

Return to Zambia after 25 Years - by Terry Bergdall, Oct 2025

Pamela and I lived 18 years in Africa, the final 13 in Zambia, doing village development work. We began as staff members at the Institute of Cultural Affairs (ICA) in Nairobi. Twenty-five years after my departure from Zambia, I finally returned in October 2025 while on my way to attend an ICA Global Conference at Victoria Falls. These reflections began as a personal entry in my journal when it crossed my mind that perhaps they might also be of some small interest to various friends, colleagues, and family members. When the reading becomes a chore, please skip to the photos at the end. The update here really is just an **overly ambitious postcard**. 🤔

Observations and impressions about change in Zambia since my departure in 2000:

- At about the same time that I returned to Chicago in 2000, the first large modern shopping mall opened in Lusaka across from the showgrounds on the Great East Road. Now **numerous large shopping malls** can be found throughout the city. The one across the showgrounds has quadrupled in size with a huge, expanded parking lot. The Kabulanga neighborhood had a single grocery store -- Melissa's (or MMM) -- during my 13 years in Lusaka. It was the grocery store where I preferred to shop because, though modest, it had the best stocked shelves in the city. Now the Kabulanga shopping area has spread over a half a kilometer and is full of several large commercial businesses. MMM itself has moved into a much larger facility and rivals the supermarkets in physical size and inventory that I frequent in Chicago. A big surprise for me was a major new mall located directly **across the street from the Co-op College**. The college, where Pam and I both delivered training programs, was far out of town during my time in Zambia and was reached by passing a long stretch of empty land and the city's cemetery. Nothing else was nearby. Now it is the busy destination of many, many shoppers.
- These malls with busy shoppers are a huge **contrast to long slow-moving lines outside small shops in the 1980s** which were unavoidable for many people needing to purchase basics like ground maize and cooking oil.
- An even a bigger surprise than the malls was the **explosion of franchise restaurants** that have appeared "everywhere:" Nandos's chicken, The Hungry Lion, Debonaire's pizza, Steer's burgers and steaks -- with most of these, I suppose, being South African fast-food chains. The number of these places is comparable to the McDonald's, Wendy's, and Pizza Huts, etc., that have overtaken American cities. KFC is one franchise that seems to flourish in both countries. I never expected to see this in Zambia. There also are many new **flyover bridges on widened roads** to accommodate the traffic to and from the malls and fast-food franchises.
- Besides the sheer number of these eating establishments and shopping malls, I was totally unprepared to see them fully occupied by **middleclass Zambians with the necessary disposable income**, especially in the more urban areas, to frequent them.
- And these changes are not only in Lusaka. On the road to Victoria Falls, we saw the same **supermarkets and food franchises in district towns** like Kafue, Mazabuka, Monze, as well as the regional center of Choma.
- As widely reported elsewhere, a dominant **presence of the Chinese is apparent** everywhere in Zambia. One of the major sponsors of the annual "chiefdom" celebration that we attended while in Choma was a Chinese mining company. Their Chinese managing director delivered a major speech during the ceremony.
- **Cell phones are also everywhere** in Zambia, including among those rural farmers who ride their bikes to market over-loaded with goods for sale. Telephone transfers of money are a major form of making payments. While we were in Choma, our host purchased a

watermelon from a roadside vendor (i.e., an elderly woman sitting on a blanket as she attempted to sell a dozen watermelons and some cucumbers, tomatoes, and a few other vegetable) via a **phone transfer of kwacha**, Zambia's currency. This is a very popular alternative to cash and credit cards.

- In contrast to these signs of affluence in towns and cities, I saw **relatively little change in the rural areas**. The challenges there seemed very similar to those I observed decades before. Farmers still move heavy loads of vegetables, firewood, and charcoal, etc., by bicycle to outdoor markets. It is backbreaking work. On the road between Lusaka and Choma, roadside vendors continue to sell small items to those that can be persuaded to stop. One noticeable change, however, as mentioned above, is the extensive presence of cell phones.

Mr. Hademu, regenerative agriculture, and family connections:

- **Pam and I stayed for a week on a small farm** 10 kms north of Choma in the Southern Province. It belongs to **Mr. Cornwell Hademu**. Pam began doing training programs with him in 1990 while I was working with the Swedish Cooperative Centre. He and Pam continued to partner together during subsequent years as I shifted to doing independent consulting work across Africa. During 2000-2005, Mr. Hademu became program coordinator for an ICA program in Choma and then Program Director, 2005-2016, as the program morphed into an independent non-profit organization.
- After our move to Chicago, Pam returned annually to Zambia to do voluntary work with him, usually 4-6 weeks each year. The covid years, 2020-2021, were the only ones she missed. His organization assists local farmers, women's groups, and youth in developing **regenerative organic agriculture** practices in rural areas. After his retirement, his small farm has become a demonstration site for short-term residential training programs. During my stay, we visited a district-wide gathering of representatives from 60 village women's groups. When Pam was introduced, the moderator asked how many had participated in a training workshop led by Pam: $\frac{3}{4}$ of the group raised their hand.
- Mr. Hademu's farm is built on principles of **appropriate technology** which can be applied at low cost by his neighbors. While he has solar electricity for water pumps, old-fashioned bucket-&-cup showers were the norm throughout our visit. The solar panels keep a few lights on after the sun sets but Mr. Hademu has no frig for keeping leftovers. All food is cooked over open flames. In a word, life on his farm is very simple.
- One demonstration we observed while there was an **innovative way to produce charcoal briquettes and "biochar" fertilizer**. Rather than cutting trees on a landscape that is increasing becoming bare, these are made from dead tree branches and almost anything else that is flammable. Pam and I attended an educational demonstration session with half a dozen residential students. The "biochar" involves mixing charcoal with manure and adding enriching "microbes" which then serves as an organic fertilizer.
- Since his retirement, Mr. Hademu has also hosted a **weekly radio program** that promotes sustainable farming practices through educational messaging based on first-hand experience from his farm and experiences of groups like those in Chief Cooma's chiefdom. He also is the **Committee Chairman of the "Choma Central Constituency Development Fund."** Of 166 constituency committees in Zambia, his was recognized nationally for its actions to expand accessibility to water, lending much credibility to Mr. Hademu's radio broadcasts. He also has become a major patron of the local museum and an enterprising nursery by playing an active role on their Board of Directors.
- As a result of her annual trips, **Pamela has become a virtual member of the family headed by Mweene Kalibi, Mr. Hademu's first son**. He is a successful independent

architect with a few employees in Lusaka while Rita, his wife, is a social worker. They have two boys and a young daughter: Luyando is 13; Lumuno is 9; and the daughter, Lusungu, is four. Because Mweene's and Rita's mothers died well before the birth of their own children, Pam has become a surrogate grandmother to these three kids, a fact that was obviously apparent to me from the moment I stepped into the house. A major motivation for my trip to Zambia was to spend time with this family and to become personally acquainted them all. It has been a terrific experience.

- Pam has developed a very **strong relationship with Chief Cooma** over the years. During our stay on the farm, we attended his "silver anniversary" as Chief which was combined with thanksgiving celebration for the recent harvest. Chief Cooma is a champion of progressive ideas like protecting land tenure for single women and the promotion of organic farming. He himself has stopped using chemical fertilizers and instead has returned to the use of manure and preservation of his own heirloom seeds. This is significant where the dominant approach encourages dependence on chemicals and GMO seeds which require annual new purchases from international corporations.
- Chief Cooma welcomed and supports the work of a kindred-spirit farmer, an American working with a faith-organization that follows an approach called "Farming God's Way." This is an interesting strategy where the religious ethos is very strong. Their program stresses that God has provided farmers an opportunity of **good stewardship through organic care of soil, nature, and water**, etc. A more secular and universal interpretation of this approach means "people are never victims and can creatively move forward with the resources they have rather than waiting for something to arrive from the outside in the hope of escaping from the reality of their situation." Though wordy, it's an important insight. It's a matter of a relationship. Pam and I were impressed by the emphasis this group places on **changing "mindsets"** in contrast to promoting schemes of hyped-up "techniques" based on externally marketed inputs. These often are empty hopes based on expensive, harmful, and unsustainable practices that risk ever increasing debt. Pam and I view the alliance between the Chief and this group to be very encouraging.

Zambia, of course, has significantly changed over the past 25 years but many of the same challenges remain. It's been an invigorating experience to make the comparisons. Below, and on the following pages, are a handful of photos that visually elaborate upon my grand return.



Mr. Cornwell Hademu (left) who is Pam's primary host during her annual work trips to Zambia, and Chief Cooma (center), an enthusiastic and progressive traditional Chief committed to the active promotion of regenerative agriculture across his large Chiefdom.



Grandmother Pam with the Kalibi family in Lusaka: Meena (father) standing to her left, the three grandchildren in the center: Luyando (13), Lumuno (9), and Lusungu (4); cousin Gift to the right of Luyando, and Rita (mother) is on the right. Godfather Terry is sitting at the left.



While we were in the Southern Province, we attended the extended Kalibi family reunion held on the farm site of Mr. Hademu's father.



Several years ago, Pam and Mr. Hademu planted many trees around his mother's home before she died and we stopped to see their progress.



The reunion's ritual ceremony decorating graves of family members, including Mr. Hademu's father.



Mr. Hademu is the oldest surviving child of his father and, therefore, is now the family patriarch.



Pam (upfront) did training with many of these 60 representatives from district women's groups.



Mr. Hademu riding a bike in front of his farmhouse where Pam and I stayed during our visit.



A demonstration of making biochar (a sustainable fertilizer) with resident learners at the farm.



Charcoal briquettes made in a similar fashion as biochar from dead limbs rather than live cut trees.



On a site visit to a large nursery, a project of the Constituency Development Committee.



Wood on the way to market by bike, the workhorse in rural areas across Zambia.



Rita, Mr. Hademu's daughter-in-law, at his farm in the Southern Province near Choma.