



Anthropological Symbolic Significance of the Number ‘Three’: A Case of Selected Languages and Cultures in Zambia

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Abstract: This paper problematizes the symbolic significance of the number ‘three’ in Zambian culture and society. The paper aims to highlight the pragmatic implicature of the number ‘three’ conveyed by different cultures and languages in Zambia. The study used a qualitative approach. Data were collected through elicitation by conducting unstructured interviews as well as document analysis. Primary data were collected from 33 respondents who were selected purposively to represent six cultures from five provinces of Zambia. Primary data were justified by secondary sources of information. Phenomenology theoretical locale was chosen to underpin the study. The study reveals that there is a significant value in numerology such as the arithmetic number ‘three’. The number ‘three’ is highly interpreted in both Biblical and cultural contexts and can be used to preserve indigenous knowledge for future generations. Anthropologically, the number ‘three’ is used to teach, admonish, counsel, reconcile, and unify people such as families, churches, and marriages. It can be concluded that the anthropological symbolic significance of the number ‘three’ bears some commonalities in the Zambian culture and the sample languages, and has minor pragmatic variations.

Keywords: Culture; numerology; phenomenology; significance; three; Zambia.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The paper presents the cultural significance of the number three in the Zambian context. The paper aims to put across the anthropological interpretation of the number three in the Zambian culture. Anthropology is a sociolinguistic locale that studies language concerning society, beliefs, culture, and the interpretation of environmental phenomena. Therefore, the significance of conducting an anthropological analysis of what the Zambian culture upholds about the significance of the number ‘three’ cannot be overemphasized because it is meant to preserve indigenous knowledge (Siame and Lubungu 2022).

Mbiti (1999) defines numerology as “the study of numbers and the occult manner in which they reflect certain aptitudes and character tendencies, as an integral part of the cosmic plan.” In the Biblical context, the number three is very significant and is associated with the daily life and observances of individuals. For instance, the number three signifies ‘strength’. It is believed that the number three represents a man while four represents a woman and the result is perfection. This shows that the number three has extreme symbolic purposes in the Bible and stands out as one of the most prominent numbers featured in the scriptures. Three tends to symbolize harmony, wholeness, or completeness which shows relatedness to the number seven as depicted in the scripture that God created the earth

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(including the day he rested) in seven days (Genesis 1-2).

The paper draws insights from an autobiographical text 'A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man' where James Joyce makes a follow-up on the intellectual, moral, and spiritual development of a young Catholic man named Stephen Dedalus who dares to go against some of the Catholic and cultural anthropological ideologies (Botan 2014). It is envisaged that after giving in to his physical desires, Stephen decides to go on a three-day retreat and later hears a sermon with three aspects; sin, judgment, and hell. Lubbungu (2016) adds that Stephen's three-day retreat evokes the image of the connection with the Holy Trinity as opposed to the three unholy Trinity that is, Sin, Judgment, and Death. Therefore, it can be argued that the number three has both a spiritual and cultural anthropological significance which this paper aims to present.

This paper highlights the conceptions and interpretations that culture attaches to the anthropology of the number three in Zambia. The Bible records that the number three symbolically appears about 467 times in it. The number three in the Bible is used as an emphatic Semitic triplet to describe the intensity of something to show its completeness and goodness. For example, the number three overwhelmingly appears in the Bible to signify completeness, holiness and perfection in areas such as, the three wise men; God being complete in three, that is, father, son and Holy Ghost; Peter denied Jesus Christ three times before the cock crawled; the cock crawled three times before Peter denied Jesus Christ, Jesus Christ said I will destroy and build the temple in three days; Jesus Christ rose on the third day; baptism to be done in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ (three attributes); truth to be established on the basis of three witnesses; three were saved when God destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah by fire, that is, Lot and his two daughters; three angels appeared to Abraham and Lot before the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, two criminals were crucified along with Jesus to make three, Peter said I will build three tabernacles on mount transfiguration, one for Jesus Christ, the other one for Elijah and the third one for Moses, three loaves of bread, three fish, and so on and so forth (Thomas 1973).

The above literature shows that the physical types the spiritual, hence the number three should also have cultural significance in the Zambian context. Therefore, the paper problematizes the anthropological significance of the number three and demonstrates how different cultures and languages in Zambia interpret the number three. The paper proceeds as follows: introduction, literature review,

theoretical locale, methodology, results and discussion, and conclusion.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Literature shows that in the Arabic number system, the first plural or odd number is three. When counting from one, the very first odd number that shows plurality or multitude is three. Cole (1972) points out that in certain aspects of Shari'ah when a large amount is intended, it must be counted or done in at least the odd number three which denotes multitude. This is consistent with the Muslim law where a man can divorce his wife by repeating the phrase three times 'I divorce thee'. In addition, Islam holds that accomplishing certain tasks in the odd number (three) is significant and shows that Allah is odd and loves that which is odd.

In most Zambian societies, the significance of the number three is embedded deeply in the tradition. It is believed that the number three and its connotative meaning should only lay in the minds of mature adults who are expected to transmit it to the young and future generations. This is aimed at preserving the indigenous knowledge. Traditionally, the number three is associated with the mature who either come to terms with getting married or those who are already married which is meant to provide knowledge and wisdom to the world of marriage life thus making the couple qualified which is in tandem with Gondwe (2015) and argues that that the significance of the number three is not known by every adult, but is subject to one's culture and the circle of those who are brave enough to marry or get married. Mwenda (2012) contends that the number three is associated with the male genitalia which portrays an attribute of masculinity. For instance, if a couple is saved nshima and three pieces of relish, a woman who is well cultured and understands its pragmatic implicature should not eat as it is tantamount to insolence or lack of respect for the husband.

It can be argued that the number three holds a significant place in African religions and is usually associated with the concept of the triple deity. This implies that the number three represents the three aspects or offices of the Supreme Being. This can be seen in examples such as the Yoruba religion of Nigeria where the Orisha trinity represents Olodumare, Olorun, and Olofi. Another example is the Akan religion of Ghana where the triple deity Nyame, Oroso, and Nyankopon represent the three aspects of the Supreme Being. In like manner, the number three is significant in the Egyptian religion where their god Osiris was divided into three parts, namely, the body, the soul, and the spirit. This interpretation is in tandem with Ejizu (1986) who postulates that the power of the number three is universal which

portrays a tripartite nature of the world as heaven, earth, and waters which translates human into body, soul, and spirit.

The other significance of the arithmetic number three is seen in the African political sphere and structures in the governance system. For instance, the traditional political system of the Yoruba people in Nigeria is divided into three parts, namely, the Oyo Mesi (the central government), the Ogboni (the judiciary), and the Osi (the military). On the other hand, the traditional structure of the Akan people was divided into three groups namely, the Abusua (the extended family), the Odekuro (the chief), and the Amunthene (the king). Similarly, there are three organs of the Zambian governance system, namely, the executive, legislature, and the judiciary. In addition, the number three is reflected in the tripartite elections where three elections, namely, presidential, parliamentary, or national assembly and local government are held at the same time. These organs or structures of governance make the operationalization of the political system complete and perfect. It can be argued that the pragmatic significance of the number three in the social and political structures reflects the importance of balance and unity in African society (Hemenway 2005).

The next pragmatic significance is reflected in the three distinct stages of life that human beings go through. The three stages are childhood, adulthood, and old age. These three stages of life are often depicted in traditional African art and literature. For instance, in some Western African cultures, the Adinkra symbol for life cycles in a design consists of three fish swimming in a circle. The three fish symbolize the continuous cycle of life from birth, to death and finally rebirth.

In some ancient cultures such as the Egyptians and the Babylonians, time was divided into three parts, namely, the past, present, and the future. This pragmatic concept of the number three is applicable today in the teaching of languages in what is commonly described as 'tenses'. The three-part division is also found in the concept of the tripartite soul which is believed to consist of the *ka* 'life force', *ba* 'personality', and *akh* 'immortal soul.' Pragmatically, the concept of the tripartite soul symbolizes that the human experience is not limited to the present moment, but goes beyond it.

3. Theoretical Locale

This paper is underpinned by a phenomenological approach. The main proponent of this theory Husserl (1963) defines phenomenology as the descriptive, non-reductive science of whatever appears, in the manner of its appearing. This phenomenon can be in the subjective and inter-

subjective life of consciousness. Husserl (1963) says, "The discipline of phenomenology may be defined initially as the study of structures of experience, of consciousness. Phenomenology is the study of "phenomena"; appearances of things, or things as they appear in our experience, or the ways we experience things, thus the meanings things have in our experience. Phenomenology studies conscious experience as experienced from the subjective or first person point of view". This theoretical underpinning is immense and befitting in this study because this is the exact expectation of interpretations of the prevailing phenomena concerning the significance of the number three in the Zambian culture. Husserl (1963) postulates that the intentional theory of consciousness proposes that 'being' and 'meaning' are immersed in each other. Therefore, the phenomenological approach emphasizes a fundamental reading of the literary work without any effect from the outside. The significance of the number three in Zambian culture is depicted as they are presented by the respondents of respective languages.

The phenomenological approach first came into being in the early years of the 20th century. Phenomenological theories of literature regard the work of art as a mediator between the consciousness of the author and the reader. Phenomenology is the philosophical study of structures of experience and consciousness. The phenomenological approach originated in ancient times, but major works began with Husserl. Jenkins (1974) shows that the roots of phenomenology are found in the epoch of Plato, Socrates, and Aristotle as a philosophy of human existence. Eagleton (1983) indicates that the modern founder of phenomenology is the German Philosopher Husserl (1963) and says, "Husserl, like his philosopher predecessor Rene' Descartes, started on his hunt for certainty by provisionally rejecting what he called the 'natural attitude' - the commonsensical person -the in-the-street belief that objects existed independently of ourselves in the external world and that our information about them was generally reliable. Such an attitude merely took the possibility of knowledge for granted, whereas it was this, precisely, which was in question" (Eagleton 1983:55).

It can be argued that Husserl (1963) is a serious, difficult (often inaccessible) thinker, yet his work exhibits extraordinary originality, range, depth, vitality, and relevance. His unique contribution to phenomenology was highly influential in twentieth-century European philosophy. It can be argued that Husserl's phenomenology is not practical since there is really little place for language in his approach. However, Husserl's celebrated pupil Heidegger (1982) transformed the theory to make it practical

and applicable for the analysis of language matters such as anthropology in the current paper and called it interpretive-hermeneutic phenomenology. This is befitting in the present study on anthropology where culture requires to be interpreted to fulfill Husserl's proposed theory which advocates for 'being' and 'meaning.'

4. METHODOLOGY

This was a qualitative study that was non-numerical and subjective (Brink and Wood 1998). The research involved the eight (08) provinces of Zambia, namely, Central, Copperbelt, Eastern, Luapula, Muchinga, Northern, North-western, and Southern. The phenomenology approach was adopted for this study. Primary data were collected using the elicitation method through unstructured interviews. The document analysis method was adopted during the collection and analysis of secondary data regarding the anthropological symbolic significance of the number three in the Zambian culture which was used to justify the primary data (Chaleunvong 2009).

The study had a sample size of thirty-three (33) distance education students from eight provinces of Zambia who were sampled purposively. Central, Copperbelt, Luapula, Muchinga, and Northern provinces had 25 informants, Eastern had 02 informants, and North-western had 03 while Southern Province had 03 informants. The study adopted pseudonyms to uphold ethical considerations. Data analysis went hand in hand with data collection (Mugenda and Mugenda 1999). Data were analyzed thematically using descriptive and analytical skills.

5. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The themes that emerged out of this study were analyzed according to the following cultures: Luvale, Bemba, Lunda, Tonga, Tumbuka and Kaonde.

5.1 The Luvale Culture

Luvale language is spoken in Zambezi, Chavuma, Kabompo, and other surrounding areas in the northwestern province of Zambia. The language is also spoken in Congo and Angola. The Luvale speakers attach great importance and symbolic meanings to numbers, in particular three which is the topic of discussion in this paper.

Respondent LV submitted that:

In our culture, we believe that things happen threefold. This involves the use of our head, heart, and hands.

Based on the above data, the researcher notes that Luvale speakers believe that human beings study and learn to know who God is through their

heads. They engage in relationships of love with their hearts. Finally, they serve with their hands which help to reshape and build families. The focus of the threefold in this language is on the hope of complete restoration of family relationships. The symbolic significance of the threefold among the Luvale is that man acquires new knowledge and skills by effectively using the head which requires critical thinking. Secondly, human beings are expected to love others from their hearts and not based on either material things or outward appearance. Thirdly, genuine love aims at reshaping and building families and relationships to have a complete and better society. This finding is consistent with Siame and Lubungu (2022) who argue that upholding cultural aspects should be encouraged because they are meant to preserve the indigenous knowledge.

Respondent LV added that:

In Luvale, the number three is associated with the communication between the living people and their ancestors. There are sites, ancestral burials, or places where they communicate with their ancestors. For instance, a Luvale is expected to shout a particular word such as holy three times to begin invoking the ancestor or to pay homage and show respect to them.

The above results show that the number three is symbolic of an angel and is highly respected by the ancestors. Communicating with the ancestors by repeating the same word three times symbolizes respect. This result is in tandem with Pryse (1964) who submits that the number three bears a certain universal meaning and repeating it is primed for the activities and energies linked to it which demonstrates growth, learning, socializing, and creativity. This implies that the person who repeats the same word three times when addressing the ancestors at the burial site in Luvale culture has respect, has grown, and wants to socialize with the ancestors and learn something from them.

5.2 The Bemba Culture

Guthrie (1948) classifies Bemba as M42 which is spoken in Zambia. The language is among the seven local languages that have been granted the regional official language status and is used for initial literacy. Bemba is spoken and taught in five provinces of Zambia, namely Northern, Muchinga, Luapula, Copperbelt, and part of Central Province.

Respondent NT submitted that:

In Bemba culture, the number three is symbolic in terms of the meals that are prepared by the woman's family during the marriage process. Three meals are prepared to signify unity, peace, and cooperation in the matrimonial home. The first meal is called icisekela nsalamu or icisumina

nsalamu 'acceptance of marriage proposal'. The second meal is called icilanga mulilo 'introduction to cuisine'. The third meal is called amatebeto 'thanks offering'.

The study reveals that the three meals are symbolic and as such are prepared at different times during the marriage process. This finding shows that in Bemba culture, the number three is associated with the mature who either come to terms with getting married or those who are already married which is meant to provide knowledge and wisdom to the world of marriage life thus making the couple qualified which is in tandem with Gondwe (2015) who argues that the significance of the number three is not known by every adult, but is subject to one's culture and the circle of those who are brave enough to marry or get married. The *icisekela nsalamu* or *icisumina nsalamu* 'acceptance of marriage proposal' is the first meal prepared during the marriage process that symbolizes the acceptance of the groom's marriage proposal by the bride's family. The meal consists of one plate of nshima and a plate of a full chicken where the groom is not expected to pay anything in return. The second meal prepared by the bride's family is called *icilanga mulilo* 'introduction to cuisine' which symbolizes granting permission or freedom to the groom to have meals from the bride's family during visits. The second meal is prepared and served at a fee before the wedding or marriage to show the groom the kinds of food that are in the Bemba culture and what he is expected to eat or to be served by the bride's family during the marriage time. The third meal is *amatebeto* 'thanks offering' which is served to the groom by the bride's family when they are already in marriage. This meal is an appreciation of the groom by the bride's family for keeping their child or daughter in marriage safely and without marital disputes or problems. It also symbolizes an acknowledgment that the groom is capable of taking care of his wife and that they reaffirm their blessing of the marriage.

Responded CB added that:

In Bemba culture, the number three is believed to symbolize continuity of life. The number three is connected to the past, present, and future lifetime.

The past symbolizes the integral part of the present and future time. The experiences, traditions, and customs of the ancestors are believed to inform and shape the present and the future of the citizenry. The Bemba culture holds that it is important to honor and respect their ancestors through various cultural practices such as ancestral veneration and storytelling. Therefore, the number three symbolizes the past in three historical generations, namely, grandparents, great-grandparents, and great-great-grandparents. The second phase of life is represented

by the present time which is interpreted to be the most important of the three times as it symbolizes the time people live in and the experiences they have. Bemba culture believes that the present actions have far-reaching consequences in the future and have a bearing on past experiences. The study shows that it is vital to live in the present time with caution. The third instance of time symbolizes the future time in Bemba culture. It is believed that the future is shaped by the present hence the Bemba people strive to make correct decisions for a better future for themselves and their communities. Therefore, the number three symbolizes the potential of any action or decision in terms of positive, negative, or neutral.

Respondent MC further stated:

In Bemba, the number three symbolizes a marriage home. The three things used to describe a marriage life are akabende 'motor', umwinshi 'pestle or pounding still', and uwakutwa 'the person who is pounding'.

The study reveals that the number three is significant and three elements are symbolic in a marriage setting or holy matrimony. The motor signifies a woman and symbolizes the vagina where pounding takes place. On the other hand, the pestle or pounding stick symbolizes the penis. The third element is the person who pounds which symbolizes the man who uses the penis to make love in the vagina. The study also shows that the married woman is discouraged from lending the pestle or pounding stick to her neighbors because it is an indirect communication that she is allowing the husband to have sex outside of marriage. Similarly, a woman is discouraged from lending a motor to a neighbor as it symbolizes that the married woman is okay with having sex with other men than the husband. Therefore, the number three is significant in the Bemba culture because it symbolizes, love, unity, and honesty which agrees with Hemenway (2005) who opines that the number three in the social and political structures reflects the importance of balance and unity in African society.

5.3 The Lunda Culture

Lunda language is spoken in the Northwestern province of Zambia. It is among the seven mandated regional official languages for initial literacy in the country. Lunda tradition exists around the Zambezi area and surrounding districts such as Chavuma and Kabompo. The study reveals that the number three has anthropological symbolic significance.

Respondent LD indicated that:

In Lunda culture, the number three reflects the power to give life, rebirth, and death. In Lunda myths and stories, the number three is portrayed

as an ancestral symbol of wisdom, authority, and custom. Therefore, the number provides a bond between the dead and the living. The number three is also used when performing certain rituals where a particular word is said three times as a way to connect with the ancestors.

The above result shows that Lunda natives have a strong bond and belief in the number three. This shows that there is a threefold relationship that forms the basis of the community. It can be argued that Lunda uses the symbolic number three to express themselves, to transform others, and to extend the world they live in following the pattern that is revealed in the mystery of the Trinity. It can also be argued that the language considers the number three to be sacred which bears attributes such as oneness and duality. The above attributes and many more manifest in the three-fold nature which expresses an inevitable principle, an archetypal fact that solidifies in series, as a representation of ideas and energies that work magically and mysteriously while obeying precise, universal laws, which the numerical codes and their respective geographical correspondences symbolize. This analysis is in tandem with Mbiti (1999) who observes that the number three is very significant and is associated with the daily life and observances of individuals in different societies.

Respondent LD added:

The number three is symbolic in the colors of the beads in what is called iheta de tala 'three colored beads. The three colored beads are given to a woman as a wedding gift. The colors of the gift are black, red, and white. A woman displays the black bead to her husband to symbolize that her pubic area will be shaved. Secondly, a woman displays the red bead to inform the husband that she is menstruating and hence cannot have sex. On the other hand, a woman displays the white bead to inform the husband that the menstrual period is over and she is free to have sexual intercourse.

Based on the above results, it can be argued that the number three has pragmatic and symbolic significance to society. The results show that the symbolic significance of the three colored beads requires some induction before application. The black bead can be interpreted as a symbol of the pubic hair which is usually black for Africans and during this time, it was overgrown and required to be removed. The black bead also symbolizes the call from the wife or demand that she would like the husband to clean her pubic area. The red bead symbolises the blood that flows during menstruation which is deemed to be unclean for a man to have sex with a woman who is on her period. When the red bead is displayed, it sends a message to the husband

to exercise self-control until the flow is over. On the other hand, the white bead symbolizes purity. White implies that the woman is clean, that is, the menstrual period is over and she is free for sexual intercourse. It can be argued that displaying the white bead is a formal announcement by the woman or wife that she is ready for lovemaking (sex). These findings are related to Siame and Lubungu (2022) because the number three points to the creation of sanity in the marriage life as well as preservation of the indigenous knowledge.

Respondent LD further indicated that:

The Lunda people use three stones called mafwesa to symbolize a perfect home. The three stones represent three groups in the family, namely, husband, wife, and children.

The study shows that the three stones symbolize complete knowledge. Every happy family is premised on three stones that are in tandem with Holman (1986) who contends that the basic family consists of three figures, namely, father, mother, and children. In the Lunda culture, marriage is dependent on three things. Firstly, the three stones signify the fireplace which is interpreted as the decision and preparation to marry. Secondly, when the fire is made, there is a need to put the pot on the three stones where the pot is symbolic of a woman. Thirdly, there is a need for the pot to be filled with water which is symbolic of the man's penetration and depositing of reproductive cells. Finally, food is prepared in the pot and served to the whole family as an output which symbolizes the reproduction of children in the family. The pot (woman) is usually put on top of the three stones which signifies that the woman is the one who holds her home together, that is, the husband and children. It can be argued that when a woman is away from home, there is disorderliness in the way things are managed. Traditionally, it can also be argued that what makes the marriage complete and peaceful is childbearing.

5.4 The Tonga Culture

The Tonga culture exists in the southern part of Zambia in districts such as Livingstone, Monze, Mazabuka, and Choma. Two respondents provided the anthropological significance of the numerology three in the Tonga culture.

Respondent TN said:

The chicken is among the most important domesticated birds in Tonga society. Therefore, all parts of the chicken are treated to avoid embarrassment to the elders during visitation by the in-laws to children's homes. Every couple is expected to know the meaning of each part of the chicken, such as the head, beak, features, neck, gizzard, and back of the chicken. From the above

list of parts of the chicken, three parts are held in high esteem because they are symbolic among the Tonga, namely, the neck, the gizzard, and the back of the chicken.

The study reveals that the chicken is a symbol of unity in that it makes marriage to be strong and comfortable to live in. The head of the chicken symbolizes the man or the husband who is expected to head the family. Beak of the chicken is a symbol of the wife's mouth who is expected to keep secrets in the home as well as not talking anyhow to people around. The features represent the pubic hair of both the husband and wife or male and female in the community. The esophagus signifies equal treatment of family members by both the husband and the wife regardless of their status.

However, three parts are highly respected on the chicken and are not served anyhow except to the husband. These parts are the neck, the back of the chicken, and the gizzard. The neck of the chicken symbolizes the penis of the man which is an important instrument that is used by the woman which correlates with Mwenda (2012) who contends that the number three is associated with the male genitalia which portrays an attribute of masculinity. The back of the chicken is served last and it signifies that the relish or chicken is finished. The gizzard symbolizes two things, the husband and the wife. Regarding the husband, the gizzard symbolizes the testicles. On the other hand, in terms of the wife, the gizzard represents the private parts in particular the labio majora and labra minora which are the outer and inner lips of the vaginal opening. The study further reveals that no woman is allowed to serve the above-discussed three important parts to a man except the wife. It can be argued that the three important parts discussed here symbolize the private parts of both the husband and the wife which should be prepared and served with dignity. The above three parts symbolize the respect that the wife is expected to have for the husband.

Respondent TG added that:

The number three in the Tonga society and culture may help to understand certain underlying or concealed insults that arise from various individuals depending on the circumstances at hand in which the numerology has been used. For instance, it is an insult to the husband in the Tonga culture for the wife to serve three pieces of chicken at the same time the neck, the gizzard, and the liver.

The study shows that when the wife serves the three parts or pieces of chicken at the same time, she is indirectly insulting the husband. The three pieces of the chicken symbolize an open insult to the

husband as the three parts represent manhood and are consistent with the findings of Mwenda (2012) who argues that the number three is associated with the male genitalia that portrays a character of masculinity. The first part such as the neck symbolizes the penis while the other two pieces of the chicken such as the gizzard and the liver symbolize the two testicles. Serving relish (three pieces of chicken) in this manner is a confrontation with the husband and shows that the wife has no respect for the husband and hence has resorted to insulting him. Therefore, the number three helps couples to understand what is being communicated which is in tandem with Lauré (2014) who observes that the number three helps to understand the diverse status quo in mainstream society.

5.5 The Tumbuka Culture

The Tumbuka language is spoken in Muchinga province and part of the Eastern Province in Zambia. Tumbuka speakers believe that there is a relationship between a number and one or coinciding events. The respondent stated that Tumbuka speakers believe that numbers reflect certain aptitudes and character tendencies.

Respondent TK submitted that:

Just like other African countries that believe in cultural aspects, Tumbuka believe that the number three designates the third dimension. We do things in threes because we believe that they will manifest in our physical.

The above findings show that Tumbukas believes that the number three is moving forward in terms of energy, overcoming duality, expression, manifestation, and synthesis. The interpretation of the number three by the culture under discussion in this paper suggests that the roots of the number three stem from the meaning of multiplicity creativity, power, and growth. Therefore, the number three means all which can be interpreted as the triad of helping the number of the whole which contains the beginning, the middle, and the end.

Respondent TK added that:

Three in Tumbuka symbolizes tatu 'strength'. To Tumbuka people, three is not an ordinary number hence does not require to be joked about or to be used negligently. Throughout history, the number three has had a unique significance of strength among the Tumbuka people.

The above data shows that in Tumbuka culture, the number three is powerful and can have a significant impact on someone's life path. This strength that is embedded in the number three is likely to have a connection to gods. This shows that the life path number is used or appears when the gods

are trying to encourage someone to take action and create something new in their life. When the number three keeps on appearing to Tumbuka natives, it implies that they are required to open their hearts and hear what the gods are saying or trying to communicate. This appearance of the number three further symbolizes that the gods are always providing guidance and strength.

Respondent TMK stated that:

The number three in Tumbuka culture symbolizes unity and firmness. For instance, when women are preparing a meal, they usually balance the clay pots on three stones that are arranged in a triangular form.

The three stones symbolize the degree of firmness to endure pain, humiliation, or suffering that is inflicted upon a person by another without revenge. To achieve the above, they use the saying *potsi haarwirwi, piri haarwirwi asi tatu torwa* 'the first mistake is not punishable, the second mistake is also not punishable and one is given another chance while the third mistake is punishable.'

Respondent TMK added that:

The number three in Tumbuka signifies lobola 'bride price.' Tumbuka tradition allows a man to give or pay the woman's family three cows as a bridal price. Tumbuka culture also holds that the groom family can also pay money equivalent to three different phases or names of animals, namely chiganga 'first cow', fuko 'second cow', and beka 'third cow.'

Results show that three cows that are paid as bridal prices have symbolic interpretations. *Chiganga* 'first cow' is paid to the woman's family when the man starts leaving with a woman without the consent of her parents. Paying the first cow implies that the family of the man makes an official announcement to the bride's family that your daughter is with our son hence stop looking for her. The first cow symbolizes an apology to the bride's family for the crime committed by the bridegroom. *Fuko* 'second cow' is paid directly to the bride's parents as bride price. The second cow or equivalent money symbolizes an appreciation from the husband to the bride's family for raising their daughter well and allowing him to be married in their family. *Beka* 'third cow' signifies 'see' or 'look'. This is the cow that is paid to the bride's family to complete all the marriage payments. The third cow symbolizes a complete *lobola* 'bride price' and at this stage, the family can announce that the couple is legally married. Therefore, after the third cow has been paid, the couple is declared officially married and can live together as husband and wife freely.

Respondent TMK further said:

The number three is symbolic of food in the Tumbuka culture. The woman is taught when entering the marriage or holy matrimony that when she joins the husband's family, she will meet new people who will be different from the ones she grew up with and as such she should be ready to adjust. Therefore, the woman is introduced to three types of food, namely, nchunga 'beans', skaba 'groundnuts' and nyungu or chiwawa 'pumpkin leaves'.

The symbolic significance of *nchunga* 'beans' is that the woman is expected to be as hard as the raw beans when it is being cooked and how long it takes to be edible. The two characteristics of beans teach the woman that in her new marital environment, she will meet new people who will be difficult to get along with, but with time they are likely to change and hence should be treated with fairness and kindness. The second food is *skaba* 'groundnuts' which is different from beans hence symbolizing that she will meet people in her new environment who have characteristics that are different from what she expects and their thinking is also different hence must love them like her own family.

The third food is *nyungu* 'pumpkin leaves' which symbolize soft hearted people like pumpkin leaves when cooked. Pumpkin leaves imply that she will meet people with soft hearts and are easy to go along with, but should not be taken advantage of. Therefore, a woman is told that just as foodstuffs have different tastes and textures, preparations, and appearance, she should be ready to meet different kinds of characters and must treat and care for them equally because they are all her new family members which is symbolic of how different foodstuffs taste.

5.6 The Kaonde Culture

Kaonde speakers in Zambia are found in the North-western province in districts such as Solwezi, Mufumbwe, and Kasempa. Kaonde is another regional official language that is mandated for initial literacy in the province. The study reveals that the Kaonde language like other Zambian languages and tribes attaches some significance to the number three.

The respondent TK said:

The number three in the Kaonde language is a holy sign that symbolizes the birth of triplets in a particular family. Kaonde speakers believe that when a woman is pregnant and bumps into a stone three times, she is likely to give birth to triplets. In this language, bumping into a stone three times by

a pregnant woman overshadows and symbolizes carrying triplets.

The study shows that do not take the number three lightly for expectant mothers. It can be argued that the number three for expecting mothers in Kaonde is very significant as it helps them to prepare for their unborn babies. This pragmatic interpretation of the number three for expectant mothers helps the woman to be psychologically prepared. The occurrence also helps the family to be prepared financially and socially.

TK added that:

The number three in Kaonde culture symbolizes time. Three is used in the Kaonde tradition as a measure of time. The day is divided into three parts, namely, morning, afternoon, and evening. For instance, the phrase lukelo mwane 'good morning' is used to signify the early hours of the day while kyungulo mwane 'good evening' is used to indicate the evening time.

The above results show that the Kaonde culture can interpret the number three in terms of time. While the above findings center on the time of a particular day, this result is consistent with Siame and Lubungu (2023) who opine that the number three can be pragmatically used to interpret time in terms of the past, present, and future tenses. The above anthropological application of the number three concerning time can also be used to teach learners in schools the interface between culture or society and language. It can be argued that it is such kind of relationships that bleed sociolinguists in language education.

6. CONCLUSION

The study was conducted in Zambia to ascertain the cultural significance and interpretation of the number three among the six selected cultures and languages. The study concludes that the number three is very significant and highly regarded in the Zambian cultural perspective. Numbers always communicate something. Numbers require a mature mind. They also require interpretation which goes beyond human thinking. Wisdom is embedded in numbers. The symbolic significance of the number three is dependent on the culture of a particular society. Finally, the anthropological cultural significance and interpretation of the number three in the six sample cultures show that there is more relatedness than variations.

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