). This authoritarian Jesuit experiences no difficulty or compunction in putting into practice those archetypical words of British imperial advice. Indeed, most of the words he utters underscore his commitment to this dictum. Apart from the demeanour he brings to his position, Father Oliver's attitude towards the Africans facilitates his posture of supremacy. During his vituperative exchange with Lubinda over taking Mwape away for medical treatment, the incensed priest is more concerned with his interlocutor's audacity in contradicting

him than he is with the salvation of the indigenes. He has been willing to trade intellectual blows with "heretics" at the University of Cracow and even find debates with them "stimulating". "But these creatures", he thinks of the Nsengas, "what right had they even to think for themselves?" (p. 137). In another revelation of his colonialist attitude, Father Oliver effectively denies the individuality of the Nsengas as rational human beings in a typically heated exchange with the Father Superior, who questions the wisdom of taking Mwape for medical treatment without first securing the consensus of community opinion in Mpona. "The only time these natives will agree with you is if you ask them to agree to being fed", fumes Father Oliver. "Otherwise, they won't do anything positive" (p. 142).

For that matter, Father Oliver has at best an ambiguous attitude towards his colleagues at Katondwe Mission, notwithstanding the hierarchical nature of the Society of Jesus. At times, to be sure, he defers to the Father Superior. "That was the way of the Order. You may argue, but must follow the leader" Father Oliver reasons reluctantly (p. 143). Yet his direct criticism of Father Gonzago can be brutal. Accusing him of tolerating the traditions of local converts to Catholicism, Father Oliver claims that his Superior does not care "what paganism they bring to the altar so long as they don't kill anyone" and, "shouting into the old priest's ear", cautions that "the work of the Church will come to nought" unless discipline is imposed (p. 149). Father Oliver also unleashes his authoritarianism at the convalescent Nyalutila at Katondwe, ordering him to assume certain postures while, however, bandaging his burns and administering medicine (p. 200). He believes Nyalutila could accelerate his own recovery by practising some measure of hygiene. "But that habit of expectorating on to the floor, never getting up to wash his stinking body, vomiting into his blanket — how could these help to cure him? He wonders" (p. 199). Father Oliver's words to Brother Arrupe rarely rise above the level of badgering, and he is equally domineering towards Arrupe's successor, Sergio, commanding him in a representative to "bring my two bicycles to my room and deflate them" and, rather than brooking any protest on the part of his subaltern on the grounds that the Father Superior needs one of the bicycles for transport the following day, simply order him to "do what I tell you. He can walk" (p. 153).

For all his faults *vis-à-vis* the Nsengas, Father Oliver evinces genuine concern for them and has made an impact on their lives that extends beyond the neophyte school at Mpona. Perhaps most obviously, without his intervention Mwape presumably would have remained dumb and, consequently, Lubinda's malevolent revolt would have been carried to its murderous conclusion. That he cares about their eternal salvation, as he understands it eschatologically from his orthodox Roman Catholic

perspective, is beyond dispute, and he seeks to convince them to abandon their belief in witchcraft which Mulaisho clearly depicts as the bane of Nsenga society. More problematically, Father Oliver, whose quiver of virtues does not include the arrow of humility, holds himself in higher esteem than does anyone else. "Without him, as he was often wont to remind the Little Father Superior, the mission would be dead and he, Father Superior, would be forced 'to feast off the skulls of those mummies' in the cemetery" (p. 39). For his part, Father Gonzago readily acknowledges, at least to himself, that Father Oliver is "hard-working" and, despite their great differences, is grateful for both his presence at Katondwe and his contacts overseas. "Without him and his wide net of friends abroad, where would the mission have been?" he wonders. "There would have been no quinine, which had saved the lives of many Africans around the mission. Above all there would have been little money and, therefore, no bandages" (pp. 142, 154).

FATHER SUPERIOR GONZAGO: DEVOTION AND ACCULTURATION

Mulaisho provides considerably less information about Father Gonzago's background. His surname is Spanish, and although Father Oliver assures his sister in Cracow that his colleagues at Katondwe are "Europeans" (p. 32) there is no compelling reason to believe that Gonzago hails from Spain rather than from Latin America or, for that matter, some other part of the world. Since the sixteenth century, the Society of Jesus has operated on an international basis, recruiting missionaries from several countries on both sides of the Atlantic. In any case, Father Gonzago has toiled at Katondwe for a decade in 1948 (p. 38). Mulaisho describes him initially in the third chapter as "a little, dried-up old man" (p. 38); during the balance of the novel much more of this devoted priest's personality and spirituality emerge, especially in his interaction with Father Oliver, who is nearly his polar opposite with regard to attitudes towards the Africans and missionary strategy. Indeed, it is chiefly in the generally antagonistic juxtaposition of these two arguably overdrawn types that Mulaisho illuminates pivotal missiological themes.

The theme of Father Gonzago's attempts to identify with the people to whom he seeks to convey the Gospel is a scarlet thread running through much of the narrative. That at least some of them accept him is established early on. On Christmas, an emaciated, old African man who appears to be blind visits Katondwe Mission and gives Father Gonzago a chicken as a Christmas present (p. 34). Perhaps it is such acts of generosity despite palpable poverty that has convinced the elderly cleric that the Nsengas are "good people", as he enthusiastically tells Father Oliver, adding that "they are even better than some of our own people, we the

carriers of Christianity" (p. 149). He refers to these Africans as "my people" and expects them to bury him and pray for the repose of his soul (p. 150). Accordingly, Father Gonzago embraces the Nsenga headman Mpona as "my friend" and assures him, "We are your people, Chief" (pp. 158-159). This stands in marked contrast to Father Oliver's threats to appeal to the colonial authorities to punish Mpona and other Nsengas. In his final words before expiring at Katondwe Mission, uttered to Father Oliver, he says, "I leave my people in your hands. Pray for understanding. They are good men, these people. There is more love among them than in our society" (p. 228). The Father Superior does not wish his identity with the Nsengas to end with his death. His written "dying wish" is "to be buried among the people in the ground" rather than having his bones displayed with those of fellow missionaries in an ossuary at the station (p. 230).

Father Gonzago's commitment to the inculturation of the Gospel becomes apparent almost immediately. As part of his annual preparation for Christmas, he carves figures for a Nativity scene. In 1948, the three members of the Holy Family are depicted as Africans. This draws the ire of Father Oliver, who accuses his colleague of distorting what he assumes is the truth that "Jesus was white, not black." The diminutive creator of these figures vigorously defends his artistic licence on theological grounds, focussing on the primacy of the essential incarnation as transcending accidental ethnic characteristics of it. "Jesus became Man. This is the most important mystery of the Nativity. It is as Man I am going to portray Him and it so happens that here in the valley — nay — I would go further, here in Northern Rhodesia, here in Africa, the majority are black". Evincing no sympathy for or understanding of this reasoning, however, Father Oliver labels it "nonsense" and insists — pointedly distancing himself from the indigenous population — that "these black people of yours must be taught that they owe everything to the white man — their health, their salvation from slavery, their salvation from hell". Tipping his ethnocentric hand, he adds that "Jesus had to be born white. No civilized person would have listened to a black Jesus" (pp. 28-29).

Attitudes towards traditional African marriage practices which are at variance with European Christianity have been a recurrent theme in missiological controversies since the nineteenth century, usually crossing verbal swords over the question of polygamy. The personnel at Katondwe Mission echo part of this well-worn controversy, namely that dealing with the practice of widowers marrying the sisters of their deceased wives. Predictably, Father Gonzago defends this convention, whereas Father Oliver asks, "At what point does a pagan custom become a Christian practice? Are your actions not heretical?" His Superior easily disarms this objection, pointing out that "the only impediment to a proper marriage

in this case is consanguinity, of which there is none". Mulaisho uses this exchange to voice his perception of the superiority of Nsenga to European marriages. Father Gonzago asserts:

There is more love between man and woman among these people than in our own country. In our country we kiss our women in public, in the streets, in order to sjambok them better in the homes. The holy love that these people have for their wives extends to the woman's family (pp. 150-151).

The two priests also clash over the legitimacy of indigenous African medicine. As he approaches the end of his earthly journey, the ailing Father Gonzago refuses to enter a hospital for treatment, "because even here there are many African medicines, Father, which can cure this yellowness which you consider to be a disease". Countering Father Oliver's objections that indigenous healing practices are "pagan" and lamentations that he has wasted time "teaching these Africans to come to hospital to receive medicines, teaching them not to scatter their faeces all over the place, to avoid disease, to be treated for leprosy, smallpox and everything else", Father Gonzago insists that the gap between African and European medicine is less expansive than one might initially believe. "Tell me, how is it pagan to believe in African medicine?" he asks.

So many of our medicines are made from herbs, both in Europe and here. These people have medicines which will stop birth when they want. I'm not saying it's right, but the fact is that they can stop the arrival of unwanted children (pp. 220-222).

A final, overarching difference between the two European men lies in their general missionary strategies. To the elderly Father Superior, the key to successful evangelisation of the Nsengas lies partly in their hierarchical social structure in which an old chief holds considerable sway over his subjects.

For him [i.e. the Father Superior] the gospel was to be brought through the old people rather than the children. It was the old people who stood nearest to the Day of Judgement. Anything learnt in childhood was bound to be forgotten in adult life unless there was a connecting ladder between the old and the new (p. 36).

This conviction, which runs counter to much nineteenth and twentieth-century missiological thinking and practice, helps to explain Father Gonzago's insistence on maintaining cordial relations with and showing respect for Chief Mpona. To the considerably younger and more academically inclined Father Oliver, however, the establishment and maintenance of the school in that chief's village is paramount.

Mulaisho gradually reveals aspects of Father Gonzago's essential spirituality and thereby explains to a considerable degree this missionary's

approach to his vocation. Much of this revelation comes late in the narrative. Psychologically an introvert, the Father Superior is a man of private devotion who

always looked forward to a moment of calm when he could say his prayers, and when he found it he guarded every second of it jealously. It was from these brief moments of utter loneliness that he recharged his spirit.

Mulaisho finds this individualistic quietude harmonious with life in Africa. Father Gonzago has "stayed too long in lonely places to think that a man could go on doing this and that, stirring the whole earth into *Action*". Consequently, rather than emphasising social ministry, the Father Superior believed that the "mystical experience was what really mattered" (pp. 216-217). For all his learning, Father Oliver, who is quite unsatisfied with his own devotional life (p. 224), does not comprehend Father Gonzago's religious nature until after experiencing a nightmare and reading the dying priest's devotional notes, which include reminders to pray for "Father Oliver's continued strength and health", "Chief Mpona, to be saved from the false judgement of the *kamcape*", and "obedience to my holy assistant" (p. 229). This epiphany does not cause Father Oliver to alter radically his own strategy, although he elects to visit the chief on behalf of the deceased Father Superior (p. 247). It is this pastoral call which saves Mpona's life, giving him at least salvation from the caprice of the *kamcape* and Lubinda's followers who are intent on putting their headman to death.

NYALUTILA: AN INDIGENOUS INCARNATION OF EUROPEAN MISSIONARY ZEAL

Mulaisho provides in Nyalutila an almost obligatory indigenous missionary not only to represent the vital role which Africans played in the evangelisation of their own societies but also to bridge the otherwise formidable gap between Father Oliver and the village of Mpona. Very little information is provided about this local Christian. He is said to reside in Nyimba near the Kaunga Valley, but whether he is a native of the region or has merely settled there in connection with his employment for the Katondwe Mission is not stated. For that matter, the text reveals little else of a biographical nature, and Nyalutila's personality never fully emerges. Apparently he is an introvert, "a shy man" whose seeming aloofness has led some local residents to accuse "him of isolating himself from the adults of the village" (p. 23). Mulaisho emphasises his zeal for his calling in the second chapter, however, as well as his devotion to the children whom he instructs in Mpona. Within a short time he has become a fixture "among them exuding encouragement, mystical joy, and

satisfaction" while giving his undivided attention to his work, thereby gaining enough respect amongst the villagers that they refer to him as "Aphunzitsi", meaning teacher. His love of education extends to the schoolhouse which bears his personal stamp:

For him the construction of the new low mud-walled shelter was the fulfilment of a dream. It was his design he had put everything that he had into this building, and to him it appeared to bubble with his soul.

Moreover, Nyalutilla's Catholic piety is inseparable from his educational vocation:

Every night he walked around it [i.e. the school] as he recited the rosary. He prayed God to bless every particle of mud that went into the building, every pole, every blade of grass (p. 23).

In some respects this simple educator mirrors Father Oliver's intolerance of indigenous practices, on which he has turned his African back. He diligently follows the instructions that Jesuit had stressed when commissioning him to establish a school in Mpona, namely that "it is a sin to attend the funeral of a pagan. It is a sin to join in or watch pagan dances" (p. 26). These strictures imposed on him prevent Nyalutilla from attending the initiation of Chief Mpona's daughter immediately preceding her marriage to the elderly Simbeya only three months after she has experienced her first menstruation. Yet the teacher remains sufficiently in contact with and has enough compassion for non-Christian villagers that he seeks to join the mourners after the untimely death of Dulani. His condolences are rejected, however, by townsmen who resent his absence from the initiation rites the previous evening. "I know that they will not even be at the funeral today because it is a pagan burial", declares Lubinda of Nyalutilla and his wife, who is seeking to console the widowed Natombi. "Why don't they just go away now, back to the home their white missionaries have built them?" (pp. 24-25). Of necessity they do after the school is temporarily closed, but his dedication to the work of the church prompts him to remain in contact with residents of the region who are sympathetic to Christianity. He travels to nearby Cacuwamba, for example, to baptize a sick man. For his efforts there, Nyatulilla is beaten senseless by Lubinda and others who falsely accuse him of using his connections in both indigenous society and the Katondwe Mission to sell African women to Whites (pp. 64-66). He is also one of the very few people who continues to evince any sympathy for Natombi, notwithstanding her apparent rejection of the Gospel, and probably saves her life and that of her dumb son after they are hounded out of Mpona.

Although Nyalutilla is generally depicted as a saintly person, the series of tribulations he must endure because of his faith take their toll on his personality. After being accused again of practising witchcraft and

feeling totally alienated from the population of Mpona as Lubinda's self-serving intrigues there have pitted nearly everyone against everyone, he abandons his belief that the chief has been an instrument of God's salvation for the village (p. 175) and becomes thoroughly disillusioned with the local population.

This was what these people were, he thought to himself, dogs, absolute dogs. You gave them so many years of your life, but you were still a foreigner. For that they would neither trust nor forgive you (p. 175).

The suspected teacher remains isolated in his house, fearing for his life if he should appear in public. "Not all the pictures of a dying Jesus Christ along his wall could shake him out of his stupor of hate", declares Mulaisho of this once forgiving Christian servant. "They had become meaningless masks mocking his irresolution" (p. 181). The extensive burns his enemies inflict on this easy target shortly thereafter, create a crisis for Nyalutilla, during which he almost dies while convalescing at Katondwe Mission. While virtually *in extremis*, however, he gradually recoups his spiritual strength, in part owing to the ministry of Father Gonzago. "At Mpona he had been an active Christian, a crusader. He had been a salesman for Christianity", we read of Nyalutilla's spiritual transformation during this time of regeneration. "But in the last few weeks that he had been at the mission, he had found a new richness, a spiritual uplifting which he could not describe". Long before his recovery is certain, he expresses his determination to return to Mpona and attempt to save it (pp. 200-201). Finally able to make that effort, the teacher nearly loses his life at the hands of the people to whom he desires to proclaim salvation. Again, the timely intervention of the new Father Oliver, at last operating in the spirit of the deceased Father Superior, prevents him from being killed for allegedly practising witchcraft.

BROTHER ARRUPPE: THE EUROPEAN AS AFRICAN?

Mulaisho devotes much less space to Brother Arrupe than any of the other principal missionary personnel and provides virtually no information about his background, but in his portrait of this serious little man he underscores certain traits that have allowed him to make a valuable contribution to the work of Katondwe Mission by serving as a bridge to the local Africans whom the intellectually far more gifted Father Oliver was unwittingly antagonising.

The brief description of Brother Arrupe includes unmistakable signs of his personality and relationship to the Nsengas. Mulaisho introduces him as a "small elderly brother" and as a "small man with a weather-beaten scaly skin, hairy arms, and a back curved into a bow from lifting heavy bags and stones". Nothing about him is physically attractive:

His head was pointed, and only at the apex was there any sign of visible hair-growth. He was so light and small that sitting there before the enormous organ he looked like an ugly sparrow treading on a heap of maize (pp. 29-30).

Much later in the narrative, Mulaisho refers to "the sweaty smell of his greasy little body" (p. 144). Though visually and aromatically unappealing, Brother Arrupe has sufficient musical proficiency to play what Mulaisho variously calls a piano and an organ while leading choir practice to prepare the mission's congregation for the celebration of Christmas.

Brother Arrupe contributes virtually nothing to the dialogue, only grunting "No" upon hearing a report on the radio of the introduction of capital punishment for practising witchcraft in Cameroon. Whether this response is intended to suggest a toleration of indigenous folkways or an abhorrence of violence, particularly when it is inflicted by colonial authorities, is impossible to say. In any case, he communicates with man and beast alike and has gained wide acceptance by both the Nsengas and at least a part of the local animal kingdom. Domestic animals are his companions at Katondwe, especially the chickens he tends. "To him the fowls were pets, and while he dressed them for the table he would never eat them", explains Mulaisho of this Assisi-like churchman (p. 144). These birds recognise his scent and welcome him when he investigates their safety. Like many Christians in the Roman Empire, however, Brother Arrupe falls victim to a lion while tending his flock. His death weighs heavily on the Nsengas whom he has touched. They mourn his death in accordance with their own customs, singing funeral songs whose unchristian character infuriates Father Oliver and imbibing alcohol:

Beer passed around and people sang. But it was not the song of drunken people, or of people rejoicing. It was the song of people sorrowing and people who sipped at the calabash to lighten their hearts (p. 148).

Apparently more than any of his colleagues, Brother Arrupe has managed to reach the local indigenes without — unlike the teacher — alienating many of them. Missing from Mulaisho's narrative, however, is more than the sketchiest impression of how he has done this. One must assume that to a great extent Brother Arrupe has won the hearts of the Africans by becoming one of them, at least to the extent that the constraints of his own cultural identity have allowed this. Mulaisho's account of his outreach to the Nsengas is entirely positive.

CONCLUSION

Post-colonial African fiction is rich in categorical generalisations, many of them clearly vilifying, about foreign missionaries and their alleged

disrespect for indigenous cultures. One needs only read the novels of such authors as Mongo Beti, Ferdinand Oyono, and Timothy Wangusa to find ample evidence of deep resentment of heavy-handed clerical bumbling and unbridled colonialist attitudes. To be sure, one can also find more favourably disposed representations, or at least qualified criticisms of Christian missionaries in the works of *inter alia* John Munonye, Kenjo Jumbam, and T. Obinkaram Echewa, but these are decidedly in a minority. Mulaisho's *The Tongue of the Dumb*, by contrast, cries out against categorical indictments as well as facile affirmation of Christian missionaries and their strategies in propagating the Gospel. The ongoing development of Zambian literary studies and research on the proliferation of Christianity in southern Africa would be well served by giving such carefully qualified portrayals their due. Unlike Mark Antony in Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*, in his consideration of the missionary endeavour Dominic came neither to bury nor to praise.