THE 'MUTUMWA' CHURCHES OF ZAMBIA: AN INDIGENOUS AFRICAN RELIGIOUS HEALING MOVEMENT*

BY

CLIVE DILLON-MALONE

(University of Zambia, Lusaka, Zambia)

The widespread emergence of indigenous African religious movements in Africa since the beginning of the twentieth century is a phenomenon which has received, and continues to receive much attention from scholars in many fields ever since the appearance in 1948 of Sundkler's seminal work entitled Bantu Prophets in South Africa, followed twenty years later by Barrett's more comprehensive Schism and Renewal in Africa.1 Zambia has been no exception with regard to such religious movements, although relatively few have received the attention which they deserve among the peoples of Zambia.2 Apart from their widespread presence in the rural areas, one has only to move about the numerous townships of Lusaka, Zambia's capital, or the densely populated Copperbelt district to become quickly aware of the extraordinary proliferation of such religious bodies flourishing side by side.3 Many draw attention to themselves on weekends in particular by their display of a wide variety of forms of religious dress as well as by their enthusiastic singing. On the other hand, their use of restricted outdoor spaces, small rooms or simple backyard shelters for prayer meetings in place of more conspicuous church buildings often conceals the widespread extent of their presence and activity.4

At the office of the Registrar of Societies in Lusaka, in addition to the more well-known established churches, there are two lists of

* The writer is presently in the process of completing a book on the Mutumwa churches of Zambia. Research for this article was carried out over a period of fifteen months during which time contact was established with Mutumwa centres in the following places: Lusaka (Mutendere, Matero, George Compound, John Lenje); Satellite Station, Kabwe; Ndola (Lubuto, Kabushi, Masala, Chipulukusu, Sinia, Kawama, Chifubu); Luanshya, Kitwe (Bulangililo, Chimwemwe); Chingola, Mufulira.
churches which fall under the headings of ‘minor churches’ and ‘other exempt churches’ respectively.\(^6\) These together number from between fifty to a hundred, although little is known about most of them. Many are relatively recent in terms of formal registration, and more especially since national independence in 1964, whereas their origin and effective presence usually dates back to a much earlier period. Precise information concerning membership of such religious bodies is usually difficult to determine but their growth, extent and appeal for large numbers is indicative of a significant socio-cultural religious need to which they are responding. While becoming more formally recognized in the peri-urban areas, their origins can frequently be traced to the rural areas where they continue to flourish, in addition to their more recent presence in the urban townships. Indeed, while the forms which such movements take will vary in response to socio-cultural and economico-political change and the emergence of new problems and needs, one is well advised to search for basic roots in continuity with traditional African indigenous religious systems.\(^6\)

The Mutumwa Churches as a Movement

The Mutumwa churches are identified as a movement not only because a variety of distinct medico-religious bodies acknowledge the title of Mutumwa and a similar inspirational source, but also because their impact has crossed ethnic barriers. Originating in the early 1930s among the Tumbuka- and Namwanga-speaking peoples of the Isoka district of north-eastern Zambia, the Mutumwa churches have today extended their influence westwards and southwards among the Bemba-, Nyanja- and Tonga-speaking peoples of Zambia. They are formally registered as having an official local presence in forty-three branches throughout the Copperbelt province and an additional twenty other branches throughout the eastern, northern and central provinces.\(^7\) While also present in the western and southern provinces, their influence is so far much less in evidence there, although signs of their growing spread in these areas is increasing.\(^8\) It should be noted that formal registration of the locations of Mutumwa churches in Zambia is by no means co-extensive with their far wider presence and activity. Furthermore, dates of formal registration\(^9\) and the fulfilment of official stereotyped requirements demanded in registration forms