



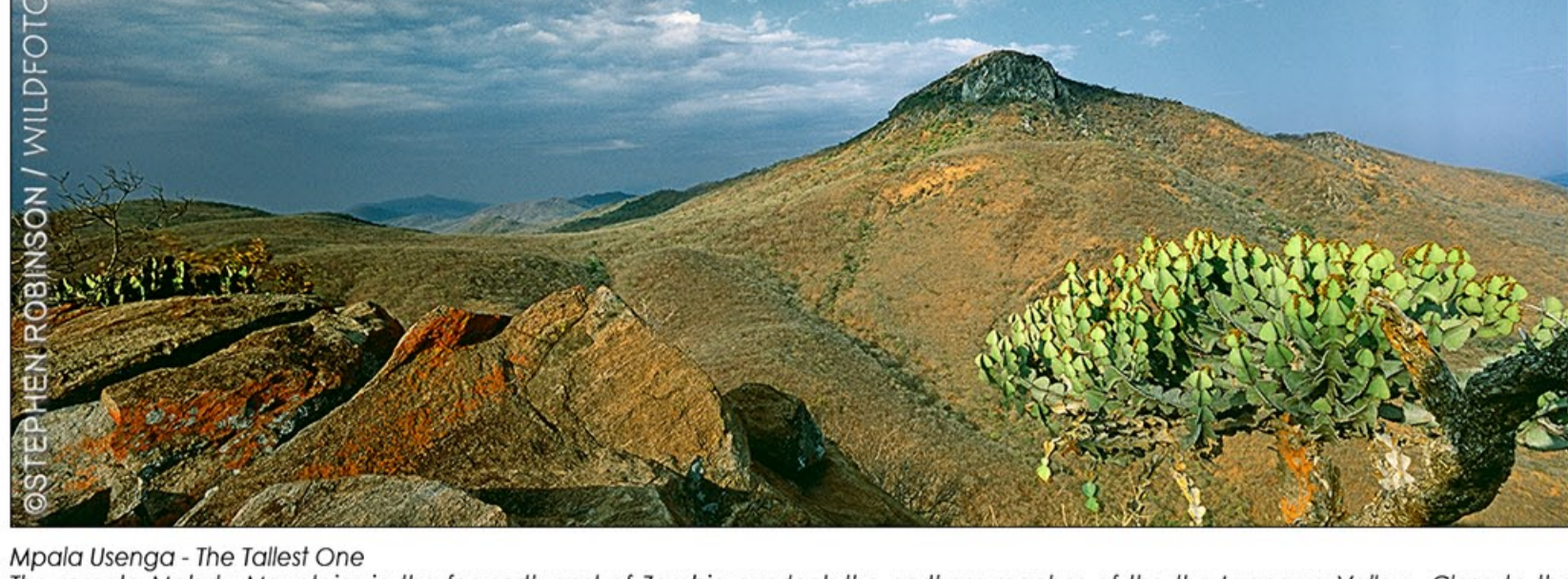
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PhotoMail is an occasional picture newsletter for those with an interest in photography, nature and the environment, travel, Africa, Zambia, Zambian life and happening things
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The Story Behind the Pictures: *Witches, Wizards & Dissidents*

In this PhotoMail, some African history and some spooky photography.



Mpala Usenga - The Tallest One

The remote Makutu Mountains in the far north-east of Zambia overlook the northern reaches of the the Luangwa Valley. Close to the beautifully named Dungulungu village, stands this mountain called Mpala Usenga - The Tallest One. It's a dramatic but windswept place, forcing you to double over as you walk up and up. At the top, you take shelter behind the big rocks as the elements threaten to blow you away, along with your camera and tripod.

A Dungulungu village headman had acted as guide in the climb to this vantage point. He said he spent his time "growing lots of Chinese". We chuckled, and in typical jest, my artist friend & bush trip companion Quentin Allen asked: "But don't we have too many already?". The joke was missed by the Headman, who was of course referring to the variety of cabbage he farmed.



Nanyuma Baobab

At the foot of the Mpala Usenga mountain and close to Dungulungu village, is this unhappy looking baobab tree known as Nanyuma or "The Mother of Nyuma". In addition to its grimacing face, it has quite some history.

The local folklore story is that in the early 1960s, in the troubled & politically-charged times just prior to Zambia's independence, Lumpa Church followers rampaged through the area trying to force villagers to join their sect, killing the village headman in the process. The villagers fled and some hid inside the hollow trunk of this baobab. Whilst in hiding, one young woman gave birth to her child which she named Nyuma. Ever since, the tree has been called Nanyuma, which means 'Mother of Nyuma'.

The Lumpa Church and its founder Alice Lenshina:

The background to the above Nanyuma Baobab tale centres around the story of Alice Lenshina and her Lumpa Church.

In the years and months leading up to Zambia's independence in October 1964, a woman called Alice Mulenga Lubusha formed and developed her own break-away Lumpa Church in Chinsali. She championed the causes of the poor, women's rights, the eradication of witchcraft and the fight against polygamy.

Her Lumpa Church also challenged the supremacy of the two main Christian Missions: the Roman Catholic Missionaries of Africa (a.k.a. the White Fathers) and the United Free Church of Scotland. In addition, and importantly, the Church denounced all politics and politicians.

Alice took the name Lenshina, which was a Bemba derivation of the latin word Regina or 'Queen'. She also renamed her home village Zion (Sione). So successful was her mission that, by 1958, the Lumpa Church allegedly had up to 150,000 followers and over 100 churches.

The Lumpa Church ordered its followers to move to their own exclusive villages and to shun all political activity. In 1964, fights, riots and a gun battle broke out between the Lumpas and the followers of Kenneth Kaunda's new UNIP political party. Kaunda was the interim Prime Minister during this time of transition towards independence and was to become Zambia's first President. A state of emergency was declared and State troops were deployed. What resulted has been referred to as a 'Lumpas-UNIP war' involving Lumpa Church followers against Kaunda's UNIP 'militias' backed by the State security force.

It's alleged that between 700 and 1,000 Lumpa Church followers were killed. Other reports claim that over 2,000 were killed and that 'thousands' more died later due to wounds inflicted on them and from starvation and sickness as they fled. The reports include stories of horrific acts of rape, brutal torture & murder, with some instances being based on alleged photographic evidence.

The Lumpa Church was banned and over 15,000 of its followers fled to Katanga in the Congo. Alice Lenshina herself surrendered and was imprisoned by Kaunda. Apart from a brief period after an escape, she was detained in prison, and without trial, for the following 11 years and then under house arrest for a further 3 years until her death in December 1978.

Alice Lenshina's Lumpa Church lives on to this day in Congo and Zambia. Though in Zambia, it is split into three separate factions, one being the New Jerusalem Church in Kitwe's Chimwemwe Township.

More recently, some have called for an official inquiry and for those responsible to be tried at the Hague for crimes against humanity. However, this dark chapter in the country's history has remained very effectively hidden (including throughout Kaunda & UNIP's 27-year rule) by what has been called "a curtain of silence"



Chamtwati - The Tree of Witches

This appropriately ghoulish & menacing baobab can be found at Chitope village, in the lower Luangwa Valley, close to the Mozambique border, about 55kms north of Luangwa (Feira). Local folklore has it that, when wizards and witches were killed, their bodies were dumped in the hollow trunk of this baobab at the edge of the village: the last recorded instance of this being in 1952. Villagers say a colonial District Officer once entered the tree to collect a skull for a museum, but was chased away by a big snake. It is certainly a sinister and spooky tree. Any modern-day doubters can go inside and see the remnants of skulls and bones, and decide for themselves if they are human or not.

Spooky Footnote:

Recently I searched the internet for reports of other African witch trees. I found the above photograph being used on the Poetry Foundation of Ghana's website to illustrate a poem called "The Witch Tree at Mubende". The poem is by the celebrated African (Malawian) poet David Rubadiri and it was written in the 1960s / 1970s - several decades before the above photograph was made. This was the first I knew of this poem and so I was completely unaware of it at the time of making the photograph. The poem gives an uncannily accurate description of the baobab in my photograph. But does it also foretell of photographers snapping away at it? Here's the poem, so you can decide for yourself:

The Witch Tree at Mubende

The witch tree
 old and knobble
 stood with years
 scratched by a cross
 abused
 as cameras clicked
 and learned tongues discoursed.

Naked it stood
 in its age of mysteries
 beauty and innocence
 stood there too
 side by side -
 two witches
 as I saw them
 prismatic lenses prying
 the old and the new -

To me she was then
 the Mubende Witch Tree.

David Rubadiri

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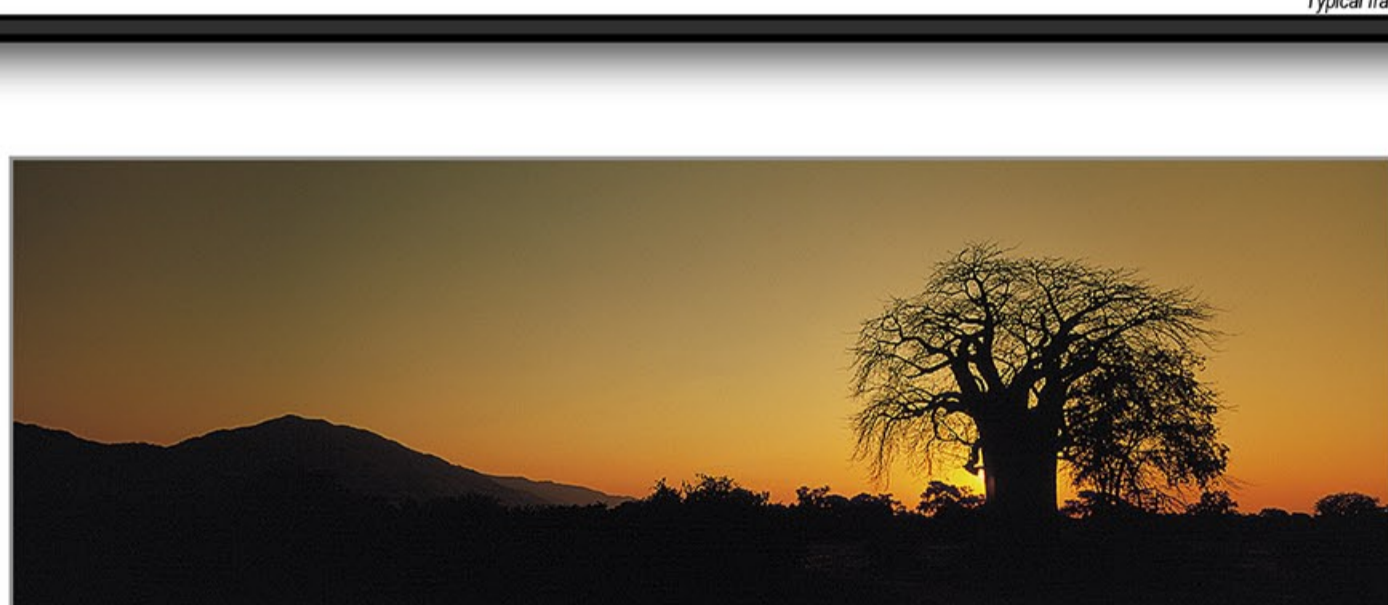
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Stephen Robinson is a photographer operating from his Zambia base. He undertakes photo assignment work in the corporate, industrial, mining, donor-aid project and environmental fields, including the production of photo based communications, advertising and promotional media.

This commercial work supports his nature photography speciality, including landscape, environment, conservation and wildlife work - and including his well-known panoramic photography project and exhibitions on the remote landscape, peoples and environment of Zambia.

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