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Taxis, taverns, tuck shops and temples: An ethnographic account of performed gendered and religious dynamic in Lusaka's public spaces

ABSTRACT

This article explores how masculinities are performed, contested, and reproduced in public and domestic spaces in Lusaka. Drawing on five months of ethnographic fieldwork across bus stations, taverns, tuck shops, and churches, it examines the intersections of gender performance, economic precarity, and lived Christianity. Using Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity, Raewyn Connell's hierarchical masculinities, and the male dominance–male fragility cycle, the article argues that the pursuit of unattainable hegemonic ideals produces chronic anxiety that reinforces domination rather than moderating it. Ian Nell's theo-dramatic framework is applied to identify the actors, scripts, and plotlines shaping everyday urban life. The analysis demonstrates that masculinity is spatially specific: bus stations reward competitive hustle, churches cultivate responsible patriarchy, and taverns valorise rugged dominance. Although public support for gender equality is increasingly visible, patriarchal practices persist privately. The article concludes that transforming masculinities requires engaging embodied everyday practices alongside public theology.

1. INTRODUCTION: SETTING THE STAGE

What does it take to be a man in Africa?

This question is not merely philosophical – it is lived, contested, and often violently enforced in homes, churches, and communities across the continent. This article steps into that tension, born from doctoral research that sits at the crossroads of masculinities, gender-based violence, and African Christianity in Zambia. To explore this, I did not remain a detached observer. Instead, I entered the field as a participant observer, walking alongside the Reformed Church in Zambia – not as a silent witness, but as someone present in the pews, the prayers, and the quiet struggles of its members. Ethical clearance for this work was duly obtained (Van Jaarsveld 2022). While the full study offers a richer narrative, the constraints of this article allow only a window into its findings – a glimpse, not the whole landscape.

This article asks: How are masculinities performed, contested, and reproduced in Lusaka's public and domestic spaces, and what role does the male dominance-fragility cycle play in these performances?

The article situates field journal observations from Lusaka's bus stations and surrounding areas within the theoretical frameworks of Connell (2000; 2002; 2005) on masculinities and Butler (1988; 1990; 1993) on gender performativity. These observations provide a thick description of how masculinities are performed and contested in everyday public spaces (Browning 1991:97). The core argument is that the city street is a primary site for the negotiation of identity, where gender, economics, and faith are not separate spheres but are intricately woven together in public performance.

The article is grounded in the concept of "lived religion", which poses that theological knowledge is not confined to institutions but is found and embodied in everyday life (Ganzevoort 2007:5; Ward 2017:56). This approach prioritises concrete human experiences and "embodied expressions" of knowledge, which contain "the significance of the human context and the realities of lived experience" (Graham 2017:3). For many Zambians, religion is lived and performed during the daily commute long before entering a place of worship. This article, therefore, seeks to "trace the sacred" (Ganzevoort 2009:n.p.) in the streets of Lusaka, examining the intersection of religion, gender, and geography. As Ganzevoort (2007:5-6, 41) poses, entering the field means that concrete human experiences (or everyday lived practices) become the premise of study.

To creatively present these observations, the "messy" experience of the bus station (which could be compared to a South African taxi rank) is framed as a theatrical performance (Nell 2020; Pattison 2007:286; Ward 2017:11).

This metaphor is a deliberate reference to Butler's (1988:526) theory of gender performativity, which argues that gender is a cultural interpretation of the body – a sustained performance of acts over time in accordance with societal sanctions and proscriptions. Within this “theo-drama” (Nell 2020), where “all the world's a stage”, key figures are analysed as actors (Browning 1991:97), and the researcher takes on the role of a “passenger”, a fellow traveller (Ganzevoort 2009:n.p.) moving through a world where power politics and a hegemonic hierarchy shaped by gender, class, and economic status are on constant display.

2. METHODOLOGY: TRAVELLING, SKETCHING, AND TRACING THE SACRED

This article follows a narrative and ethnographic approach, prioritising the everyday reality and the contextual situatedness thereof from the participant's point of view (Coetzee & Rau 2019:6-7; Van Jaarsveld 2022:105).

For five months, I deliberately chose public transport as my primary mode of movement through Lusaka. As someone for whom this was a foreign experience, this choice was a methodological one, forcing a step out of my everyday reality and into the lifeworld of thousands of Zambians (Müller 2017:3; Coetzee 2019:31).

This process is described as “tracing the sacred” through travelling, following, studying, and sketching (Ganzevoort 2009:n.p.). The physical journey on the bus becomes a metaphor for the research journey. To reach a metaphorical destination, a researcher embarks on a metaphorical journey, and through observations and experiences in the field, I reached new insights and understandings on masculinities in Zambia (Ganzevoort 2009:n.p.). “Sketching” refers to the act of journaling – compiling detailed field notes that pay attention to the surrounding details of the experience, using metaphorical language to add authenticity to the narrative (Ward 2017:110-111; Ganzevoort 2009:n.p.). Finally, “tracing the sacred” involves a contemplative analysis of these sketches, seeking to identify the divine activity or the embodied expressions of faith within the mundane (Ganzevoort 2009:n.p.; Graham 2017:3; Ward 2017:14-21).

This methodology acknowledges the researcher's positionality. I found myself in an “in-between” position, a liminal space where I observed structures of power and suffering that I did not fully embody or understand (Müller 2017:87-88). I was not a guide, but a fellow traveller, aiming to understand the “who” and the “what” I encountered (Ganzevoort 2009:n.p.). As a White, Afrikaans, South African man who is formally educated, financially secure,

and homosexual, my own identity markers shaped what I noticed, what I was granted access to, and how I interpreted the performances I witnessed. This positionality is not a limitation to be overcome but a lens to be acknowledged throughout the analysis.

3. BACKSTAGE: BEHIND THE PERFORMANCE

The analysis is guided by three core theoretical concepts that provide a multi-layered lens for interpreting the urban landscape.

3.1 Gender as performance: Judith Butler

Butler's (1988; 1990) theory of gender performativity offers the foundational lens for understanding how bodies in the bus station become gendered. Butler (1988:519) begins with a deceptively simple claim: gender is not an expressive fact about a pre-existing internal self, but an effect – the product of a “stylized repetition of acts” over time. There is no ontological “doer behind the deed” (Butler 1990:34); rather, the doer is constituted in and through the deed itself.

Butler (1993:2) later refined her argument, by introducing the concept of materialisation. She argues that gender is not a free performance chosen at will, but a compulsory repetition of norms that precede and exceed the individual. These norms are so deeply sedimented that they come to feel “natural” – they materialise a gendered body that appears to have always been that way. Critically, this materialisation is never complete. The gap between the norm and any actual performance is where resistance and subversion become possible.

Crucially for this study, Butler (1990:22-34) introduces the heterosexual matrix: the intelligibility grid that requires bodies to cohere as stable, oppositional sexes (male/female) with corresponding genders (masculine/feminine) and heteroerotic desire. Within this matrix, a male body that performs tenderness, vulnerability, or same-sex desire becomes unintelligible – it does not compute. In the hyper-surveilled space of the Lusaka bus station, where masculinity is constantly policed by peers, passengers, and bystanders, this unintelligibility carries real risk. Butler's theory therefore directs our attention not only to *what* performances are visible, but also to which performances are foreclosed, mocked, or violently excluded.

3.2 The politics of masculinity: Raewyn Connell

Where Butler illuminates the how of gendered performance, Connell's (2005) theory of masculinities addresses the power dynamics – the social organisation of these performances into hierarchical relations. Connell (2005:37) argues

for plural masculinities, because a singular masculinity obscures the unequal relations between different ways of being a man.

Connell's (2005:76-81) central contribution is the concept of hegemonic masculinity: the culturally exalted form of masculinity that occupies the apex of the gender hierarchy. Hegemonic masculinity is not statistical – the vast majority of men do not embody it – but ideological. It is the legitimating claim to authority that justifies patriarchy, the systemic domination of women and the subordination of other, non-hegemonic masculinities.

Below this apex, Connell (2005:76-81) identifies three relational positions. Complicit masculinities are embodied by men who do not fully live up to the hegemonic ideal but nevertheless benefit from the *patriarchal dividend* – the collective advantage men gain from the overall subordination of women. Subordinate masculinities are positioned at the bottom, typically through association with femininity or homosexuality. Marginalised masculinities intersect with other axes of oppression such as race, class, and disability.

Connell (2005:60-66) also introduces the concept of body-reflexive practices to theorise how bodies are both agents and objects of social practice. Bodies are not passive surfaces inscribed by culture, nor are they purely natural. Rather, men engage with their bodies – and the bodies of others – in a reflexive loop. In other words, masculinity is not only displayed through bodily actions, but is also continually constructed and reconstructed through them.

3.3 The male dominance-male fragility cycle: Via Michel Foucault

The third theoretical lens addresses a paradox that emerged persistently during fieldwork. The men who most aggressively asserted dominance also appeared most visibly anxious about losing it. This paradox finds its conceptual home in what I call a male dominance-male fragility cycle – a formulation derived from the reading of Foucault's work on power and bio-power (Van Jaarsveld 2022:25-27).

Foucault (1978:135-139) famously argued that bodies are the literal and symbolic "battlefield", where power systems (society, culture, religion, economics) are inscribed. Power, for Foucault (1978:92-102), is not a possession held by dominant individuals; it is a productive force that circulates, producing subjects, desires, and even pleasures. However, Foucault also observed that wherever power operates, resistance is immanent – power is never absolute, never final, and therefore never secure.

In my doctoral research, I synthesised these Foucauldian insights into a cyclical model specifically for analysing masculinities in the Zambian context

(Van Jaarsveld 2022:25-27). The cycle operates as follows. The culturally prescribed imperative to achieve and assert male dominance (through control of women, resources, and other men) is never fully attainable. This impossibility generates chronic male fragility – a low-grade but persistent anxiety of inadequacy, vulnerability, and the ever-present risk of exposure as “not man enough”. This fragility, rather than moderating the pursuit of dominance, intensifies it. The man who feels fragile doubles down on the very performances that produced the fragility: louder voice, more aggressive posture, greater sexual conquest, and harsher policing of other men. This renewed assertion of dominance, because it is impossible to perfect, generates more fragility, which generates more compensatory dominance. The cycle is self-reinforcing, exhausting, and profoundly destructive to both the men trapped within it and those – particularly women and subordinate men – subjected to its violence.

What makes this cycle distinct from a simple “insecurity leads to aggression” model is its productive character. Following Foucault (1978:94), the cycle does not merely repress alternative masculinities, but also actively produces the hegemonic ideal as the only intelligible goal.

3.4 The city as a theo-drama: Ian Nell

To apply these three theoretical lenses methodologically – Butler’s performativity, Connell’s hierarchical masculinities, and the Foucauldian dominance-fragility cycle – to the study of everyday urban life, we turn to Nell’s (2020) concept of theo-drama.

Nell (2020:1-5) presents practical theology as the exploration of “God’s theatre”, drawing on the theatrical metaphor while infusing it with ethnographic sensitivity. The world is a stage; human beings are actors; our lives are performances guided by various scripts, some sacred, some secular, often tangled together. This framework is exceptionally useful for ethnography, as it allows us to analyse a social space by identifying:

- The stage: The specific context (e.g. the bus station/taxi rank) as a “glocal” space where local and global forces meet (Nell 2020:47).
- The actors: The individuals and groups (agents with agency) performing their roles (Nell 2020:12-13, 24).
- The scripts: The cultural, religious, and social narratives that inform and dictate the performance (Nell 2020:9).
- The plot: The overarching storylines and conflicts that unfold, which, in this instance, revolve around power, survival, and the sacred (Nell 2020:11; Ganzevoort 2009:n.p.; Van der Westhuizen *et al.* 2018:30).

This approach moves beyond mere analysis to a “hermeneutics of contemplation” (Müller & Pretorius 2019:92-93), which seeks to understand the context on its own terms and imagine alternative, more life-giving narratives.

4. THE BUS STATION AS A THEO-DRAMATIC STAGE

The bus station (or taxi rank, as it will be referred to in South Africa) is the primary stage of this urban drama: noisy, cramped, yet vibrant, with the performance of everyday life constantly in motion. To understand the daily realities of Lusaka, I adopted public transport as my main mode of travel during fieldwork.

Despite route grids taped to bus windows, departures and arrivals are unpredictable; passengers often change vehicles several times to reach their destinations. Once learned, however, the system allows access to virtually any compound, suburb or district.

My journeys usually began at Kaunda Square near Justo Mwale University, travelling through the city centre – “town”, as locals call it – to Millennium, City Market or Kulima Tower bus stations. These hubs, comparable to South African taxi ranks, are crowded yet welcoming; strangers readily assist newcomers, and buses leave only when full.

The financial underpinnings of this stage are defined by precarity. A single trip costs 7-10 Kwacha (approximately \$1), but lower-income households spend up to 40 per cent of their income on public transport – almost double the international benchmark (Chikuba 2014:5). With an estimated 453,000 passenger trips per day, the system is over-capacitated, leading to intense in-route competition. This results in “subsurface politics” such as passengers being forcibly moved from one bus to another mid-journey, a practice that goes largely unquestioned (Chikuba 2014:4-5; Cleaver 2013:e-source). The bus station is, therefore, not simply a transit point but a fiercely competitive marketplace, where economic survival dictates the day’s performance.

4.1 The cast of actors

Within this space, a cast of “actors” emerges, each enacting distinct roles in the drama of urban transport.

4.1.1 The recruiter: The hustler in raggedy clothes

The first actor to appear is the recruiter, usually a young man in raggedy clothes but possessing strong English communication skills. His performance is one of aggressive hospitality; he grabs passengers by the arm and guides

them through the maze of buses to the correct one. For this, he receives a small gratuity from the conductor – a tiny cut of the profit. His entire day is a “hustle against numerous other recruiters”, a performance of masculine competition that occasionally erupts into fights over “stealing their customers” (Van Jaarsveld 2022:105).

- **Performance of masculinity:** The recruiter performs a masculinity of relentless hustle and street-smart agility. He is the embodiment of what Connell (2000:10-12) would term a marginalised masculinity, operating at the bottom of the economic hierarchy. His puffed chest and aggressive posturing are not merely expressions of his identity but body-reflexive practices through which his masculinity is continuously made and contested (Connell 2005:60-66).
- **Fragility and dominance:** His performance of dominance through competition is fragile. His earnings are meagre, “not enough to support an entire family or to become financially independent” (Van Jaarsveld 2022:105). Respondents noted that these young men often go from the bus stop to the tavern, using their money to buy alcohol. This is a symptom of the “monotony and unpredictability of their job which leaves them fragile in an arena where male dominance is obvious” (Van Jaarsveld 2022:105). This is a clear example of the cycle where the inability to achieve hegemonic ideals of provider-status leads to behaviours that mask this fragility.

4.1.2 The conductor: The anxious manager of transactions

The conductor, also a young man, is smartly dressed and has a roll of Kwacha notes in his pocket (Van Jaarsveld 2022:105). His performance is strictly transactional. He ensures that the bus is full, often to the point of overcrowding, a necessary strategy to compensate for trips with fewer passengers (Chikuba 2014:4). He is constantly counting the money in his pocket, the first to know if they are having a “bad day” (Van Jaarsveld 2022:105). His salary is unpredictable, paid only after the driver, fuel, and the owner have taken their share.

- **Performance of masculinity:** The conductor performs a masculinity of managerial control and economic responsibility. He is higher in status than the recruiter, but his anxiety betrays his precarious position. He is complicit in the system, benefiting from the recruiters’ work but subject to the whims of the market and the owners.
- **Fragility and dominance:** His constant counting of money is a ritual of anxiety. He must perform an image of control and solvency, but his economic footing is unstable. This aligns with the observation that

competitiveness as a masculine ideal “provokes anxiety and shame” when men are unable to live up to the ideal (Langa 2020:28-30).

4.1.3 The driver: The summoned patriarch

The driver appears only when the bus is full – as though he is summoned (Van Jaarsveld 2022:106). This role is exclusively male. He is well-groomed, looks fresh, and wears a uniform of formal shoes and a light blue collared shirt. He seldom converses with passengers, maintaining an aura of detached authority. According to Chikuba (2014:4), he receives approximately 28 per cent of the gross income, a significant share. His expansive posture and calm commanding presence exemplify how authority is performed through the body.

- Performance of masculinity: The driver performs a masculinity of authority, skill, and relative privilege. He does not need to hustle; his performance is one of calm, assured capability. He is closer to the hegemonic ideal than the recruiter or conductor.
- Fragility and dominance: His dominance is clear, but it is not absolute. He is still an employee, subject to the unseen “big men”. His performance is one of delegated power.

4.1.4 The “big men”: The unseen directors

The most powerful actors never appear on stage. The “big men” are the bus owners who work “behind the scene”, organised into a private syndicate rarely discussed in public (Cleaver 2013:e-source; Van Jaarsveld 2022:107). They are the directors of this drama, setting routes and prices and taking the largest cut of the profits. They represent hegemonic masculinity in its economic form – invisible, powerful, and controlling the fate of all the other actors.

4.1.5 The woman entrepreneur: The overlooked actress

In the background, an actress is habitually overlooked. The woman entrepreneur sells goods from a small tuckshop or the pavement. She is ignored by many, going unnoticed in this macho, male-dominated environment where men are hustling and thriving (Van Jaarsveld 2022:107). Her performance differs from the numerous male vendors who walk the station with cooler boxes of cold drinks and snacks, constantly in motion yet still struggling to provide for their families. The woman does not approach customers directly but relies on fluent English and good negotiating skills from her fixed position. She is often the breadwinner, with respondents stating her husband is likely “dead, missing, drunk, jobless, or a migrant worker” (Evans 2014:e-source).

- Performance of femininity and power: The woman entrepreneur performs a resilience that contradicts prescribed gender roles. While subordinated

within the gendered hierarchy of the bus station, she is often the economic pillar of her household. This highlights the contradiction of the male dominance-fragility cycle. Even though men use their power over women, their inability to provide and care for their families resulted in more women (successfully) taking over the roles traditionally ascribed to men (Paas 2016:503; United Nations Zambia 2017:e-source; Aboum 2000:137).

4.2 The scripts

As the bus moves through the city, the stage expands, and the cultural scripts that guide the actors' performances become visible on billboards, posters, and the buses themselves.

4.2.1 Script 1: Lived religion on the move

The bus itself is a mobile repository of lived religion. It is a "site of theological inquiry" (Ward 2017:42; Ganzevoort 2009:n.p.) adorned with rosaries and crucifixes hanging from the rear-view mirror; a picture of a (White) Jesus from an old Hollywood movie asking: "Where is your faith?"; a bumper sticker proclaiming: "This bus is protected by the blood of Jesus.", and slogans such as "God is my rock", "Jesus wins", and "God's love never end (*sic*)" painted on the bodywork.

Similarly, tuck shops are christened "divine grace", "God is my boss", and "God's blessing". Wepener (2015:n.p.) would call these expressions (or manifestations) of the Christian faith in liturgical practices. This is "theology on the move" (Ward 2017:56-57), a pervasive reminder of God's presence in the midst of the city's chaos. The motivations are mixed. For some, it is genuine faith; for others, a "smart marketing strategy" in a Christian nation; for others still, a form of superstition to "ward off evil spirits and bad luck" (Kroesbergen-Kamps 2015:100-112).

4.2.2 Script 2: Pentecostal and political performances

Zambia's identity as an official Christian nation (Soko 2010:38) is leveraged by powerful institutions. Pentecostal church advertisements feature smartly dressed, typically self-appointed pastors and their wives, using the vocabulary of the prosperity gospel: "wealth", "miracles", "signs", "wonders", "powerful", "healing", and "fire" (Kroesbergen-Kamps 2015:100-112; Van Jaarsveld 2022:109). Some churches are called "temples" or "campuses", and their leaders, "prophets", "bishops", and "God's anointed". This presents a powerful cultural script for manhood: successful, authoritative, blessed, and publicly pious (Van Jaarsveld 2022:110-112; Van Klinken 2016).

This script is mirrored in politics. During his presidency, Edgar Lungu's campaign featured large billboards of him praying for Zambia. One co-traveller sarcastically noted:

People will think: 'What a good, Zambian man. He believes in God and prays for the people! I will vote for him' (Van Jaarsveld 2022:110).

These performances fuse religious and political authority, presenting a hegemonic masculinity that is dominant, strong, intelligent, and, without exception, Christian.

4.2.3 Script 3: The exploitative scripts of traditional healing

Perhaps the most revealing scripts are the small, white posters with bright blue writing advertising the services of “doctors” – traditional healers. Although officially condemned (Vidal 2005:e-resource), they thrive by exploiting the gaps between hegemonic ideals and lived reality.

For men, they promise solutions to “manhood problems” such as “penis enlargements”, “thickness”, “bigger and stronger erections” and help with “early ejaculations”; financial flourishing such as help to “become rich”, “win the lottery”, and connect with the “billionaires club”, and social power to “win court cases” and “recover lost property”. For women, they offer bodily conformity such as “hips and breast firming”, “wider hips”, and solutions to “barrenness”, and to “bring back a runaway husband”.

These posters are a stark script of hegemonic gender norms (Connell 2005:77; Connell 2000:10-12). They claim that men must be sexually vibrant, financially successful, and powerful, while women must be fertile, sexually appealing, and able to keep a man (Theron 2015:58-60). They exploit the self-reinforcing male dominance-male fragility cycle by offering quick fixes to those who cannot meet these cultural standards due to poverty, unemployment, reproductive health problems, disability, and/or gender-based violence (Ngwena 2018:151-196).

Crucially, they also offer anonymous, unsafe abortions, a service born from the “ignorance and confusion concerning abortion in Zambia” and leading to a significant number of gynaecological admissions (Owalabi *et al.* 2017:167-168; Banda 2017).

4.3 Contested spaces, actors and scripts

The journey from the public stage of the bus station leads to more intimate, yet equally potent spaces where masculinity is performed and policed: the church, the private home, and the tavern. These spaces along with its actors,

often in close physical proximity, represent powerful and often competing scripts for Zambian manhood.

The informal discussions and shared meals with Reformed Church in Zambia (RCZ) reverends and their families, a crucial source of information in this ethnographic research, revealed a complex world where theoretical support for gender equality coexists with deeply ingrained cultural practices (Van Jaarsveld 2022:166).

4.3.1 Contesting script 1: The church and the home – Reverent responsibility and domestic patriarchy

My fieldwork involved staying with families of RCZ reverends. In this instance, the performance of masculinity was distinctly different from the public hustle. The atmosphere in these homes was one of profound hospitality, encapsulated by the constant refrain of “you are welcome” and “this is your home” (Van Jaarsveld 2022:166-167). This hospitality, rooted in the philosophy of *ubuntu* (“I am because we are”), often extended to large, multi-generational households, substantiating a communal virtue of familial responsibility (Van Jaarsveld 2022:166).

Within this context, a clear model of hegemonic masculinity emerged. The ideal RCZ reverend embodies what Van Klinken (2016:117) terms “the ideal of biblical manhood”. This performance includes being a heterosexual, married, sober, and educated man, who is reliable, responsible, and hospitable. He is often engaged in a building project or pursuing postgraduate studies, demonstrating ambition within approved channels and proving his ability to lead (Van Jaarsveld 2022:167). There is also an affirmingly aware, though complex, relationship with the RCZ’s official journey towards gender equality, reflected in the support for female ministers and the current female vice president. This performance strives for a respectable, patriarchal stability – a masculinity that leads prayers and builds both congregations and physical structures.

However, this performance was not without its stark contradictions. A recurring and poignant custom in some homes was the practice of a wife, daughter, or niece entering the living room on her knees to greet the guest, remaining in that position until dismissed (Van Jaarsveld 2022:167). This gesture, considered a sign of respect in some cultures, presented a jarring contrast to the inclusive language used by the same men in formal interviews. It provoked critical internal questions. Is this not a blatant example of patriarchy? Do men practise multiple forms of masculinities, depending on the setting? (Van Jaarsveld 2022:168). This illustrated a clear dissonance between public theological ideals and private cultural performances, a form of “culturally sanctioned gender inequality” (Zulu 2015:81). Within the heterosexual matrix

(Butler 1990:22-34), this kneeling posture materialises a femininity defined by submission, reinforcing the intelligibility of male dominance as natural and right.

The gendered division of labour during these visits further affirmed stereotypical roles. While men socialised in the living room, women prepared food in the kitchen, often remaining there for the entirety of the visit (Van Jaarsveld 2022:168; Banda 2014:31; Zulu 2001:32). The husband is considered the head, provider, and protector of the house, while the wife is the caretaker, a role encompassing cooking, cleaning, and raising children (Van Jaarsveld 2022:167; Banda 2014:31; Zulu 2001:32). This role was symbolised by the *chitenge* cloth, which women wear around their waists when doing chores or in church. As one host explained, by wrapping the *chitenge*, a woman not only establishes her role in the household, but also shows respect to her husband, a practice some compared to the modesty garments of Arab women (Van Jaarsveld 2022:171; Mwaba 2016:113). This act of “putting on” the *chitenge* can be viewed as a powerful daily performance of prescribed femininity (Butler 1988) – a materialisation of gender through repeated, stylised acts.

Marriage and fatherhood were reinforced as crucial steps toward becoming “a real man” (Banda 2014:28). The ability to pay the bride price (*lobola*) serves as a public testimony of one’s capability as a provider, so much so that some men borrow money to afford it, and others remain single because they cannot (Van Jaarsveld 2022:169). This highlights the economic pressures embedded in the performance of successful masculinity. Furthermore, traditional practices such as the *cinamwali* initiation for girls, which teaches sexual techniques to please future husbands endorse a narrative where women are prepared for submission and men are entitled to sexual satisfaction, yet men are not similarly taught to satisfy their wives (Van Jaarsveld 2022:168; Sibomana & Meulenbeek 2011:e-source). In some traditions, a marriage is only considered “completed” after the birth of the first child, and the blame for a childless marriage often falls on the wife, with speculations ranging from infidelity to witchcraft (Banda 2014:20-21).

4.3.2 Contesting script 2: The tavern – Rugged domination

Juxtaposed directly against this world of churchly and domestic order was the ever-present tavern. “The tavern next door makes a lot of noise until early in the morning”, a host remarked, highlighting the audible intrusion of a competing reality (Van Jaarsveld 2022:171). The tavern is the stage for a radically different performance of hegemonic masculinity, one that the RCZ explicitly condemns, linking alcohol to the violent behaviour renounced by early missionaries (Cronje 2003:67; Cronje 1981:154; Van Jaarsveld 2022:171).

In this instance, manliness is asserted through the volume of alcohol consumed, the style of clothes worn, the prestige of the car driven, and the conquest of multiple sexual partners. Risk-taking behaviour, including violence and sexual aggression, is a means to gain admiration from peers and assert a dominant masculine identity (Langa 2020:13-15; Van Jaarsveld 2022:171). In this script, failure to perform is met with severe social penalty. In some male circles, if you do not drink alcohol, engage in regular (heterosexual) sexual activity, and if you are unable to use violence to prove your dominance and strength, you are considered weak and you are compared to a “girl” or “sissy” (Van Jaarsveld 2022:171). Within the heterosexual matrix, such a comparison functions as a policing mechanism. Any male body that does not perform hyper-heterosexual aggression risks being reclassified as feminine and, therefore, unintelligible as a “real man”. This script offers a visceral, physical form of power in contrast to the reverend’s spiritual and social authority.

The young women at these taverns also perform a different femininity, drinking alcohol and wearing modern clothes, with no *chitenge* in sight (Van Jaarsveld 2022:171).

4.3.3 Contesting script 3: A triangulation of masculinities

Observing these two opposing forms of masculinity in such close proximity was revealing. I noted that I did not identify with either, subscribing instead to another form of masculinity as a middle-class, Afrikaans, White, homosexual man (Van Jaarsveld 2022:171). This personal observation served as a powerful confirmation of Connell’s theory: hegemony is not singular but intersects with other contextual factors such as race, class, sexuality, and culture (Langa 2020:13-15). My own body, within the Zambian context, occupies an ambiguous position – privileged by race and class but rendered subordinate by sexuality. This ambiguity further illustrates the productive character of the male dominance-fragility cycle. Even those who benefit from certain hierarchies remain vulnerable to the cycle’s policing mechanisms.

The city, therefore, hosts a triangulation of masculinities – the reverend’s responsible patriarchy, the tavern-goer’s rugged domination, and the researcher’s own racial and class-based identity – all coexisting, competing, and defining themselves in relation to one another.

5. ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION: UNPACKING THE PLOTLINES

Contemplating this expanded ethnographic narrative reveals several intertwining plotlines that structure life on this urban stage (Van Jaarsveld 2022:112-114).

5.1 Plotline 1: The self-reinforcing cycle of male dominance and male fragility

The bus station is a “man’s world”, a space where men perform competitiveness and hustle – attributes stereotypically ascribed to men (Harari 2014:177). However, this performance is fraught with anxiety. The inability to prove their “manliness” results in feelings of insecurity, inadequacy, and self-doubt, which often lead to violent or risk-taking behaviour (Langa 2020:28-30; Van Jaarsveld 2022:112). The recruiter’s drinking, the conductor’s anxious money-counting, and the desperate turn to traditional healers are all symptoms of this fragility. The performance of dominance is, in many ways, a mask for profound vulnerability.

This self-reinforcing cycle – where the imperative to dominate generates chronic fragility, which, in turn, intensifies the pursuit of dominance – is visible across all three spaces. The recruiter’s meagre earnings mark him as a failure within the hegemonic script of the male provider. This failure generates fragility, which he masks by turning to the tavern. Drinking becomes a compensatory performance of masculinity when provision cannot be. Yet the money spent on alcohol further undermines his ability to provide, deepening the fragility and driving more drinking. Similarly, the reverend who cannot afford *lobola* remains unmarried, masking his fragility through intensified spiritual authority, while the tavern-goer who fails to perform hyper-masculinity risks being called a “sissy”, triggering an even more aggressive performance. In each instance, the cycle produces the very insecurity it claims to resolve.

5.2 Plotline 2: The overlooked agency of women

Despite being subordinated in the public transport sector and within many church and traditional structures, women entrepreneurs are vital economic actors. This accords with statistics showing that sub-Saharan Africa has the highest female entrepreneurial activity rate globally (United Nations Zambia 2017; Aboum 2000:137). Their marginalisation on this stage is a result of “unwritten rules saturated with patriarchy” (Harari 2014:177-178). Yet, their success as breadwinners (Paas 2016:503) directly challenges the hegemonic script of the male provider, pointing to a potential rupture in the self-reinforcing cycle. When women successfully occupy roles traditionally ascribed to men, the cycle’s claim that male dominance is natural and necessary is exposed as ideological rather than inevitable.

5.3 Plotline 3: The ambiguous space of contradiction

The bus station is a space of definite hierarchies (Connell 2002:5-7) and stark contradictions. It is saturated with Christian symbolism that preaches inclusion, yet it is a site of exclusion, gambling, and conflict. This space

“contains a variety of helpful and enlightening stories within a bigger story” (Müller 2017:87), a story where the sacred and the profane are intimately intertwined. This contradiction is magnified when considering the church and the tavern as neighbouring yet ideologically opposed spaces, both claiming to represent authentic forms of community and male identity. The same man might move between these spaces across a single week – responsible patriarch on Sunday, rugged dominator on Friday night – demonstrating the fluidity and context-dependence of gender performance.

5.4 Plotline 4: The multiplicity and spatiality of masculinities

The urban setting does not house a single masculinity, but a hierarchy of masculinities that are also spatially specific. The lived experience and performance of the recruiter, conductor, driver, and “big men” differ drastically due to class, education, and social standing (Van Jaarsveld 2022:116). This multiplicity is further complicated by the dedicated spaces of the church and the tavern, which cultivate and demand their own distinct performances. Therefore, not a single form or model of masculinity is to be found in this context, and enforcing a certain hegemonic norm on Zambian men would not only be unrealistic, but also incredibly cruel (Van Jaarsveld 2022:115). For the poor man, the hegemonic ideals preached by the church, displayed by politicians, or promised by traditional healers are constant, painful reminders of his failure, which the self-reinforcing cycle exploits to perpetuate itself.

5.5 Plotline 5: The public/private divide and the performance of contradiction

The field journal entries from the home reveal a critical tension between public discourse and private performance. While there is growing theoretical support for gender equality in Zambia (Van Jaarsveld 2022:166), this often coexists with “culturally sanctioned gender inequality” in domestic spaces (Zulu 2015:81). The same reverend who speaks inclusively in an interview may oversee a household where his wife greets guests on her knees. This demonstrates the fluidity of gender performance, where individuals can navigate multiple, even contradictory, scripts depending on the social context – the public church, the private home, or the male-only space of the tavern. This plotline underscores that transforming masculinities requires engagement not only with public theology, but also with the intimate, ingrained practices of daily life, where the *chitenge* is worn and customs such as *lobola* and *cinamwali* continue to shape gendered expectations and power dynamics.

6. THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION: CONTEMPLATING GOD'S THEATRE

Viewing this entire panorama through Nell's (2020) theo-dramatic lens, we view the bus station and the streets of Lusaka as a vibrant, chaotic, and deeply theological stage.

The stage is indeed "glocal" (Nell 2020:33). The local struggles of the recruiter are shaped by global economic pressures. The Pentecostal scripts are influenced by global Christian media, and the political performances borrow from global campaign strategies. It is a stage of contradiction, where the script of the Gospel clashes with the scripts of patriarchy and capitalism. This stage is not uniform; it contains multiple, simultaneous performances in the bus station, the church, and the tavern, each with its own *mise-en-scène* but all part of the same city-wide production.

In Ganzevoort's (2009:n.p.) terms, the actors are all "fellow travellers". The researcher is not an omniscient director but a passenger, a co-traveller learning the lines and the plot alongside the other actors. The task is to refrain from being a "guide" and instead to truly listen and understand the performances as they play out. This includes recognising the RCZ reverend, the tavern-goer, and the female entrepreneur not as case studies, but as co-actors in a shared, complex drama of existence. Each actor is simultaneously constrained by the scripts available to them and capable of improvisation within those constraints.

The scripts are multiple and competing. The unwritten script of patriarchal hegemony is the most powerful, but it is contested by the script of lived Christianity on the buses, the script of female resilience, and the subversive hope within the Pentecostal promise. The research in the home reveals that these scripts are not only public; they are also performed and negotiated in the intimacy of the household, where a theology of gender equality can be contradicted by a kneeling wife. The traditional healer's poster represents a parasitic script that feeds on the failures of the dominant one. Even within the broad "Christian script", there are conflicting sub-plots: the sober, responsible script of the mainline churches versus the prosperity-and-power script of the Pentecostals, both of which can be internally fractured by the persistence of domestic patriarchy, and all distinct from the rugged, hyper-heterosexual script of the tavern.

The plot is the ongoing drama of life in its fullness – a story of struggle, resilience, faith, and the quest for dignity. The dominant plot, as revealed throughout this analysis, is organised around the self-reinforcing male dominance-fragility cycle. However, counter-narratives emerge within this dominant plot: the female entrepreneur who defies economic subordination;

the reverend who publicly supports gender equality, and the young man who chooses sobriety over the tavern's script. One must "trace the sacred" in the midst of this plot (Ganzevoort 2009:n.p.). The sacred is not confined to the rosary on the mirror or the walls of the church; it is potentially present in the vendor's struggle to feed his family, in the quiet dignity of the female entrepreneur, in the reverend's pursuit of a responsible life, and even in the researcher's act of becoming a fellow traveller. In this instance, doing practical theology means being fully present in this context, initiating a dialogical process that points forward to real understanding, and validating the experiences of these actors in practice (Ward 2017:113).

This narrative journey is an exercise in a "hermeneutics of contemplation" (Müller & Pretorius 2019:92-93). Unlike a hermeneutic of suspicion that only deconstructs, contemplation seeks to understand the context on its own terms and advocate for new possibilities. It allows for a transformative contemplation that enables a greater theological self-understanding and reflexivity (Müller & Pretorius 2019:99). In contemplating the bus station, the church, and the tavern together, we see not only sites of oppression or piety, but also a complex ecosystem of human performance. We are challenged to imagine a stage where the scripts are not so cruel, where the fragility of men does not have to be masked by dominance, and where the sacred can be traced in the forging of more just and life-giving performances of gender and faith. The productive character of the cycle suggests that resistance is always immanent: if power produces the cycle, then alternative performances can produce alternative realities (Foucault 1978:94).

7. CONCLUSION

This thick ethnographic account of Lusaka's public transport hubs, churches, and taverns provides a vivid snapshot of the complex and often contradictory social, gendered, and religious dynamics in contemporary Zambia.

By framing the city as a multi-stage theo-drama, we can synthesise the key insights:

- Public and private spaces are interconnected performative stages that starkly reveal gender and social hierarchies. The male-dominated hustle of the bus station finds its echo in the competitive masculinity of the tavern and its contrast in the responsible patriarchy of the church, demonstrating that masculinity is not simply performed, but its performance is spatially specific.

- The self-reinforcing male dominance-male fragility cycle is the central plot across these spaces. Performances of competitive masculinity in the economy, aggressive masculinity in the tavern, and responsible masculinity in the church are all, to varying degrees, undermined by the insecurity of failing to meet an often-unattainable hegemonic ideal. This cycle is productive (Foucault 1978:94): it does not merely repress alternative masculinities but actively produces the hegemonic ideal as the only intelligible goal, while simultaneously generating the fragility that drives the cycle forward.
- Lived religion is a pervasive, ambiguous, and fragmented force. It blends authentic faith, marketing, and superstition into the urban fabric, and is co-opted by political and spiritual authorities. Crucially, "Christianity" itself is not a monolithic script but a site of internal contestation, offering different models of manhood from the mainline churches to the Pentecostal movements.
- Cultural "scripts" powerfully reinforce narrow gender norms, but the reality is a spatial multiplicity of masculinities and femininities. This makes the hegemonic ideal a source of aspiration for some, a marker of painful failure for others, and a point of negotiation for all. The traditional healer's posters thrive, by exploiting the gap between the ideal and the lived reality.
- The contradiction between public ideals and private practices is a defining feature of the gender landscape. Support for gender equality in theory can coexist with performances of patriarchy in the home, revealing the complex, context-dependent nature of identity performance. Transforming masculinities requires engaging not only public theology, but also the intimate, embodied practices of daily life.

In essence, these spaces show that identity is not a fixed essence but a performance. Masculinities and Christianity are mutually constructed and negotiated in the everyday spaces of the city through the acts of hustling, commuting, selling, preaching, drinking, and praying. The field journal, as a tool of contemplative practical theology, bridges theory and lived experience, revealing that the most profound theological and gendered dramas are not played out in abstract texts, but in the crowded, noisy, and sacred theatre of the streets, where the paths between the taxi, the tavern, and the temple are constantly traversed, and the scripts for a faithful life are endlessly written and rewritten.

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