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THE LITUNGA LAMBOELA: A WOMAN-KING AMONG PEOPLE WITH "YELLOW HEARTS"

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Abstract

This paper is about the Litunga La Mboela, which literally translates to 'earth of the south or King of the south' among the Barotse or Lozi. This woman-king rules the southern kingdom. The Rotse woman-king presents a unique synarchy (joint sovereignty) conception of power in an African setup. The powerful position of the Litunga La Mboela is not a new political invention because female kingship among the Lozi can be traced to the centralisation of power through the matriarchy.This history of the Litunga la Mboela offers a counter narrative to colonial patriarchal or androcentric historiography by demonstrating that women were not the "wretched of the earth" but were active participants and architects of power. By using textual analysis of archival and published resources and oral sources, the paper demonstrates the importance of female kingship in stabilising the Lozi Kingdom. The treacherous political manoeuvring which the Litunga La Mboela had to navigate in the 19th Century proves this point.

Keywords: *Synarchy, Ba Namuso (People of the north), Ba Lwambi (People of the South)*

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INTRODUCTION

The origins of power among the Lozi is traced to a female, Mbuyu, whose romance with the god Nyambe legitimised her progeny's claim to power. Other traditions recorded by Mutumba Mainga, however, suggest that Mbuyu and her daughter Mwambwa migrated for breach of tradition rules for female chiefs by either having children from prohibited unions, or by having incestuous relationships thus explaining missing identities of the fathers of their children (Mainga, 2010 and Hogan, 2014, p. 238). This paper explores the historical and political role of

matriarchy among the Barotse as amplified by the institution of a woman-king known as the *Litunga La Mboela*, that is, the "earth of the south or King of the South." The Rotse (Lozi, also known as Luyana) woman-king presents a unique synarchy (joint sovereignty) conception of power in an African setup. The Rotse have two kings, a woman and a man who reign at the same time. The presence of the Litunga La Mboela among the Lozi provides another platform through which we analyse the legacy of female authority and the evolution of the political structure of the Lozi.

Note that among the Luyana, the presence of queens was not new. According to Livingstone, one of the most revered kings at that time was Mulambwa Santulu who ruled the Lozi or Rotse from about 1780 to 1830. Libonda and then Naliele, the Capital of Barotse, were constructed artificially by Santulu, but his mother had also been 'elevated to the headship of town' because her town or mound was also shown to him. (Livingstone, 1857, p. 218). This showed that Santulu's mother may have been a great ruler of the Lozi. Further north, as Livingstone was exiting the Kololo-controlled territory, he noted that Libonda, the last town of the Makolo, "belonged to two of the chief wives of Sebituane" (Livingstone, 1857, p. 218). As he proceeded, another female sovereign encounter by Livingstone was Sebolamakoea, an old woman with "all her children being the offspring of underchiefs, and reared as barena (lord, master or chief)" (Schapera,1963, pp. 11-12).

LOZI MATRIARCHAL FOUNDATIONS OF POWER

The first leaders from the time the Lozi established themselves in the flood plain, included female rulers. For example, the original rulers of Libonda (Mboanjikana), Sesheke (Kaiko), Nalolo (Notulu), Mukwae Kaiko at Lusu and Kwandu (Namakau) were female (Mainga, 2010, p. 24). The position of a female Litunga can be traced to Ngombala, the Sixth Litunga, who made his daughter, Notulu, the King of the south after Mwanambinyi. However, from Notulu, it seems the position was successively held by men until the coming of the Kololo. The capital (*tota*) for the woman-king of the south known as *Lwambi* has been at Nalolo since the defeat of the Kololo. *Lwambi* is a duplicate of *Namuso* at Lealui, the northern capital where the male Litunga resides. For example, they both "have a Litunga (King) living in a royal palace (kwandu) which has a special reed-fence with pointed stakes and a particular binding. Each palace contains the same structures, the same shrine for royal spears, and the same type of royal band." (Gluckman, 1959, pp. 23-24.) When the males were kings of the South, even the number of queens' courtyards was the same, but with the resumption of female rule, usually there is only one courtyard for the *Ishee Kwandu* or queen's consort. The equivalence of the real capitals is also reflected in the limitations in the use of the word Litunga. Only these two Lozi rulers can be called Litunga. It can be argued that "technically she is the 'earth of the south' against the king's 'great one of the earth'" (Gluckman, 1959, p.24). Reinstituting the woman-king in the south and not the male after the Kololo invasion was because the Lozi realised that "only a man could be 'great one of the earth' (Gluckman, 1959, p.24).

That is, the action that the Lozi took after Kololo rule was meant to increase unity and lessen rivalry to the throne because no woman could challenge for the throne. In this way, the ritual and political significance of the southern rulers was maintained while their political aspirations were curtailed. However, note that the rivalry that weakened the Kingdom and paved the way for Kololo conquest did not start with the heirs to Mulambwa. The southern and Northern centres of power among the Lozi seemed to have rivalled each other immediately after the establishment of the Lozi kingdom. According to Lozi legends of the first King, Mboo, he did not have good relations with his younger brother Mwanambinyi and the contests between them were won by the younger brother through magic or sorcery.

Eventually, the legend continues that:

Mwanambinyi said he was tired and he and his councillors and cattle entered the ground at Imatongo, leaving only his cattle pegs and ropes and porridge spoons. The pegs became trees. Imatongo is at the extreme south of the plain and is one of the most hallowed of Lozi cenotaphs. (Gluckman, 1959, p.26)

The presence of *Imatongo* in the south was balanced by the presence of *Imwambo* in the north, which is the grave of Mboo. In the middle is *Makono*, the grave of their mother and a place where the northern king gets his kingship. The Litunga La Mboela gets her kingship at the royal grave of Ngombala, the sixth Litunga who first sent his daughter and son to establish Lwambi. The growth of the two centres of power in the Lozi kingdom signify the competitive relationship between religious power and secular power in the expansion of the Kingdom. Mwanambinyi, the great conqueror of the Subiya and Mbukushu, seemed to have exercised both ritual and secular power independently until his southern part of the kingdom became subordinate to the north when the national drums were taken by the north. Although Mwanabinyi's supernatural power is highly revered, the secular power is controlled from *Namuso*. In their custom, the Lozi constitution posits the two seats of power on an equal footing. Before the entrenchment of colonial rule and the reforms that followed, even appeals could not go from *Lwambi* to *Namuso*, that is, from "one king to another!" (Gluckman, 1959, p.29) The ritual positions of these kings were also implemented in such a way that since the two kings occupied the same positions of north-south, they occupied the same positions when they moved, and even their councils sat accordingly.

WOMAN-KINGSHIP OVER 'PEOPLE WITH YELLOW HEARTS'

After the restoration of Lozi rule from the Kololo in 1863, the first Lozi King Sipopa appointed his sister, Kandundu, to rule over the southern Kingdom. Later on, Sipopa appointed his daughter, Kaiko, as the King of the South. For about twelve years, these female rulers supposedly brought stability to Barotse politics, which had previously been permeated with strife. Unfortunately, Sipopa "made himself odious by his want of respect for the wives and property of his subjects" (Coillard, 1897, p.57). Sipopa's behaviour seemed to have been worsened by his cruelty. One of his favourite activities was to kidnap children, "cast them to crocodiles, sometimes dismembering their living limbs one by one, sometimes throwing them in whole." (Coillard, 1897, p.57) So, in 1876, the Lozi expelled Sipopa due to his tyranny and cruelty and replaced him with Mwanawina. The leader of the coup against Sipopa was his new Ngambela, Mowa Mamili, who had replaced Njekwa in 1872. Mowa Mamili, with the support of estranged Indunas assassinated Sipopa using one of his bodyguards (Caplan, 1970, p.14).

It should be noted that Sipopa's overthrow, and the subsequent turbulent period in Barotseland history, were planned and executed by indunas and not the southern Kingship. These indunas could not aspire to be kings themselves because they had no royal blood and so they always needed a prince to lead the rebellion. Mwanawina was aware of the growing power of the *Indunas* and asserted himself by killing Mowa Mamili, his children and elder brother. The murder of the Ngambela unsettled other indunas who feared for their lives. The last straw to Mwanawina's brief reign came from the north-south identity challenge and rivalry. Although there seemed to be a change in the political role of the king of the south, the divisions in the Lozi identity between *Ba-Namuso* (the people of Namuso or the Northerners) and *Ba-Lwambi* (the people of Lwambi or the Southerners) was still strong and important among the people. Gerald L. Caplan states that:

Mwanawina came from the Senanga district (that is, he was a 'southerner',

considering the flood plain as 'Barotseland proper' or *Bulozi),* and began distributing important titles as well as land to his southern kin. The latter soon demanded that the people of the north be excluded from all positions of power, and finally ordered to kill all 'northern' indunas. With this, the indunas of the north, led by Mataa, a minor but ambitious councillor, and Numwa, a famous Lozi warrior, assembled and armed their supporters, and succeeded in driving the King from the country (Caplan, 1970, p.15).

The reign of Mwanawina and his daughter, Mwangala lasted for about ten months. The indunas that led the coup then decided to look for compromise to the north-south Lozi challenge. The contenders, Sikufele and Musiwa lost to Lubosi because the *Indunas* noted that he (Lubosi) belonged both to the southern and northern sections of the Kingdom. His mother was from Senanga and his father from Lealui. Thus, Lubosi was "'really the only man of royal birth who had nothing against him,' and in August 1878, the young prince - then about thirty years old – was formally installed as King." (Caplan, 1970, p.20). Lubosi then appointed Silumbu as his Ngambela and his sister Matauka as Mulena Mukwae of Nalolo. This was the time Francois Coillard first attempted to enter Bulozi in order to establish a mission station there.

Towards the end of September 1878, Coillard had waited 6 weeks for a response from the King only to discover that his arrival had not been announced to Lubosi. By the end of October, Lubosi politely refused to grant Coillard entry because of the civil war which was looming (Coillard, 1897, p.64) This was likely because Mwanawina was not long gone and would try to reclaim the throne. In fact, Mwanawina had even burnt down villages in Sesheke and failed to reclaim the throne, as Coillard later found out. Lubosi further justified his refusal by claiming he was rebuilding his own town and would be in a position to receive Coillard in June the following year.

When Coillard returned in 1884, he again found himself in the midst of another coup. This time Lubosi was about to be deposed. In September, Mataa, again found himself the kingmaker and rebel leader. Coillard received a positive response and was expected by King immediately unlike the Jesuits who evidently were expelled from the kingdom. However, the indunas at Sesheke delayed him because, unknown to Coillard, there was a coup brewing and the indunas in Sesheke did not want to put Coillard at risk. For Coillard, Sesheke indeed had become a "Slough of despond" (Coillard, 1897, p.147). His journey was sabotaged in every possible way. Eventually, it was made known to Coillard: "A revolution had broken out in the valley; and the king, whom they wished to assassinate, had fled…the chiefs had expected it: no doubt the reason of their delays" (Coillard, 1897, p.148). Coillard further gives insight into the whole affair and importance of the north-south balance that:

This only is certain, that Robosi held the lives of the Barotsi chiefs very cheaply. He murdered seven in one day, at a banquet to which he had invited them. Lately, he caused a respected chief and one of the late Sepopa's wives to be put to death. Then he was taking measures to get rid of most of the lords of Sesheke, when his schemes were discovered. A plot was hatched, and Robosi only owed his safety to his coolness and flight. (Coillard, pp.148-150).

These wanton executions by the Lozi kings were not limited to the northern king, but were also done by the southern King. Before the revolution, Matauka executed Pakalita, probably for conspiring against her. Pakalita was Matauka's prime minister who had offended her (Coillard, 1897, p.215). According to Coillard, the execution of Pakalita may have earned Queen Matauka respect and admiration but this was the cause of the revolution and may explain why southern indunas

celebrated the coup. This coup forced Coillard to retire from Sesheke, back to Leshoma, his established station on the other side of the Zambezi. Lubosi, together with his Son, Litia, Ngambela Silumbu and other supporters went into exile. Matauka may have joined them later in exile because Coillard found her a prisoner of Mataa. With the help of her supporters, Matauka escaped from Mataa's village and went to Sioma. By forced marches, she moved from Sioma to the River Mashi, a tributary of the Linyati, which was thought to be safer and her brother joined later her there (Coillard, 1897). When Lubosi joined Matauka in exile, she encouraged him with a positive report of the people's continued support (Caplan, 1970, p.30).

On 5th January 1885, Coillard arrived at Nalolo and was welcomed by Maibiba who had become the Litunga Lamboela. In conveying the power of the woman- king, Coillard observed that Maibiba at that:

sat in the lekhothla with a great deal of grace, and transacted her business surrounded by her councillors. None of them has the right of sitting in her presence, not even her husband, who bears the title of Mokwe Tunga (Son-in-law to the Nation), but yields precedence to the principal councillors. Every one gives her the royal salutation, standing at a distance, and shouting, " *Tautona*—that is, "Great Lion"; properly speaking, the male lion (Coillard, 1897).

Coillard was filled with esteem for Maibiba as a kind leader, intelligent in business and as someone who offered good hospitality. Moreover, in contrast to Matauka, Maibiba was someone who was horrified by blood, an intense listener, and was not particularly impressed by the Coillard's camera such that Coillard did not manage to take her photo. In fact, Coillard even thought that if Maibiba had been the only king, then there might be some peace among the Lozi. When Coillard preached to her about the Christian God and about her duties, he noted that Mabibiba could only lament how Barotse land was a land of blood with kings succeeding each other like shadows, never growing old (Coillard, 1897, pp.172-173).

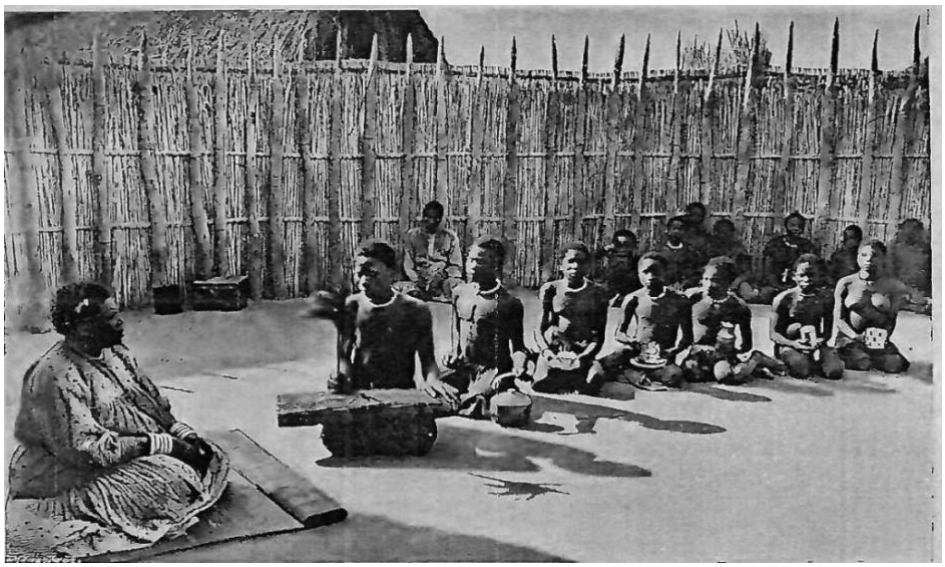
After a day's journey from Nalolo, Coillard reached Lealui and was welcomed at the Lekhotla by Mataa who had become Ngambela. It is difficult to measure the sincerity of Mataa's speech in welcoming the missionaries because after calling for peace and claims that they had waited for many years for Coillard, he cautioned them that they "will soon discover that we have yellow hearts, and that our country is a country of blood" (Coillard, 1897, pp.175). In fact, every evening, a public cry went:

" Ho! ho! Barotsi with yellow hearts " (i.e. full of covetousness); " hearken! You have yellow hearts; but know that anyone who approaches the Baruti's waggon at night will be fired upon. And if anyone should steal the smallest thing, I will put him to death. I have sworn it. So be warned, O yellow-hearted Barotsi!" (Coillard, 1897, pp.282).

Coillard had arrived during the revolution and covetousness was expected among the people. But the real problem of 'yellow hearts' was among *Indunas* like Mataa and his revolutionaries. In these tumultuous times, Mataa was right: it was impossible to trust anyone. The real yellow hearts among the Lozi were the *Indunas* who coveted power but could only go as far as installing a puppet King. While at first the presence of whites could potentially strengthen Lubosi's position as King, Mataa had been sidelined and not given the most powerful position in the land. Mataa was now the Ngambela and wished to keep it that way, if only they could control the white man. However, the major problem that still remained to be solved was the north-south problem. The reintroduction of the woman-king could bring stability and peace because it controlled the aspirations of the southern ruler but only if the ambitions of the indunas were controlled.

Meanwhile, Lubosi mustered enough support and attacked from his Mashi Stronghold. Led by Silumbu and joined by Mambari traders (African traders from Bihe, in present Angola), they managed to rout Akufuna and Mataa's forces. Pillage, acts of vengeance and cruelty filled Barotseland that Coillard lamented that: "the slaughter, even for those accustomed to bloodshed, was awful." (Coillard, 1897, p.200). Starting with the south which mobilized as early as March 1885 and advancing onto Lealui, the fight for Lubosi was protracted. After the defeat of Mataa, Lubosi and Matauka then embarked on a killing splee of their enemies. On the nights of 26th and 27th December, with many other chiefs already eliminated, they attacked the Morantsiane (Coillard,1897 and Caplan, 1970). Lubosi clearly relied on the soldiers and support from Matauka's southern Kingdom to regain his throne.

On 20th March 1886, Coillard reached Nalolo and was welcomed, this time, by Matauka who had regained her position as King of the South. She had mobilized and fought so hard to regain her position and that of her brother, the King of the North. Her return was characterised by an even greater hold on authority and power and all the splendour that went with it.' Below is a picture of Matauka with servants attending to her:



Picture 1: Mukwae Matauka with Servants bringing her food, 1886. **Source:** Coillard, *On the Threshold*, p.213.

The splendour of her court and power was described thus:

This queen has her court, her drums, her *serimbas,* and surrounds herself with all the ceremonial in usage at the king's own court. She sits in the *lekhothla* discusses state affairs, judge lawsuits. She is saluted like the king with "*Tautona*" and "*Yo-sho*" the salutations reserved for royalty alone. People prostrate themselves before her, and nobody has the right to sit in her presence, not even her husband, the *Mokwe Tunga* (Son-in-law of the Nation), who is only a servant, and can be dismissed at her pleasure. Perhaps it would be going too far to say she was polyandrous! When her majesty is not sitting in the *lekhothla*, she retires into a hut surrounded by two courts. There she grants private audiences. Whichever way one looks, the eye falls on some kind of charm. In the court, there are generally young slaves attached to the queen's service, and occupied under her direction in weaving fancy mats or working in beads. It was here that Mokwae received me. (Coillard, 1897, pp. 213-214).

Matauka and Lewanika's purge of the kingdom was so thorough that Lubosi – the

one who escaped confidently adopted the sobriquet of Lewanika – the one who joined the two kingdoms (Coillard, 1897, pp. 217-218). Maibiba had fled to Lukwakwa where she came from. The King showed her mercy and allowed her to come back. He asked her to pick a prince for a new husband: "Leave me in the shade," she had begged of him," far away from the *borena* (the governing class in all its ranks); I have always dreaded it" (Coillard, 1897, pp.345). Here, Maibiba's character which made people admire and respect her was seen. She adopted what she had proclaimed a peaceful and happy lifestyle which she had wished for Lubosi once. She married a commoner Mbunda man. When Coillard saw her in 1889, she was among the women who were kneading mud to plaster the hut Lewanika had built for the missionaries.

Maibiba's character was contrasted by that of her cousin Matauka whom Coillard thought was usually brusquer. Maibiba even shied from having her picture taken but not so Matauka. Matauka indeed acted vengeful, distrusted the missionaries and even showed off her skills at playing the accordion against Coillard's whom she eclipsed. Her exercise of power was such that she even made Coillard shudder unlike Lewanika whom Coillard termed weak! Maibiba, on the other hand, fancied a husband who could love her and carry her photo everywhere but Matauka took what she desired. Masiku, the husband she chose had to leave his first wife, Makabana, because they were both jealousy of each other and Matauka wanted to use her power to wreak havoc on her. Lewanika intervened, sent Makabana to another part of the country and gave her to another man for a wife! (Coillard, 1897, pp.352).

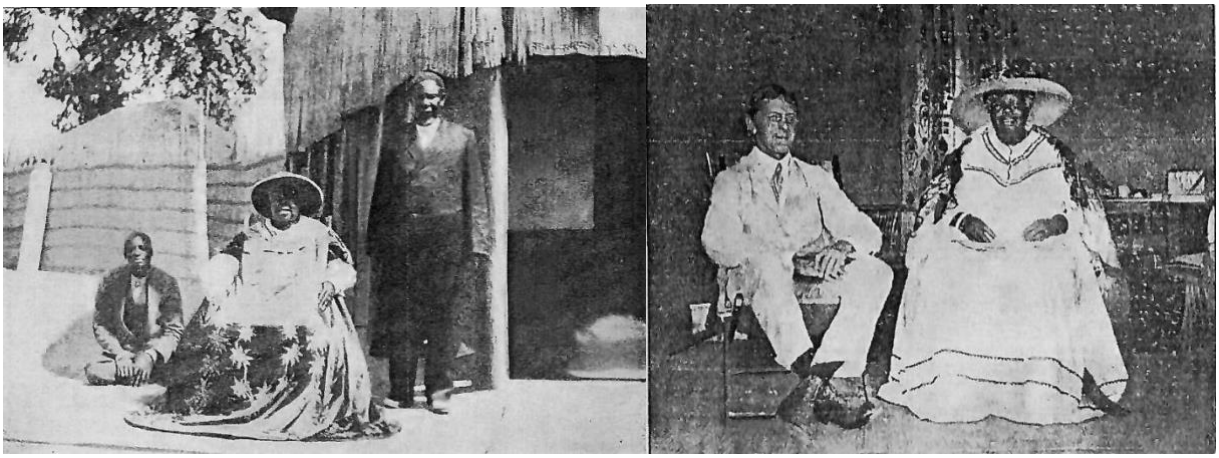
Matauka asserted her authority meticulously and made sure no one undermined her position and tradition. One dramatic event recorded by Coillard was when some subjects that were taking canoes to her brother passed Nalolo without her permission. She called them back and reprimanded the petrified men who crawled before her and swept the dust with their foreheads, and received her reproaches humbly, clapping their hands. She took possession of the two best pirogues, accepted as a fine the baskets of their provisions which the culprits hastened to offer her, and then dismissed them. To justify her conduct, which, as I knew, was not in the least arbitrary, she explained to me the custom of the country. When the queen's tributes pass Lealuyi, they must first be presented to the king, who takes what he wants; and the same thing takes place when the king's tributes pass Nalolo—Mokwae has the first choice. " But," she added sharply, "everything is altered nowadays, and these black creatures give themselves airs, and wish to set us at naught" (Coillard, 1897, pp.359-260).

What is clear is that Matauka's ability to assert her power and control over the southern Kingdom contributed to the stability and peace that existed among the Lozi people during Lewanika's second period of Kingship. That is, the Ba Namuso and Ba Lwambi divisions were amplified by weak leadership which allowed the *Indunas* to gain enough power to mobilise followers in scheming for the throne. The strong stance taken by Matauka brought the southern chiefs and *Indunas* under control and since she could not challenge for the throne, no political turmoil could develop.

However, the fear that the new found stability could devolve into chaos and bring change came from an unlikely source: the missionaries! When Lewanika regained his throne, he allowed the missionaries to continue their work at Sefula and he supported their establishment. But the teachings of the missionaries were undermining Lozi culture, religion and lifestyle. Barotseland was at crossroads. The two kings remained traditionalists but they sent their sons and relatives to the missionary school where they learnt to read and write. Litia, Lewanika's son, and Kaiba, Matauka's son attended Coillard's school and so did many Lozi children.

Opposition to missionary work arose because the missionaries' presence seemed not to have brought direct benefits and their presence coincided with a lot of calamities. The missionaries were also allowing Lozi children to work which was supposed to be done by slaves; the chiefs were offended because the missionary tours attracted a lot of people and their singing seemed to make the chiefs even dislike this new movement. Some incidents highlight the struggle between the traditionalists and the new generation which was undermining tradition: Matauka at one time became sick and the diviners pointed to the missionaries. Matauka recalled her children and people from the school. The children from Nalolo seemed to have formed the bulk of the students because more than 30 left without notice; Lewanika complained that the Barotsi thought he was becoming mad because of the teachings from the Bible, and the expulsion of the missionaries had already been tabled twice in the council. In order to sort out this hostility, Coillard visited Mukwae Matauka and he was conducted through many courts until he reached the Woman-King's hut, and at each passage a servant was waiting for us, to pour water over our feet and spread burning embers before us. Thus we had to pass through fire and through water – the flames must touch our feet; and after this ceremony of exorcism, we were fit to appear before Mokwae (Coillard, 1897, pp.350-352).

The Mukwae only changed her position because after taking pills from Coillard, she recovered the following day and promised to let her subjects return to the mission school. As if this was not enough, Litia himself started behaving 'strangely' by refusing Mukwae's attempts to have him sacrifice at the tombs of the ancestors for the recovery of Kaiba, the Mukwae's son. The struggle in Matauka's embrace of change still reflects in her struggles with Litia. The missionaries, on the other hand, were impressed by Litia's scruples because not only was he able to stand up to Mukwae but also took the same "sturdy attitude towards his father" (Coillard, 1897, pp.397). The cultural revolution and westernisation of the kingdom had come through the younger generation, which developed a taste for everything connected to Western civilisation. What Matauka and other traditionalists did not anticipate and therefore fail to guard against was not the political elites but the missionaries. The introduction of Christianity and British colonial rule eventually eroded the religious, cultural and political roles of the Barotse political elites. Slavery was no longer a dominant labour system and traditional authority became subordinate to colonial authority.



Picture 2 and 3: from top: Mukwae Matauka with Husband and interpreter; bottom: Mukwae with D.W.Strike, Native Commissioner. **Source:** Caplan, *The Elites of Barotseland*, p. 34.

CONCLUSION

The legacy of the woman-king of the south among the Lozi has continued, and it is

clear that women have not lost their power completely. The role of the Litunga La Mboela in the shifts in power, power brokering and consolidation, and the woman's 'soft power' in traditional society was the main theme in this paper. According to Joseph Nye, power should not be conceived only as hard power, which involves coercion but even the ability to affect others by attraction or persuasion (Nye, 2017 and Chitty, 2017). The princess and queens discussed in this paper demonstrate that they did not only possess hard power but also soft power which they exercised to influence the histories of their peoples. It is clear, that during the most tumultuous time of Lozi history, when betrayal of kings was the order of the day, the woman-kings provided some form of stability. This paper also demonstrated that women have been in positions of power and have influenced the history of their peoples. Matauka was Litunga-Ia-Mboela up to 1928. Matauka's daughter, Atangambuyu, succeeded her mother but later abdicated in1930 in favour of Mulima.

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