

TONGA RELIGIOUS LIFE
IN THE
TWENTIETH CENTURY

Elizabeth Colson

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PREFACE

My involvement in Tonga life stems from 1946 when I arrived in what was then Northern Rhodesia as a new research officer of the Rhodes-Livingstone Institute assigned to work among the Plateau Tonga. By then they had been influenced by Christian missionaries for half a century. However, appeals for rain continued to be made at some communal shrines and many Tonga continued to make offerings to the ancestors and rely upon them for protection. In 1949 I paid my first visit to Gwembe Valley, where mission influence was still minimal, except for some neighbourhoods in Mweemba Chieftaincy in Gwembe South. I began long-term research in Gwembe in 1956, returning at regular intervals throughout the rest of the century. My last visit was in 2005. Meantime, in 1964 colonial rule ended and Northern Rhodesia became the independent country Zambia.

Some of those I knew in the 1940s and 1950s were adult by 1890 and held vivid memories of Ndebele and Lozi raids in which a number of their fellow Tonga had been taken captive. Their parents had watched David Livingstone encamped near their villages on his 1856 trek across the Plateau en route to the mouth of the Zambezi River or on his 1862 trek up the Zambezi. They remembered songs commenting on early encounters with other Europeans such as Frederick Selous. They had experienced the arrival of colonial administrators, traders, missionaries and European and Indian settlers. A few of them saw the end of colonial rule in 1964. I have drawn on their experience and the experience of their children, grandchildren, and great grandchildren who in turn have dealt with the flux of change which has been their lives. All this provides the basis for my understanding of what I call Tonga religious experience, which involves a search for understanding and reassurance in a chaotic world.

This book has been long in the making. A first draft of much of it was written in 1981-82 and made available to those teaching religious studies at the University of Zambia and to other concerned scholars. Subsequently it has been revised and expanded after each return to Zambia. In the 1990s a rich source of information became available in daily diaries kept by Gwembe village assistants. These illuminate current practice and belief. Despite the very obvious influences of Christianity

in the diaries and in what I have seen and heard during my recent visits, much of what I wrote in 1981 remains essentially sound in 2006, at least with respect to basic orientations. I have cited only a tiny portion of the many references to religious practices and to experiences with witchcraft contained in the diaries or field notes, but they lie behind my generalizations. Some diaries are kept in English, others in ciTonga. I am responsible for translating the latter into English. When the diaries are cited verbatim at any length, whether the original text or the translated text, I have placed the material as indented passages. This is done to avoid interrupting the flow of the argument while at the same time giving some indication of the richness of the ethnographic record on which this account rests.

In 1946-47 and 1948-50 I worked among Tonga-speakers of the Zambian Plateau, in what was then Mazabuka District but is now divided among Choma, Monze, and Mazabuka Districts. I also spent one month in 1949 in Chibbwe neighbourhood on the Zambezi River, in Chipepo Chieftaincy in Gwembe Valley. On returning to Zambia in the years after 1950, I have tried to visit Plateau villages where I worked in the 1940s and have talked with old friends including some settled in towns and cities. This gives me a sense of continuities and innovations among the people of the Plateau. I have also drawn on recent books in ciTonga on various aspects of Plateau Tonga culture (community shrines, birth, death, etc) published by Mukanzubo Cultural Research Institute, and on the excellent unpublished Master's Thesis on Plateau Tonga rain shrines written by Mr. Emmerson Machila (submitted to the History Department, University of Zambia, 1990). This is based on interviews and observation at appeals for rain held at various shrines in 1987. I also benefitted from Bonnie Keller's 1977 research on Tonga women settled in the town of Mazabuka.

My deepest involvement since 1956 has been with the people of the Gwembe Valley, in what was then Gwembe District but, since the beginning of the 1990s, has been divided into the Districts of Siavonga, Gwembe and Sinazongwe. These coincide with the different regions which I and my colleague Thayer Scudder have called Gwembe North, Gwembe Central, and Gwembe South. It is convenient here to continue to so designate the different parts of the valley since

their residents continue to be known as Gwembe people though not all are Tonga-speaking. Scudder and I began work in Gwembe in 1956-57. Subsequently, either one or both of us have been in Gwembe in 1960, 1962-63, 1967, 1968, 1971, 1972-73, 1977, 1978, 1981-82, 1984, 1987, 1989, 1992, 1994, 1995, 1996, 1997, 1998, 1999, 2000, 2001, 2003, 2004, 2005. Scudder and Colson (1979 and 2002) and Cliggett (2002) describe the on-going longitudinal Gwembe study. In each of the four Plateau and seven Gwembe villages (in Gwembe North, South and Central) in which I have lived, I stayed in homesteads under the protection and close surveillance of their inhabitants, but my role and my involvement changed over the years as I aged from a young woman eager to learn to an old woman expected to know. I have been present on many ritual occasions – consultations with spirit mediums, divinations, appeals for rain, harvest celebrations, funerals, girls' puberty celebrations, offerings to ancestral spirits, church services, etc., and have been party to both formal and informal discussions with old and young on matters of belief and action, and paid careful attention to changes in vocabulary. Because of long absences between visits my *ci-Tonga* is not good enough to be relied upon on all occasions, especially since different regions use different dialects, but it is fluent enough for me to follow many discussions, especially when I know the people well. But when I need help, I ask for it. This is available from those who have learned my linguistic limitations and are able to rephrase until I understand, and from the increasing number of those who speak English which is the official language of Zambia.

I have had access to Thayer Scudder's field notes and to Lisa Cliggett's 1994-95 field notes as well as to diaries kept by research assistants, often covering periods when I was absent. The writers include Benjamin Shipopa, Senete Adam Sikagoma, Benard Siakanomba, Hastings Banda Simalabali, Benard Simalabali, Christopher Nkiwani, Stanard Sialenga, Paul Siamwinga, Bunyika Chibilika, Jelena Chasomba, Mary Mujimba, Shadrach Siajebu, Willy Drivus Chikuni, Chester Nditwa and Ward Siakapaulu. Others who have worked with me as research assistants include Chibilika Cri, Kashente Chifumpu, Ivan Siangoloma Siamwinga, Doctor Simankawa, and Johnson Simukwe. I have referred to them by name when citing their diary entries. Otherwise I have not referred to

individuals mentioned in the text under their own names, except for two well-known *basangu* mediums and several elders.

I have gained much from discussions with other scholars who have worked for a time in the same neighborhoods where Scudder and I have worked intensively and who have helped to carry forward the Gwembe longitudinal study. These include Mary Eliza Scudder (1962-63, 1972-73, 1981-82), Jonathan Habarad (August 1987-December 1988), Carlos and Sarah Madrid (1991, 1992), Sam Clark (1991, 1994, 1995, 1996, 1997), Rhonda Gillett-Netting (1993, 1997), and Lisa Cliggett (1994-1995, 1996, 1997, 1998). In addition I have been able to draw upon the work of Ute and Ulrich Luig who, from a base in Sinazeze, carried out research on Tonga religious life in Gwembe South in 1987-1989 with return visits thereafter; Timothy Matthews whose unpublished PhD dissertation is a history of the peoples of Gwembe Valley; Bennet Siamwiza whose Masters Thesis in the Department of History, University of Zambia, comprised an intensive study of hunger in Mwemba Chieftaincy in Gwembe South, Jan Karl Hofer, who kindly sent me an English summary of his study of values and life goals of adolescents in Zambia, based in part on his 1997 interviews in Gwembe South; and a number of scholars who have worked with Tonga-speakers in Zimbabwe (Weinrich, P. Reynolds, Schuthof & Boerenkamp, and Macgregor). Anya Royce and Thayer Scudder read and commented on the book in draft and I have gained much from their critiques.

Field research was supported through 1963 by the Rhodes-Livingstone Institute, (later known as the Institute for African Studies of the University of Zambia, and now the Institute for Economic and Social Research) initially under a grant obtained by its then director, Max Gluckman, from the Colonial Development and Welfare Fund. Henry Fosbrooke, the director in 1955 at the time the decision was made to build Kariba Dam and flood much of Gwembe Tonga territory, obtained funding for Scudder's and my research in Gwembe Valley through 1963. Thereafter work has been supported by a number of sources: the Joint Committee on Africa of the Social Science Research Council and the American Council of Learned Societies, the National Science Foundation, and (for Scudder) FAO and the John Guggenheim Foundation. The University of California, Berkeley and the California Institutes of Technology helped to finance data analysis. Scudder and I have also used our own funds on occasion both to finance

revisits and to pay research assistants. We have continued to share field notes, discuss findings, and read and comment on manuscripts.

The Institute under its various names has continued to provide me with a base in Lusaka and affiliation to its university. Ilse Mwansa, the former University Affiliation Officer, has been an invaluable friend as she has to many others who have carried out research in Zambia. The Jesuit fathers at Chikuni Mission on the Plateau, the Gossner Team in Gwembe South, the priests and Sisters of Charity at Lusitu Mission in Gwembe North, and especially Sister Fabiola Thomas now stationed in Chirundu, have been supportive through the years. I have had the good fortune to enjoy the hospitality of two generations of the Savory family of the Moorings Farm, Monze, who have put up with inconvenient arrivals, repaired vehicles, stored equipment, and done more than friendship has the right to expect, as well as the friendship and support of the Chona family. Many district officials over the years have given access to district records, answered questions, and tolerated my presence. Father Edwin Flynn and Dr. Brendan Carmody of the Centre for Religious Studies at the University of Zambia and Dr. Alan Haworth of the University Medical School have shared my interest in Tonga religion and provided invaluable comment. Dr. Frank Waffer, founder of Mukanzubo Cultural Research Institute, based at Chikuni Mission, that sponsors the development of a ci-Tonga literature, and Yvonne Ndaba, also of Mukanzubo, have shared their knowledge of ci-Tonga and shown me that more continuity exists between the life I knew on the Plateau in the 1940s and the present than I had expected. Suzanne Calpestre of the George and Mary Foster Anthropology Library, University of California, Berkeley gave bibliographical assistance. I also thank Fay Gadsden of Bookworld Publishers for her editorial work and encouragement.

But my greatest debt is to Tonga men, women and children who patiently, and sometimes impatiently, accepted my presence at rituals and other gatherings, answered questions, questioned me, and demonstrated in action the values by which they live. I am especially indebted to Chiefs Chona, Mwanza, Monze and Mwanachingwala, and to the people of Mujika, Nampeyo, Katimba and Mwanachingwala neighbourhoods, all on the Plateau, and to Chiefs Chipepo and Mwemba and the people of Miyaka, Mpwe, Chezia, Chibbwe,

Kanchindu, Simankawa and Siameja neighborhoods within Gwembe Valley. It is in their villages that I have lived and it is their perspectives that permeate my understanding of Tonga religious thought and action.