ROOT WORK JOURNAL
SUMMONING FLIGHT: NAVIGATING BLACK MYTHOLOGY, FLIGHT, AND ACTS OF REFUSAL, VOL 2, ISS 1

UKUPUPUKA:TRANSCENDENCE, FLIGHT AND INCULTURATION IN ZAMBIAN DEVOTIONAL ARTWORK

Aaron Samuel Mulenga

amulenga@ucsc.edu

This paper seeks to interrogate the tensions and overlaps in various representations of transcendence that have shaped my spirituality by interrogating how these have featured in Eurocentric Christian iconography and Zambian cultural practices, particularly cultural artefacts used for spiritual flight, housed in Zambian museums. Transcendence is understood by some as a change in a person's physiological or psychological state that allows them to go beyond their experience of time, place or being. I understand transcendence to be the moment that one's spirit is elevated beyond the limitations of their physical body. The use of Biblical text relating to flight will also be discussed as a comparative study to explore how transcendence through flight operates within Christianity and a Zambian cultural context. This paper also explores how the work of an artist in Zambia is grappling with concepts of representation of black people in Christian iconography.

Aaron is a Visual Studies Ph.D. student at the University of California, Santa Cruz. His area of study includes contemporary art of Africa, post-colonial theory and the roles that museums play in shaping cultural narratives. Mulenga is a multi-disciplined artist with a keen interest in sculptural forms and installation. Mulenga uses his art practice to inform aspects of his doctoral research process.

DOI: https://doi.org/10.47106/12577293

Citation: Mulenga, A. S. (2022). Ukupupuka: Transcendence, Flight and Inculturation in Zambian Devotional Artwork. Root Work Journal, 2(1). https://doi.org/10.47106/12577293

As far back as I can remember, the concept of transcendence has always fascinated me. I am perplexed by how a person can conduct supernatural feats such as walking on water, calling fire down from the sky or making it rain even during times of drought. These are stories I read about in the Bible or heard as a child growing up. Aside from reading Bible stories, I enjoyed copying images to draw from our family's huge, illustrated Bible that my grandfather gifted my mother. This Bible is one of the first references I recall of Christian iconography. At the time, I only saw those images as pictures, which related to stories I had read or was taught in church. Only when I grew older did I realise that none of the images in this Bible looked like my family and me; they all looked white. Slowly, I began to question the representation of these biblical characters and whether or not there was room to depict black people in Christian artwork; and if there was, how would such depictions appear?

When I looked more closely at the lack of representation of black people in this Bible, I realised that this lack of representation is something I have come across in the depiction of Christian iconographic artwork in a number of Catholic churches in Zambia (my country of origin and the location of my study). I chose to focus my study on the Catholic Church in Zambia because my first encounter with Christian iconographic art came from the church. For the most part, the representation of Christian iconography (in Zambia) has predominantly maintained a Eurocentric depiction (i.e., most of its imagery appearing white). I believe it is essential to address subtle forms of regression, such as the lack of representation of black people in Christian iconography in the church. I am particularly interested in the work that must be done to represent more black people in Christian iconographic art in Zambia.

A metaphor that resonates with the concept of transcendence for me is that of elevation or more accurately, flight. I am interested in the idea of flying because it conveys weightlessness and rising above the limitations placed before an individual. In Christianity how have people used the power of the Holy Spirit to fly, and in contrast how have people in Zambia achieved flight through the spiritual objects they have crafted? Lusaka Museum ethnographer, Esther Banda (personal communication, 2019), narrated to me during an interview that culturally in Zambia, flight is performed in secret (and mostly at night); usually, only those that engage in this form of flight would be able to explain the mechanics behind it. Alternatively, an individual who may have been a former practitioner may also elucidate on how to achieve flight; however, this practice is shrouded in mystery and perceived as a practice of witchcraft (Esther Banda, personal communication, 2019). In this paper, I question whether flight (in these two forms) can be understood as a way of transcendence, allowing individuals to find their space of belonging and fulfilment. Finally, I will interrogate iconographic images found in the Catholic Church that depict flight, and question how such images can function as tools to represent transcendence for the benefit of the church congregants.

Transcendence is a concept that has been extensively discussed by scholars in various academic disciplines. To bring clarity to my argument, I shall use Rebecca Sager's definition of the concept as one of my main reference points in this paper. Sager (2012: 27) defines transcendence as "a change in a person's physiological or psychological state that engenders an awareness or sensation of going beyond one's usual experience of time, place or being." Paul Levesque in Symbols of Transcendence unpacks the writings of his predecessor Louis Dupré's work on transcendence. Levesque (1997:1) explores the importance of symbols and their use in the expression of religious understanding. He uses art to explain how aesthetic images are used constantly to express religious experiences; one can think of images found in churches that play this role. Levesque believes that transcendence is essential for religion; it takes on various meanings depending on its context. He also believes that transcendence is made manifest through faith; a belief that aligns with the theories of Professor Svein Christoffersen. He states that transcendence is a means of connecting humans to the divine (i.e. God) by associating transcendent experiences with experiences of divinity. Christoffersen (2015: 21) defines transcendence as "man's ability to go beyond the form of existence he has, at a given time in his life, and thus, go beyond his own limits, physically or psychologically."

Christoffersen questions whether a sensory experience such as one brought about through art in its various forms (literature, drama, music, visual art, and architecture) can cause an individual to experience transcendence. I believe that transcendence can indeed be brought about through the arts, and as my focus is on visual arts, I explore how this could be achieved by using a number of visual objects as examples. The ability to transcend is not limited to Christianity, one can see this concept utilised in Zambian culture practices. In Zambia, some people are thought to have the ability to create flying objects that fly through spiritual means. This process allows them access to a state of transcendence by going beyond their physical limitations. Using Christoffersen's understanding of transcendence, I believe a sensory experience that goes beyond a modern understanding of flight takes place for the users of such objects. Similarly, when one reads Bible stories where flight is depicted, a form of transcendence takes place as individuals are able to go beyond physical limitations through the power of the Holy Spirit. The main difference between the biblical stories and those within a Zambian context is that the Bible explicitly highlights the power of God through the Holy Spirit as the mechanism to attain flight. Whereas it is unclear to lay people what powers are used in a Zambian cultural context to achieve flight.

Acts 8:26 – 40 (Holy Bible, 2011) narrates the story of Philip and his encounter with an Ethiopian eunuch to whom he preached the gospel of Jesus Christ and baptised. After baptising the eunuch Philip disappears/takes flight to another region; the Bible reveals, "39 When they came up out of the water, the spirit of the Lord snatched Philip away. The eunuch never saw him again… 40 Philip, however, appeared at Azotus and travelled about, preaching the gospel in all the towns until he reached Caesarea."

Weissenrieder (2014) describes Philip as "an object led by the Spirit" pointing out that it was through the intervention of the Spirit that Philip met with the Ethiopian eunuch. This goes to show that for transcendence through flight to take place (in Christianity) there must be a willing vessel (object) that the Spirit of God can work through. In most instances where flight has taken place in the Bible, there seems to be a purpose attached to it. For instance, Philip spoke to the eunuch about Jesus, thereafter he baptized and converted him into Christianity. It appears as though Philip was ministering the gospel to various people when the Holy Spirit gave him the power to fly in order to expedite this mission across a broader region. However, it is comforting to know that Christians should not considered this practice off-limits as it is made possible through the power of the Holy Spirit. This is significant for me because in Zambia, when people speak about flight through spiritual means, they refer to it as witchcraft. In turn, this has made it difficult to imagine or speak about flight through an alternative framework.

Flight has also been depicted through Christian artwork. The first place I recall actively engaging with Christian art was in our family Bible, where most of the illustrations I saw of flight were focused on Jesus' ascension into heaven. In Luke 24:51 (Holy Bible, 2011), we are told of Jesus' dramatic exit from earth into heaven after his resurrection. Andreas H. Hunnaeus depicts this moment in a painting entitled The Ascension (Fig. 1).

Fig. 1. Andreas H. Hunnaeus, *Ascension* (no date), oil on canvas, Aagerup Church, Denmark. (Published in C.D. Stampley Bible, 1976)

In this painting, Christ appears to be floating on the clouds with an angel on either side of him, while his disciples and other bystanders below look up at him in awe. The image of Christ and the angels appear as white individuals. I take note of their race because, in our family Bible (where this image is from), most, if not all, the individuals depicted are fair-skinned or have seemingly white features: which is very similar to the depictions I encountered in most of the Catholic churches I visited in Zambia.

According to Christoffersen (2015: 195), John of Damascus (in the Byzantine era) believed that "through the icon [a devotional painting of a holy figure], believers moved into dimensions of the holy space and holy time, in living contact with the person or mystery depicted." In his statement, John highlights his belief in the importance of the icons to connect believers with the supernatural. Through icons (such as the one of Christ above), individuals have the opportunity to connect with the supernatural and envision themselves in a similar state. This makes the possibility of transcendence through flight more tangible for them through visual imagery.

As I explore transcendence through flight using a Zambian cultural lens, I have come across several stories where people are believed to have flown on spiritual objects they designed and operated through mystical powers or "witchcraft" as it is often called. I hope to shed light on flight as a cultural practice in Zambia to demystify what it entails. However, this may prove challenging, as most people are not forthcoming with information on this topic. The secretive nature of this type of flight and its attribution to witchcraft are limiting factors that cause people not to speak freely about it. As a Christian nation, witchcraft in Zambia is labelled as evil, and its practitioners may be ostracized from their communities or imprisoned if they are caught engaging in it. I believe transcendence is taking place in both instances of flight (through the Spirit of God and through the Zambian spiritual object.) This is because as Sager states, a physiological change occurs in the individual's experience of time and place.

Anthropologist Katerina Mildnerová (2010: 20) describes the spiritual objects used for flight in Zambia as advanced magical technology used by "progressive" witches to reach remote areas during night attacks. The association of "attacks" that Mildnerová places on these flying objects connotes something malevolent and maintains the sinister association most people have of these objects. For my research, I visited the Lusaka, Ndola, and Livingstone Museums in Zambia. During my visit to the Livingstone and Lusaka Museums, I learnt that most of the flying objects serve multiple purposes. For instance, aside from flight an "aeroplane" (the label given to these objects in the museum) can also be used for spiritual protection against one's enemies.

These objects have the power to cause harm to those that may oppose their user, narrated Esther Banda (personal conversation, 2018) the Lusaka Museum's ethnographer. She informed me that for the objects to be safe for display in the museum, a witchfinder had to deactivate them of their powers. In Fig. 2a, the label of one of the "aeroplanes" in the Livingstone museum states that the object was used to cause death through pneumonia by biting into the chest of its victim and depositing poison (this is aside from its ability to fly). Though it may be difficult to authenticate these claims, it is important to consider people's lived experiences. These include people's claims of first-hand encounters with forces they attribute to witchcraft.

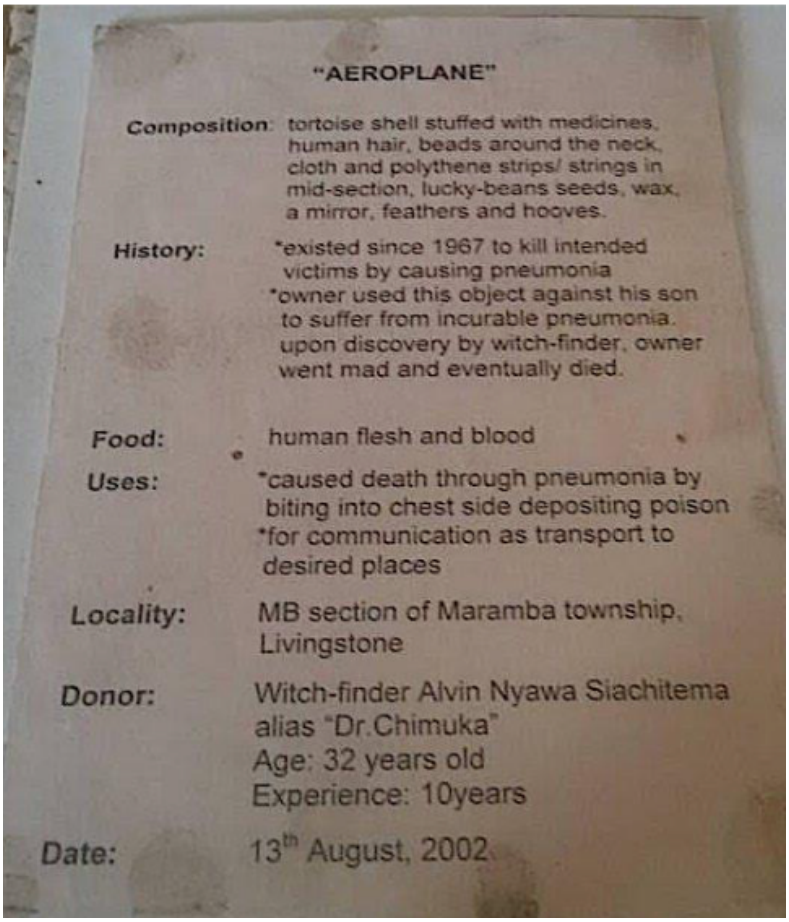

Fig. 2a. Livingstone Museum label of an 'Aeroplane' with its description below. Photo courtesy Aaron S. Mulenga (2018)

One of the challenges I faced while conducting my research in the museums was a lack of up-to-date information. Some artefacts on display (or in storage at the Livingstone Museum) were not labelled or had insufficient information about the object to piece together what they were used for. This challenge made it difficult to gather sufficient information on the "aeroplanes" I was researching. In turn, it has revealed the need for more data to be collected on the processes involved in creating these objects to the point when they are flown.

The objects used for flight ("aeroplanes") vary in material composition. Having had a closer look at one, I shall describe what I saw. Fig. 2b, (which corresponds with the label in Fig 2a) is located in the Livingstone Museum. It is made of a tortoise shell partly covered in human hair and wax. The object is wrapped with chitenge on its side, and a rod mimicking the tortoise's neck is covered in what appears to be wax and beads. Two seeds sit where eyes would have been, while what looks like a human tooth is fixed on top of where the tortoise's mouth would be. An oval mirror is placed on its back, and some form of medicine would have been placed inside the object (supposedly to enable it to work). The mirror is believed to "represent the 'other world' inhabited by the spirits of the dead, who can peer through and see potential enemies", according to scholar Shawnya Harris (2015). Harris's explanation of the mirror was in reference to a spiritual object called an nkisi nkondi that has similar properties (and to some degree a similar function) to this "aeroplane". The nkisi nkondi also uses the mirror in a similar way by connecting the material object to the spirit world. Further research to uncover the meaning behind the other components on the aeroplane must be conducted.

African print or traditional fabric used in Zambia

Fig. 2b. Aeroplane (2002). Mixed material (tortoise shell, human hair, wax, beads, chitenge, tooth, and mirror), Livingstone Museum. Photo courtesy of Aaron S. Mulenga (2018)

It is commonly believed in Zambia that for these objects to fly human blood must be used as fuel. The blood is obtained from an individual sacrificed (killed) for this purpose. George Mudenda (personal communication, 2018), director of the Livingstone Museum, confirmed this belief by adding that aside from blood, human fat or bone marrow can also be used to fuel these "aeroplanes".

In Zambia there are many stories of witchcraft that it becomes challenging to sift the truth from a fabrication. Journalist Charles Chisala (2018) in the Zambia Daily Mail newspaper narrates the story of a 75-year-old woman who was on a mission to murder a witchfinder, when something went wrong mid- flight and she fell to the ground off the Puku horn ("aeroplane") that she and her accomplices were flying. She was taken to the Ndola Central hospital and admitted for a fractured hip after her fall. Once released from the hospital, she was taken into police custody and charged for admitting to the practice of witchcraft. Such stories are commonplace and may add to the stigma attached to people who are accused of being witches. Most witchcraft stories are unfortunately connected with murder or the intention to murder. In 2018 a UNESCO grant of $340, 000 given to the University of Zambia to study intangible cultural heritage, a course was introduced for students to study and learn about witchcraft (Lusaka Times: 2018).

The course is directed at studying all intangible culture, of which witchcraft is simply one component. I believe studies of this nature could help to demystify what witchcraft is. Hopefully, through avenues like academia, new ways of interacting with such subject matter can be created. This may, in turn, shed light on why people choose to engage in certain spiritual practices such as flight, and allow for studies to be conducted, not from a place of fear but rather with the aim of learning. I would argue that due to a number of cultural practices being labelled as evil or taboo, there has been a lack of engagement with these practices, making it difficult to learn how they happen.

Journalist Heidi Holland in her book African Magic, also stresses the importance of contextualizing practices and being careful not to dismiss or mislabel what is perceived as foreign or does not fall under a Eurocentric knowledge system. Speaking about the absurdity of the negative labels placed on people's spiritual beliefs Holland (2001:1) states "Roman Catholics, who think nothing of gaining spiritual strength by symbolically eating the body and drinking the blood of Christ, will be astonished at the African who immunizes himself against evil by rubbing lion's fat into his skin." Her intention is to challenge the ways we perceive spiritual practices that are different from what is perceived as the norm. In the same way, I believe it is necessary to question labels such as "witchcraft" and the function they play and what connotations such labels carry.

Cultural theorist, Stuart Hall (1997:15) speaks about representation as "an essential part of the process by which meaning is produced and exchanged between members of a culture. It does involve the use of language, signs and images, which stand for or represent things." In this regard, images used to represent the Christian faith in Zambia must also be in alignment with the people and culture of the country. The Marian Shrine, a Catholic parish in Lusaka, Zambia, established in 1974 houses images of Jesus and the saints depicted as black people. Laurence Yombwe, a Zambian painter is one of the artists whose work is present in the Marian Shrine. He visually reinterprets the message of the gospel and its relevance to a Zambian audience by allowing the viewer to see that the shift in the images used to represent Christian iconography is not only about changing skin color, but also involves the infusion of cultural narratives that resonate with a local Zambian audience. This reinterpretation lets local Zambians engage with Christian iconography in a manner that affords them the opportunity to find a place of belonging and fulfilment in the Christian narrative.

The concept of looking is linked to the concept of representation in Christian iconography; that is to say, if there are going to be icons, then they must be engaged with visually. I surmise that images and objects inherently possess power, which is why, in the past, I felt disillusioned when I saw many Christian icons that did not visually represent black people. Cultural theorist, bell hooks (1996: 247) states that "there is power in looking", she analyses how looking can be a political tool. hooks' text on The Oppositional Gaze: Black Female Spectators, examines the concept of looking, as she argues the importance for black women (and black people by extension) to be imaged in a positive light and afforded the right to look in a manner that does not render them powerless, either through omission or by being imaged as subservient.

hooks (1996: 260) states that "Those black women whose identities were constructed in resistance, by practices that opposed the dominant order, were most inclined to develop an oppositional gaze." For her, some of the practices that are needed to oppose the dominant order come with looking critically, as opposed to accepting everything that one sees as factual or mere entertainment. I believe this form of critical viewership can extend beyond cinema and television (which was the focus of her argument) to images that an individual looks at within the context of art, such as those found within the Catholic Church. hooks (1996: 261) further elaborates on the role of criticality by asserting, "We do more than just resist. We create alternative texts that are not solely reactions.

As critical spectators, black women participate in a broad range of looking relations, contest, resist, revise, interrogate and invent on multiple levels." hooks is showing that looking critically, must allow for a creation of something new. The benefit of the oppositional gaze is that it has the potential to shift reality. hooks (2003: 248) states that "by courageously looking, we defiantly declare: Not only will I stare. I want my look to change reality." I believe it is through such defiance that indeed, reality can change. When I take for instance the artwork of Laurence Yombwe in the Marian Shrine, his work utilises the oppositional gaze by shifting the depiction of the icons found in the church so that they better represent the local people. In shifting these representations and through the oppositional gaze transcendence begins to take place because, as Sager (2002) states, "transcendence is a change in a person's psychological or physiological state that produces an awareness or sensation of going beyond one's usual experience."

Yombwe, through his depictions, allows for the local population to engage in this process of transcendence by being represented in images of the divine. He also provides an alternative way of seeing and representing Christian iconography. Yombwe's painting African Saints in Heaven (Fig. 3), displays how a shift in the depiction of Jesus and the saints can positively affect the representation of Zambian cultural beliefs in Christianity. This painting depicts how transcendence through flight can materialise, as it shows Jesus ascending into heaven. I believe this artwork asks viewers to consider how cohesion and integration can take place during worship and how to view culture and faith as integrated rather than opposing entities.

Fig. 3. Laurence Yombwe, *African Saints in Heaven* (2010), mural in oil, Marian Shrine, Lusaka, Zambia. Photo Courtesy Aaron S. Mulenga(2018)

St. C. Lwanga

St. Augustine

St. Catherine

Close up view of the names of the saints depicted in the artwork.

In African Saints in Heaven, one can see Mary (the mother of Jesus) and a handful of saints surrounding Jesus in adoration as he ascends further into heaven. A look at the names of the saints shows the artist paying homage to Zambian priests such as St C. Lwanga, while the other saints are recognizable from the Christian canon, such as St Augustine. Each of the saints is dressed in robes and positioned in adoration of Jesus. Saint Catherine plays a trumpet, while Saint Lwanga plays a traditional Zambian drum, similar to those that would have been used in traditional ceremonies. Yombwe deliberately paints some of the saints as black, and others white because although he is choosing to shift the representation of Christian art; he appears to leave room for the representation of white individuals in his work. This may show the need for an ongoing dialogue between white and black people on how they appear within Christian iconography in Zambia (and the broader church community). His choice to depict white people as saints in this image may also show how the Catholic Church in Zambia has a diverse group of people in it. Jesus can be seen ascending into the clouds with his gaze upwards in a manner that is reminiscent of earlier Christian iconographic works such as Rembrandt's "Ascension" (Fig. 11).

Fig. 4. Rinji Rembrandt, The Ascension of Christ (1636). Oil on Canvas, 93 x 69 cm, Alte Pinakothek: Munich. (Reproduction from http://www.artway.eu/content.php?id=2354&lang=en&action=show. Accessed 27/06/2019)

Through this work, Yombwe begins to employ aspects of the oppositional gaze by taking a pre-existing image and reinterpreting it in a manner that shifts the reading of the narrative through representation. Yombwe (personal conversation, 2018) states that he is not trying to rewrite history by depicting Jesus as a black man but rather, to view it through a different lens. Going by hooks' argument, I would say that Yombwe's "looking" has allowed him to "change reality" because, through his art, he affirms that the image of Jesus and the saints can change to mirror a broader demographic of people and cultures in Christian iconography found in the Church. A closer look at Jesus' appearance shows him split in the middle, where one side appears black, and the other white.

Fig. 5. Laurence Yombwe, Close up of African Saints in Heaven (2010), mural in oil, Marian Shrine, Lusaka, Zambia. Photo Courtesy Aaron S. Mulenga(2018)

N.B. This image depicts Christ split in the middle, appearing as a black man on one side and a white man on the other.

The artist presents a tension that exists with shifting the representation of Jesus through this split image of Christ. Yombwe narrated to me how during the conceptualisation of this work, some people were in opposition to him displaying Christ as a black man; they wanted him depicted as a white person. The split displayed in Yombwe's figure reveals the tension that exists not only by physically changing the image of Christ but the split figure could also represent the challenge of integrating cultural values within Christian visual culture.

African Saints in Heaven (Fig.3) begins to explore the notion of transcendence through flight, for the congregant looking at this image, transcendence becomes possible when they can see themselves mirrored in the image before them. If we take Sager's definition of transcendence as a change in a person's psychological state, it is possible to imagine that the moment a person's psychological state shifts through the image they see; they would be able to imagine themselves attaining similar feats.

Transcendence through flight becomes a possibility through the use of various elements such as visual arts and the depictions of the divine, and through cultural artifacts made for the purpose of spiritual flight. Though various elements of spiritual flight are not easily explained it does not diminish real power that they possess. Instead of labelling these forms of knowledge as taboo or witchcraft, there remains a need to learn more and understand what function they serve in contributing to the knowledge of transcendence within the varied context they exist. The fact that these methods of flight are documented leaves room for further exploration through which to explore its possibilities and transcendence our own limitations.

Bibliography

Chisala, C., 2018. How I Became a Cruel Witch. Available: http://www.daily-mail.co.zm/how-i-became-a-cruel-witch/. Accessed [10/07/2019]

Christoffersen, S.A., Hellemo, G.T., Onarheim, L., Petersen, N.H. and Sandall, M (eds). 2015. Transcendence and Sensoriness: Perceptions, Revelation, and the Arts. Brill. Boston

Hall, S. (ed). 1997. Representation: Cultural representations and signifying practices (Vol. 2). Sage.
Harris, S.L, and Klemm, P., 2015. "Power Figure (Nkisi Nkondi), Kongo peoples," in Smarthistory, Available: https://smarthistory.org/nkisi-nkondi-kongo-people/. Accessed [13/07/2019]

Holland, H., 2001. African magic. Penguin Random House. South Africa.

Holy Bible, New International Version (Online)., 2011. Biblica, Inc. Available: https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Romans+12%3A3-8&version=NIV. Accessed [24/02/2020]

hooks, B., 1996. "The Oppositional Gaze black female spectators." In Movies and Mass Culture. Rutgers University Press. USA

Levesque, P.J., 1997. Symbols of transcendence: Religious expression in the thought of Louis Dupré. W. B. Eerdmans Publishing. Belgium

Lusaka Times (2018). UNZA Starts Offering Courses in Witchcraft. Lusaka Times. June 12 [Online] Available: https://www.lusakatimes.com/2018/06/12/unza-starts-offering-courses-in-witchcraft/ . Accessed [10/07/2019]

Mildnerová, K., 2010. Local conceptualisation of health, illness and body in Lusaka, Zambia. Anthropologia Integra, 1(1), pp.13-23.

Sager, R., 2012. Transcendence through aesthetic experience: Divining a common wellspring under conflicting Caribbean and African American religious value systems. Black Music Research Journal, 32(1), pp.27-67.

Weissenrieder, A., 2014. Searching for the middle ground from the end of the earth: the embodiment of space in Acts 8: 26–40. Neotestamentica, 48(1), pp.115–