

## **Lived Experiences of Bemba Catholics Living With Dual Religiosity of African Indigenous Religion and Christianity In Muchinga Province of Zambia**

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### **Abstract**

The study sought to understand the lived experiences of Bemba Catholics in Zambia, Muchinga Province, as they negotiate dual religiosity by mixing African Indigenous Religions (AIR) with Catholicism. Such a blending of worldviews (dual religiosity) often concerns the acceptance of traditional beliefs and rituals that sometimes conflict with Christian doctrine, posing unique challenges to individuals trying to honour both identities. Nevertheless, such experiences have not received much attention in academia. A sample size of 20 Bemba Catholics was used. In-depth interviews, focus group discussions, and observation were engaged. The study employed a hermeneutic phenomenological approach and Van Manem's hermeneutic thematic reflection for data analysis. The study has revealed that Bemba Catholics in Muchinga Province have a wide range of lived experiences of dual religiosity, including ethno-religious experiences such as cultural identity, personal identity, cultural heritage and community subtleties. Bemba Catholics have psychosocial and emotional experiences, which include struggles with dual allegiance, community undercurrents, a complex belief system of duality, challenges, resilience, and confusion. Nevertheless, Bemba Catholics find dual religiosity to strengthen their cultural identity and allows Bemba Catholics to preserve their cultural heritage. The study concludes that of Bemba Catholics lived reality consists of cultural adaptation, spiritual search, and social engagement, all entwined to make a meaningful synthesis of their cultural heritage and Catholic faith. The study contributes to substantiating an understanding of faith and cultural identity in Africa, as African Christians continuously negotiate between traditional practices and Christian beliefs.

**Keywords:** African indigenous religion, culture, dual religiosity, lived experiences, identity.

## Introduction

The very act of living with and being exposed to two worldviews leads to the merging of beliefs and rituals that are considered incompatible with the Christian faith, thus giving rise to an area of contention, a unique challenge, and posing the need for individuals to navigate traditional beliefs, worldviews, cultures, and practices. This duality in the case of the Bemba Catholics leads them to straddle the borderline between Catholicism and ethnic practices. However, their experiences as they walk these thin lines have not received enough attention in the scholarly world. Unless there is documentation on how Bemba Catholics experience dual religious identities, there is a risk of misconstruing their perspectives and beliefs, leaving them with less support from religious bodies and presenting a lesser opportunity for inter-religious dialogue. Mbiti (1991) suggests that African Christians navigate their dual religiosity by balancing their African and Christian identities. Understanding the experience of African Christians with dual religiosity sheds light on the intertwining of faith and cultural identity. Mbiti (1991) suggests that African Christians navigate their dual religiosity by balancing their African and Christian identities. The simultaneous practice of AIR and Catholicism among Bemba Catholics is a lived reality with emotional and practical challenges. Understanding the experience of African Christians sheds light on the intertwining of faith and cultural identity. Exploring the experiences of living with both AIR and Catholicism among Bemba Catholics is essential for a comprehensive understanding of their dual religiosity.

The fusion of Christian and AIR traditions is further manifested where African cultures retain their identities among their believers, enhancing this act by including traditional practices in Christian rituals, with older generations being the link (Hellen and Orina, 2021). Christianity and AIR mix with the spirituality and identity of African Christians, providing additional support for their beliefs and practices (Mokhoathi, 2020a). In the diasporic context of Christianity and AIR, social relationship dynamics from the community can be leveraged. There is lucidity in these communities that religious practices are mixed for social solidarity, and when such orthodox Christians reject them, these become fault lines for tensions: the rejection creates feelings of alienation amongst all those who are trying to honour their hybrid lives of Christian and traditional identities (Okeke *et al.*, 2017). As noted, quite a considerable number of African Christians who have blended Christianity and AIR do so to fortify their spiritual and cultural identity, blending in and reinforcing their faith and rituals (Mokhoathi, 2020b). Religious pluralism implies traversing various faiths, such as Christianity and indigenous faiths, in achieving different religious identities (Janson, 2021). The very notion of indigeneity delineates a convoluted area where local traditions coexist with and are drawn upon to sustain Christian worship (Adogame, 2021; Durodolu and Chisita, 2024). The question of indigeneity raises an important distinction in the traditions involved: whose local traditions are being prioritised, and according to which contexts these practices assimilate to, or resist, the homogenising force of global Christianity.

In African communities, the combination of AIR and Christianity creates syncretism where traditional African powers are utilised to address spiritual insecurity

arising from the traditional worldview (Magezi and Magezi, 2017). They can synthesise their traditional worldview and Christian doctrine to comprehend spiritual forces, challenging assumptions about the compatibility of different belief systems (Vanden Berg, 2005). The practice of Christianity alongside AIR often results in heightened spiritual fulfilment. Moreover, many African Christians find that traditional healing practices, such as herbal remedies and divination, complement their Christian faith. This synergy is particularly evident in contexts where access to modern medical facilities is limited. Traditional medicine is not seen as contradictory to their faith but as an additional resource for spiritual and physical healing (Mawere *et al.*, 2021). This duality not only highlights the strength of cultural practices but is also suggestive of the tensions that arise within those practices where indigenous traditions correspond with more mainstream religious beliefs.

Many African Christians integrate traditional African religious practices with Christianity to preserve their cultural identity while upholding Christian principles. This blending is evident in the inclusion of traditional rituals within Christian ceremonies, creating a connection between their ancestral heritage and their religious faith (Hellen and Orina, 2021). The fusion of AIR and Christianity is regarded as resistance to the Western interpretation of Christianity and an exploration of self-discovery through the interaction of African religious heritage, traditional culture, and identity (Mokhoathi, 2024). The process of African Christians amalgamating their indigenous beliefs with Christianity is complex, emphasising a combination of the two rather than a straightforward adoption of a new Christian identity. Despite potential conflicts, many African Christians do not view their cultural identity and religious beliefs as contradictory but embrace a comprehensive approach that integrates both aspects (Mokhoathi, 2024). This ongoing negotiation and adaptation process stresses the importance of understanding faith within specific cultural and social contexts (Vahakangas and Lauterbach, 2019). This view raises an important point: the prevalence of Western Christianity in applying a monolithic scheme that frequently overlooks many local belief systems. But such an outlook may also underestimate the subtleties of faith, identity, and cultural expressions, all inextricably tied together and undergoing constant reinterpretation and negotiation. Milingo (2019:54) argued while reflecting on the handles to inculturation in the Catholic context:

An important point related to the foregoing was that the inculturation of religious life [as a specific case] would create a sense of feeling of being at home. According to the respondents, African values such as ‘family’, ‘joy’, ‘Ubuntu’ and respect for the family and culture would be experienced.

This stresses the very fact that these cultural values, in the actual sense, cannot be relegated to the side but incorporated into the living experience of faith. Combining traditional practices within Christianity among African Christians not only affirms cultural identity but also raises a critical perspective on how personal exploration of faith can become a site of cultural preservation against hegemonic narrative.

Dual religiosity of Bemba Catholics entails understanding their lived experiences and cultural worlds through an interpretive circle (Lavery, 2003). An interpretive phenomenological design was employed to understand the dual religiosity of

Christianity and AIR among Bemba Catholics after the centenary of the Catholic faith in Muchinga Province. It draws on Heidegger's (Wilson and Hutchinson, 1991) 'Being and Time' model, to which Van Manen (1997) added four reflective themes of lived experience, namely space, body, time, and relations. Van Manen considered the lived experience as occurring within these four dimensions: space, body, time, and relations. Muchinga Province, where the Bemba Catholic community is situated, presents a very rich tapestry including some of the greatest highlights of the facets and experiences articulated in human existence; that is, space, body, time, and relationships. Space is concerned with the geophysical nature of Muchinga, whereby the environment reflected in it represents the organisation of human daily lives and spirituality retained by them. The lived body means culture and spirituality in the sense of the way people engage their environments through their bodies. It is more temporal in that a community brings its people into time by merging the contemporary practices of Catholics with traditional rhythms and seasonal happenings that hold paramount significance to them as a cultural identity. The temporal engagement opens rich conversations as to what people are currently doing with their experiences. Relationality thus emerges in its essence regarding associational ties, thereby making pertinent the significance of interpersonal relationships and social networks within the Bemba grouping. In doing so, these ties underpin the identity and sense of belonging, which are created through common faith practices and communal social gatherings. In much the same vein, the Bemba in Muchinga live out a way whereby their strong Catholic identity intermarries with more indigenous faith and practice. More dynamic than these processes are the dialogues of culture, tradition, spirit, and moral tyros, all of which knit together and enrich their lives and community identity. Indeed, these syncretic beliefs have worked themselves into a dominance over time after the post-centenary of Catholicism in the area, thus giving credence to the resilience of faith among the Bemba Catholics.

Kenneth Pargament's (1997) religious coping theory states that human beings may tap their religious beliefs and tools to deal with stress, adverse situations, or existential questions. Traditional rituals, well-being, and supernatural practices provide them with emotional solace, spiritual well-being, and some measure of control in the backdrop of cultural clashes with religious doctrine. For instance, participation in life-cycle rituals affords them social support and provides a known framework to cope with societal stigma, identity crisis, or religious authorities, even putting them to resistance. Conflicts with or misunderstandings from time to time encourage them to balance seeking solace in some traditional practices with their Christian religious pathway to avoid dissonance and resilience.

Park's (2010) meaning-making model contains five principles that create a theoretical basis for how someone appraises a stressful situation and how that appraisal comes to bear in the interpretation and processing of events. The first principle holds that there exists a global meaning system within each person. This global meaning consists of a collective organisation of beliefs, goals, and feelings that together form the bulk of schemata for how people perceive and interpret the world and their own place in it. The second principle asserts that when persons experience an occurrence that challenges their

global meaning system, they actively attempt to locate meaning in that occurrence.

According to the third principle, increasing incongruence between an event and the perceived situational and global meaning results in a perception of greater stress, thereby generating cognitive dissonance, which motivates a reduction of the inconsistency. The fourth principle states that this discrepancy between one's appraisal and the global meaning activates the meaning-making process toward restoring equilibrium. If the meaning-making process succeeds in aligning appraised meaning with global meaning, better adjustment to the stressor will result (Park 2010). This theory highlights how individuals define experiences in their lives as giving meaning and purposive rationality to life. Taken together, these theories illuminate Bemba Catholics' ingenious and adaptive imbrication of the exploitation of both traditional and religious means to cope with adversity, as well as the concomitant ability to reinterpret and integrate meaning into their dual religious identities. It combines resilience with reaffirmation of identity and tension with cultural continuity against the background of contemporary religious strife.

The study aims to explore the lived experiences of Bemba Catholics who practice the dual religiosity of AIR and Catholicism in Muchinga Province of Zambia through a hermeneutic phenomenological approach, virtually a hundred years after the entry of Catholicism into the region (1999-2024). The study contributes to theological reflection on the relationship between Christianity and African traditional religions, thus advancing the case for contextually anchored theologies. The study enhances the Bemba Catholic person's understanding of religion, giving them a sense of belonging.

## Methods

This study aimed to explore the lived experiences of dual religiosity among Bemba Catholics using a qualitative research approach and Heideggerian interpretive phenomenological approach. The study was conducted in Muchinga Province, chosen for its historical significance to the Bemba people, its history of 125 years of Catholic presence, and its conducive environment for studying Bemba cultural practices. The study included 20 participants from the Bemba Catholic community, providing insights into the prevalence and impact of dual religiosity. Purposive sampling was used to select participants, allowing for unbiased information dissemination and equal participation from both genders. Interviews with Bemba Catholics employed a semi-structured approach, with note-taking and audio recording for analysis. This study maintained integrity by involving participants in the interpretation process, using various data collection methods, and ensuring transparency and flexibility. The research process aimed to produce reliable results while following ethical guidelines, including obtaining informed consent, ensuring privacy and confidentiality, and allowing participants to withdraw if desired. Participants were informed about the research process, and the researcher demonstrated empathy, objectivity, and respect for the cultural norms of the Bemba people.

An interpretive phenomenological design provided an understanding of the dual religiosity of Christianity and AIR among Bemba Catholics in the post-centenary of the

Catholic faith in Muchinga Province. This application follows Heidegger's model of 'Being and Time,' which was further expanded by Van Manen's (1997) four (4) reflective thematic areas of lived experiences. According to him, lived experience takes place in 'space,' 'body,' 'time,' and 'relations.' The application of Heidegger's four reflective themes of lived experience was expanded by Van Manen's model of phenomenology. With Van Manen's methodological approach, this study emphasised the systematic exploration of lived experiences, beginning with a deep reflection on the phenomenon under consideration. It focused on investigating how experiences are perceived in real-life contexts through data collection methods such as interviews and focus groups, which tapped into actual lived experiences. The subsequent step was thematic analysis, reflecting on the core themes that define the phenomenon by listening to recorded interviews and seeking to understand the overall meaning of the informants' experiences. The writing and rewriting process aimed to convey the participants' feelings regarding their thoughts, behaviours, and attitudes while ensuring alignment with the research questions. Orientation to the phenomenon was essential, guiding the discussion and interpretation of the themes. Finally, an ongoing evaluation of the study design was necessary to validate the analysed data against a broader context through rigorous verification.

## **Results**

### **Bemba Catholics' Lived Experience of Dual Religiosity**

In exploring the lived experiences of Bemba Catholics regarding dual religiosity, several themes emerged. The first theme focuses on ethno-religious experiences, which include cultural identity experience, personal identity experience, cultural-heritage experience, and community dynamics experience. The second theme focuses on spiritual and religious experiences, encompassing spiritual syncretism, spiritual growth and transformation, and spiritual fulfilment experiences. Additionally, psycho-social and emotional experiences are explored within a third theme, which includes struggles with dual allegiance, community dynamics, the duality of belief systems, challenges, resilience, and the interconnectedness of beliefs.

### **Ethno-religious Identity Experiences**

Bemba Catholics' experiences with dual religiosity revolved around the complexities of ethnicity and religious identity. They faced challenges related to cultural identity, navigating the tension between maintaining cultural heritage and embracing faith. Many believed that by not abandoning their culture, they were honouring it.

### ***Cultural Identity Experience***

The participants expressed the importance of maintaining indigenous beliefs and practices as part of their cultural identity as Bemba people, but indicated troubling experiences. P8 shared the ongoing struggle with identity: "I often wrestle with complex questions about my cultural identity as a Bemba Catholic who incorporates indigenous elements into my

Catholic identity.” P10 described the effort to maintain balance, “I strive to combine my Indigenous cultural practices and spiritual beliefs into the [framework] of Catholicism, in this process, I encounter a delicate imbalance between honouring my ancestral traditions and fully embracing the teachings of the Christian faith.” P19 expressed the tension inherent in these negotiations, asserting, “This relationship produces a profound sense of tension as I navigate the expectations of my community, the doctrines of my religion, and the legacy of my heritage.” P12 highlighted the difficulties involved in this navigation, “I practise rituals that combine my indigenous beliefs with Catholic practices. This leads to a complicated and sometimes conflicting view of my cultural identity as I seek a balanced life.” P4 noted the need for thoughtful reflection, stating, “I need to consider how my cultural background fits into my religious beliefs [Catholicism]. This makes me rethink what it means to be both Bemba and Catholic.” For most participants, the appropriation of indigenous beliefs and practices preserved their cultural identity and culture while honouring Catholicism.

### ***Personal Identity Experience***

Participants revealed that the interaction between AIR worldviews, traditions, beliefs and practices, and Catholicism was complicated, and it significantly contributed to their search for identity as Bemba Catholics. They reflected on how this integration informed their journeys. P2 articulated the depth of this integration, stating, “Integrating my ancestral traditions into my Catholic faith is not just a religious practice; it is a key part of my personal identity. It reflects both my distinctive life experiences and cultural background.” P10 discussed the transformative nature of this integration, stating, “Combining my ancestral beliefs with my Christian faith helps me experience a deeper spiritual journey.” He further elaborated on the broader implications of this integration, stating, “Through combining ideas from both my tradition and Catholicism, I develop a personal identity that goes beyond simple labels.” Participants emphasised that this appropriation was crucial, as it enabled them to negotiate their identities in ways that resonated with their cultural backgrounds while remaining aligned with religious convictions. For most participants, dual religiosity was about a personal identity experience.

### ***Cultural Heritage Experience***

For most participants, AIR was their cultural heritage, which could not be denied to them; it shaped their identity. Ancestral worship, reverence for nature, and community rituals were central to their practices, passed down through generations as a vital link to their past. P11 expressed how this merging of traditions was meaningful, stating, “This combination allows me to honour my ancestors and customs while still engaging in the Catholic community.” P7 highlighted specific cultural events as examples of this integration, noting, “Bemba ceremonies such as the annual festival marking the harvest season, initiation ceremonies are prime examples of how we celebrate our identity.” P8 stated, “Through cultural festivals, storytelling, music, and dance, we continue to share our Indigenous beliefs and practices, ensuring they remain vibrant and relevant in today’s

society.” Most participants expressed strong faith that preserving and promoting cultural heritage served as a promise to keep their indigenous identity intact despite the influence of Catholicism, modernisation and globalisation.

P13 provided a concrete example, stating, “Our Catholic ceremonies include traditional symbols like ancestral figures or spiritual objects, which create a connection between the two belief systems.” P10, who practised herbal medicine, explained the harmonious integration of Indigenous practices with Catholic elements:

In the practice of herbal medicine, specific indigenous practices, such as communal gatherings, song, dance, and herbal medicines, are harmonised with Catholic elements like prayer, the cross, holy water, and statues. I believe these Catholic items should be used alongside herbs because it is the same God who created all things and listens to our prayers.

P7 remarked on the adaptation of traditional ceremonies, noting, “Traditional ceremonies that honour ancestors or celebrate agricultural cycles have been aligned with Catholic feasts and liturgical calendars. An example is *Ubusomboshi* (Harvest Sunday).” The researcher observed that the local Catholic Church has embraced various traditional elements within its liturgy, making them relatable to Bemba Catholics. These elements included traditional songs, drumming, attire worn by the *Abaomba* (traditional choir), and *Imishikakulo* (praise songs/poems). Through this integration, most participants felt a sense of familiarity and connection to both heritage and faith. P11 expressed that this integration strengthened their spiritual bond with religion and honoured their cultural heritage. P16 captured this sentiment, stating, “Through this exceptional fusion, we Bemba Catholics form a vibrant religious practice that resonates with our community’s heritage while participating in the broader Catholic faith.”

### ***Community Dynamics Experience***

Most participants agreed that the collective values of the Bemba community weigh heavily on their spiritual journeys. P1 stated, “I feel a strong inclination to conform to collective values, which significantly affects my spiritual journey.” Most participants argued that integrating AIR beliefs with Catholic doctrines in a local context is seen as a path to identity and belonging, yet it comes with its share of challenges. More vividly, P9 added, “I struggle to balance the expectations of my community with the traditional beliefs and Catholic teachings I embrace.” For most participants, the influence of Bemba society not only shaped personal faith but also affected acceptance within the Indigenous cultural framework and the Catholic community. P11 affirmed the influence of this dual acceptance, stating, “Dual acceptance of my indigenous and Catholic cosmologies defines my spiritual life and influences my experiences of community, acceptance, and belonging in a society where both religious forms I believe must coexist.” This statement encapsulated the intertwined nature of their identity and social belonging, which most participants echoed.

### **Spiritual and Religious Experiences**

The findings of this study have indicated that Bemba Catholics who engaged in both the elements of AIR and Christianity experienced spiritual syncretism, spiritual growth and transformation, spiritual fulfilment, and personal belief systems.

### ***Spiritual Syncretic Experience***

Integrating the AIR worldview into Catholicism for the Bemba Catholics was a process that reflected the depth of their spiritual experiences. P1 reported navigating the intersection of traditional beliefs and Christian teachings with a sense of reverence and respect while honouring the wisdom of his ancestors and embracing the tenets of his faith. The researcher observed that this fusion of cultural and religious practices was not a superficial overlay, but an intensely rooted and meaningful expression of their spiritual identity. For instance, P6 asserted, “Through rituals, ceremonies, and communal gatherings, I engage in traditions that reflect my connectedness with the divine and the natural world.” Some participants perceived the synthesis of AIR values and Catholic beliefs as generating a spiritual context, both traditional and contemporary. P1 said that the relationship between tradition and faith influenced his worldview and informed his daily life, providing a framework for understanding the mysteries of existence and the interconnectedness of all things. Dual involvement for these participants brought about the unification of the spiritualities of AIR and Catholicism. With many citing a sense of conflict and others a sense of fulfilment with this syncretic experience. P9 asserted, “Are my religious beliefs against my cultural heritage? I am often looking for compromises through which I can combine both sides of my life, seeing places where my Catholicism flows with my cultural beliefs and practices.” For most participants, this journey was about finding peace within themselves and learning ways to honour both spiritual beliefs and cultural backgrounds, but they faced struggles along the way.

### ***Spiritual Growth and Transformation Experience***

Bemba Catholics who engaged in dual religiosity reported experiencing spiritual growth and transformation. For instance, P1 reported that respect and honour for ancestral beliefs and practices significantly influenced their spiritual growth and transformation, especially after the centenary of Catholicism in the province. For most participants, this observation highlighted an active intersection of Catholic and traditional beliefs that influences the spiritual landscape. In recent years, P1 noted, “We Bemba Catholics have found ways to live with traditional worldviews and our Catholic practices and beliefs.” Reflecting on the post-centenary era of Catholicism in the province, he further stated, “We Bemba Catholics have come to realise that traditional practices can coexist with Catholic teachings to supplement our spiritual lives.” For instance, the veneration of saints and praying for the dead, such as on ‘All Saints Day’ in the Catholic Church, resonated deeply with various participants’ view that certain catholic practices had similarities with AIR practices, such as ancestral veneration, community rituals, and a profound connection to the natural world. P9 shared, “I have been able to deepen my understanding of the divine and cultivate a stronger sense of belonging within both my cultural and religious communities.”

### ***Spiritual Fulfilment Experience***

It was reported in this study that having AIR elements incorporated into both personal lives and Catholicism led to a greater experience of spiritual fulfilment and articulation of their belief systems of some Bemba Catholics. This was revealed in the participants' key insights into the ever-dynamic relationship between the two spiritual orientations. P1 expressed the depth of this integration, stating, "I feel a profound sense of spiritual fulfilment when I combine elements of my traditional heritage with the teachings of Catholicism in my life." For P1, this synthesis transcended mere coexistence; it created a dynamic experience that, he stated, "allows me to honour my ancestral heritage while also engaging fully with the teachings of the Catholic Church." Reflecting on the importance of cultural identity in the spiritual journey, P18 noted, "Traditional practices, such as rituals and ceremonies that are significant to my ancestral lineage, are often merged with Catholic rites in our family practice." P13 added and shared her perspective on cultural continuity, alleging, "Rituals surrounding life events like birth, marriage, and death incorporate both Catholic and traditional elements; they promote a holistic approach to my spirituality." P11 further emphasised the enriching effects of this dual practice: "Through embracing my roots, I not only uphold my traditions but also enrich my religious experience, which I believe creates a faith that is profoundly personal and community-oriented."

### **Psycho-social and Emotional Experiences**

The study reports that Bemba Catholics faced psycho-social and emotional experiences because of their involvement in the elements of AIR while trying to remain faithful to Catholicism. These experiences included grappling with conflicting loyalties, navigating the coexistence of two belief systems, and encountering various challenges while demonstrating resilience and experiencing the interconnectedness of their beliefs in daily life.

### ***Struggles with Dual Allegiance Experience***

The lived experiences of Bemba Catholics have revealed significant internal struggles as they attempt to reconcile religious beliefs with the cultural practices of ancestors, as reported by the participants. For example, P5 expressed this struggle, stating, "I often deal with a profound internal conflict as I attempt to reconcile my religious beliefs with ancestral cultural practices. This 'dual allegiance struggle' has challenged my spiritual life." P3 encountered challenges in balancing loyalty to traditions that were intensely embedded in his identity. Similarly, P15 elaborated, "I encounter difficulties in balancing my loyalty to ancestral traditions, which often include rituals, oral histories, and communal practices, with the teachings and doctrines of the Catholic faith." Additionally, P12 articulated the emotional weight of this conflict, stating, "I feel torn between honouring my past and embracing the tenets of my current beliefs." This was a collective experience for most participants. P8 identified societal pressures as a significant complicating experience in her spiritual journey, noting, "The societal pressures and

expectations surrounding these two worldviews complicate my spiritual journey even more.” This struggle was compounded by experiences of isolation or judgement from community members for most participants, with P8 explaining, “I have experienced isolation and judgement from community members who either strictly adhere to traditional practices or wholly embrace Christianity, which makes me feel disconnected from them and the community.” For most participants, such experiences contributed to an environment where individuals felt estranged from their cultural roots and religious community.

Participants shared profound struggles in navigating the complexities of AIR beliefs and practices alongside the doctrines and practices of Catholicism. P1 expressed this struggle: “I wrestle with deep questions about my cultural identity and spirituality, a tension that manifests in so many ways.” Other participants also found it challenging to bridge the gap between differing belief systems. P13 shared her struggle: “I question how my ancestral customs, rituals, and spiritual connections align or clash with Catholic teachings.” P5 expressed this sentiment, stating, “The struggle evokes feelings of ambivalence, as I seek to honour my heritage while adhering to my faith.” To sum it up, P11 captured the essence of this ongoing process, stating, “I am engaged in a continual negotiation of these two belief systems, striving to carve out a personalised space in which both can coexist meaningfully in my life.” Participants reported their struggle to reconcile the two worldviews, spiritualities, religions, traditions, and cultures as a daily experience.

### ***Challenge and Resilience Experience***

Participants reported experiencing challenges while reconciling AIR worldviews with Catholic teachings, yet they demonstrated resilience at the same time. Evidently, P10 reported this struggle succinctly, stating, “I encounter a range of challenges as I navigate the intersection of indigenous worldviews and Catholic teachings.” These challenges were not only personal but also social, explained P4. P3 further elucidated, “Societal, peer and family judgements lead to feelings of isolation or misunderstanding.” This pressure led to alienation, which further complicated relationships with friends and family, reported most participants. P4 offered insight into the familial aspect, stating, “Conflicts arise within my family, where differing beliefs exist, which creates tension and emotional distress for us who engage in AIR elements.” P2 articulated a personal experience, stating, “This internal conflict sparks a deep sense of uncertainty about my identity and faith.” Despite these challenges, participants sought to cultivate resilience. P11 emphasised the importance of adaptive strategies, asserting, “Understanding how I express resilience and adaptability in confronting these challenges is essential to me.” P6 shared, “My struggles are significant as they enable me to reconcile these often-conflicting worldviews.” P14 reflected on whether his ability to navigate these complexities illustrated the strength of character and commitment to his faith.

### ***The Interconnectedness of Beliefs and Experience***

Participants reported enriching experiences that illuminated the profound harmony between AIR and Catholic spiritual traditions. Their narratives reflected a conscious

commitment to both cultural heritage and the Catholic faith. P9 expressed a central belief, stating, “I believe that incorporating Bemba beliefs and practices into my faith allows me to embrace the interconnectedness of different spiritual traditions.” The idea that the core elements of both belief systems can coexist in one personhood was echoed by P3, who stated, “The core elements of both belief systems are complementary rather than contradictory, and I approach my faith with the understanding that traditional rituals and Christian beliefs can coexist harmoniously.” The merging of traditions was recognised as an enriching experience by P7, who remarked, “Combining traditions enriches my worship and promotes a more meaningful spiritual life that reflects both my cultural identity and my commitment to Christian values.” P9 shared, “I strive to maintain a connection to my roots while engaging with the teachings of the Catholic Church, which eventually improves my understanding of faith as a holistic journey.” For most participants, tradition and faith were both a personal and communal journey interconnected, wherein honouring one’s heritage heightened one’s overall spiritual exploration.

## **Discussion**

The study found that Bemba Catholics have immersive experiences of dual religiosity. These lived experiences of Bemba Catholics revealed the reasons, circumstances, and contexts surrounding living with two worldviews. Social-cultural, historical, and religious factors have been identified as the driving force behind the persistence of Bemba Catholics’ dual religiosity.

### **Lived Experiences of Bemba Catholics Practising Dual Religiosity**

The study has established that dual religiosity is a lived reality for Bemba Catholics. These experiences reflect various individual and collective narratives. These narratives include different aspects of ethno-religious identity, which involve experiences of cultural identity, personal identity, cultural heritage, community dynamics, and cultural heritage syncretism. Furthermore, spiritual and religious experiences speak to the path of spiritual journey, fulfilment, and formation of one’s belief system. Furthermore, entanglement experiences convey the complexities involved in struggles against dual allegiance, duality of beliefs, and the resilience to keep fighting while keeping in mind the more complicated web of beliefs. The experiences of Bemba Catholics with dual religiosity reveal a subtle interaction of spiritual growth, syncretism, and identity formation. This is a demonstration of the trends of combining Christianity with AIRs among Bemba Catholics in Muchinga Province following the faith’s centenary.

### **Ethno-religious Identity Experiences**

Bemba Catholics experience dual religiosity as an ethno-religious identity that encompasses cultural identity, personal and community dynamics, and cultural heritage. These elements often interact within the synthesis of Bemba culture and the Catholic faith. These ethno-religious experiences include encounters with religious and cultural realities

within communal and personal beliefs and practices, which influence Bemba Catholics' sense of self-identity.

### ***Cultural Identity Experience***

The study found that Bemba Catholics experience dual religiosity in two ways: first, as a way of living and preserving their cultural identity, and second, as a challenge to their cultural identity. Bemba Catholics are increasingly confronted with challenging questions about their cultural identity, as they tend to incorporate their indigenous practices and spiritual beliefs into their lives. This combination requires a commitment to their ancestral traditions while also honouring Catholic teachings. This sometimes causes conflicts and deep tensions in balancing their community's demands, church doctrine, and history. They live an interactive existence, performing rituals that honour Indigenous beliefs alongside their Catholic practices. This combination is apparent, for instance, in the way Christian ceremonies incorporate the indigenous culture of the people, connecting ancestral roots with religious convictions (Hellen and Orina, 2021). P8's ongoing struggle with self-identity, wrestling with tough questions about cultural identity as a Bemba Catholic, and incorporating indigenous elements into life as a Catholic was a common experience among participants. Bemba Catholics often wrestle with complex questions about their cultural identity as they incorporate AIR into their Catholic identity. Ironically, this struggle exemplifies a delicate balancing act between integrating Indigenous practices with Catholic beliefs and respecting ancestral traditions. Evidently, many African Christians do not view their cultural identity and religious beliefs as conflicting; instead, they adopt an integrated approach, indicating the importance of understanding faith within distinct cultural and social contexts (Mokhoathi, 2024; Vahakangas and Lauterbach, 2019). Some people "look elsewhere than their community of origin for alternative notions of self and self-worth" (Hefner, 1993:26). This is the case with Bemba Catholics who return to AIR for meaning and answers to their never-ending life questions.

### ***Personal Identity Experience***

The study established that dual religiosity among Bemba Catholics was not just a practice but a personal identity that embraced both worldviews. Participants' perspectives indicate that dual religiosity is not a simple fusion, but a personal process that defines their cultures and spiritualities. Beliefs and cultural identity are inextricably linked to one's personal and collective histories, profoundly influencing one's faith and practice. This lived experience indicates that their personal religious identity is fluid and context-dependent, as these contexts are essential for defining their practice. Bemba Catholics' experiences are an illustration of how dual religiosity creates an identity that honours a person's heritage and faith. This reality among Bemba Catholics contrasts with Western-centric notions of religious purity and exclusivity. Their experiences are a demonstration that faith is a versatile space for individual and collective expression. This is true of many other Christians in Africa, who balance Christianity and AIR to boost their spirituality and cultural identity, integrating and reinforcing their faith and rituals (Mokhoathi,

2020b). Religious pluralism allows people to hold two or more faiths, such as Christianity and indigenous beliefs, in a way that develops their distinct personal religious identity (Janson, 2021).

### ***Community Dynamics Experience***

The study revealed that Bemba Catholics are constantly navigating the conflict between societal expectations and personal spiritual identity, demonstrating a lived experience. Personal religious practices and beliefs are influenced by traditional values in Bemba society. This role of social conformity suggests that individual spirituality is mediated through community norms. It is more than outward pressure; it is an internalised sense of how people form their beliefs, reinforcing collective identity, and how divergence has social or religious implications. The Bemba Catholics' combination of AIR's faith with Catholicism in their lives indicates the experience of juggling two identities, which they believe produces a sense of identity and belonging. Dual acceptance of indigenous and Catholic cosmologies defines their spiritual life and shapes their experiences of community, acceptance, and belonging. Individual faith is often embedded within social structures that impose restrictions and expectations, influencing how identity is affirmed. This study's findings illustrate Bemba Catholics' experiences of resilience in reconciling everyday AIR beliefs with the Catholic faith despite societal pressures. Milingo (2019:54), reflecting on inculturation within the Catholic Church in religious congregations, stated that integrating culture into religious life could cultivate a sense of belonging, which would allow them to experience core African values like family, joy, Ubuntu, and respect for family and culture.

### ***Cultural-Heritage Experience***

For Bemba Catholics, dual religiosity opens doors to living with, safeguarding and preserving their cultural heritage. Traditional Bemba rituals include the annual *Ubusomboshi* festival, naming customs, and marriage ceremonies, all of which are linked to identity recognition because they highlight cultural celebrations that are important in cultural heritage preservation and empowerment. "Through cultural festivals, storytelling, music, and dance, we continue to share our Indigenous beliefs and practices, ensuring they remain vibrant and relevant in today's society," argued P8. Integrating elements of AIR into Christian practice has provided a much more culturally sensitive way for indigenous peoples to practice their faith (Adasi & Fusheini, 2025). The cultural heritage that Bemba Catholics carry on remains in line with their purpose of continuity in identity while still holding Catholic beliefs: to build a future that acknowledges the past while negotiating the present dual faith. Bemba Catholics narrate their indigenous beliefs through cultural festivals, folklore, music, and dance to remain alive in the post-centenary of the Catholic faith in the country. Bemba Catholics view such a development as God's harmonisation of their practices that strengthens their spiritual ties with Catholicism while honouring their culture. Duality of religiousness serves as an enabler of cultural intervention, allowing Bemba Catholics to maintain their indigenous identities while adhering to the Catholic way of life. For most of them, this is their only hope of holding

on to religious meaning and cultural significance.

### **Spiritual and Religious Experiences**

The study discovered that Bemba Catholics' participation in indigenous aspects, such as spiritual and daily rituals, resulted in personal spiritual and religious development and change. While participating in AIR elements, they felt spiritually fulfilled and linked to this belief system, and integrating the two belief systems elevated their religious and spiritual experiences even more.

### ***Spiritual Syncretic Experience***

The Bemba community exhibits an exceptional form of spiritual expression characterised by dual religiosity, which represents a substantial instance of spiritual syncretism. Re-introducing the AIR worldview into their lives gives a complex picture of some Bemba people's indigenous spiritual beliefs. Bemba Catholics today blend traditional and Christian beliefs, respecting ancestral wisdom while adhering to Christian principles. The result is an active interaction of AIR values and Catholic practices that creates a new spiritual environment, contemporary and indigenous, that nurtures a feeling of continuity and belonging. They find the intersection of tradition and belief to influence much of their worldview, allowing them to live with two distinct streams of life that complement one another and present distinct spirituality. Bemba Catholics do not find this integration compromising, rather, complementing culture and faith to give way unified spirituality. Undeniably, in many African communities, the combination of AIR with Christianity leads to syncretism. This involves incorporating traditional African spiritual practices to manage the spiritual misgivings that stem from traditional beliefs (Magezi & Magezi, 2017).

### ***Spiritual Growth and Transformation Experience***

The phenomenon of dual religiosity promotes spiritual development and transformative experiences for the Bemba Catholics. The AIR and Catholic worldviews influence the daily lives of the Bemba Catholics. In the post-centenary era of the Catholic faith in this Muchinga Province, the Bemba Catholics have realised that traditional practices enhance their Catholic teachings and spirituality. For example, by incorporating AIR elements in their Catholic life, such as the significance of community rituals, ancestral veneration, and a close connection to the environment, they perceive the divine in a way that strengthens their sense of belonging to both their cultures and Catholic faith. Thus, dual religiosity has been very influential in the spiritual upliftment and change of the Bemba Catholics. Bemba Catholic spirituality is influenced by historical and cultural experiences, and is neither static nor rigid. This study has also revealed that dual religiosity for Bemba Catholics is more of a tuning, with everyday experiences influencing spiritual journeys, family and community attachments. For many African Christians, integrating Christianity and AIR is a way to express their faith and define who they are, increasing and reinforcing their faith and traditions (Mokhoathi, 2020b).

### ***Spiritual Fulfilment Experience***



The study found that through their practice of dual religiosity, Bemba Catholics achieved a sense of spiritual fulfilment. Rituals surrounding life events such as birth, marriage, and death incorporate both Catholic and traditional elements. Dual religiosity acts as an enabler for Bemba Catholics to continue practising their cultural traditions that have shaped their identity for generations. For the Bemba Catholics, in spiritual upliftment, Catholic teachings do not move alone; they are accompanied by indigenous spirituality. Through this duality, Bemba Catholics illustrate belief adaptability by remaining true to their cultural roots while embracing the modern faith. Within this integration, Bemba Catholics augment their religious experience, personalising faith and making it community-oriented. They have established a spirituality that sustains ancestral practices alongside Catholic teachings, which not only enables them to honour their heritage but also engage fully with their Catholic faith. For Bemba Catholics, indigenous elements express lived spirituality, integral to both their identity and community life, and make their faith a lived experience. However, combining traditional African religious beliefs and Christianity leads to syncretism, allowing individuals to address spiritual uncertainties within their blended worldviews (Magesi and Magezi, 2017).

### **Psycho-social and Emotional Experiences**

The study revealed that Bemba Catholics experience psycho-social and emotional subtleties in their dual religiosity. These experiences include grappling with conflicting loyalties, challenges in navigating the coexistence of two belief systems, and encountering various challenges. Dual religiosity has exposed Bemba Catholics to the confusion of the interconnectedness of their indigenous and Catholic beliefs in their daily lives. Despite the challenging experiences, Bemba Catholics have demonstrated resilience.

### ***Entangled Loyalty to Belief Systems Experience***

The study indicated that Bemba Catholics are entangled in the loyalty of belief systems of AIR and Catholicism. They often face internal conflict as they navigate the challenges of reconciling their AIR beliefs with the doctrines and practices of Catholicism. Bemba Catholics strive to carve out a personal space where both AIR and Catholicism can coexist meaningfully in their lives. The reality of self-deception unfolds as they try to reconcile their AIR beliefs with those of the Catholic Church. This feeling of being caught between two worlds increases the sense of internal discord experienced by Bemba Catholics striving for spiritual and faith fulfilment, accentuating this experience, Onwuegbuchulam (2012:1) contends that “Christian catechetical teachings, originating from Christian missionaries, have portrayed the Christian Bible and faith as incompatible with the cultural practices of African communities.” Consequently, these Bemba people who adopted the Christian faith often face a dilemma of belonging to ‘either...or.’ Many choose to adhere to their traditional customs while identifying as Catholic. This behaviour leads to a fractured identity regarding their faith and beliefs. Bemba Catholics who indulge in AIR elements often feel caught in between, isolated and discriminated against. While blending religious customs promotes social unity, conflicts arise when

conservative Christian communities perceive traditional practices as incompatible with their faith, potentially isolating individuals trying to balance both their Christian and traditional identities (Okeke *et al.*, 2017).

### ***Challenges and Resilience Experience***

Bemba Catholics face challenges at the intersection of AIR worldviews and Catholic teachings, resulting from societal judgement from peers, the church, and family members holding differing perspectives. This leads to feelings of isolation and misunderstanding, further complicating their relationships with peers, family and church, causing emotional distress for some of them. These personal struggles are significant experiences as individuals reconcile these conflicting worldviews. Understanding how Bemba Catholics demonstrate resilience and adaptability in the face of these challenges is critical, as is a profound strength of character and devotion to their faith. This often results in innovative ways of living with dual worldviews. Bemba Catholics experience both personal and social challenges, which extend beyond internal conflict among peers, family, church and community relationships. Societal judgement and family friction impacted their emotional and social welfare. This is rejection from peers, family, church, and community because of their involvement with AIR elements. It is this type of rejection that Okeke *et al.*, (2017) alleged results in individuals feeling alienated as they attempt to reconcile their Christian faith with their traditional identities. Undeniably so, external factors exacerbate internal conflicts and complicate social, religious, cultural, and spiritual identities of those who practise dual religiosity. On a personal level, participants dealt with issues that threatened their sense of self and faith. In these situations, confusion influences self-definition and complicates spiritual and personal identity, whereas emotional struggles demonstrate the lived experience that influences self-understanding. Despite the challenges, Bemba Catholics have demonstrated resilience in their endeavour to balance their ancestral heritage and Catholic faith in their lives.

### ***The Interconnectedness of Belief and Experience***

Bemba Catholics who combine AIR and Catholicism are perplexed by how closely these religious and spiritual traditions are linked while also being disconnected. This dichotomy is the source of the tension experienced while negotiating these two faith traditions. Nevertheless, the integration allows traditional rituals and Christian beliefs to coexist. This allows Bemba Catholics to honour their heritage while also deepening their spiritual experience through cultural practices like ancestor veneration and communal celebrations. There is a sense of complementarity rather than a contradiction between the core elements of both faiths, as traditional rituals and Christianity are believed to coexist. Bemba Catholics not only honour their heritage but also deepen their spiritual experience. The study states that the merging of AIR into Catholicism among the Bemba Catholics is profoundly experiential, psychological, emotional, and socially construed and lived out in one's everyday life. All these combined elements have become a source of resilience and interpreted affirmation as they negotiate issues concerning their cultural and religious identity brought in amongst the change experienced in society after the centenary of the

Catholic faith in Muchinga Province.

Linking personal stories and social contexts, the Bemba Catholics assimilate the Catholic faith with their traditions. While conflicts may arise between aspects of both worlds, there is a vibrant acceptance among many African Christians that cultural and religious identities are not mutually exclusive but can coexist, rather than throwing one's attempt at a more comprehensive and integrated view into a one-dimensional and superficial understanding. (Mokhoathi, 2020a). While it is understood that Bemba Catholics living with AIR in conjunction with Catholicism have undergone experiential, psychological, affective and socially lived constructions regarding lived experience. The synthesis of AIR and various Catholic aspects has become a promoter of resilience and construing affirmation as cultural and religious identities are negotiated amidst social change experienced in the post-centenary days of the Catholic faith in Muchinga Province. Bemba Catholics seamlessly integrate narratives about their personal experiences in overcoming societal challenges with their contexts. While conflicts may arise from both domains, many African Christians do not regard their cultural identity and Christian beliefs as conflicting but tend more towards the holistic integration of both manifestations (Mokhoathi, 2020b).

### **Conclusion**

The study has revealed that Bemba Catholics in Muchinga Province have a wide range of lived experiences and factors that motivate their dual religiosity. It has been discovered that Bemba Catholics had ethno-religious experiences such as cultural identity, personal identity, cultural heritage, and community subtleties. Furthermore, Bemba Catholics had psychosocial and emotional experiences, which included struggles with dual allegiance, community undercurrents, a complex belief system of duality, challenges, resilience, and confusion brought by the interconnectedness of AIR and Catholic beliefs and practices. Nevertheless, Bemba Catholics found dual religiosity to strengthen their cultural identity. Bemba Catholics have numerous experiences with dual religiosity. Dual religiosity allowed Bemba Catholics to preserve their cultural heritage. Their lived reality consisted of cultural adaptation, spiritual search, and social engagement, all entwined to make a meaningful synthesis of their cultural heritage and Catholic faith. The Bemba Catholics in Muchinga Province have demonstrated personal cultural resilience, spiritual creative genius, and contextual adaptation. For the Bemba Catholics, dual religiosity provides them with ethno-religious experiences such as cultural identity, personal identity, cultural heritage, and community subtleties. Furthermore, dual religiosity has a bearing on their psychosocial and emotional experiences, including their struggles with dual allegiance, community subtleties, challenges, resilience, and confusion brought about by the interconnectedness of AIR and Catholic belief systems. They also experience conflicting loyalties that arise from the acceptance of Church teachings while preserving their own cultural practices alongside those of their Catholic faith. Bemba Catholics, who have maintained their dual allegiance to their ancestral faith, have demonstrated exceptional creativity in adapting to the varied nature of their engagement. The study recommends a deeper appreciation of the Bemba Catholics'

experiences of dual religiosity and promotes more dialogue between the church and its Bemba Catholics engaged in dual religiosity. For future studies, investigations on how lived experiences with dual religiosity interact and shape individual ethno-religious identity can be made.\*\*\*

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