

‘DIVINE KINGS’: SEX, DEATH
AND ANTHROPOLOGY IN INTER-WAR
EAST/CENTRAL AFRICA*

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ABSTRACT: The elaborate mortuary rites of the Chitimukulu (the paramount chief of the Bemba people) attracted the attention of both colonial administrators and anthropologists in inter-war Northern Rhodesia. This paper examines the political and symbolic significance of these rites before turning to an analysis of accounts, by the anthropologist Audrey Richards, of the deaths of two ‘commoners’ in the 1930s. The paper argues that chiefly power resided less in the threat of death which was enacted spectacularly in the Chitimukulu’s mortuary rituals than in the promise to create and protect life, located in the practices of quotidian life. This promise of the creation and protection of life was being progressively undermined by the conditions of colonial rule.

KEY WORDS: Central Africa, anthropology, chieftaincy.

THE complex and lengthy mortuary rituals of the paramount chief of the Bemba people, the Chitimukulu, attracted the attention of both colonial administrators and anthropologists in inter-war Northern Rhodesia. The administrators were concerned to prevent human sacrifice and to contain ritualized disorder while maintaining the legitimacy of the traditional political hierarchy on which Indirect Rule depended. The anthropologists meanwhile incorporated accounts of the chiefly death ritual into debates on the nature of ‘divine kingship’ and sovereignty in Africa. Audrey Richards contributed to these debates, and to a structural-functionalist reading of the Bemba political system, but she was also careful to point out that there were severe limits to the direct exercise of chiefly power. As a re-reading of her fieldnotes indicates, political power resided less in the threat of death than in the promise to create and protect life, particularly through control over

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sexuality, and this power was located in the practices of quotidian life.¹ Colonial rule certainly diminished the power of chiefs to make compelling the threat of violence and death, but, more importantly, a combination of economic and social change and the spread of Christianity undermined their ability to control sexuality and therefore to protect life. This paper explores these issues through Richards's description of the deaths of two 'commoners' in the 1930s.

DIVINE KINGSHIP AND DEATH IN LUBEMBA

In 1968 Audrey Richards delivered the Henry Myers Lecture at the Royal Anthropological Institute. The title of her lecture was 'Keeping the king divine', and in it she drew on her 1930s fieldwork in the northeast of Northern Rhodesia and her re-visit there in 1957, to outline Bemba beliefs in the supernatural powers of their chiefs in relation to the Frazer–Seligman thesis of divine kingship, and to discuss the 'processes by which these beliefs are maintained'.² Richards had written extensively on the Bemba political system before, and a whole bevy of British anthropologists had joined in with their contributions.³ This attention to the Bemba political system can be explained in part by its intrinsic interest to anthropological theories of succession and African political systems more generally, and partly by the problems it posed (and the opportunities it presented) to the engineers of the Indirect Rule system in Northern Rhodesia. British administrators in this part of Africa were in general relieved when they found hierarchical 'traditional' polities in place, but the Bemba polity also posed some challenges to orderly colonial administration. The structural opposition between the chief and his councillors was one issue; and the frequent and prolonged succession disputes at the death of a Chitimukulu (and of two or three other major chiefs) was another. When a Chitimukulu died, a game of musical chairs ensued, with incumbents of the other major chieftaincies (Mwamba and Nkula in particular) vying for the top job. Furthermore, after the death of a Chitimukulu there was always an interregnum of a year, institutionalized

¹ For a similar argument see T. Saunders, 'Making children, making chiefs: gender, power and ritual legitimacy', *Africa*, 68 (1998), 238–62, who in turn draws on the work of Thomas Beidelman, *Moral Imagination in Kaguru Modes of Thought* (Washington DC, 1993).

² On the anthropology of 'divine kingship' see Gillian Feeley-Harnik's very insightful review: 'Issues in divine kingship', *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 14 (1985), 273–313.

³ A. I. Richards, 'Tribal government in transition', *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute (JRAI)*, 34 (1935), supplement, 1–26; A. I. Richards, 'The political system of the Bemba of north-eastern Rhodesia', in M. Fortes and E. E. Evans-Pritchard (eds.), *African Political Systems* (Oxford, 1940), 83–120; A. I. Richards, 'Social mechanisms for the transfer of political rights in some African tribes', *JRAI*, 90 (1960), 175–90; M. Gluckman, 'Succession and civil war among the Bemba – an exercise in anthropological theory', *Rhodes–Livingstone Journal*, 16 (1954), 6–25; R. Werbner, 'Federal administration, rank and civil strife among Bemba royals and nobles', *Africa*, 37 (1967), 22–49. A. L. Epstein had also carried out research among the Bemba in their homeland (as well as on the Copperbelt) in the 1950s, while W. V. Brelsford, a colonial administrator in the area, well-known to Richards, published extensively on the subject: W. V. Brelsford, *The Succession of Bemba Chiefs* (Lusaka, 1944); W. V. Brelsford, *Aspects of Bemba Chieftainship*, Rhodes–Livingstone Institute Communications, 2 (Lusaka, 1944).

through a complex and very lengthy death ritual which involved the embalming of the dead chief's body, and (within living memory when Richards conducted her research) human sacrifice. So the death of a Chitimukulu was of direct interest to the colonial administration for more than one reason, and it remains of interest to the modern state of Zambia. The Bemba-speaking people form a large and politically significant group within the nation – the election of the Chitimukulu matters to party politics in the age of democratization, as it mattered in the colonial period when urbanized Bemba-speaking peoples played a crucial role in emerging urban politics on the Copperbelt.

Though the structural features of the Bemba political system are undoubtedly fascinating, functionalist descriptions of this system were misleading in some respects, giving the impression of a well-oiled, even bureaucratic system. The secular power of the Chitimukulu had probably always been limited, in part by the physical constraints of the expansive and sparsely populated territory occupied by the Bemba since their arrival in the area in the sixteenth century.⁴ As Richards pointed out in her lecture, Bemba chiefs had no standing armies, and though their secular power, arguably, had been enhanced by colonial rule, in the end their power rested on a 'knife-edge', that knife-edge being 'their peoples' belief'.⁵ Richards's most important contribution to the literature on the political system of the Bemba came from her examination of the symbolic mechanisms through which it was maintained. Richards's extensive work on what would now be called something like 'the materiality of everyday life', was critical here, since it was through the everyday practices of agricultural production and village maintenance, as well as through a system of complex rites connected with fertility, that the Bemba paramount exercised his 'supernatural power'.⁶ And 'supernatural power' was the only real power he had once his ability to wage war, take slaves, and sacrifice and mutilate had been brought to an end by colonial rule.

Richards's exposition of the workings of this power is lengthy, but she summarized as follows in the lecture. There was 'no single divine ruler' in Lubemba, but the Chitimukulu was acknowledged as the ritual head of the people and chieftainship itself was thought to come from him. The Chitimukulu (through his councillors) was in possession of the Bemba's most sacred relics – those of the first ancestor and first ancestress – and was charged with preserving the memories of dead rulers, ensuring that they were not forgotten and that they were correctly addressed. In justifying her

⁴ The Bemba political system had evolved in the very specific circumstances of the nineteenth century. Richards showed some awareness of this, but in most of her publications she writes as if it were a timeless traditional system. For the political history of the Bemba and its evolution in the nineteenth century, see A. D. Roberts, *History of the Bemba* (Madison, 1973), 171–4 and 306.

⁵ A. I. Richards, 'Keeping the king divine', *Proceedings of the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland*, 1968 (1968) 23–35, 24.

⁶ A. I. Richards, *Land, Labour and Diet in Northern Rhodesia* (London, 1939). On this work, see also H. Moore and M. Vaughan, *Cutting Down Trees: Gender, Nutrition and Agricultural Change in the Northern Province of Zambia* (London, 1994). On fertility, see Richards's other major work on the Bemba: *Chisungu: A Girls' Initiation Ceremony Among the Bemba of Northern Rhodesia* (London, 1956).

use of the term 'divine king' to describe the Chitimukulu, Richards explained that he exercised his supernatural powers through his mere existence and his person (his 'involuntary' influence), as well as through a series of 'voluntary acts' such as rites which he carried out. Under the heading of 'involuntary' influence, Richards included the effects of the Chitimukulu's 'health, sickness, anger, sorrow, dreams, misdemeanours or death'.⁷ The 'voluntary' acts included a complex set of rites – economic rites to ensure fertility, sacrifices at shrines, ceremonies for the installation of chiefs, and the performance of a series of sex acts with his head wife followed by the lighting of new fires at the capital.⁸ The sex life of the Chitimukulu and the purification rites connected with it were central to the well-being of the entire country, and the same principles applied to the sexual lives of his subjects. Through these symbolic mechanisms, then, the life and death of the Chitimukulu were connected to the life and death of every subject.

The death of the paramount chief was, as Richards put it, a 'disaster'. The land under his rule was said to have 'gone cold', and to have 'broken into pieces'. And, further proof that the Bemba had a 'divine kingship' along Frazer–Seligman lines, Richards provided evidence that the Bemba had strangled their dying chiefs, fearful that, if they were left to breathe their last naturally, they would breathe out the *mipashi*, the spirits of the land. As she would later put it, 'No myths required, but just the fixed belief that the paramount chief derives his power from the spirits of the dead predecessors and must not be allowed to die with these spirits still in his body'.⁹ Throttling a senior chief (this applied not only to the Chitimukulu, but also to other senior chiefs of the 'Crocodile' clan) kept the spirits safe in the chief's body, which was then embalmed and preserved as a 'relic'.

Richards did not think that regicide was a really central part of Bemba kingship belief. As she commented in her lecture, 'it was never discussed', and this silence (which might be interpreted in various ways) she contrasted with the pleasure and enthusiasm with which people regaled her with accounts of the human sacrifices formerly made at the burial of the Chitimukulu.¹⁰ In fact, as Richards noted when her fieldnotes on the death and burial of chiefs were being archived: 'For strangling see separate notes NB I was not told of this during my first visit, I didn't ask'.¹¹ It was Richards's fellow anthropologist and friend, Godfrey Wilson, who asked on her behalf when he was carrying out research in the same area in 1938.¹² Wilson had collected similar accounts from the Nyakyusa/Ngonde area of southwest Tanganyika and in 1959 Monica Wilson, his widow, incorporated this material in her

⁷ Richards, 'Keeping the king divine', 26.

⁸ *Ibid.* 27.

⁹ Audrey Richards Papers held in the British Library of Political and Economic Science at the London School of Economics (hereafter 'Richards papers'): 1/1 A, 'Chiefs: death and burial', Richards to Edmund Leach, 27 Nov. 1982.

¹⁰ Richards, 'Keeping the king divine', 30–1.

¹¹ Richards papers: 1/1 A, 'Chiefs: death and burial'.

¹² See correspondence between Richards and Wilson in both Richards papers (1/1 A, 'Chiefs: death and burial') and in Godfrey Wilson's papers held at University of Cape Town: University of Cape Town, Centre for African Studies Library, Manuscripts and Archives Department: Monica and Godfrey Wilson Papers (BC 880), Wilson to Richards, 14 Nov. 1938; Richards to Wilson, 25 Nov. 1938; and Richards to Wilson, 13 Dec. 1938.

own Frazer Lecture entitled 'Divine kings and the breath of men'.¹³ Richards supplemented Wilson's evidence with accounts from two colonial administrators with whom she was in regular correspondence, W. Vernon Brelsford and Thomas Fox-Pitt, though the existence of the practice was denied by her former research assistant, the church minister Paul Mushindo, who described it as 'just the imagination of the people'.¹⁴ Despite her own admission that regicide was not a central feature of Bemba notions of kingship, Richards continued to collect evidence about it, presumably because of its salience to the continued anthropological debate on 'divine kingship' and the importance of African examples to that literature.¹⁵ In 1982, in a letter to Edmund Leach responding to his Frazer Lecture, Richards wrote that, although his lecture had been 'very ingenious and stirring, actual events in Bemba country at the present day back up Frazer more convincingly perhaps', and, to justify this rather sweeping claim, she described in some detail the procedure for the strangling of senior chiefs:

When he is ill and obviously going to die the hereditary councillors come into the hut and the eldest son of the chief (not an heir in a matrilineal society) remains at the door to watch which gives the signal for the strangling of the dying man. In the case of the last chief who had cancer of the liver (a three to six month job usually) he was taken to the small European hospital with the proviso that the hereditary councillors would be allowed to see that he 'died properly'. I understand that the councillors – about five or six in number – were allowed to come in when the death seemed imminent. I saw in the distance the doctor – serious, bespectacled and of course white-coated – and a nurse in pretty uniform and a cap. I was not in the room but heard from the mission driver who had brought the party that councillors thronged round the bed while the Europeans remained aloof. I suppose that coroners in the then Northern Rhodesia had different concepts of their duties than those here.¹⁶

Audrey Richards died herself in 1984, and it is tempting to read this almost Hitchcockian passage as her own late and very retrospective attempt to elevate the Bemba chiefs to 'real' divine kings. The colonial authorities, she implied, turned a blind eye to regicide, and the presence of the mission driver on the scene even hints at some missionary connivance – though this would be rather extraordinary if true.

As Gillian Feeley-Harnik noted in her review of the anthropological literature on divine kingship 'Western scholars devised their ideas about power and prosperity in African politics as they were in the process of incorporating them, often forcibly, into their own'.¹⁷ Feeley-Harnik also

¹³ Monica Wilson, *Divine Kings and the 'Breath of Men'* (Cambridge, 1959).

¹⁴ Richards papers: 1/1 A, 'Chiefs: death and burial', W. Brelsford to Richards, 27 June 1939; Paul Mushindo to Richards, 3 Apr. 1937. On Mushindo, see Lyn Schumaker, *Africanizing African Anthropology: Fieldwork, Networks and the Making of Colonial Knowledge in Central Africa* (Durham, NC, 2001), and Paul Bwembya Mushindo, *The Life of a Zambian Evangelist: The Reminiscences of the Reverend Paul Bwembya Mushindo* (Lusaka, 1973).

¹⁵ Feeley-Harnik, 'Issues in divine kingship'.

¹⁶ Richards was presumably referring to the death of a chief which had occurred during her last visit to Northern Rhodesia in 1957. Richards papers: 1/1 A, 'Chiefs: death and burial', Richards to Edmund Leach, 27 Nov. 1982.

¹⁷ Feeley-Harnik, 'Issues in divine kingship', 274.

pointed out that Frazer's original inquiry into the question of why killing should be required to sustain life, had originally included a reflection on the 'irrationality and violence underlying the smooth surface of Christian ideals of progress', but that in later editions of *The Golden Bough* he dropped all reference to Christ's crucifixion. By the time of the 1922 edition, the focus of discussion of divine kingship had come to centre on African examples.¹⁸ Even if we might suspect that Richards, later in life, tailored her analysis of the Bemba polity to fit a current academic interest, she can certainly not be accused of wholly 'inventing' the supernatural dimension of chiefly power in Lubemba. The occasion of the death of the paramount chief provided an explicit and very performative exposition of the nature of that power.

THREE DEATHS IN LUBEMBA

Death I: the death of the Chitimukulu

When the Chitimukulu, died, the land of the Bemba entered into a kind of 'state of emergency'.¹⁹ Though Richards herself never witnessed the complex mortuary rites associated with the death of a Chitimukulu, she collected a large amount of information about them, constructing a kind of composite account.²⁰ After her death, Piers Vitebsky produced a description and analysis based on these extensive notes and there are other accounts, published and unpublished, of the burials of individual Chitimukulus.²¹ There is only space here to give a very abbreviated version of the complex set of events which made up the burial.

A Chitimukulu, as we have seen, was not allowed to die naturally, but was strangled by senior councillors before he breathed his last, with a view to keeping the spirits of the ancestors inside the body. The English phrase 'gone cold' hardly conveys the sense of total disaster which Bemba subjects were expected to feel on this occasion. The central idea, according to Richards and Vitebsky, 'seems to be a loss of contact and control over the land: access to the spirits of the land is blocked, since only a living Chief has this access. Hence there is a suspension during the interregnum of all regular rites related to the land. The land has become inaccessible, *kuloba*'.²² The announcement of the Chitimukulu's death was made to other chiefs and, at dawn, the sacrifice victims were arrested (though not killed immediately). The list of these victims varies a little from source to source, but most agree

¹⁸ *Ibid.* 274. See also Florence Bernault's discussion of sacrifice and her conversation with a Catholic priest: 'Body, power and sacrifice', *Journal of African History*, 47 (2006), 207–39.

¹⁹ Giorgio Agamben's discussion of 'homo sacer' is relevant here: G. Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford, 1995); see also Benjamin Noys's discussion of Agamben in *The Culture of Death* (London, 2005).

²⁰ Richards knew one Chitimukulu well – this was Chitimukulu Kanyanta.

²¹ Piers Vitebsky, 'The death and regeneration of a "divine king": a preliminary account of the mortuary rites of the paramount chief (Citimukulu) of the Bemba of Zambia, based on the unpublished fieldnotes of Audrey Richards', *Cambridge Anthropology*, 10 (1985), 55–92.

²² *Ibid.* 67.

that there were ten of them, including the Chitimukulu's head wife.²³ As Paul Mushindo put it in his 1934 account:

In the past when Citimukulu dies, his favourites (*ababile*) were killed in order that they accompany him into the new world ... These *ababile* who were killed did not include the Chief's children, but were former slaves redeemed by the chief, war captives and people 'sold' by others as serfs to the chief. Those who fattened themselves at the Chief's expense and partook of the choicest morsels! ... In life the chief paid special attention ensuring that these ten people were well looked after and cared for, because he knew that they were his comrades-in-death.²⁴

Mushindo's explanation, which emphasized the logic of a certain kind of slave society, was only a partial explanation, as Richards was well aware. The list of ten 'sacrifice victims' was not a complete one. In addition to these ten 'compulsory victims', some accounts spoke of the taking (more randomly) of additional victims along the route of the burial procession. And finally, the ritual leader, the Shimwalule, whose job it was finally to bury the Chitimukulu, was himself killed (or possibly committed suicide) once his task was over.²⁵

The interregnum lasted from the announcement of the Chitimukulu's death until the accession of his successor, and was marked by an initial period of anarchy, followed by a period of 'structured marginality', as Vitebsky puts it, with an interim government formed by regents and overseen by councillors. Meanwhile the body of the Chitimukulu was placed under the control of a set of officials known as *bafingo* (undertakers), including embalmers and pallbearers. The body was taken to the hut of his head wife and placed on a raised platform, wrapped in a cloth. Over the following year or so the body was regularly bathed in a specially prepared embalming fluid, until completely desiccated (and likened to a 'seed').²⁶ Eventually the body was transported in a procession from the Chitimukulu's headquarters, across the river Chambeshi, to the burial ground at Mwalule, which housed all the relics of previous Chitimukulus (and other chiefs of the ruling clan) and was presided over by the Shimwalule. The procession took about four days and included prescribed stopping-off points. Human sacrifices were made at specific points along the route, and institutionalized battles took place as the body was handed from one group of officials to another. Finally, having crossed the Chambeshi, the procession reached the burial ground at Mwalule, where the first Chitimukulu's remains were buried. Events within the sacred burial

²³ *Mukolo*, the head wife; *mushika*, a military captain; the holder of the chief's drinking straw; *wacinkuli*, the holder of the chief's cannabis pipe; the public crier; a slave-companion since the chief's childhood; *chamata*, a standard-bearer; *cishiko*, a sexually pure female cook; *kateule-kateke*, a fetcher-and-carrier; the man who carried the chief on his shoulders. Vitebsky, 'Death and regeneration', 70, based on information from Mushindo and Brelsford.

²⁴ Richards papers: 1/1 A, 'Chiefs: death and burial', Paul Mushindo (Apr. 1934), translated by Patrick Mumba in 1975.

²⁵ On the position of the Shimwalule see Vernon Brelsford, 'Shimwalule: a study of a Bemba priest and chief', *African Studies*, 1 (1942), 207-23.

²⁶ This traditional form of 'embalming' aimed at drying out the body completely, reducing it to a 'seed'-like substance. This is very different from the other forms of embalming (practised in present-day Zambia, as elsewhere) which aim to slow down decomposition and create an appearance of wholeness.

ground are reported secondhand, since outsiders were forbidden entry, and this included colonial officials like Brelsford, on whose reports Richards (and hence Vitebsky) relied heavily. According to other accounts collected by Richards, buried alive with the Chitimukulu were his head wife, at least one other woman and, possibly, two boys. Then followed a series of purification rites (including a sexual rite), a rite of inheritance anointing the regent, and the death of the Shimwalule. The cycle of death now complete, normal time could resume and regeneration of the land and people begin.

It is not difficult to see why the burial of the Chitimukulu attracted so much attention from colonial administrators and anthropologists alike. The rich symbolism (which I have not had space to explore here, but which is described by Vitebsky) speaks clearly of the relationship between death and regeneration, of violence and fertility, and of the connection between ritual and political power. One of the most obvious political functions of the burial rites was to re-state the importance of the dominant 'Crocodile' clan, founders of the Bemba paramountcy, going back to the first remembered Chitimukulu; but the burial rites of the Chitimukulu also 'staged' the structural opposition between various elements in the Bemba polity: between the chief and his councillors, for example. In other words, the burial rites of the Chitimukulu were a gift to structural-functionalism. For Malinowski, with whom Richards had studied, the rituals of death, like other rites, served a basic function of reinforcing group solidarity, leading inquiry 'away from the corpse and back to the problem of death for society'.²⁷ The Chitimukulu burial rites certainly lent themselves to analysis in these terms.

The British administrators of Northern Rhodesia were well aware of the significance of the death of a Chitimukulu, and indeed of other major Bemba chiefs whose burial rites took a similar form. The prolonged succession disputes which followed the death of the Chitimukulu (and of the other major chiefs) were an administrative headache. Brelsford, who was a keen amateur ethnographer, explained that there were administrative as well as anthropological interests at stake: 'the typical movement of chiefs from one district to another on succession is a factor that affects the work of officials of many departments. So that though the subject may make dull reading its importance to Government justifies a detailed study'.²⁸ It is possible that the structural features of the Bemba polity had always made succession disputes likely.²⁹ Certainly, in the colonial period, lengthy disputes were the norm, due in part to the material advantages accorded to chiefs by Indirect Rule structures. The frequent interference of the colonial administration probably did not help. Another anthropologist, Max Gluckman, drew attention to what he thought would be the likely results of this interference in an article published in 1954.³⁰ In the inter-war period a number of Bemba chiefly

²⁷ Phyllis Pakgi and Henry Abramovitch, 'Death: a cross-cultural perspective', *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 13 (1984), 389.

²⁸ Brelsford, *The Succession of Bemba Chiefs*, quoted in Vitebsky, 'Death and regeneration', 80.

²⁹ See Richard Werbner's analysis of the nineteenth-century evidence: 'Federal administration, rank and civil strife among Bemba royals and nobles', *Africa*, 37 (1967), 22-49.

³⁰ Max Gluckman, 'Succession and civil war among the Bemba - an exercise in anthropological theory', *Rhodes-Livingstone Journal*, 16 (July 1954), 6-25.

successions generated large amounts of administrative documentation, as evidenced by voluminous correspondence in the archives. Amongst these were the Chitimukulu succession dispute of 1924 and the Nkula succession of 1937,³¹ and, most notably, the Chitimukulu succession of 1944, which resulted in a Commission of Inquiry.³²

Colonial administrators, thanks to individuals such as Brelsford and a wide reading of Richards's works, were also aware of the close relationship between the performance of ritual and the political authority of Bemba chiefs. By the later 1930s the Bemba had become an 'anthropological object' of some significance, as well as being a very important political grouping, whose role in the urban politics of the Copperbelt was of immediate concern.³³ As elsewhere in British-ruled Africa in the inter-war period, Indirect Rule required that administrators pay lip-service, at least, to the authority of chiefs and to the maintenance of 'custom'. As elsewhere, this policy was fraught with contradictions and ironies.³⁴ The liberal 'civilizing' strand of colonial thinking drew a shaky line at customs deemed 'repugnant'. Whilst there were endless discussions and disputes over whether such practices as polygyny and child betrothal were 'repugnant', human sacrifice (and mutilation) fell rather squarely within this category for anyone with liberal sensibilities.

The last human sacrifices associated with the burial of a Chitimukulu were said to have taken place in 1911. Colonial officials and their African emissaries, continued to accompany the burial processions to enforce the ban on sacrifice and to try to maintain order during this period of institutionalized 'disorder'. But they apparently kept a respectful distance when they arrived at the sacred burial ground at Mwalule, and therefore, in principle, could not be completely certain that sacrifices did not take place at the last stage of burial. It is not entirely clear why colonial administrators refrained from entering the burial ground, but it was probably due to a combination of considerations. On the one hand, they were probably anxious that this would be a breach too far, likely to create dissension. On the other hand, it was also in their interest to contribute to the maintenance of some residual 'mystique' in relation to the death of the Chitimukulu. It is not surprising then that stories circulated on the ghastly fates that had befallen white men who had been so foolish as to enter the burial ground (even inadvertently) and that Brelsford repeated these stories himself in 1939.³⁵ He stayed outside the perimeter fence when he accompanied the procession in 1944.³⁶

³¹ Zambian National Archives (hereafter ZNA), Mporokoso District Notebook, enclosure of 21 Oct. 1924; ZNA: KTQ, Nkula Succession 1937.

³² ZNA: Sec. 2/308 – Chitimukulu Succession Enquiry 1944–7.

³³ This was especially the case after the 1935 disturbances on the Copperbelt.

³⁴ Audrey Richards had drawn attention to some of these contradictions in an early paper on colonial rule and chiefly power in Lubemba: 'Tribal government in transition', *Journal of the Royal African Society*, supplement (Oct. 1935).

³⁵ Richards papers: 1/1 A, 'Chiefs: death and burial', copy of Vernon Brelsford's tour report, Chinsali District, May 1939.

³⁶ Zambian press reports of the most recent burial of a Chitimukulu (Mutake Ng'andu, 2005) give a similar impression of the political utility of the maintenance of a degree of mystique – but perhaps I am being too cynical here.

Once the threat of human sacrifice had apparently receded, the colonial administration represented itself as exercising a kind of schoolmasterly authority, geared towards avoiding ‘disorder’ of various kinds. In 1938 an African government messenger was sent to monitor the burial of Chief Nkula, a senior chief of the Bemba whose body was also buried at the Mwalule burial ground. In all likelihood his account exaggerated his own impact on the event, but it is a good indication, nevertheless, of the nature of colonial (and missionary) presence at the death of a senior chief:

It was on Monday 8th when the D.C Chinsali sent me to Nkula’s village. I went to Mano (Nkula’s old place). There I told the chief Chikwanda that it was now time to take Chief Nkula to be buried, and that all the chiefs should gather together, and that I was sent to see that the people should not make quarrel or fight, and if something happens I should report it to the D.C Chinsali. The Chief Chikwanda thanked the D.C very much for sending me (Chitwamali) to him and look after the people ... On Wednesday I and the Chikwanda went to Mukukamfumu’s village, next morning the D.C arrived at Mukukamfumu’s I had been asked by the D.C if all the chiefs had come and replied that there were only one chief Chikwanda, that other chiefs had not yet come. Chief Chikwanda came to see the D.C and thanked him for sending me (Chitwamali) to accompany the body of the chief. On Saturday I came to Nkula’s village, when I came in the village I found that many people were in the village singing ‘Songa’ and playing about. I used to go in group to see if they were causing any troubles, but found that there were no troubles in them. On Sunday Dr D. M. Brown of Lubwa came to bless the chief, all people were gathered together when the Doctor to the chief’s body [*sic*], go in peace, after this the Doctor went back to Lubwa ... [then describes procession to Shimwalule’s] ... Chief Shimwalule welcomed the chief and said that the chief would rest on Friday 19th, there were many men doing a lot of dance, no trouble were noticed. On Saturday 20th the chief was buried, on Sunday people went away to their homes.³⁷

There are other, similar accounts of government surveillance of chiefs’ burial rites from this period, amongst them those of Fox-Pitt, a district officer of liberal leanings, who became an outspoken critic of the colonial administration for which he worked, and was later a member of the Movement for Colonial Freedom. In his (frequently scurrilous) letters to Audrey Richards after she had left Northern Rhodesia, he kept her in touch with local events, including succession disputes. Fox-Pitt was deeply critical of what he saw as the cynicism of Indirect Rule and so was keen to draw Richards’s attention to its more absurd aspects. In August 1936, for example, Fox-Pitt wrote that Chief Matipa had died and that Chief Kopa had written to him to say that he would be buried in November. This was extremely hasty by Bemba chiefly standards, so Fox-Pitt had inquired ‘why this urgency’, to which Kopa had replied that ‘it was the wish of the Bwana at Luwingu Boma that he be buried quickly’. Kopa, he noted, was ‘a little vexed at this, but only a little’ and perhaps quite pleased ‘as it must take off the dignity of Matipa to be buried without the traditional period in a hut

³⁷ Richards papers: 1/1 A, ‘Chiefs: death and burial’, ‘Eyewitness accounts of burial ceremonies: R. Bush’s (Chinsali)’s messenger’s (1938) account of the burial of Chief Nkula’.

built in a tree'. Fox-Pitt decided to intervene, using Richards and the pursuit of anthropological knowledge as a pretext:

I will write to Raustane (D.C. Luwingu) and tell him that an account of the double funeral according to strict native custom would be very valuable to science and the Empire. He is a pompous ass, and will probably be flattered (particularly if the Empire is mentioned). He may write you an account full of long words. He may even allow native custom to function normally. The whole story may be wrong or a misunderstanding – or is it the new enthusiasm for hygiene in villages that drives him on.³⁸

Though it is clear that the colonial administration interfered with the mortuary rites of Bemba chiefs, they did so in typically British style – that is, whilst purporting to have the highest regard for 'tradition'. But this did not mean that they left 'death' untouched. In order to understand this, I turn to two other deaths recorded by Richards (though neither account was published), which can be read alongside the account of the death of the Chitimukulu.

Death 2: a woman dies in childbirth

At dawn on 2 April 1933 a young woman died in Chitikafula's village in the north-eastern region of Northern Rhodesia. Chitikafula was no ordinary headman – he was one of the royal 'embalmers'.³⁹ The day before the woman died she had given birth to a stillborn baby.⁴⁰ Richards happened to be staying in the village at the time. Chitikafula summoned Richards at 11 a.m. to tell her that the woman was soon to be buried – would she like to attend? Perhaps Chitikafula knew that anthropologists were interested in mortuary rites, or perhaps he just wanted to teach Richards a moral lesson. The headman told her that the woman had died *ncentu* – that is, that her unfaithfulness to her husband had caused her own death and that of her child. They knew this because she had herself died *after* giving birth and because she had not confessed. If she had confessed they could have given her medicine and she could have been saved. But she was too afraid of her husband to confess and now she was dead. Perhaps (wrote Richards in her notes to herself), she had not confessed because she 'didn't do it'? But this was hardly an appropriate suggestion in the circumstances, and we can assume that Richards did not voice it.

At the shelter men and women were grouped separately and made space for Richards to sit down. The corpse was tied up in a mat and lying on its side. Because the woman had died *ncentu* she was to be buried at a crossroads away from the village. The corpse was lifted onto an improvised bier, and the men set off at a run. There was supposed not to be any wailing for such a death, but an old woman did wail and threw herself under the bier. They stopped twice on the way to the crossroads and at each stop the dead woman's husband, who was a Roman Catholic, said a prayer and marked a

³⁸ Richards papers: 1/8, 'Chiefs: general and administrative': Thomas Fox-Pitt to Richards, 8 Aug. 1936 (writing from Mpika).

³⁹ Vitebsky, 'Death and regeneration', 73.

⁴⁰ This account is taken from Audrey Richards's fieldnotes housed at the LSE: 1/34/HH, 'Case studies'.

tree with a cross. The men dug the grave with an apparent 'feeling of un-concern, a job to be done'. At the grave the women 'were upset'. There was some muttering from the woman's family, criticism of the husband. Richards noted, to herself, that this might have been the result of antagonistic 'kinship feeling', or maybe just because 'he really was *very* stupid'. The body was laid flat in the grave ('we learnt that from the white man'). The woman's five-year-old daughter was told to look into the grave. She cried. Her father told her to throw clods of earth in, which she did, and the women did the same. The grave was covered over and they walked back to the village.

The burial of the woman (whom Richards does not name) who had died *ncentu* was intended as a kind of non-event. It was a death without regeneration: a birth had ended in two deaths. Hers was the worst kind of death, and the woman was herself to blame – not because of her supposed adultery, but because she had not cleansed herself of that transgression and she had not confessed. Richards, very much a 'stiff upper lip' kind of anthropologist, recorded it all with as much objectivity as she could muster, but she was clearly a bit rattled, perhaps even angered, by this death, muttering to herself in her notes. People were 'upset' – the women were 'upset', the little girl was 'upset', the husband was 'very stupid'. There was a body and raw grief, but the wailing was suppressed. There was none of the complex symbolization which marked even a normal commoner's death amongst Bemba-speaking people in the inter-war period,⁴¹ let alone that of a chief, and though Richards noted that Christian prayers were said, she did not seem to have regarded them as filling the terrible gap left by the absence of the normal actions and utterances.

Yet, of course, this was anything but a non-event. By not burying the corpse according to usual custom, by apparently relegating it to a non-place outside the symbolic order, the body and the death itself were imbued with meaning. The woman's behaviour (not her alleged adultery, but her refusal to confess) had placed her outside the protection of society. Although the lesson that Richards (and indeed everyone else) was supposed to take away from this death was clear enough, it could also be argued that this was a death which marked the limits of social and political power.⁴² According to both Richards and her missionary counterparts, much Bemba social and ritual practice was geared towards preventing just this kind of death – regulating sexuality, preserving fertility, ensuring the safe delivery of babies and their survival into adulthood. It had all failed. Faced with the reality of impotence in the face of death, the people of Chitikafula's village responded, or were instructed to respond, with a hollow kind of defiance signalled in a refusal to

⁴¹ For Richards's own accounts of the deaths of 'Commoners', see Richards papers: 2/12/1, 'Mortuary ritual (commoners)'. Other detailed descriptions of funeral practices and mortuary rites were produced by White Fathers working in the area, whom Richards consulted on some of these matters: Eduoard Labreque, *Beliefs and Practices of the Bemba and Neighbouring Tribes*, trans. Patrick Boyd (Language Centre, Ilondola, Chinsali, n.d.?). This is a translation of two works by Labreque, who worked in the area between 1920 and 1951, and of Father Louis Etienne, *A Study of the Babemba and the Neighbouring Tribes* (Kasama Diocese, 1948).

⁴² See Foucault's arguments on death and sovereignty: *The History of Sexuality*, vol. 1, trans. Robert Hurley (London, 1979).

mourn, and with the accusation that the woman had brought it all upon herself.

Death 3: the death of Chanda – government messenger

In June 1931 Richards had recorded the course of the death of another commoner in her notebook.⁴³ This was not a case of an emblematically 'transgressive' death, such as that of the woman who had died in childbirth at Chitikafula's village. But it was, nevertheless, a death which clearly caused Richards some discomfort.

A man named Chanda was dying in a village in Chinsali district. He was a former government messenger, 'intelligent and promoted above his fellows on the staff', generally thought to be rather 'above himself' and not very well-liked. Richards noted that he had a rather querulous manner, and also that he had no children of his own. At the Lubwa Mission hospital (Church of Scotland) he had been examined by Dr. Brown and diagnosed with lung cancer.⁴⁴ Chanda had previously consulted a local healer (*nganga*) who had given him medicine, but Brown had scolded him for this. Richards watched over the coming three weeks as Chanda became weaker and sicker. He kept saying that he wanted medicine to make him well. The Mission doctors had drained liquid from his chest, but later, when his feet swelled, they sent him home without treatment. Chanda came back saying that the Bwanas understood chests but not feet. Richards talked to Chanda and his wife and asked why they had not consulted an *nganga* again. This question met with a 'burst of indignation' from the couple, who pointed out to her that Dr. Brown had already told them off once for this. Richards offered to get 'permission from Munday' (another church minister) for them to get the *nganga*. They 'gladly accepted' this offer. Richards came back the next day with the 'permission' but found that medicine had already been brought from the next village and Chandamali had arrived with meat. Since these are Richards's notes to herself, she does not explain the identity of Chandamali, but this can be gleaned from other parts of her archive and from an article by Brelsford. Chandamali was a former 'head messenger' at Chinsali *boma*, but he had also had an abbreviated career as the Shimwalule, the highest ritual authority.⁴⁵ He could therefore be said to have embodied both the old and the new forms of power at work in Lubemba – he was certainly well acquainted with both

⁴³ Richards papers: 1/34/HH, 'Case studies: course of death, Chinsali, June 1931'.

⁴⁴ Dr. Brown features in this paper on several occasions. Brown was a medical doctor and minister of the Church of Scotland, who worked at the Lubwa Mission from 1927 to his death in 1947. I have yet to study his papers in detail (they are in private hands), but he is referred to many times by Richards in her own papers, and was clearly an important influence (alongside the White Fathers of Chilubula Mission) on the communities she studied.

⁴⁵ Brelsford explains that during the 1924 Chitimukulu succession dispute, the new incumbent, Chitimukulu Kanyanta, had initially refused to acknowledge the rightful heir to the position of Shimwalule and had put his younger brother, Chandamali, in his place. However, under pressure from the councillors, the Chitimukulu was forced to revoke this decision. Brelsford wrote that 'Chandamali still lives at Chinsali, though I doubt if he could be called the third living Shimwalule since he never buried anyone and his title was always in dispute while he held it'. Brelsford, 'Shimwalule', 212.

systems and their interaction. Richards noted that Chandamali was angry and said to her that maybe the man could be saved, but he doubted it:

it's all the fault of you Bwanas. No-one is afraid, they will kill anyone now with witchcraft ... A man who wastes slowly is one attacked by his enemies. If the DC were to call up the messengers and say 'Unless Chanda is well tomorrow you shall each have ten', then he would be walking tomorrow.

Two days later a man named Chisonde arrived to throw bones. The cause of illness was on the woman's side, he said. Richards's informants agreed. Everyone knew that Chanda's wife had had twins by another husband and had not done the 'purification ceremony' at his death. Why? – 'Because the Bwanas stop this ceremony'. She had had a child with Chanda, but it had died.

Chanda died a few days later. The funeral included a few Roman Catholic prayers and 'the Boma messengers were paraded'. Chandamali could not attend 'as he had been a Shimwalule'.⁴⁶ Chandamali, Richards noted, was very 'anti-Christian', and some of this animosity, she implied, was directed at herself. After it was all over, Richards made a note of the three reasons which had been advanced for Chanda's death. They were:

- an illness which could be cured by the *nganga* but the Bwanas' won't allow it.
- witchcraft – the Bwanas allow it
- neglect of carrying out ceremonial purification – the Bwanas' teaching.⁴⁷

Whichever explanation you chose, the 'Bwanas', in one form or another, were ultimately responsible.

SEX, DEATH AND BIOPOWER

While for the anthropologist the death rites of the Chitimukulu spoke to the theory of 'divine kingship' – or at least to the workings of a 'system' in which political and spiritual power were inseparable – the two other deaths outlined here speak to the workings of that 'system' in ordinary lives and to the effects of colonialism and Christianity.

It is very possible that Richards exaggerated the extent of the supernatural power held by the Chitimukulu and by other senior chiefs, which she saw as binding the Bemba people together (albeit on a 'knife-edge', as she described it).⁴⁸ This exaggeration was due in part to Richards's structural-functionalist training, and to the fact that she spent much of her time (but certainly not all of it) in the villages of important chiefs. Fox-Pitt put this view frankly to her in a letter in 1935:

I have never thought the religious and magical duties of chieftainship were as important in native eyes as you and most investigators here said they are. This is

⁴⁶ Richards does not explain this, but I take it to mean that, as a burier of chiefs, he was ritually impure – though, as Brelsford points out, Chandamali had never, in fact, buried any chief.

⁴⁷ Richards papers: 1/34/HH, 'Case studies: course of death, Chinsali June 1931'.

⁴⁸ For an alternative view of 'traditional' Bemba spirituality, see Hugo Hinfelaar, *Bemba-speaking Women of Zambia in a Century of Religious Change, 1892–1992* (Leiden, 1994).

due to an anti-religious bias [on his part, he means], and also to ignorance, but I don't find the religious influence active in their lives as I come across them. The religious duties go on and a pious section of the community think them important, just as the Prayer Book controversy years ago was thought important by a section, but are the masses really interested in such things? ... Do the Awemba as a tribe really mind about the sacred fires and the blessing of new village sites? The courtiers and priests do, of course, but do all the people?⁴⁹

Fox-Pitt had a point. Richards did hang out with 'courtiers and priests' and admitted in letters to her sister and mother that she preferred the company of 'aristocrats'. Neither of the two deaths of commoners described here were 'ordinary' since both involved the intervention of a senior ritual authority – a 'royal embalmer' in one case and an ex-Shimwalule, or royal burier, in the other. These two figures were almost bound to put across the 'official line'. Nevertheless, what these deaths and their interpretation have to say is significant. Both point to the importance, at the level of individual lives, of the links between sexuality, authority and death. Fox-Pitt may have been right about ritual of the grand sort (the funerals of chiefs, the founding of new villages), but he may have under-estimated the degree to which 'the masses' were, nevertheless, concerned with supernatural power as it affected their own lives and practice.

The Bemba-speaking people had been a raiding and warring group in the nineteenth century, and there is no doubt that part of their chiefs' power derived from their ability to maim and kill.⁵⁰ To this extent the power they wielded conforms to certain models of the operation of pre-modern 'sovereign' power and its relationship to death. Undoubtedly colonial intervention, which brought an end to raiding and slave-taking, and which prohibited human sacrifice and maiming, thereby undermined this aspect of the authority of chiefs, and demystified them. But no sovereign ever ruled through threat of violence alone – at least not for long. More important than their power to inflict death, was the chiefs' alleged power to give life, through their control over the fertility of both land and people. The 'knife-edge' of the Bemba polity (as with many other African systems) rested on the belief that, through the performance of certain rites and, particularly, through the proper conduct of marital sexual relations, life could be secured and sustained. All accounts of Bemba 'traditional' society and belief systems are problematic in one way or the other, and Richards may have exaggerated the extent to which these beliefs constituted a well-oiled ritual 'system', but there is little doubt that these beliefs existed, that they were vitally important and continued to exercise a hold on the imagination (if not on practice) well into the colonial period. Crucially, they took their effect through everyday bodily praxis. This, it could be argued, was a form of 'biopower'. Foucault's concept of biopower, elaborated in his *History of Sexuality*, is a form of internalized power, regulating social life *from within*, which he sees as characteristic of modern societies and associated with the disciplinary institutions of the modern state. In

⁴⁹ Richards papers: 1/8, 'Chiefs: general and administrative', Thomas Fox-Pitt to Richards, 12 Dec. 1935.

⁵⁰ Fox-Pitt had accumulated documentary evidence (including photographs) of the mutilations carried out by a former Chief Mwamba.

practice, Bemba chiefs may have had limited ability to exercise ‘biopower’ but there is little doubt that they aimed to do so.⁵¹

As Richards outlined in her study of girls’ initiation rites, and as Catholic missionary writers confirmed, Bemba believed that there was a code of conduct for sexual relations which *had* to be observed if fertility was to be ensured and deaths avoided.⁵² Amongst the most important practices were the keeping of the ‘matrimonial pot’ by a married couple, from which they washed each other after each act of sexual intercourse; the observance of sexual taboos around menstruation, childbirth and the period of lactation; the ‘confession’ and purification of adulterers; and the custom of ‘taking off’ the death in which a widower had sexual relations with a female relative of his dead wife, and a widow was ‘inherited’ by her dead husband’s brother. As Fox-Pitt implied, not everyone might be expert enough in religious matters to understand exactly how these ‘family matters’ linked symbolically to rites at the highest level (such as the burial of the Chitimukulu), but as Richards pointed out in her study of *Chisungu*, some of the most important messages were *not* conveyed explicitly, but were rather encoded in symbolic acts, the precise meanings of which might remain obscure to ordinary participants.⁵³ However, the basic ‘dogma’ underlying the Bemba belief system, according to Richards, concerned the

magic influence of sex, blood and fire which, when brought into wrongful contact with each other, are thought to be highly dangerous to any Bemba, but particularly to babies and young children, who are believed to be vulnerable to so many dangers; and to chiefs, on whom the prosperity of the land is held to depend.⁵⁴

Richards wrote that ‘It is difficult to exaggerate the strength of these beliefs, or the extent to which they affect daily life’, and here she drew on her own work on everyday practice, rather than ritual – on food preparation and cooking and on bodily praxis – to make this point. Husband and wife were, she argued, ‘mystically linked’, and the spirits (*mipashi*) of their respective ancestors mixed in the course of sexual acts. Fertility could only be assured by conduct pleasing to the ancestors – conversely misconduct in marital sexual relations was likely to anger them. It was the innocent who would suffer, and so, according to Richards, ‘This feeling of guilt is so widely diffused that innocent people are thought to suffer from the magical results of a sex misdemeanour committed by someone else’.⁵⁵ Colonial court records from this period seem to confirm Richards’s analysis: how you conducted your sexual life was a matter of deep interest to those around you, because any transgression which was not counteracted by the appropriate act of

⁵¹ Foucault, *History of Sexuality*, 1; see also the discussion of sovereignty in Agamben, *Homo Sacer*.

⁵² Richards’s fullest account of this comes in her description of the girls’ initiation ceremony – Richards, *Chisungu* – but she also described it in many of her other works including *Bemba Marriage and Present Economic Conditions* (Rhodes–Livingstone Paper, 4) (Livingstone, 1940). The White Fathers also took a close interest in Bemba sexual practice and taboos, and wrote lengthy accounts: see Labreque, *Beliefs and Practices*, and Etienne, *Study of the Babemba*.

⁵³ Richards, *Chisungu*, 126. This point is emphasized by Jean La Fontaine in her Introduction to the 1982 edition of the work (London, 1982, xxii).

⁵⁴ Richards, *Chisungu*, 30.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.* 36.

confession or purification, might endanger their lives. In the 1950s A. L. Epstein found much the same reasoning at work in his analysis of urban marriage on the Copperbelt.⁵⁶ More recently, Suzette Heald has argued (in the context of the literature on African sexuality and the HIV/AIDS epidemic) for the importance of the 'essential sacredness of sex' in African societies.⁵⁷

Richards eschewed a psychoanalytic interpretation of her material. Godfrey Wilson was more directly influenced by Freudian thinking and more inclined also to stress the *emotional* tenor of ritual, as well as its symbolic content.⁵⁸ Nyakyusa burial rites made the link between sex and death very explicitly and Nyakyusa sexual 'theory' held that the spirits of the ancestors were present at every act of marital sexual intercourse. As Wilson put it, 'the Freudians will have a field day!'⁵⁹ It was straight out of *Totem and Taboo*. It is not easy to know whether the Nyakyusa people were more guilt-ridden than the Bemba-speaking people, or whether they simply had an anthropologist of a different disposition – but Wilson put even more stress than Richards on the guilt and anxiety which was the price one paid for supernatural protection in these systems of thought. What is striking in both Richards's and Wilson's accounts is the degree to which it was possible to do harm simply by being careless or through unconscious anger and jealousy. Just as the 'divine king' could affect others by both 'voluntary' and 'involuntary' acts, so too could the ordinary subject. You could, quite literally, kill by being careless. Death could not be defeated, but through regulating themselves, and particularly their own sexual lives, individuals could influence the course of events, to some extent at least. When things went wrong and when 'bad' deaths occurred, deaths which would not lead to regeneration, individuals could be blamed. Women, it seems from these examples, were more likely than men to be blamed, but that is hardly unique to Bemba society.

Colonial anthropologists, including Richards, were inclined for various reasons to describe change in terms of 'breakdown', which was not always very helpful.⁶⁰ But change there certainly was in this part of Africa in the inter-war period, and it was change which was perceived by some as having a direct impact on death. Bemba political and ritual leaders had almost certainly never succeeded in putting into effect the entire 'system' which Richards described, which linked the highest authority to the everyday actions of ordinary people. Though ordinary people were affected by the big events which 'staged' this system, such as the burial rites of chiefs, they were more directly affected by the prevalence and ritual reinforcement of a belief system which linked their sexual behaviour to the well-being of others

⁵⁶ Many of the cases of infertility and adultery which came to the colonial courts (both urban and rural) included accusations that important rites had not been observed. See ZNA KTQ 3/1, Civil Cases: Chinsali, 1910–14; ZNA KDH 3/2, Criminal and Civil Cases: Kasama, 1924; ZNA BS 1/155, Magistrate Court Cases: Abercorn, 1904–11.

⁵⁷ Suzette Heald, 'The power of sex: some reflections on the Caldwells' "African sexuality" thesis, *Africa*, 65 (1995), 489–505.

⁵⁸ Wilson's work is the subject of another paper.

⁵⁹ Wilson Papers, University of Cape Town (BC880), B2: Letters from Godfrey Wilson to Monica Wilson, Folder 5, 8–10 May 1937.

⁶⁰ Moore and Vaughan, *Cutting Down Trees*, introduction and ch. 6.

around them. Colonialism had fatally undermined the chiefs' power to sacrifice their subjects – to put them to death in the name of regeneration. But more fatal still were the incremental changes which affected the ability of any authority to secure and preserve life.

Firstly, and most importantly, as Richards had documented in her book, *Land, Labour and Diet*, labour migration had inevitably had a profound effect on the economic system which underpinned the authority of chiefs over subjects, elders over the younger generations and men over women. These effects can be seen as much in terms of adaptation as in terms of collapse or breakdown; nevertheless, the absence of such a large proportion of younger men, the radical shifts in the gender division of labour which resulted from this and the perception that villages were now 'cold' and therefore infertile, are facts. In the 1930s there was a perceived crisis of reproduction in this part of Northern Rhodesia, and the Depression added to this. Furthermore, as chiefs and elders apparently became less able to flex their authoritarian muscles and to provide their people with protection against a 'cold' and unproductive land and against an apparent epidemic of infertility, the colonial state appeared unwilling to step in and perform this role. This was made explicit by the appearance of the 'Mchape' witchfinding movement which swept the region, and which Richards witnessed (in the company of Malinowski) in 1934.⁶¹

Richards tells us that witchcraft, and the unwillingness of the 'Bwanas' to deal with it, was the primary reason advanced by Chandamali to account for Chanda's death. Chandamali had said that it was 'the fault of you Bwanas' because no-one was afraid any longer. And he seemed to think that the colonial authorities were deliberately withholding their power to remedy this situation when he added that Chanda would be 'walking tomorrow' if the D.C. had rounded up the other government messengers (whose jealousy was the cause of the illness) and threatened them with a beating. Scholars of the history of witchcraft in colonial Africa have long argued that the colonial state's unwillingness to recognize the existence of witchcraft, along with their willingness to prosecute those who made allegations of witchcraft, left many of their subjects feeling that the new rulers were consciously withdrawing their protection and exposing communities to death.⁶² Conversion to Christianity supplied, for some at least, the protection they were looking for.⁶³ But witchcraft was not the only explanation advanced for Chanda's death, as Richards noted. The two other theories heavily implicated the Christian missionaries. Dr. Brown, of Lubwa Mission, a medical doctor and

⁶¹ A. I. Richards, 'A modern movement of witch-finders', *Africa*, 8 (1935), 448–61. The perception that colonial rule was 'soft' on witchcraft and had therefore brought about an increase in its incidence was widespread in colonial Africa.

⁶² Natasha Gray, 'Independent spirits: the politics and policing of anti-witchcraft movements in colonial Ghana, 1908–1927', *Journal of Religion in Africa*, 35 (2005), 139–58; R. D. Waller, 'Witchcraft and colonial law in Kenya', *Past and Present*, 180 (2003), 241–75; A. Booth, "'European courts protect women and witches': colonial law courts as redistributors of power in Swaziland, 1920–1950', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 18 (1992), 253–75.

⁶³ Clearly the protection offered by Christian missions in the region (both Catholic and Protestant) requires a much lengthier discussion. For this I need to consult more primary sources.

no-nonsense Presbyterian, had scolded Chanda for having resorted to 'native medicine' and had, apparently, put the fear of God into him in the process. But perhaps more significantly, Chanda's death was also attributed to the fact that Chanda's wife (presumably also a Christian) had not gone through the customary purification rites after the death of her first husband. This accounted both for the death of the child she had had with Chanda, and for the death of Chanda himself. Both Catholic and Protestant missionaries had vigorously campaigned against these purification rites, which included sexual intercourse with a close relative of the dead husband, and there is little doubt that many women were only too keen to find a justification to abandon such customs.⁶⁴ As the death of the woman in childbirth showed, the traditional regime of the Bemba placed a particularly heavy responsibility on women for self-regulation. When the wrong kind of death occurred, as it inevitably did, they paid a heavy price, as Richards made clear. This was a harsh regime which relied on self-regulation, large doses of guilt, and the occasional sacrifice at the death of a chief. Christians now claimed that, the ultimate sacrifice having been made, death had now been conquered. But this new protection could only be secured by those who stopped confessing for the wrong reasons (and started confessing for the right reasons), who stopped believing that by performing a ritualized sex act they could protect themselves and others from death (but who would nevertheless believe that transgressing the new rules of sexual conduct would jeopardize their chances of redemption).

The spectacular burial rites of the Chitimukulu secured the Bemba people a place in the anthropological literature on 'divine kingship'. But these rites were impotent unless continually connected to the daily conduct of the sexual lives of Bemba subjects. The 'wrong' kinds of deaths had always occurred, but when they occurred in the 1930s, there were new agents at work who could be blamed for them.

⁶⁴ The White Fathers at Chilubula Mission often provided refuge for such women and sometimes became embroiled in conflicts with chiefs and with the colonial administration as a result. Liberal feminists in this region still campaign vigorously against these practices: see particularly the work of the organization Women and Law in Southern Africa. W. Ncube and J. Stewart (eds.), *Widowhood, Inheritance, Laws, Customs and Practices in Southern Africa: Regional Comparative Report on Inheritance* (Harare, 1995).