

# In Search of Doctor Dolittle in Zambian Bemba Fiction

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## Summary

The purpose of this article is to describe and engage the Zambian writer Stephen Mpashi's work entitled *Pano Calo* (1956). Mpashi's material is presented in the Bemba language, one of the major Zambian vernaculars. The material has been synthesised in English in this article for ease of access. An attempt is made in the discussion that ensues to provide an analogous analysis of *Pano Calo* with the material in the film *The Story of Doctor Dolittle* (1997). In the film African American actor Eddie Murphy plays the part of John Dolittle who has the power of speaking to animals. The article makes an attempt to bring to the surface the potential role of the Zambian literary material in the vernacular in informing modern day popular culture.

## Opsomming

Die doel van hierdie artikel is om die Zambiese skrywer Stephen Mpashi se werk *Pano Calo* (1956) te beskryf en te bestudeer. Mpashi se materiaal word in die Bemba-taal, een van die hoof tale in Zambië, aangebied. Die materiaal word in hierdie artikel in Engels gesintetiseer sodat dit maklik toeganklik is. In die bespreking wat volg, word daar gepoog om 'n analogiese ontleding van *Pano Calo* en die materiaal in die film *The Story of Doctor Dolittle* (1997) te gee. In die film vertolk die Afro Amerikaanse akteur Eddie Murphy die rol van 'n karakter wat die mag kry om met diere te praat. Hierdie artikel is 'n poging om die potensiaal van die literêre materiaal in die Zambiese dialek om moderne populêre kultuur te inspireer, aan die lig te bring.

## Introduction

A special issue on African literary studies hangs between a boomerang and a catapult. To reach out for what every literary artist should yearn to do, namely dipping into the psyche of Africa's literariness, is to stand at the threshold of challenging what the artist fears most about what embodies African literariness and the very extent to which African literature or the African-language novel, play or poetry embodies literary studies. Such a

mental exercise conjures images of a mythical chimera that pushes and pulls reliably on reparative fetishism.

## **The Context**

In a fair world, a writer theorises the African literary space should necessarily call for moral or ethical literary space. However, when it comes to finding possible moral or ethical literary spaces in the literatures of Zambia in Zambian languages, such spaces have been extremely tight. For example, commenting about literary studies in Zambia, John Reed has this to say:

All Zambian fiction so far has been quite free of literary pretention and self-consciousness. Its writers have not employed the studied simplicity and off-hand quality which Hemingway carried to the point of caricature and which in modified forms has provided a sound model for the best West African writing.

(Reed in Killian 1984: 83)

On our first reading (and unfortunately for many of us it may be our only reading), the comment above might pass as a positive appraisal of the Zambian contribution to literary scholarship particularly if one assumes that the writer believes fiction should be free of literary Picassos and if one assumes that the writer is against studied simplicity, which the famous American writer Ernest Hemingway is said to have depicted as caricature and that is said to be imitated by West African writers.

The moral or ethical dilemma arises in the expectation imposed upon the Zambian fiction writer to have to study Hemingway so as to acquire the lucidity provided by such canons as a sound model for the Zambian writing. If this in fact is true and I am right, the ethical literary trap is then carefully unveiled by Reed thus:

None of the Zambian writers has had a postgraduate literary education and from their work I would judge that none has written out of an interest in the novel as a literary form or from a detailed acquaintance with schools of twentieth century fiction.

(Reed in Killian 1984: 83)

To the assertion above alternative literary scholarship promptly demands transparency on how much postgraduate literary education William Shakespeare had or a total rejection of literary morals, canons and ethics – a return to what Kaplan (2000) refers to as “pagan ethos” or “warrior ethics”; the former epitomised in radical Islam and the latter emerging as the ancient African warrior tradition that Mazrui (1997) points to as a counter to Western philosophical cunningness. Disappointingly, none of the alterna-



tives is possible because Zambia is a declared Christian nation constitutionally. Be this as it is, a missed point by commentators on the Zambian literary scene is that literary writing in Zambia is understood exactly as what it is: an art. For this reason, prolific Zambian literary writers of note have not needed any acquaintance with schools of any specific century fictions, romantic or non-romantic, existentialist or renaissance. As artists, they have simply sculpted their original images. To provide some form of working literary compass the purpose of this article is to showcase the work of one Zambian Bemba writer, Stephen Mpashi.

Reed writes:

Bemba boasts the one outstanding vernacular writer that Zambia has produced in Stephen Mpashi who has published some dozen titles and well before independence was writing stories of Copperbelt life that satirise the institutions of colonial society and the pretensions of the Africans who served them. He sometimes uses conventions of crime and detection but with skill that relates them to the realities of Northern Rhodesian life and characterization. He has an accurate ear for the spoken Bemba of the Copperbelt and also for the way English is used and misused in the society he treats.

(Reed in Killian 1984: 86)

The one rare gift of foreign literary commentators on Zambian literary scholarship in the vernacular, which would be folly to ignore, is that they eagerly assess the quality of the writing in the vernacular even when their knowledge of the vernacular has not been proven improved beyond their evangelical Sunday homily mispronunciations. And generous Zambia, how often do you feel fascinated when you hear the English mumble a few Zambian language syllables when left to themselves they take such keen interest in documenting the way English may be misused by you?

Indeed Stephen Mpashi has written quite widely in Bemba. Nevertheless, contrary to what Reed says, not all Mpashi's writing has the Copperbelt of Zambia as its setting or the realities of Northern Rhodesia as troupes of its commentaries, assuming Reed's "Northern Rhodesia" is not couched in an arcane literary connotation.

Writing on educational and linguistic constraints on the development of a national literature in Zambia, Chileshe states:

It is important to note that in the colonial period, writers such as Stephen Mpashi and Andrea Masiye were publishing fiction in indigenous languages which were prescribed texts on the formal educational curriculum and which were immensely popular.

(Chileshe in Adams & Mayes 1998: 73)

What Chileshe writes above holds true across many Zambian indigenous languages even after Zambia's independence in 1964. In the present article, I draw on Mpashi's short novel, *Pano Calo* (loosely translated as *On This*

*Earth*), first published by Oxford University Press in 1956 to mirror *The Story of Doctor Dolittle* first written by Hugh Lofting in 1920 (Lofting 1997). Most of Mpashi's Bemba books are stocked in the University of South Africa library. And quite curiously, much as Zambia imposed trading sanctions against apartheid South Africa later, Mpashi's novel *Pano Calo* bears the UNISA library imprint of 11 October 1958 as the date when it was first put on the library catalogue, only two years after the book was published.

Given the uniqueness of the material that Mpashi put together in writing *Pano Calo*, I shall be demonstrating in this article the narrative structure of the material and the ways in which the work defies or confirms some or all the views of the critics of Zambian literary prowess. It is hoped that the discussion will illustrate the ways in which the material stands as Mpashi's psychological masterpiece whose plot, setting and central characters lie in the relation of the things of the spirit with those aspects of the flesh; the relationship of the things of the invisible to the visible that mankind undergoes in the discovery of the self, including moments when omniscience sets human flesh at war with its sense of retribution. This, as the present article will show, is part of the prolegomenon of the explanatory factors for the depths and labyrinths of the Zambian literary artist that remains unexploited and is very often unnoticed by celebrity postgraduate authors.

## The Story of *Pano Calo*

The story of *Pano Calo* (Mpashi 1958) opens one day when a heavily pregnant woman returns from visiting her parents from a nearby village. On her way back to her husband's village, she meets pallbearers carrying a casket. Inside the casket is the dead body of an old man who is being taken to the graveyard to be buried. The old man died when the pregnant woman had just left for her parents' village. As the woman is passing the casket both she and the pallbearers stop abruptly without knowing why. Then the dead body starts talking to the unborn child:

[You, child in that belly, where are you going?]

(Mpashi 1958: 1)<sup>1</sup>

The child in the belly answers:

[I am going to be born.]

(p. 1)

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1. Subsequent references to *Pano Calo* will be indicated by page number(s) only.



The dead body says:

[You child, do not dare to be born: There is nothing you can do good to others on earth. Let's just return together. See how I could not manage and I ended up dying and I am now leaving the world!]

(p. 1)

The unborn child replies:

[And indeed you have played and enjoyed yourself Grandpa; looking at the years you have spent on earth, would anyone really underrate your exploits?]

(p. 1)

The old man in the dead body responds:

[Take heed child, go back; there is nothing good on earth. All enjoyment and what people themselves refer to as happiness and affluence, I tell you they are nothing. The problem is that people themselves do not want to know that the world has just placed foul air in their hands. You child, come back with me; do not dare to be born.]

(p. 1)

The unborn child retorts:

[No, Grandpa. Allow me also to go and see the world by myself.]

(p. 1)

The old man in the dead body then answers:

[Really? Then my friend, do go. However, if you really want to view the world properly, go and be born dumb.]

(p. 1)

The child in the belly says:

[Thank you. That much I accept. I will do as you suggest.]

(p. 1)

At this moment, neither the mother nor the pallbearers know who told them to move on. The woman goes to the village and the pallbearers go to the graveyard to bury the dead old man.

By midnight, the woman gives birth to a bouncy baby boy. In the same night, one of the chief's wives gives birth to a baby boy too. This pleases both the chief and the Citi family. The chief does not have a boy child to send on errands, he only has an adopted son by the name of Lesa, who carries his walking stick wherever he goes.

The two boys, one at the palace and the other at the Citi, soon grow into young men. However, as time goes on, the Citi family realises that their child is unable to talk but this does not bother them that much because they are extremely fond of him. Nevertheless, the boy's peers sometimes make a fool of him referring to him as the dumb one (*ci Cibulu*). To make matters worse, the boy never gets angry even when other boys bully him. When his peers punch him, he never retaliates and this makes his peers really take advantage of him.

One day when all the adult men are out hunting and looking for food, the boys are left playing in the village and Cibulu, the dumb one, is among them. The boys catch someone's chicken, kill, roast and eat it. Then one of them asks what they will say when the owners of the chicken find out. They sit down deep in thought. One of them suggests that they should just say it was Cibulu who killed the chicken, roasted it, ate it and gave them only the wings to taste. They quickly agree among themselves and say indeed the dumb boy will not be able to deny anything.

When their parents come back from the farms in the evening, the owner of the chicken notices that her chicken is missing. She starts cursing whoever took it. Quickly the boys tell her that the dumb boy killed the chicken, roasted it and gave them only the wings to eat.

Furious but relieved at knowing what happened to her chicken, the owner of the chicken goes straight to the Citi family and demands that they repay her with another chicken. This the Citi family willingly does although they know their child never stole anything at home.

Once the lads have found a scapegoat in Cibulu they are now insulated. Wherever they go they make sure they take Cibulu with them so that should they get involved in any mischief, they would put the blame on Cibulu.

During one of the boys' wanderings, they find themselves herding sheep along a river. They miss having a braai. An idea occurs to them. They chase one of the sheep, catch it and kill it. They then set up a braai at the river bank, roast the entire animal, eat the meat and throw bones and badly burnt chunks into the river.

As usual when it comes to explaining, they tell the owner Cibulu is the culprit. The owner of the sheep demands compensation from the Citi family. The Citi family oblige. They surrender their sheep and the case is closed.

On another day when the sun is extremely hot, the boys drag Cibulu with them to the river saying:

[Let's go and have a swim. Oh, dear Cibulu, why are you so fond of making yourself sad?]

(p. 4)

Although Cibulu has complied coming to the river with the boys, he does not take part in swimming when they reach the river. He stands by the river



bank and watches them as they engage in all sorts of dangerous pranks in the water. As time goes on, they start immersing one another. In no time, the chief's son drowns. The other boys just see him come up to the surface twice, then he is swept away by the current.

In fear, the boys agree among themselves that they will tell the chief that it was Cibulu who drowned the chief's son. However, as they are walking back home, they realise that Cibulu is dry since he has not been swimming and therefore the chief will not buy their story. Seeing that they are far away from the river, they seize Cibulu, pin him down to the ground and urinate on him. When he is wet enough, they let him go.

As they approach the village they start wailing. They tell the chief how Cibulu drowned his son. The chief gets extremely furious and orders the arrest of the Citi family so that they too can be killed one by one to avenge the death of his son, starting with Cibulu followed by his mother and then his father.

The scenes above regarding the boys highlight the ultimate rape of conscience. First, the boys by abusing Cibulu wilfully perform an earthly rite of passage from childhood purity to complex adulthood. Secondly, in defiling Cibulu by urinating on him, they gang-rape their individual and collective moral conscience and ultimately lose their childhood innocence. Although they are still young rogues and many an African young boy may have done worse things in life, the boys are to be punished as a collective later on when the whole village finally loses its memory.

At the palace there is a man called Nkomamatwi who is deaf. This is the man whom the chief loves and rewards more than any other servant because he is the one who has been appointed to carry out difficult assignments for the chief. Therefore the job of killing Cibulu naturally falls on him, accompanied by a normal man named Kampinda.

Early the following morning, Nkomamatwi and Kampinda set off to kill Cibulu. When they reach the assigned place, they tie the dumb boy, Cibulu, and cover his face so that he should not see the killing blow. Just as they are busy trying to prepare Cibulu to be killed, a bird flies over and sits on a nearby patch of grass.

The bird says:

[Do not kill this child, because he is innocent. Whoever kills this child will forever be cursed.]

(p. 6)

As Kampinda is able to hear, he hears everything the bird says. Nkomamatwi, being deaf, is not able to hear the words of the little bird.

Upon hearing the words of the bird, Kampinda smiles to himself and quickly retreats, saying:

[O thank God, I will not take part in this killing. Let me leave this Nkomamatwi to kill the child so that he should be the one to carry the burden of the curse about him as he has enjoyed the chief's attention too much.]

(p. 6)

Nkomamatwi strikes Cibulu with his axe and as soon as he is done, the little bird flies back and says:

[You are the one who has killed this child, Kampinda; it is not Nkomamatwi because Nkomamatwi is deaf and therefore he could not hear what I said. Since you were able to hear what I said, you should have tried to stop Nkomamatwi by either holding him back or giving him a sign not to strike the child. You chose not to stop him. Now you should remain steadfast. Whatever you will be able to hear you should keep it to yourself. The day you disclose whatever you will be able to hear to other people, that will be the end of your life.]

(p. 6)

Before Kampinda can open his mouth to ask the little bird to clarify what it means by what it has just said, the bird gets up from the grass and disappears into the forest. At that moment Kampinda feels his humanness surpass his understanding. He begins to hear everything the birds are twittering among each other in the forest. He starts hearing everything the animals, big and small, are chatting about among each other. He hears what the insects, including the grasshoppers, are saying to each other. His ears become more than just open. He becomes conscious of himself.

On the way back to the village, Kampinda hears a little grasshopper telling its friend:

[You, indeed you are brainless. Why is it that when you see me jump in a particular direction you also jump elsewhere? Your mind is just as foolish as the minds of the stupid human beings.]

(p. 7)

The friend responds:

[Oh really my friend, you have a very low opinion of me ... how could you compare my mind to the little minds of the stupid human beings?]

(p. 7)

The grasshopper says:

[That is how foolish your mind is – exactly like human beings' minds, just like these two foolish human beings passing in this path, here.]

(p.7)



Kampinda just shrieks inside at what he has just heard. Among the things he hears the animals talking about when he reaches the village is the narration of a cock pointing to a boy who is passing by as being responsible for killing one of the chickens but heaping the blame on Cibulu.

On another day Kampinda is returning from the river to get his soaked tree fibre when he hears the sheep talking to each other about how hungry they are and how they should go and eat the millet people soaked for preparing beer. One of the sheep tells the others to delay the eating of the millet until the time the people would be drunk. However, the others brush the suggestion aside as an example of how foolish human beings reason. From this conversation Kampinda also learns how the boys killed the sheep and put the blame on Cibulu.

The following day, Kampinda is told to accompany Nkomamatwi to go and kill Cibulu's mother. As they reach the place of slaughter and the deaf man starts preparing to strike Cibulu's mother, Kampinda quickly gives him signs to abandon the act. Nkomamatwi is surprised, thinking that perhaps he has not heard the instructions properly, but he does not strike the blow.

When they reach the palace, Kampinda tells the chief that he had a dream that the Citi family should not be killed but just be kept as slaves who should be toiling for the chief to atone the death of the chief's son. The chief takes Kampinda's advice, believing he will benefit more by treating the Citi family as slaves.

The two scenes above confirm the validity of Kampinda's awakening to the insubstantiality of his former existence when the little bird warned him against killing Cibulu.

At this point, Kampinda realises that his real life lies in the space he occupies in the emotions of others, but because he did not exercise this authority at the time when Cibulu was about to be struck by Nkomamatwi, the deaf one, he is perpetually at the mercy not only of the darkness that lies deep-seated at the core of his being, but also of the irrationality at the centre of human nature collectively. However, because the killing of Cibulu is irreversible, any attempt to mitigate the consequences will constitute a futile act of firefighting.

During spring, Kampinda goes to cut the trees on his farm in order to burn them as fertiliser in preparation for the farming season in what is known among the Bemba people as "*citemene*". He climbs one of the trees. As he is cutting a branch, he hears the branch groan as it falls:

[Oh, poor me, I am dying. What have I done to deserve this? After all, this year I wanted to bear much fruit so that human beings could survive during the famine that is about to befall these parts. You unkind human being, you have killed me!]

(p. 11)

Upon hearing this, Kampinda cannot continue cutting the trees. He puts his axe on his shoulder and home he goes. He tries to explain to his wife that he has decided not to cultivate his farms that year. Instead, he will go far and wide to distant places to procure food that he will stock because he is anticipating a famine. Although his wife does not understand why Kampinda has decided not to farm that year, she supports him. However, many people mock him for opting to go begging instead of preparing his farms for growing food.

When he returns home from procuring food one day, he does not find his wife. He looks up the roof of his house and sees two spiders laughing. One of them says:

[Look! This foolish man of this house has come back today. Foolish of him; you will see that just after resting a bit he will go to his enemy, the chief, kneel down and start paying homage to him, not knowing that the thief fools around with his wife every night in his absence. Some sorts of marriages are not worth the trouble. As for this prostitute of this house, immediately this man leaves to go and look for food the chief takes over.]

(p. 13)

After hearing what the spiders are saying, Kampinda tries to contain himself but he fails. In the end he decides to follow his wife into the inner village. He finds his wife at a beerhouse. They both get drunk and when they come home he accuses his wife of being unfaithful. The wife denies all charges and demands that he reveal the source of his information. In the end Kampinda tells his wife that he knows she has been fooling around with the chief. She becomes violent and when he beats her up she runs to the chief's palace and tells the chief that Kampinda is suspecting her of fooling around with the chief but cannot substantiate his claims.

When Kampinda is summoned by the chief he complies and gives the chief a piece of his mind. The chief has him flogged and he is told to take back his wife. Here, Kampinda's wife is ready to operate in the darkness. What she fears most is the embarrassment if any other person should know of her secret affair. She, like anybody else, is bound by perpetual sin but it is not the shame of that sin she dreads.

For Kampinda, this marks the first step in the discovery of the deep-seated darkness at which point the truth is no more refined than the time he heard it from the spiders. What he seeks is some marvellous, imaginary accomplished fact that should be able to whet his audacious desire. However, although he is sure of his wife's infidelity, the truth still remains unapproachable and therefore its meaning becomes meaningless as he pays for revealing the truth and he is shoved his wife back into his face.

One evening the chief's wife with whom he had the son who drowned, falls seriously ill. The whole village goes to console the chief and among the



people are Kampinda and his wife. All is quiet at the palace and everybody fears that the chief's wife will die any moment.

As Kampinda sits solemnly like everybody else, he hears two palace mice chatting to each other. One of them says:

[Today let's eat all the dried caterpillars poor people have been giving the chief during the famine.]

(p. 19)

The other says:

[No, let's not eat everything. We should keep some for another day.]

(p. 19)

The first one says:

[Those who keep, keep for everybody. How do you know that the owners will not remove the caterpillars from where they are and put them somewhere else?]

(p. 19)

The other replies:

[Yes, those who keep, care for everybody but as for you who would like to eat everything now, you will eat and when your stomach is about to burst and you try to climb down to the hole from the roof, the rope you are climbing down on will get cut because of your heavy weight and you will fall into the furnace down there and burn.]

(p. 19)

When Kampinda hears this, he bursts into laughter, startling everyone including the chief as his wife lies dying. Everyone turns in the direction of Kampinda and one of them asks him:

[So Kampinda, what do you find funny?]

(p. 19)

The chief also demands to know why the man is laughing when these are the last moments of the chief's wife. Kampinda responds that he is not laughing at anything. The response angers the chief even more. Kampinda is accused of being responsible for bewitching the chief's wife in retaliation for the flogging he underwent when he accused the chief of having an affair with his wife. The chief orders Kampinda to be taken to jail, threatening that if Kampinda does not cure the chief's wife and she dies, he too will be killed.

While in jail, Kampinda hears a bird singing a song related to some kind of a fever which is severe but does not kill people. Although he suspects

that the chief's wife may be suffering from this fever, he does not know how to convince the chief that his wife is not going to die, for doing so will be tantamount to confessing that he is practising sorcery.

After some time, the chief's wife suddenly gets well. However, everybody concludes that Kampinda has just applied his magic to cure the chief's wife in order to save his life. The following morning, Kampinda is released from prison, but the chief tells him to leave his village because his witchcraft is unbearable.

When Kampinda is thrown out of the village, he is escorted by people to the hills together with the food that he has stocked. His wife refuses to follow him, believing that he is a wizard. Once Kampinda is out of the village, the chief starts bragging that because he is the chief, he will look after Kampinda's wife well.

However, a few months after Kampinda has left the village, famine breaks out. Everyone in the village remembers the words of Kampinda. As no one has any food left, people start persuading Kampinda's wife to go and reconcile with Kampinda and some to beg food from him. Sensing that the chief cannot provide for her at all, Kampinda's wife decides to walk up the hills and try to persuade her husband to reconcile with her. She finds him naked, sun-basking on a rock, scratching himself as he listens to birds.

She begins:

[Hey, dear husband, how thin you have become! It is all because you have been cooking for yourself. Oh dear, see, you have no one to scrub your back, dandruff from your hair has even reached your back! Now, dear, listen: Don't be bitter. The only wife with whom wedding bells were sounded is me. If you should soften your heart, why, I could come and start cooking for you! You see, we women do not think as much as you men do; that is why we are just looked after by yourselves as men. I could not continue living in the village and let you be troubled by wild animals.]

(p. 24)

Kampinda turns and looks at the woman. He shakes his head and tells her that it is too late for her. She tries to plead with him but he refuses and tells her to go back to the village so that she can learn a lesson about the world.

As she is hungry, tears have collected in her left eye. In disappointment, she tries to wipe the eye with her hand. As she does so, her eye starts seeing through the trees and other objects. With that eye, she can see through everything. The other eye is just fine. This terrifies her but she cannot tell Kampinda anything. She just leaves for the village. On her way she looks through a hill and sees a dead animal! She braces herself and collects parts of the animal and hides it in her basket and home she goes. In the village, she is shocked to see that some people are still cooking food despite the famine, but when she tries to ask for some they all pretend that they don't have any. However, when she cooks the meat she has cut from the dead



animal, the whole village gets the whiff of it. The biggest intruder is the chief and when he has finished eating the meat at the woman's house, the chief says:

*"Ale nomba"*

(p. 29)

In English the phrase "*Ale nomba*" simply means "And now?" However, the solicitation for sex is fully understood by the woman. Therefore, the phrase is not to be taken literally. To the chief's bewilderment, the woman refuses, saying it is not safe for them to make love because people are passing by and she is able to see them. Although the chief tries to press her further, she does not give in, pointing at people who are passing outside the house, who she says will catch them in the act. The chief ascribes her refusal to her being tipsy and thinks when she comes to her senses she will regret her decision. He leaves her alone.

On another day, the chief tries to invite the woman to the palace hoping to make love to her there, thinking that she will not claim that she is seeing people around. However, the woman again stands her ground citing her embarrassment of the people she is able to see through the walls of the palace.

One day the chief takes the little boy, Lesa, with him outside the village. As he patrols the village he sees Kampinda's wife going to the forest. So the chief tells the little boy to hide somewhere behind, holding his walking stick. He lets Kampinda's wife walk a little farther into the bush. Darting and lurking behind her, he emerges just in time as the woman is bending down to pick up her basket. The chief is now convinced that the woman will not claim that she is seeing people around since they are all alone in the bush. When he tries to pull her to him, the woman says:

[Look! There is the little boy, Lesa, there, looking at us, holding your walking stick. We can't do this in the presence of an innocent boy. See, maybe let me call him so that you know it is true.]

(p. 31)

Without even waiting for the answer from the chief, the woman calls little Lesa and the boy emerges from his hiding place. The chief is annoyed and starts off, leaving his walking stick behind but swears to teach the woman a lesson any time soon.

Once again, it is seen that it is not the woman's conscience at stake here. Rather, it is the embarrassment of being seen making love with the chief. Conclusively, Kampinda's wife is prepared to sin against the conscience she does not see.

One afternoon, one of the chief's wives goes to the river in a group of other women. While there, they meet Kampinda's wife. They start showering her with insults, calling her a prostitute. Kampinda's wife does not

respond. After a few moments, the chief's wife decides to go behind a hill to pick some mushrooms she has spotted. Kampinda's wife warns her that where she is going there is a dangerous serpent near the mushrooms so she should not go behind the hill. The chief's wife retorts saying it is Kampinda's wife who is going to bewitch her. How does she know that there is a serpent unless she is the one who has cast her spell there, since she is a wizard's wife?

It is apparent at this point that Kampinda's wife is projected by the villagers as a woman with a fractured character – one who does not mean well in any circumstance. In this sense, the woman becomes meaningless to the lives of those around her. What this means is that the power she dubiously acquires to see through things becomes inimical to her existence as a part of others.

Shortly after the chief's wife has gone behind the hill, she is bitten by a poisonous cobra. She yells in a loud voice:

[Help I've been bitten!]

(p. 32)

She tries to run to the village but just a little distance away she falls into the mounds. The whole village comes over to take her to the palace. As the sun goes down, the chief's wife dies too.

The chief is told that it was Kampinda's wife who has been wishing his wife ill luck and therefore she must be the one who has bewitched her.

The chief sends for Kampinda's wife and throws her into jail. He realises the only way he can forget about the death of his son and his wife is to kill the remaining family of Cibulu, the Citi family and Kampinda and his wife. So he sends for Kampinda so that he and his wife can be tried summarily and killed.

The people find Kampinda sitting on his rock, naked. Seeing him naked, they tell each other that indeed Kampinda is a wizard since a person who goes naked should be a wizard. They explain the offence to him and drag him to the village.

This time round, Kampinda knows that he is going to be killed. What Kampinda omitted *to do* at the right time certainly has *perpetual ramifications*. By leaving the village, he has detached himself from the moral world. That is why he goes about naked. As Kampinda has been rejected by his wife first and in return rejects his wife when she comes to reconcile with him, he has no reason to feel the sense of shame of nakedness. In this respect he represents the erotic man whose nakedness should be watched by the entire village as the ultimate insult to his cheating wife and chief.

Ordinarily, the wilderness Kampinda has been cast into by his fellow human beings should serve as a penitentiary for a common criminal. In the case of Kampinda, it turns him into an inscrutable radical who must commit suicide; for to reveal what the bird said to him without an antidote is to elect



to blow himself in a packed village square for a sin committed by an unfaithful estranged wife. So, by detaching himself from the world, Kampinda has destroyed that world and if he has to go back he knows that he is going to destroy himself too.

When they reach the village, just as Kampinda is about to start explaining his part, the chief tells the little boy, Lesa, to go and fetch his walking stick where he has left it, for only Lesa knows where he has left it.

While Lesa is away, Kampinda tells everything that has happened from the time the little bird spoke to him to the time he was banished. However, the people do not believe his story. They all think he is a liar. But once he finishes telling his part, he dies.

The next is Kampinda's wife. She also recounts her experiences and once she has finished, she dies. At this point everyone forgets everything. No one remembers who his father or mother or child or wife or sister or brother is. The chief forgets he is a chief. People forget he is their chief.

When the little boy, Lesa, returns, he alone has the memory to remember who is who, but no one recognises him. So the little boy remembers the Citi family that is still kept in prison. He goes and opens for them and explains to them that no one can remember anything. The only thing he does not know is how Kampinda and his wife died. So he gives the stick to Citi and tells him that since he is the only elderly man around, he is the only one with a mind sound enough and fit to be the chief to guide everybody. Citi accepts the honour, but only his people and the little boy, Lesa, understand what this means. The rest do not.

One day Citi and his people go to the hills to collect food that Kampinda has left to distribute among the people. While they are away, the people in the village get very hungry. Senseless, they catch Lesa, kill him and eat parts of him. As soon as they have finished, their memory is restored. They are able to remember what is happening but the only thing they cannot remember is where Lesa is.

When the Citi family returns from the hills, they find bits of meat and think the people must have found it somewhere. So they eat parts of the meat. As the day grows late they begin to wonder where Lesa is, but no one is able to tell. Some point to the skies, others to the hills, and others to the river.

As time goes on, people go about their business but no one can tell where Lesa is because Lesa is inside them as they have eaten him.

Mpashi (1956) presents his material, *Pano Calo*, in 40 pages of artistic suspense. However, as can be seen from the narrative of the book, the text is dense with action and packed with themes that touch the core of human existence. Monogamy is practised in the Bemba traditions and polygamy is only reserved for the royalty. Even so, if there is an attempt at uncanny celebration of the aggrandisement of the noble vestiges of the Bemba royal traditions and their male philanderers, there is much contempt in the fading of the grip on that masculine royalty. Although the chief still has many

wives after the death of his wife, he is unable to continue exercising his sexual authority over Kampinda's wife. More poignantly, the chief surrenders his symbol of authority, the walking stick, to his purported slaves, the Cibulu family, who, unaware that they have always been innocent, become at one with the assailant.

Although it is difficult to imagine what the Cibulu family could have done if they had known that their child was innocent, the intrigue surrounding the surrender of authority to those we ill-treat when we have power only to be repaid with forgiveness encapsulates the power of reconciliation with a human being superior to us.

Ultimately, there is in this novel an intricate playing at the name of God and the concept of a free will all human beings possess. First, the Bemba name, Lesa, means God. Secondly, the oracle depicted in the conversation between the unborn child and the dead old man is symbolic of the story of creation. The eating of the little child, Lesa, typifies the early Catholic influence in the Bembaland of Zambia. This is to be expected, as Stephen Mpashi's writings are among the early signs of writing in the Zambian vernacular influenced by the Catholic White Fathers. Garvey writes:

In one respect Bembaland Catholics followed a stricter path than that of their co-religionists elsewhere and one that was not even in accord with the regulations of their church. The Chilubula Council decided that any Christian who becomes guilty of a serious but transitory sin ... will be deprived of holy communion and the superior of the mission decides to readmit to the sacrament.

(Garvey 1994: 106)

Given this perspective, it can be concluded that the ruling metaphor in eating Lesa (Eucharist) is the Catholic doctrine and not cannibalism among the Bembas as one might mistake such a practice in the present form of the story. In the section that follows a cursory view of *The Story of Doctor Dolittle* is given.

## **An Overview of *The Story of Doctor Dolittle***

Doctor John Dolittle is the main character of a series of children's books by Hugh Lofting. He is a doctor who shuns human patients in favour of animals with whom he can speak in their own languages in order for him to understand nature and the history of the world.

The stories are set in early Victorian England, where Doctor John Dolittle lives in the fictional village of Puddleby-on-the-Marsh in the West Country. Doctor Dolittle has a few close human friends as well, including Tommy Stubbins and Matthew Mugg, the Cats'-Meat Man. Among the animal friends are Polynesia (a parrot), Gub-Gub (a pig), Jip (a dog), Dab-Dab (a



duck), Chee-Chee (a monkey), Too-Too (an owl), the Pushmi-pullyu, and a white mouse later named Whitey.

To the extent that the human character in *Doctor Dolittle* is able to communicate with the animals, the material is more fictional than Kampinda's in *Pano Calo* who merely understands animal language.

### **Analogous Fictional Images between *Pano Calo* and *The Story of Doctor Dolittle***

One aspect that prefigures the potential parallels between *Pano Calo* and *The Story of Doctor Dolittle* is that the central character in *Doctor Dolittle*, John Dolittle, has the power of speaking to animals just like the main character, Kampinda in *Pano Calo* acquires the power to hear animals and insects.

In popular culture, Doctor Dolittle was referenced by the Red Hot Chili Peppers rock band in the song: Naked in the Rain from the album Blood Sugar Sex Magik. Parts of the lyrics go:

Naked in the rain  
 Doctor Dolittle what's your secret  
 Give it to me Doctor  
 Don't keep it

I never met an animal that I didn't like  
 You can come to me I won't bite  
 Don't you know dog is man's best friend  
 There is some love that you can't fight

Naked in the rain with black tattoos  
 Runnin' through the woods laughing at the blues

Implicit in the lyrics above is the seeming frigidity of the doctor. However, in *Pano Calo*, the image takes a different symbol just beyond sexual satisfaction and fantasy. We see Kampinda in the costume of the doctor (efficacious enough to hear what animals and insects say) who earns himself flogs for "laughing at the blues" and then "naked in the wild" refusing his wife (p. 25). The difference is that Kampinda's nudity is not veiled by the rain.

But what has made Kampinda a painfully impotent figure is his inability to do enough to prevent the butcher, Nkomamatwi, from hacking the dumb boy, Cibulu, to death. In merely retreating from taking part in striking Cibulu with all the potency he has to hear what the little bird says, he becomes Doctor Dolittle who *does too little* to make a difference. He wilfully castrates himself and succumbs to the Pontius Pilate conspiracy theory when he washed his hands to let the Jews crucify Jesus Christ. The differ-

ence is only that not much is known of the consequences that befell Pontius Pilate. For Kampinda, like all mortals in the line of the first Adam, there is a price to pay for the decisions we take in life as we aspire for survival in a world where destiny and fate should be challenged. In this respect, there is a strong appeal to every human being, through Kampinda, to subject his or her contribution to the betterment of humanity to integrity tests whether in political life, academic life, private life or indeed religious life.

Throughout the text, there is a collective understanding by the animals and insects that Kampinda happens to hear that humanity has an inferior brain when compared to the animals and the insects. This view runs contrary to the universal assumption of human beings who believe they are of a superior order which enables them to tame and domesticate wild animals. At the heart of the text then lies the all-too-important question of the superiority of what human beings claim to possess, namely conscience over animals' intuition. One dreaded question that should be posed is: What if human intelligence were in fact subservient to the very intuition that animals are deemed to possess? It is in pondering that question that we ought not to shy away from a twin question as a response to one literary scholar's assessment of the Zambian literary scene: What if postgraduate literary scholarship were inferior to literary art hardly acquired?

Therefore, in this and many other respects not considered here, the text provides a moral for each human being to ask the self about the texture of the part one plays on earth when one is availed an opportunity of responsibility.

To this end, if the noted zoologist and author, Richard Dawkins (2004), in *The Devil's Chaplain*, should regard Dolittle the childhood forerunner of his adult hero, Charles Darwin, Kampinda in *Pano Calo* should occupy a special place as humankind's Second Adam, for if Kampinda had evolved of the reptiles, mammals and insects he had been cast to live with, he would have been saved by the animals through Darwin's theory of evolution.

Thus what may have started as children's literature, has drawn the attention of some analysts who have accused the author of being racist due to his usage of derogatory terms that depict certain ethnic groups in both the text and the illustrations. For this reason, editions in the United States have sometimes had alterations made from the 1960s. To mark the centenary of Lofting's birth, new editions were published in 1986 which had passages that were thought to be in bad taste rewritten or removed (sometimes termed as "bowdlerisation"). In many instances, offending illustrations were either removed or altered.

The *Story of Doctor Dolittle* may have been acted in movies by many actors of note, but for the purpose of the present article, attention is drawn to the 1998 film, *Dr. Dolittle* and its 2001 sequel based on *The Story of Doctor Dolittle* which starred the African American film star, Eddie Murphy. Eddie Murphy has lived the life of Hollywood to its fullest through many of the



movies such as *Coming to America* based on the title *Coming to America: The Story of Immigration* by Betsy Maestro (1996) in which Murphy depicts the raw African masculine royalty in some crude fantasy. Apart from his modern steel looks of an African male, Murphy is comical and voluble in most of the characters he portrays. Actors like him have much to gain in coming to Africa and discovering the exact plot of what is depicted of Africa in stories such as *Doctor Dolittle*.

The use of the film and the song in modern-day popular culture in the developed world has helped to recast *The Story of Doctor Dolittle* in a more engaging light that goes beyond satirising racism. Such efforts can be replicated in African languages to revive the spirit of the African-language novel in Zambia and Africa in general.

## Conclusion

In this article, I have discussed *Pano Calo*, written by a Zambian Bemba writer by the name of Stephen Mpashi, to make the point that Zambian literary studies in the vernacular cross boundaries with respect to the themes, characterisation and the plot. I have made reference to previous literature that has tried to cast the Zambian literary scene in some light that suggests that the Zambian literary scene has not been developed to the required level largely because the writers have no postgraduate qualifications. I argue in this article that writing is an art and therefore it might not depend so much on skills acquired at postgraduate level. In the end, by showcasing Mpashi's work, I hope that renewed interest will be generated in the African-language novel. The Zambian society may have been portrayed as a society that is preoccupied with urbanisation or consumed with the pursuit of modernisation epitomised by the Copperbelt. Although the material utilised in this article was written before Zambia's independence in 1964, the material pretty much gives a fair sense of assessment of the Bemba rural society of the modern-day Zambia. In the Bemba society, life revolves around cultivation (cutting of trees) in the deep forests of Chatwala Ensa. It remains largely a cashless society where pride is measured not by government donations but by one's intercourse with nature. Hollywood, "Nollywood" and "Bollywood" actors in search of the original African material should look at this contribution as a sample of what still remains in pristine state in Zambia and Africa at large for the film industry.

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