



Fr Frank Wafer, S.J.

(1934-2021. In Zambia 1959-2021)

17 September 2021

Fr William Francis Wafer (called Frank) was born on 9 April 1934 in Dalkey (outside Dublin), Ireland. He was the eldest of the four children of William Wafer and Kathleen Martin. He is survived by his brother John, in Maryland, USA.

He went to the Christian Brothers School in Monkstown and afterwards entered the novitiate in 1959. He went on to University College Dublin for a BA and began his philosophy in 1958.

He spent his regency teaching in Canisius College, Chikuni, Northern Rhodesia and learning chiTonga. The exposure to the local music made a lasting impression on him. He returned to Ireland for theology, was ordained in 1965 and completed his tertianship. During the long breaks he went to London University to SOAS (School of Oriental & African Studies) where he met professional mentors, like Rev A M Jones (originally in Mapanza in Southern Zambia), a musicologist and Hazel Carter, a Tonga linguist. After his priestly studies, he requested to do an MA in African musicology in SOAS, which included some field work in Zambia.

His first assignment was to Charles Lwanga TTC as a lecturer. After his 30 classes a week, he would head out to the neighboring villages for ministry and to record the local music. Mr Donal O Murchu, a lay teacher at the College, (1967-1974) recalls that “it did not take long for his mark to be observed. From the very start it was the music... He could miss meals... come back and his excitement was palpable. He had found a new *mudaala* or *baama*. Most of his sources were elderly but at the same time he was nurturing the spark in other younger people.”

Some visitors from the Copperbelt saw him at work, and organized the Catenians (a Catholic organization) who funded his professional recording material, as well as his Honda motorbike – from which he suffered several falls. The joke in the College was the answer to the question: ‘What is the most dangerous animal in the bush?’: Answer: ‘Wafer on his Honda.’ “He would work himself to a standstill... and be laid low for a few days and then off again.” In time these relapses became more serious and he had to recover in Ireland in 1989 to 1990.

He was released from teaching and assigned to parish ministry (1977-1980) in Kasiya and Nakambala where he had more scope to continue his efforts to get the local Christians to develop their own liturgical music. He then spent almost a decade (1981-1989) in St Mary’s, near St Kizito pastoral and catechetical centre, outside Monze. During these years the new hymns were composed and recorded and taught in all the parishes of the diocese.

He collapsed from exhaustion in 1989 and on his return was assigned to Chikuni in 1991, where he set up the Mukanzubo-Kalinda Centre, in the refurbished old primary school, adjacent to the community house. He sought overseas funding for the centre and had many of the old Tonga readers reprinted. He also greatly encouraged younger Tonga writers and he succeeded having 30 booklets published. In his failing years he saw to the completion of his major work: the Tonga-English dictionary.

In collaboration with Yvonne Ndaba and many others, the centre grew both in the collection of music and folklore, as well as becoming a Tonga cultural centre, where much of the traditional values are passed on to the younger generation. Yvonne was a key element in the organization of the older women to help in the traditional ways of preparing young women for their future role in the community.

In conjunction with Chikuni Radio, much of their material could be broadcasted throughout Tongaland. In time, Chikuni Radio, under Fr Andrzej Lesniara, participated in organizing an annual music and cultural festival with both traditional and modern musicians.

Mr. Kevin Reynolds, a teacher in the Jesuit College of Belvedere in Dublin, paid several visits to the centre in Chikuni. He brought a small professional team to catalogue the music holdings of the Centre (363 reel to reel tapes and 201 cassettes tapes). He had arranged with the Burns library of Boston College, USA to begin the process of digitalization, so that this cultural heritage would be easily available in the future. They were greatly helped by the fact that Frank had always insisted on high quality recordings.

Frank was a pleasant person who wholeheartedly gave his life that the Good News would be better expressed in the local people’s language and music. He was a humble man “forever willing to shed the credit for the work done and rarely took what was due to himself” (O Murchu). His quiet and unassuming manner enabled others to give of their best to preserve and transmit the local culture. He was known affectionately as *Maembo*, the ‘Singer’.

In 2007 he stepped down as director but continued to work there (2007-2014). In 2015 he had a fall and lost a lot of blood. As his memory was beginning to fade, he was assigned to Chula House in 2015. After a final stroke he passed to the Lord on 17 September 2021 – just after completing 70 years as a Jesuit!

He was given a traditional funeral of a well-respected elder by the local people – with an all-night vigil organized by Yvonne Ndaba. At the final rites, in the Chikuni cemetery, the grave was surrounded by a troupe of dancing women, while a group of younger women danced on the top of the burial mound. A drum was then smashed and the pieces inserted into the mound. The Singer was laid to rest as people saw fit.