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SEEKING AN ESCHATO- RELATIONAL FUTURE: A ZAMBIAN BEMBA FUTURISTIC CRITIQUE OF PENTECOSTAL DISPENSATIONAL PREMILLENNIALISM¹

ABSTRACT

In the context of relational spirituality, the article explores the possibility of decolonising Christian eschatology from the perspective of Zambian Bemba future imaginaries. It argues that, in order to reorder the social relations of any former colonised groups, it is imperative to decolonise their epistemic vision of the future and align it with the *Missio Christis* that encapsulates the eschato-relational vision. An eschato-relational future is proposed as one way of articulating the vision of the future informed by Bemba imaginaries.



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1. INTRODUCTION

To be human is to seek the purpose and meaning in transient history; to never be neutral, and to not exist in an eschatological vacuum. Hence, every human community has an ultimate vision

1 Yonsei University for the New Faculty Seed Grant [2019.03–2020.03]. 2019 Yonsei University Future-Leading Research Initiative - New Faculty Grant Program [2019.03 - 2022.04].

of the ambivalent future. This vision energises the present struggle in relation to an immutable past and seeks the promise of the future. This vision converges on the future from the past and the present, in order to give meaning and purpose to human existence. This vision of the future, classified in Christian terms as eschatology, refers not only to the final aspects, but also to the human struggle to realise awesome relationships between men and women, humanity and creation, and, ultimately, between God and the rest of the created order (Hayes 1990). This specific vision of the future informs how societies are structured, how social relations are governed, and the forms of knowledge that are produced.

At the core of this vision is the search for meaning and purpose related to the human quest for fullness of life. If this perspective makes sense, the fundamental concern shifts from classical Christian eschatology with its radical concern with the consummation of divine activities into what is classified as “last things” (Guthrie 1994; Althouse 2003) – *eschaton*² – to a socio-anthropological eschatology, “that is the problem of human nature in itself, in its relation to” one another, creation and the Creator (Hayes 1990:70). Hayes argues that,

[i]f there is something wrong in the very structure of human nature that serves as the basis for hope in its human forms, then that element may be seen as the deep point to which the word and divine promise is addressed (Hayes 1990:70).

Hayes seems to suggest that one should scrutinise in detail various human communities, in order to unearth the basis of their hope. This is also important in critiquing the imperial legacies of colonial Christian eschatologies, which have reduced human hope for the future to the colonial missionaries’ vision of the future. Feminist theologians (Keller 1996; Russell *et al.* 1999; Pennington 2016) and eco-theologians (Conradie 2005; Moo 2006) have called for rethinking eschatology in terms of gender and creation within both present and future terms. They have called for “articulating and living out a vision of human liberation rooted in the eschatological potential of Christian life” (Russell *et al.* 1999:27).

In order to realise the vision of human liberation, the future imagination needs to be relationalised. The increase in African decolonial theological studies has challenged colonial missionaries’ versions of theological imaginations, arguing that the vast majority of postcolonial African Christian beliefs and practices are locus for the enunciation and reproduction of colonial mentalities that continually destabilise the African vision of

2 Such as death, judgement, heaven, hell, the end of world history, the coming of the future kingdom of God, and new heaven and earth.

the future. One must beware of the colonial nature of African Christian doctrines (Ramantswana 2016, 2017; Methula 2017). Eschato-relational thinking is not merely reactionary rebellious resistance; rather, it is

a process of identification, articulation and representation – a critical positioning which provides a sense of place, a context from which to develop our insights, ideas and responses, a strategic site that allows sufficient rounding for specific forms of thought, speech and representation to emerge and gain meaning (Borsa 1990:36).

It is about unmasking, unthinking, exposing, troubling and undoing unconsciously inherited and internalised non-relational eschatological visions. Eschato-relationality is based on the *Ubuntu* struggle to risk undergoing symbolic death, in order to quicken the end of a colonially imposed vision of the world and return to a new life based on a decolonial constructed African vision of the future. The article proposes an eschato-relational future, especially for some Zambian Pentecostal Christians who have embraced the dispensational premillennialist eschatology of the Pentecostal Assemblies of God in Zambia (PAOG-Z)³. It investigates the ways in which the traditional Bemba vision of a relational future could initiate a process of de-centring and de-linking the non-relational eschatological vision inherited from the Pentecostal Assemblies of God of Canada (PAOC). This is critical for the emancipation of the Bemba people who affiliated with the PAOG-Z from the coloniality of an eschatological future. Thus, relational thinking is employed as a strategy for epistemic de-linking and transgression against the apparent colonial nature of eschatological imagination. The following section seeks to dismantle the colonial nature of an eschatological future.

2. THE COLONIAL NATURE OF THE FUTURE: WHOSE FUTURE IS DISPENSATIONAL PREMILLENNIALISM?

The views of the end of history held by any particular group cannot be taken for granted, as such views dictate how such a group of people live in the world. The ways in which a dispensational premillennialist⁴ lives in the world and interprets reality is qualitatively and relationally different from

3 The PAOG-Z is a Classical Pentecostal denomination founded by missionaries from the PAOC in the 1950s when Zambia was still colonised. Kaunda (2017) discusses in detail the history and theology of the PAOG.

4 Balfour (2011) concisely discusses the key tenets of premillennialist imagination.

the ways in which a post-millennialist⁵ lives in the world and interprets the same reality. As a dispensational premillennialist movement, the PAOG-Z is entrenched in the perception of the empirical world as irredeemably sinful. This vision of the end of the world was inherited from the founding PAOC missionaries who argued for the destruction of the present reality and the end of all things which God, in his infinite wisdom, has decided to bring about.⁶ The fact that the majority of the PAOC missionaries have left and the leadership handed over to the indigenous Zambian clergy has not necessarily amounted to an end of the PAOC's eschatological imagination. In fact, dispensational premillennialism is one of the most prominent and well-known eschatological views in contemporary Zambian Pentecostalism (Kaunda 2017). The PAOC's eschatological vision continues to function as an imposing invisible structure of religious power that reinforces the colonial missionaries' relations of domination and continual alienation of Bemba Christians in the PAOG-Z from their traditional or, at least, hybrid eschatological future.

It is argued that the PAOC's imposition of its eschatological vision on the Bemba people remains as the colonial nature of *Missio Dei*. This differs from *Missio Dei* colonialism, where the eschatological future of the missionaries is imposed on the evangelised through religious colonisation in which traditional religious beliefs and practices of the evangelised were "demonised" and overpowered by the conquering religious system. However, the colonial nature of *Missio Dei* refers to the continuation of the PAOC eschatology-based values that emerged as a result of religious invasion, and that have remained the defining vision of the future postcolonial Bemba members of the PAOG-Z.⁷ *Missio Dei* colonialism not only created a new religious system and redefined social relations as well as ways and forms of theological knowledge production. It also introduced a new religious and new eschatological vision by altering relations between women and men, humanity and creation as well as creation and God. In this process, socio-religious relations and eschatological future remain colonised (Kaunda 2016). Dispensational premillennialists argue that authentic reconciliation between human beings and God will be realised

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- 5 "The postmillennialist holds that the kingdom of God is now being extended in the world through preaching of the gospel and the saving work of the Holy Spirit in the hearts of individuals, the world is to be Christianized and that the return of Christ is to occur at the close the long period righteousness and peace commonly called millennium (not a literal thousand years)" (Boettner 1977:117).
 - 6 I shall not deal with all the tenets of this eschatology; I shall only highlight aspects that have implications for its relationship to the world (Althouse & Waddell 2010).
 - 7 This is a modification of Maldonado-Torres' (2007:243) definition of coloniality.

by God at the end of the age. Thus, in their initial stage, they believed in passive withdrawal from social responsibility, due to the belief that the moral climate of the secular world will worsen and slide into apostasy. The church can do nothing to change the world, except to obey the Lord's Great Commission to evangelise "the lost souls" to help them escape hell's fire. There was a complete disregard for social transformation and eco-justice.⁸ Issues of gender justice and equality as well as eco-justice were not embedded in their eschatological consciousness.

Boone observes that premillennialists such as Bob Jones, founder of the Bob Jones University, argued that

the church is not called to change the moral climate of the world. The commission of the church is to save men and women out of the world (Boone 1990:53).

The future of this world is determined by God who will completely destroy it at the "end" of the age. The "end" will be preceded by what is classified as birth pangs – a chaotic period the world has never experienced. The dispensational premillennialists essentially perceive many signs such as earthquakes, terrorism, plagues, calamities and famines as indications of an imminent apocalypse and the second coming of Christ. Boone (1990:53) further argues that

the philosophical and political consequences of premillennialist thought can hardly be overstated: human efforts to effect changes for good are not only futile, but by definition contrary to the divine plan.

Briefly, the best the premillennialists could do was simply to live faithfully according to their beliefs, win non-Christians for the kingdom, and wait for the second advent of Jesus Christ (Crowley 2006).

This vision of the destructive end of history continues to impose itself on the PAOG-Z. However, in the late 1980s, many PAOG-Z pastors became dissatisfied with the first President of Zambia, Dr Kenneth Kaunda, who was consistently viewed as a threat to Christian faith; many were forced into political engagement (Kaunda 2017). In the 1970s, President Kaunda introduced humanism – a synthesis of Christianity and traditional African religious-cultural practices. In the late 1980s, he attempted to combine humanism and scientific socialism. Many Christians including the PAOG-Z became uncomfortable, as this combination was perceived as having the potential to lead to Marxist ideology that could threaten the mission

8 The following authors have extensively discussed premillennialism in relation to political engagement (Boone 1990; Wilcox *et al.* 1991; Crowley 2006).

and evangelistic ministry of the church in Zambia. The most notable and politically engaged pastor since the late 1980s is Bishop Joshua Banda of the Northmead Assembly (PAOG-Z) in Lusaka. He is the former Chairperson for the National AIDS Council of Zambia and, in 2015, was appointed by the President as Chairperson for the National House of Prayer Advisory Board. Bishop Banda believes that the declaration of Zambia as a Christian nation was necessary in order to replace the humanist foundation upon which Kaunda established the nation (Kaunda 2017). This motivated some pastors in the PAOG-Z to get involved in politics in order to safeguard their beliefs in the nation. However, the dispensational premillennial faith assumptions remain central to the Pentecostal notion of the contemporary Zambian nation-state.

According to Boone, a similar threat pushed premillennialists in the United States of America into politics. They increasingly justified political engagement as necessary for maintaining the church's mission and evangelism in a sinful world (Boone 1990:53). However, their perception of this world as inherently sinful and of history as heading to eternal damnation has not changed and is used as a basis for social engagement. It is important to highlight that dispensational premillennialism was not conceived with issues of gender justice and ecojustice as part of its foundational imagination. They are foreign to a premillennialist vision of the future which it has to seek in order to accommodate political rightness. Feminist eschatologists have argued that the constructions of male and female bodies in dispensational premillennialism eschatology have assigned ultimate, divine worth to the male and subordinated the female (Pennington 2014:6). Particularly in Africa, it has been underlined that African Pentecostalism is an inherently conservative force, which reinforces gender inequalities in the home that become detrimental in the context of HIV (Nadar 2009; Gabaitse 2015). In her empirical study in Ghana, Soothill found that African Pentecostal gender ethic promotes gender equality in the public social domains, while simultaneously reinforcing uncritical wifely submission in marital contexts:

It should not be assumed, however, that the spiritual and material equality of believers undermines inherent biological and psychological differences between women and men, or that it fundamentally disrupts the rules governing social relations between them. In marriage a woman is still to 'submit' to her husband (Ephesians 5: 22-4) (Soothill 2010:84).

Thus, political engagement has not changed the fundamental PAOG-Z dispensational premillennialist assumption; it has merely helped the movement mimic the new socio-political context demanding promotion of gender justice, equality and the rights of women. The

fundamental conviction remains that God has already determined an “end”; the impending damnation of the present reality cannot be altered (Kaunda 2015:120). This world and everything in it is only a means to an end; it has no divine purpose beyond facilitating the believers’ ultimate purpose to live blissfully with Christ in the coming Kingdom. This colonial missionaries’ eschatological vision has not even dared to adopt any life-giving aspects from African cultures. The engagement in politics is not for the sake of social transformation but for self-preservation in the process of waiting for rapture. This vision of the future continues to alienate the Bemba Pentecostal Christians from the original vision of the future. In fact, the Bemba people’s future has been disregarded and reduced to worthless beliefs and practices. How can we reclaim the Bemba eschatological vision within the PAOG-Z, in order to promote authentic and awesome living in the here and now? In order to achieve this, it is important to understand traditional Bemba eschatological imagination.

3. BEMBA FUTURE IMAGERIES: A SYMBOLIC JOURNEY

In the beginning there existed two genderless beings. Lesa gave one of them two parcels with an order not to open them before they had reached mutual understanding and friendship. In these parcels were hidden feminine and masculine attributes of the Divine respectively. After some time, one of the parcels begun to smell badly, so the being that carried it, threw it away and decided to open the other. At once it was endowed with Divine maleness and became umwaume. This new status caused desire for the other being, who could not respond. Realising that the desire was a result of opening the parcel, the second being returned to Lesa, who bestowed on it Divine femaleness. This is how the beings were reduced into two sexes. Therefore, the quest to become whole (full person) is through realization and acquisition of the other (Hinfelaar 1994:6-9).⁹

This creation myth undergirds Bemba cosmology and people’s eschatological imagination. The Bemba ethnic group is one of the largest ethnic groups in Zambia. They are matrilineal in social organization and are found in the Northern, Muchinga, Luapula and Copperbelt provinces of Zambia.¹⁰ Bemba “eschatology” expresses traditional understanding of human beings as in the process of relational progression toward intricate

9 For a different version of this same myth, see Doke (1931:228).

10 A few other ethnic groups in these provinces of Zambia speak languages that are similar to Bemba but are not the same.

gender balance and wholeness of all creation. This eschatological vision informs every aspect of their socio-political life, including death. It is conceived as a process that began with the creation of two genderless beings by *Lesa* (the Supreme Being) who also sent them on a mission to reach an intrinsic mutuality and relational equilibrium before opening the two parcels that contained undisclosed divine gifts. This sending on a mission could be described as *missio humanitas*, a progression of responsibility for relationality, solidarity and mutuality (Bevans & Schroeder 2004:293). The Bemba notion of God seeks to strike an intricate balance between femininity and masculinity. God is conceived as complete, possessing both a male and a female model of being. In other words, God is immutably and radically reconciled within as *Mayo na Tata* (Mother-Father; Female-Male) – the intricately balanced one. The notion *Lesa* means the ground of life-giving relationship, of all mutuality and awesome existence.¹¹ It is in this perspective that *Lesa* sent them on the *missio humanitas* of releasing the intricate relational balance by becoming like *Lesa*. Becoming like *Lesa* meant the radically, inherently, and intrinsically connecting and the mysterious embodiment of the essence of the other, thereby becoming the manifestation of the nature of God.

Regrettably, one being was not patient enough to overcome the contradictions that go hand in hand with the search for relational solidarity and mutuality. The myth argues that, when one of the parcels started stinking, the impatient being decided to throw it away without consulting either the other being or *Lesa*. It decided to open the remaining parcel without consulting or even reaching relational solidarity and mutuality. The being became male. The action of opening the parcel resulted in the distortion of what it means to be a human being in a mutual and solidary relationship. The being that became male constructed masculinity as separate from femininity and divinity. His masculinity was devoid of divinity and feminine values that promote life-giving masculinities and relational mutuality and solidarity. Ultimately, his masculinity isolated him, and formed the foundation for patriarchy and other negative aspects that characterize the Bemba social order. His self-construction of masculinity, without regard for the other being and God, was based on self-interests and the need for domination and control. The result of such distortive constructions was obvious: he immediately began to sexually objectify the other being who did not even have any gender specification at that stage. This demonstrates that all masculinities that are constructed in opposition to sound relationship and mutual respect and understanding and divinity, whether they be heterosexual or homosexual,

11 Elsewhere, I have discussed the notion *Mayo na Tata* more extensively (Kaunda 2010).

have the potential to promote the sexualisation and objectification views of women, girls and the seemingly fragile masculinities such as gay men with feminine characteristics.

In order to understand what happened, the still genderless being returned to *Lesa*, the owner of the parcels who rewarded the being with the gift of female sexuality for her courage to return. Hence, female sexuality would be celebrated among the Bemba people as a sacred gift.¹² In addition, *Lesa* presented three more sacred gifts to the now female being – to own the seed (*mbuto*) of life. In the Bemba belief system, the woman already has children in her womb and the husband only helps activate them. This implies that marriage is defined in matrilineal terms. It is believed that blood is passed through the wife to the children; hence, children belong to the mother. The father has no right over the children. This secret of giving life (procreation) comes with social status. The woman is made *cibinda wa ng'anda* – given the responsibility to head the household. The female who would always construct femininity in dialogue with God is ultimately connected to life-affirming through either procreation or social wholeness. Thus, life is fundamental to the Bemba worldview. The woman is the symbol of life-giving relationship – she is the life-giver for the Bemba people. She orients the community towards life. She is an embodiment of divine life, the medium through which God flows into the community. Thus, giving birth is central in the Bemba belief system and has a strong eschatological significance because the children come from the future. The woman's menstrual blood and birth pangs are often interpreted as resistance against forces of death and ruination of the community. According to the Bemba worldview, giving birth is regarded as a process of dying and resurrecting. The woman who is delivering is perceived to be in between life and death – both dead and not dead. After delivery, she is greeted as *mwapusukeni* or *mwabweleni* (you have been rescued or welcomed back to life). This means that, symbolically, giving birth is about giving life in all its complexities.

Secondly, she was given the power to protect the sacred hearth (*ishiko*). The Bemba people perceive male sexuality as dangerous, alienating and life-threatening (fire that can easily go out of control) that must be tamed in order to protect the community (Poewe 1982). The wife has the power to tame her husband's sexuality and, for this reason, the Bemba people do not subscribe to polygamy. The fire is sacred as it is associated with sex that can give or destroy life depending on the context of the intercourse. Sex outside the confinement of marriage is deemed to be as dangerous as

12 A detailed discussion of the sacredness of female sexuality and the implications of these three gifts is found in Kaunda & Kaunda (2016).

wild fire which devours without remorse. This means that the destructive nature of male sexuality is easily controlled within customary marriage where the husband and wife are “put in each other’s power and dependent on each other for ceremonial purification” (Rasing 2001:50).¹³ A man who commits adultery mixes the blood (*ukusankanya umulopa*) of his own, of his wife and of his mistress to their peril. If the wife was pregnant, she was likely to die during delivery (*incila* – crossed the wife). If the woman committed adultery, she was likely to die after delivery (*incentu* – crossed herself). If there was no pregnancy, adultery could be detected through its effects on the children – illness or even death. However, the woman as the protector of sacred fire also has a spiritual status of *kabumba wa mapepo* (the mediator between *Lesá* and her household – the priestess). She (only legally married) is the only one who can petition *Lesá* for forgiveness in the event of such breaches.

Thirdly, the female being was given the secret of bored stones (*ilibwe*) as symbols of work, knowledge and industriousness.¹⁴ The woman was made *nacimbusa wa cisungu* (liminal guardians of virgins and brides to be) in order to pass on this knowledge to succeeding generations. The Bemba traditional culture has no rite of passage for boys, but only for girls at puberty and for brides. Cultural beliefs and practices centre around two rites for girls and young brides. The first ritual *icisungu* (derived from the noun *icisungusho* – miraculous event) occurs at the first menstruation of the girl. This event is celebrated as an initial return to *Lesá* to receive the divine gift of feminine sexuality in readiness to give life. The second ritual *imbusa* is given to a young woman a few months prior to her wedding in which she is prepared to understand and take her rightful place in society (Kaunda & Kaunda 2016).

However, in the myth, the male being who had selfishly acquired masculinity was not only discarded or punished, but also granted implements to help realize the divine vision of balance, relational mutuality and solidarity. Yet, the woman becomes a symbol of life-giving through whom humanity could realize the divine vision of intricate relational balance between women and men with implications for a mutual relationship with the rest of creation and ultimately with *Lesá*. The Bemba’s destiny is oriented towards the East. They say “*tuya kukabanga*” – we are going to the East. In Bemba thinking, the West (*kumasamba*) symbolizes past

13 For further discussion, see Rasing (2001:50). For scholarly engagement with the Bemba people, see the pioneering work of Richards (1982). See also Maxwell (1983).

14 For a detailed discussion on Bemba cosmology in relation to women, see Hinfelaar (1994:9).

– a moment from male alienating and life-threatening power which manifests in gender dichotomy, undeveloped (socially, relationally, and politically), darkness, disorder, corruption, and suffering. This appears to be based on the logic that the Sun rises in the east and makes its way westward across the sky. Therefore, the East (*kukabanga*) from which the sun rises with its increase in energy, intensity and brightness is the future where the fullness of life is found. It is called *kwaLesa* (*Kwa* – means abode/dwelling, *Lesa* is a Bemba name for God – abode/dwelling place of God). It is where people draw strength and hope in their struggle to transform their present realities. God is never conceived of as being in the past, but in the future, in the East. Considered to have perfect feminine and masculine traits, *Lesa* symbolizes the perfection that people seek to actualize in gender and social relationships. Certainly, this is a much more symbolic than actual journey. Although it begins in the past, it has no definite end, as this is determined by the degree at which socio-relational mutuality could be fully realized. Unlike in Christian eschatology, where the “end” is to be realized by God alone, with a seemingly male-dominated future space, and, in fact, it is futuristic in nature, Bemba eschatology is not limited to the future, but in the present actions of the people. Social and existential challenges are described as reflecting a masculinity-constructed culture of death. Life-giving actions are regarded as continuous eschatological fulfilment and are expected to result in symbiotically reconciled humanity with one another, God and the rest of creation. This future requires commitment and a conscious search for relational balance, in order to overcome the culture of death. In this journey, *Lesa* is both the guardian and the paradigmatic model for an intricate balance of genders. On the contrary, every life-denying action is perceived retrogressively into the past – *kumasamba* (south – darkness). The deceased are buried facing *kukabanga* to symbolise the continuity of the journey in the next dimension of life. There is no dichotomy between life and death, as death is the continuation of existence in a spiritual model of life. The dead continue to seek gender balance, as is evident in the naming. The Bemba believe that their dead relatively often return in any gender of their choice by appearing in their pregnant relatives’ dreams, informing them about their return through the baby in the pregnancy. This appearing means that they want to be named. Once the baby is born, it is given their name. Hence, all Bemba names are unisex to illustrate this continuous search for gender balance.

This perspective critiques some Africanists such as Mbiti (1990:23) who have argued that

in traditional African thought, there is no concept of history moving ‘forward’ towards a future climax, or towards an end of the world.

In another work, Mbiti (1971:159) explains that “[t]he linear concept of time, with a Past, Present and Future, stretching from infinity to infinity, is foreign to Africans’ thinking, in which the dominant factor is a virtual absence of the future.”¹⁵ Numerous scholars have critiqued Mbiti’s essentialist perspectives (Mugambi 1992; Òkè 2005). Within Bemba thought, the concept of “end”, contrary to Mbiti’s (1990:23) desire, does not come with the notion of “a final destruction of the world” – indeed this “has no place in traditional concept of history”. The Bemba notion of the end is entrenched in the human search for realization of the intricate relational balance of all things beginning with gender justice.

In the Bemba belief system, the pursuit of relational mutuality and balance also includes achieving inner self-balance of both female and male characteristics against the backdrop of *Lesá*. The perfect relational balance, therefore, requires the acquisition of life-giving qualities of the opposite gender and dialogical with *Lesá*’s quality of being. The genitals do not define anything about femininity or masculinity, as both male and female children are regarded as neutral and balanced within themselves. The reason for this is that the Bemba people believe that children are found in the *kukabanga* (East – the abode of God). Through menstrual cycles (called *kumpepo* – coldness), the woman is believed to symbolically go into the future to ask *Lesá* for the gift of children (Hinfelaar 1994:7-8). The sexual union between the husband (*ukukaba* – hot influence) and the wife (cold body) brings mutual balance that is essential for receiving the divine gift of children. It is believed that people can access the blessings of the future in the present through actions that seek to promote balanced and mutual relationships. This constant convergence between the present and the future brings life in the present. Similarly, elderly individuals who exhibit characteristics of both genders are regarded as nearly the future or perfection (*ubuntunse*) (Hinfelaar 1994:8).

Ubuntunse is a compound word – *Ubuntu* (humanness) and *nse* (wholeness) that refers to an act of imitating the divinity – *ukupala Nyina na Wishi ukuwama* (to become balanced like Mother-Father God in goodness is to be balanced) in order to become truly human. *Lesá* is ideal. But the human being can only achieve the divinity kind of gender balance through a conscious and intentional choice to belong with other human beings. This balance has implications for living justly and rightly in society. When one chooses to belong, the community expects one to contribute to the realization of relational mutuality and intricate gender balance. Those who are enslaved or colonized cannot realize this balance.

15 John Mbiti (1971) has given a detailed discussion of Christian eschatology within African worldview.

Thus, Mbiti's (1990:23) argument that

some African peoples have no 'belief in progress', the idea that the development of human activities and achievements move from a low to a higher degree

is conceptually faulty. The Bemba worldview is based on relational progression. The only challenge is that people are not at the same level of relational progression – some are more progressive than others. Soskice's (2007) suggestion is helpful, in this instance, namely that humanity's vision of the end is integral to conceiving of what they understand they are becoming. The Bemba understand that they are becoming increasingly a radically relationally balanced community, in which *Lesa* will be fully expressed in human daily interaction. This is similar to Soskice's (2007:181) notion: "'What we will be' is not separable from what we were made to be and what we now are." Thus, the function of Bemba traditional religion was to enable people to internalize the fundamental values of relational progression such as human rights, peace, justice, unconditional love, hospitality, and so forth. The consummation of history would occur when the human social life-world has reached the pinnacle of balance gender and socio-relational perfection as *mupashi mukankala* (generous spirit with perfection of both female and male genders). Humanity will realize its purpose by achieving the divine intentions for them. Bemba eschatology provides a humanistic critique of dominant socio-religious power relations and challenges of the dispensational premillennialist eschatological future to which the PAOG-Z subscribes. The following section proposes a decolonial eschatological future based on the Bemba quest for radical relational mutuality and intricate gender equilibrium within the PAOG-Z.

4. RECLAIMING THE FUTURE: ESCHATO-RATIONALITY TURN

How do we move forward? It is impossible to understand the eschatological future outside the context of the *missio Christi* (the mission of Christ) framework. This mission statement is summarized in the Gospel of John 10:10: "I have come that you might have life and have it more abundantly." The content is given in the Gospel of Luke 4:18-21:

The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.

Such passages are either ignored or interpreted in futuristic terms in most of the PAOG-Z discussions on the eschatological future. These passages do not mention futuristic anticipation, but rather experiencing the fullness of life in the now (Erickson 1998).

Jesus' mission is a response to the collapse of the eschato-relational foundation that resulted in abnormal social relations. This abnormal situation manifests in gender inequality, economic injustices, political corruption, and ecological destruction. Vaai (2018:1-2) rightly argues that all this is an "assemblage of relationality". Humanity has lost its eschato-relational foundations upon which "the fullness of life for all" should be anchored. Every action of Jesus in the gospels addressed the restoration of eschato-relationality. One cannot realise the fullness of life without restoring authentic relationships. Eschato-relationality re-orientes the world toward the fullness of life. Jesus embodies perfect inner balance between divinity and humanity. Within him was a radical reconciliation between the Creator and the creature. After his baptism, Jesus received the Holy Spirit (feminine quality of the Divine) – a kind of acquisition of feminine qualities. There is sufficient scholarly evidence to show that the image of the Holy Spirit is feminine (see, for example, Schüssler 1983; Brock 1990; Quispel & Van Oort 2008; Van Oort 2016). This understanding shows that the Holy Spirit's feminine qualities give the fullness of being in the Divine (Van Oort 2016). Attributing feminine or maternal characteristics to the Holy Spirit does not mean that the Holy Spirit is female; it helps counterbalance the masculine conception of God and helps one understand the fullness and wholeness of God within Godself (Kärkkäinen 2002). This also means that the depiction of the Holy Spirit coming on Jesus symbolizes Jesus' acquisition of inner balance of gender which he also radically transcends. If one views Jesus as a model, one can conclude that to be human is to strike a relational gender balance and mutuality in society.

To emphasize eschato-relationality is to re-centre the transforming power of the Holy Spirit into the relational path of *Ubuntu*. Vaai (2018: 1) argues:

The Spirit is not just the force behind the dynamic flow of relationality. The Spirit 'is' relationality, as the Spirit is synonymous to fluidity, openness, and transformation. Who continually draws us to celebrate and embrace the diverse rhythms and movements of life within the eco-relational[ity].

Eschato-relationality is about critically re-imagining masculinities for life-giving. Becoming an authentic human is relational in nature, thereby entering into the mode of the being of God. The relational context of *Ubuntu* is the locus for constructing relational masculinity, in contrast to the non-relational

approach which is characterized by a lack of empathetic love and respect for the human being and dignity of the other. Jesus' mission is to be found not only in what he did and said, but also in what he sought to be within himself. This was ultimately expressed in radical reconciliation between the Creator and the creature; the male and the female; the spiritual and matter. Thus, he becomes the paradigmatic human whom human beings must seek to imitate in order to strike a relational balance and mutuality through following the relational path of *Ubuntu*. *Ubuntu* is not an end in itself, but a life-giving ethical means for realising social relationality.

However, the ultimate act of Jesus' mission is found in death and resurrection. Symbolically, every sinful action, every act of injustice leads to the death of divinity in human society. Since life is not lived in linear form, human beings are constantly experiencing death and resurrection. This means that, whenever injustice happens, humanity and creation, symbolically, experience death, just as Jesus died, due to injustice. However, at the heart of Christianity is the belief that Jesus is life itself. He came to give humanity new birth (Pennington 2014:115),¹⁶ and authentic life: "I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly" (John 10:10). Jesus not only promised life to come, but also gives new life today. He gave life as a relational gift through incarnation, death and resurrection. He stressed: "Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends" (John 15:13). All of Jesus' social activities were grounded in relationship. In so doing, he demonstrated that authentic life is only realized through genuine relationships. Jesus is the symbol of a life-giving relationship – he is the life-giver. Through his shedding of blood, his death on the cross and his resurrection, Jesus gave birth to those who believe. Saint Peter confirms:

In his great mercy [God] has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead (1 Peter 1:3).

This divine act of giving birth through the resurrection from the dead could be described as resistance against anti-life forces. The birth metaphor is not to be interpreted literally, but metaphorically: resurrection from the dead is depicted as symbolic resistance to death and all its manifestations through injustices such as social, political, economic, ecological, gender, exclusion, and so on. All these problems are fundamentally relational in character. They demonstrate gross failure in social relationships. For Jesus,

16 Pennington (2014) paid attention to the implications of the birthing metaphor in rethinking eschatology within feminist theology. Jantzen (1998) also engaged with the notion of birthing and its implications for feminist eschatology.

eschatology lies in the genuine search for authentic relationships in the now, as it promotes relationships to be fully realised in future relational harmony.

Thus, Jesus' resurrection narrative is the ultimate source of life for the world. He gave life to the world through his death and resurrection. He is an embodiment of eschato-relationality which he brings within the present reality. This means that those who embrace Jesus have already begun experiencing eschatology. Seeking relational justice and gender balance is eschatology in itself. It follows, therefore, that an eschatological vision should include the following aspects.

First, the search for authentic social relationality which leads to the fullness of life for all in this present reality that gives energy to eschatological vision. This search for authentic social relationality is at the core of the *Ubuntu* commitment emerging from death and resurrection of both Jesus and women to resist and renounce "all forces, powers, and systems which deny, destroy, and reduce life" (Keum 2013:13). The *ubuntu* commitment to eschatological vision, therefore, involves deconstructing patriarchal and anthropocentric ideologies and seeking to restore just and intricately balanced relationships between women and men and humanity and all of creation. An eschato-relational future that emerges from a Messianic vision through the Bemba worldview is based on resistance against the culture of death and promotion of the culture of life for all, in which gender is inconsequential and creation can justly flourish.

Secondly, authentic transformation and more emphasis on what is taking place rather than what is to come. Just as the birth of a child in the Bemba belief system brings convergence between the present and the future, the incarnation of Jesus (human from the future) inaugurates an eschato-relational future. The incarnation marks a single crucial point in human history when the future and the present begin a radical convergence – heaven and earth – Creator and creation – humanity and the rest of creation. For Jesus, those who accepted his message through actions of justice, righteousness, peace, and so on already experienced the kingdom of God. Briefly, the just and transformative actions of the community of faith are the initial actualization of the kingdom of Christ. This does not in any way negate the notion of a Second Return of Christ, because the return itself points to the fullness of justice and radical relational mutuality and balance of all things in which God will be all in all. In this instance, there are similarities with Bemba future imaginaries which hold that relational balance and eco-justice are not solely future issues.

Jesus introduced a future in which humanity and all of God's creation march towards liberation. In contemporary Zambia, this liberation is needed

from a dispensational premillennialist future which has caused Bemba Christians in the PAOG-Z to remain trapped for fear of impending cosmic destruction. This is contrary to the messianic vision of the future which advances towards radical justice, equality and reconciliation of all things and is already taking place. There is sufficient biblical evidence to suggest that heaven and earth will be made new rather than destroyed (Is. 11:1-9; 25:6-10; Rev. 21:1-4). This means that aspects of the Scriptures that point to cosmic destructions must never be taken literally, but as symbolic of the process of transformation that is already taking place in the world as people are becoming increasingly conscientised about issues of justice in their diverse ways. There is a critique of universalism concerning a colonial missionary-imposed Euro-American vision of the future.

5. CONCLUSION

The article is based on a search for relationality in order to reclaim the Bemba notion of an eschatological future for Bemba Christians in the PAOG-Z. It argues that relationships are not given; they emerge from commitment to justice and equality. This implies that the future is not fixed, not predetermined, and not random; it emerges from human commitment to make this world a better place where both human beings and the rest of creation can experience abundant life. In other words, the future is an open reality that evolves from present human interactions with each other and the rest of creation. Therefore, an eschato-relational future is all about developing socio-relational consciousness that can help human beings seek to develop intricately balanced relationships between women and men and the rest of creation. The hope of a just and equitable future is anchored in the fact that, in apparently small ways, human beings are achieving some levels of gender justice and eco-justice. There can be no greater eschatological future than that which is being realized in the midst of contradictions and death-dealing forces. Therefore, the PAOG-Z's eschatological vision must seek to help the community of faith experience the authentic relational balance found in Jesus Christ.

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