WOMEN’S REVOLT: THE LUMPA CHURCH OF LENSHINA MULENGA IN THE 1950s

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Introduction

One September morning of the year 1953 in a village called Kasomo about five miles from Chinsali a young woman was found in a deep coma after an attack of cerebral malaria. Following her birth in 1920 she had been given the traditional name of Mulenga after a Bemba deity and, on coming of age, she had chosen the name of Lenshina, the local pronunciation of the Latin word Regina (Queen). She belonged to a minor house (nganda) of the polygamous Lubusha Kasaka, who, after service as a soldier during World War I, had become a Messenger for the local administration. As a son of the junior chief Mukwikile he belonged to the royal Bena Ngandu family. It was said, however, that because of his promiscuous exploits the children of his households suffered chronic poverty and neglect.¹

The people of the village regarded Lenshina as near to death and prepared themselves for a burial. But after a few days she slowly regained consciousness and to everybody’s surprise claimed to have met the saviour Jesus Christ, who had sent her back to earth with a special message and a new commitment. As a sign of her vocation she began to compose beautiful hymns according to traditional modalities.

Lenshina’s spiritual experience and her subsequent baptism at the Presbyterian mission of nearby Lubwa initiated a welcome movement of revival, favourably ministered to both by the residing missionary, the Rev. Fergus McFerguson and the church-elders.²

However, within the time-span of two years the revival and its strident call to repentance was not only taken by some of the adherents as a witchcraft eradication movement, but had also established itself as an independent Church, called Lumpa (to be
superior) in opposition to the mission churches and the colonial administration.

In the years that followed the bloody clashes between Lumpa and U.N.I.P. supporters, it was generally accepted by both sides that the Church’s aggressiveness against the establishment had been caused by those who had used the movement as a useful vehicle for their political ends.

They had been the Prophetess’s lieutenants called Badikoni (Deacons). Some had betrayed her by joining the national party, others had stayed till the end but had driven the more simple adherents, many of them women and children, towards suicide and the fateful trek into neighbouring Zaire.

Lenshina herself was hardly blamed for what took place from the beginning of the 1960s onwards. As proof of her innocence it was pointed out by the people that even Dr. K. Kaunda, who originally had wanted her ‘Dead or alive’ never called for her to be tried in Court. The Prophetess denied any involvement with the ‘political’ disturbances and blamed some of her young men for the bloodshed. She expressed this during a short but pregnant interview a few months before her death:

*Tabatesheshe ifunde lyandi*
*Ukucila abalumendo abapula mafunde*
*Fimapolitiks fyabo fyalifulishishe*

(They did not understand my teaching
In particular the immoral young men
They were too much occupied with politics.)

She looked back with a certain nostalgia to the first phase of her apostolic life when all she did was to compose new hymns for her fellow Christians.

There is ample evidence of the fact that Lenshina’s religious and cultural revival was soon carried forward by the political aspirations of her contemporaries. Lubwa’s mission education had imbued its pupils with the values of individual freedom and self-reliance. Members of well-known Protestant families, like the Kaundas, the Kapwepwes, the Makasas etc. became enthusiastic adherents of Lenshina’s movement. In 1955 and 1956, it was reported to the administration that the A.N.C. used Lumpa’s mud and pole churches as a means to spread the political message of civil disobedience.