

Mlenga, Joyce

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The Modification of Traditional and Religious Rituals and Its Impact on the Adherents in Modern Malawi

Joyce Mlenga

Abstract

There has been an increasing trend of modification of traditional and religious rituals, which has led to a remarkable impact on the adherents of the rituals in Malawi. Therefore, the modification has raised questions about the authenticity, purpose and meaning of these modified rituals. This chapter seeks to examine these modifications occurring in traditional and religious rituals associated with puberty initiation and funeral rites in modern Malawi. Additionally, the chapter analyses the impact of the modification on adherents in Modern Malawi. The study utilised a hybrid of methods to collect data on funeral rituals in Traditional Authority Mwilang'ombe in Karonga District. Data was gathered through observation and interviews with key informants. Field notes and audio recordings, with participants' consent, were utilised. Data was analysed thematically. However, data on puberty initiation rites was based on a review of grey literature, anecdotal evidence, and informal conversations. The study found that due to modernization, religious influences and health concerns, there have been considerable modification of puberty initiation and funeral rites, affecting the adherents positively and negatively. Positively, modification of rituals protects those involved from contracting contagious diseases and pandemics, while at the same time, it has created a void in many people's lives, leaving them with unresolved issues, especially concerning identification and their relationship with their ancestors. Understanding this modification and its consequences is crucial for comprehending the challenges and opportunities facing Malawian society as it navigates the delicate balance between preserving cultural heritage and adapting to contemporary realities.

Introduction

Malawi's traditional and religious rituals are ingrained in the daily lives of its people, connecting them to ancestral heritage, agricultural cycles, and

community cohesion. These rituals, ranging from rites of passage to communal celebrations, have served as channels for passing down cultural values and maintaining a collective sense of identity (van Gennep, 1960). The traditional and religious rituals are deeply rooted in the customs of various ethnic groups of Malawi. However, the dynamics of traditional and religious rituals are evolving in response to changing societal structures, modernisation, the influence of Christianity and Islam, and epidemics, such as HIV and AIDS and, most recently, COVID-19 (Prazak, 2007). While some rituals are being modified, others have been abandoned completely.

There are many rituals that communities in both rural and urban areas perform, which are connected to traditional religious beliefs in Malawi. These include rituals associated with pregnancy and birth, initiation rites of boys and girls, funeral and mourning rites, enthronement of chiefs, healing rituals and many others (Kyalo, 2013). While changes are being witnessed in several rituals, this chapter focuses on those changes associated with two rites of passage ceremonies: initiation of boys and girls (puberty initiation rites) and funeral rites. The choice has been based on the observation that these two rites are ritually laden, but at the same time, there is an increasing trend of changes with accompanying effects. Mbiti (1991) notes that some rituals associated with rites of passage, such as those connected with birth and the naming of children, can continue to be followed with slight modifications. However, those associated with the initiation of boys and girls seem difficult to maintain due to Western education, and recently, owing to the influence of Christianity and Islam.

This qualitative study employed observation and in-depth interviews as data-collecting strategies on funeral rituals in Karonga, in Northern Malawi. Forty people (21 males and 19 females) and four key informants, who function as traditional leaders within their community, were interviewed. The community members were conveniently sampled, while key informants were selected through purposive sampling. Thematic analysis was conducted on the data. Data on puberty initiation rites, which are concentrated in the Southern and Eastern regions of Malawi, was collected through existing grey literature and anecdotal evidence. Analysis was conducted thematically. Ethical procedures were maintained throughout the study.

This study contributes to the conversation on change and traditional and religious rituals, and how the changes impact different communities. Comprehending the challenges and opportunities facing Malawian society in navigating the delicate balance between preserving cultural heritage

and adapting to contemporary realities requires understanding the modifications and their consequences.

Ritual: A Conceptual Analysis and Significance

The most common definitions present ritual as a religious action or ceremony, even though not all rituals are religious (Mbiti, 1970; Kyalo, 2013). For instance, Mbiti (1970) defines ritual as “a set form of carrying out a religious action or ceremony” (p. 131). He considers ritual as a means of communicating something of religious significance through word, symbol or action (Mbiti, 1991). Assmann (2006) believes that “rites are symbolic actions whose meaning exceeds the primary purpose of the action” (p. 71). It is important to note that rituals are not practised in a vacuum, but there are underlying beliefs. According to Ugwu and Nwankwo (2020), a ritual is a set of gestures and actions that make up rites. Some rituals contain a series of actions that are always performed in the same way each time they are done, and, in most cases, those who do them like to do them, just like their ancestors did them. Rituals are mostly connected to religious activities, but they can also be related to other traditions or cultures of a specific community, or they can be connected to ceremonies or different protocols. It is important to note that rituals are often associated with specific mythological concepts. Participants believe that the authority for the ritual comes from external sources such as the state, society, God, ancestors, or tradition (Lavenda & Schultz, 2003).

Closely related to ritual are rites. Rites are ceremonies performed by a particular group of people, often for religious purposes, such as initiation and funeral rites, commonly known as rites of passage. Bell (1997) defines rites of passage as “ceremonies that accompany and dramatise such major events as birth, coming-of-age initiations for boys and girls, marriage and death” (Bell, 1997, p. 94). It is a ceremony or event that leads to a new phase of life. Rites are established, well-structured and ceremonial acts, while rituals are the actions that are performed in a rite. Rites of passage are important events or ceremonies that symbolise a person’s moment of transition from one social status to another (Ludwig, 2001; Frogelin & Schiffer, 2015). Some authors refer to rites of passage as “life-crisis” or “life-cycle” rites that culturally mark a person’s transition from one phase of life to another (van Gennep, 1960; Bell, 1997; Skinner et al., 2013). Some rituals are religious, while others are just traditional, especially those to do with initiation rites, even though it is very difficult

to separate tradition from religion since culture and religion are intertwined in Africa.

Notably, rituals associated with rites of passage play a vital role in Malawian societies. The rituals occupy an important place in the lives of those who perform the rituals, or of the individuals on whose behalf the rituals are performed. First, rituals associated with rites of passage tend to knit people together, increasing solidarity (Jindra & Noret, 2022; van Gennep, 1960). The rituals and ceremonies play a crucial role in shaping the identities of members of various communities. Every society, whether traditional or otherwise, engages in rituals, which give it identity and cohesiveness. Rituals are an expression of the collective consciousness of a society. According to Durkheim, as cited by D’Orsi and Dei (2018), the negative, positive, or peculiar rituals all have one major function; they provide social order. They aim to uphold the community to renew the sense of belonging to the group and maintain their beliefs and faith.

Hiebert et al. (1999) state that rituals have multiple important functions, one of which is to provide people with a sense of identity and belonging. During rituals, a group feels its unity most intensely, and members acknowledge their mutual sense of belonging. Rituals also connect people to the supernatural, enabling them to experience and relate directly to the spirits, ancestors, and supernatural forces. There are different rituals, each with its own meaning and rationale. Those who perform the rituals are usually confident that something will happen or will not happen after performing each ritual, depending on the need at the time the ritual is performed.

While there are different kinds of rituals, rituals of passage serve a specific function. The specific function of rituals of passage is to create fixed and meaningful transformations in the life cycle. People are physically and sociologically transformed into “new” beings with new roles in the life cycle. Ray (1976) expresses it thus:

Newborn infants are made into human persons, children are made into adults, men and women are made into husband and wife, and deceased people are made into revered ancestors... This remaking of man... involves the symbolic destruction of the old and the creation of the new (p. 91).

Human rituals are universal symbolic actions that are repetitive, standardised, and highly valued. They help individuals channel emotions, share beliefs, and transmit values (Santos & Gould, 2018).

Initiation and puberty rituals have many symbolic meanings in addition to the physical drama and impact. According to Mbiti (1970, p. 158), the youth are ritually introduced to the art of communal living. Another great significance of the rites is to introduce the candidates to adult life: they are now allowed to share in the full privileges and duties of the community. They enter a state of responsibility: they inherit new rights, and new obligations are expected of them by society. They are prepared in matters of sexual life, marriage, procreation and family responsibilities. Initiation rites have an educational purpose; the occasion marks the beginning of acquiring knowledge, which is otherwise not accessible to those who have not been initiated (Mbiti, 1970; Schroeder et al., 2022).

In Malawi, boys' and girls' initiation rituals are far more commonly practised in the Southern Region than in the other regions, and are also more common in rural areas than in urban areas. The *Fisi* tradition is almost exclusively prevalent in the South, where it is particularly common in the districts of Mulanje and Phalombe (Makwemba et al., 2019), even though it is discouraged nowadays due to the HIV and AIDS epidemic. It must be noted that girls and boys are mostly encouraged to go for initiation as a matter of fulfilling traditional requirements. Initiation rites are important not only for the initiates but also for the parents and guardians of the initiates (Ussi, 2004). For instance, the circumcision of a boy improves the social status of his parents because they gain respect. The puberty initiation rites of passage serve to introduce and transition young people to a new sense of identity and a more respected social standing in their communities (Schroeder et al., 2022; Thomas, 2005). Boys feel more assertive than before, and girls feel empowered by the lessons they get from initiation ceremonies. Ekine et al. (2013, p. 15) note that girls' "value depends on how feminine they are and whether they can please men sexually or not".

Funeral rites are more elaborate than other rites and are assigned the greatest importance in many societies in Malawi. The rites play a significant role in ushering the spirit of the deceased into the realm of spirits by purifying it after burial. Such rituals ensure that the departed enter the ancestral realm in peace, an aspect that is crucial for the flourishing of the living. When the deceased has a peaceful transition, it also enables the living to thrive.

Traditional and Religious Rituals and Change in Malawi

Modification in this chapter is used to refer to minor and major changes that have taken place in a particular ritual due to factors such as modernization, religious influences and recently, epidemics, such as HIV and AIDS, as pointed out already. Rituals change over time and space. However, they sometimes change rapidly in response to events that challenge people's beliefs, myths and health. In Malawi, the past few decades have witnessed accelerated social and cultural transformations caused by economic conditions, political and ideological changes, epidemics and new technologies. These events have resulted in people adapting old rituals to suit the new conditions.

Some rituals have been modified, changed or transformed to accommodate contemporary realities. It is also obvious that other rituals remain the same because there has not been anything that necessitates the change. The power to change rituals lies with various people. However, at the village level, the village chiefs and elders hold the most power. Additionally, the government and non-governmental organisations can also influence changes in rituals based on the prevailing circumstances (Makwemba et al., 2019). For instance, during the Covid-19 pandemic, some rituals were suspended or modified, to prevent the disease from spreading further.

Research and personal observations have noted that some rituals have been modified because the original ones seemed to have lost their place in modern society. Both internal and external factors have influenced ritual modifications. Due to Christianity, western education, and modernity, some members of society consider some rituals irrelevant. Other factors that have influenced the modifications include neo-colonialism, globalisation and urbanisation. The next section discusses the changes that have taken place in rituals associated with puberty initiation rites and funeral rites.

Rituals Associated with Puberty Initiation Rites

Initiation rites associated with puberty serve a very important function. They allow boys to participate in the transition from boyhood to manhood and girls from girlhood to womanhood. In Malawi, several significant changes have been witnessed in the way that puberty initiation rites are conducted among the Chewa of Central Malawi. One of the changes in the initiation rites among the Chewa has occurred in response to the HIV

and AIDS pandemic. In the past, traditionally, the ceremonies for courtship and marriage followed immediately after initiation. However currently, this is not always the case (Ott, 2000). The onset of sexually transmitted diseases such as HIV and AIDS has caused the Ministry of Health to intervene in initiation rites in order to reduce the spread of the disease. To modify this practice, the church has taken over the initiation of boys and girls who belong to the Christian faith. Several authors have written on the “Christianization” of initiation rites of boys and girls, which tries to provide an alternative or a modification to what has been occurring before (Chakanza, 1995; Fiedler, 2005; Phiri, 1995). The usual lament is that with the Christianization of the rites, some cultural elements have been lost. Those who belong to other religions, such as Islam, are being encouraged to conduct the puberty initiations in a way that will ensure safety for the initiates, such as encouraging circumcision that is done in hospital facilities. Despite Church and government injunctions, some communities still follow traditional puberty initiations. It is true that even Christians take their children to traditional initiation, in addition to Christianized initiation, as they see the former as necessary (Ussi, 2004).

Today, parents are encouraged to take their children to health facilities for circumcision. However, contemporary research shows that this ritual is considered incomplete, and even empty, because the ritual is described as authentic based on who does it, where it is done, and how it is done (Schroeder et al., 2022; Prazak, 2007). For most Malawian traditional initiation rituals, the process is filled with ceremonies and incantations. For instance, in a *Jando* initiation ceremony conducted among the Yao tribe, a special person known as *Ngaliba* is responsible for the surgical operations and uses traditional medicine to heal the wounds (Ussi, 2004).

The Changing Funeral Rites in Malawi

The dead body is at the centre of a number of funeral ritual practices in Malawi. Death, including proper ways of mourning, preparation of the body and beliefs about the afterlife, involves complex and even long rituals and ceremonies (Mombo & Mojola, 2022). The people in Karonga are very sensitive to what is done when death occurs in the family. They ensure that everything is done right so that an individual or the family does not face the consequences of negligence.

There are three kinds of rituals regarding death: pre-burial, burial, and post-burial. There are rituals concerning the preparation of the corpse for

disposal. Ritual leaders found in every village perform these rituals. Apart from preparation, there are rituals that are associated with the actual burial and after burial. It must be noted that funeral rites vary depending on the status of the person on whom the rites are being performed (Mlenga, 2016). Major funerals such as those of chiefs and other important persons require a lot of preparation and rituals. The death of children or ordinary people may not require a lot of preparation and rituals. Funeral and mourning rites mark symbolically the transition from the material world into the spiritual world, which Mbiti refers to as the community of the “living dead” that is the spirits of the ancestors. Deceased persons are usually made to rest among their dead relatives within their land. This explains why when one dies in an urban area, the dead body is taken home (to the village) to be buried among ancestors which is also the place where rituals are freely performed.

In Malawi, many changes have been observed over time, from the preparation of the body to the burial itself. For instance, there is a tendency for many urbanised people to be buried where they reside, and this is a major concern for the relatives who live in the village. Burying a person in the city prevents elders from directing the burial according to the “essential” rites, by village standards. This is because the context of rituals is the village, and the city does not provide a conducive environment for such rituals. The respondents in Karonga consider the sending of the dead to the ancestors in the city as incomplete and, therefore, inauthentic, because proper burial rites have not taken place. This remains true even when the relatives or elders of the village are invited to attend the burial ceremony in the city. In fact, people in some cultures in Malawi, such as the Tumbuka, refer to urban centres as “*kuthondo*” (bush). Towns and cities are not “home”, the genuine home is the village. For communities where burial rites are important, it becomes an issue of great concern if a deceased relative is buried in towns or the city. Normally, rituals are performed for the safety of both the deceased and the bereaved. If the living do not carry out the rituals, they may face misfortunes if the deceased is displeased.

Additionally, traditional funeral rituals such as shaving hair, washing hands in medicated water after burial, especially when people come from the graveyard, sweeping the premises after burial (including who sweeps), the period for mourning the dead, gathering and spending nights at the funeral home, have undergone some considerable changes. For a long time, in the Ngonde culture of Northern Malawi, close relatives used to wash their hands with traditionally medicated water on the grave of the

deceased, immediately after burial. This was done to ward off the spirit of the dead, which may 'stick' to their hands. This was a modification because, in the past, the family members bathed their whole bodies to remove the 'smell' of death and spirits from the bodies. The washing of hands is a case of practical innovation, where symbolic rituals have replaced the original ones. Today, washing hands is not mandatory, and with the advent of COVID-19, some choose to use sanitizers on their hands. Rather than shaving the head, a pair of scissors can be laid on the head, or very little hair can be cut as a symbolic gesture (Mlenga, 2016). Further, in the past, the sweeping of the premises would take place after three days, but these days, it takes a day after burial and it is just symbolic. A small area is swept, while in the past, the whole surrounding premises would be swept.

Among the Chewa of Central Malawi, when it came to the preparation of the body, the deceased's head was shaved and anointed with oil. This is no longer done today (Breugel, 2001). Breugel further reports that in the past, the outside cloth for wrapping a dead body, especially for the chief, had to be red, and white for an ordinary person, but today, any colour may be used. Concerning the period of mourning, strangers may go home after the burial, but relatives are expected to stay for five or six days and continue to observe the taboos concerning sexual relations. In the past, the strangers used to stay for as long as the relatives stayed, but nowadays, they consider themselves free once the burial itself is over. It is worth noting that the shortening of the mourning period is not just common among the Chewa, but among many ethnic communities. Yet, the period of mourning among the Chewa lasts until the "first shaving of the hair" (*kumeta maliro koyamba*). According to van Breugel (2001, p. 114), there are two separate periods of mourning. The first one lasts for five to seven days for an adult, three days for a child and four weeks for a chief. It ends with the ceremony of the first shaving. The second period of mourning lasts until the second shaving (*kumeta kachiwiri*), which always takes place during the dry season from six to twelve months after the death. Breugel notes that men nowadays do not have their heads shaved as they used to (2001, p. 115). Similarly, due to modern concerns, many females today do not accept shaving, even though the one who passes away is their husband or child. Usually, female villagers are more willing to be shaved than women living in urban areas.

Death cleansing rituals are also common, such as *kulowa kufa*. These are mainly practised in Nsanje District (Muhuta, 1997). These rituals are performed to help the living cope with the loss of a loved one and to honour the dead. *Kulowa kufa* is a death cleansing ritual that involves a man having ceremonial unprotected sex with a widow of his deceased relative. Normally, the brother to the deceased is asked to have sex with the widow, in order to cleanse the village of the dark cloud that engulfs it following the death. The widow cleansing ritual is done with the view of exorcising the ghost of her late husband. It is believed that if a woman does not perform this ritual, the deceased husband would haunt the wife as well as the whole village (Mahuta, 1997). This ritual is still being practised, only that it has been modified to prevent the spread of epidemics. Today, it is not allowed for the widow to have sex with the deceased's brother, but the elders request a couple, either from among the family members or outside, to conduct the *kulowa kufa* ritual. This couple is involved in ceremonial sexual relations to ward off the dark cloud that has befallen the village. This, therefore, raises the question as to how this modification fulfils the need for cleansing without the involvement of the one who needs cleansing.

One more change relates to what happens to the widow. In the past, when a married man died, the mourning period for the widow could last for some months, and the woman was allowed to wear one dress only, the dress she wore when her husband died. The widow was also expected to sleep on the floor until some rituals were performed. In those days it was common for widows to wear black clothes until after a year. However, recently, very few widows wear black clothes after burial and mourning period rituals have been relaxed in many clans.

Another new development has been the attendance of funerals online. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, people could not travel to attend funerals. So they chose to be part of the funeral services virtually. This meant that some of the rituals could not be performed by all those who were supposed to participate in the services. For instance, among the Tumbuka found in Karonga, when a loved one passes on, close relatives are expected to throw some soil used to bury the deceased into the grave. Alternatively, the gravedigger passes around soil on a shovel so that close relatives of the deceased can touch it, and then after everything is done, the soil is thrown into the grave, and then the filling of the grave with soil begins. This is done to ward off the spirit of the dead so that it does not come to the relatives in a bad way. If this is not done, consequences might follow.

The Impact of Changing Rituals on the Adherents in Malawi

Malawi has undergone significant changes in the performance of traditional rituals, as cited above, and the changes have affected the adherents in one way or another. These changes have caused social and emotional impacts. This section focuses on the impact of the changing rituals on funeral rites based on data collected from Karonga in Northern Malawi, and also discusses the impact of changes in puberty initiation rites based on grey literature and anecdotal evidence.

Various people have reacted differently to the modifications. The modifications have been well received by those who are moving with change. However, many have reluctantly welcomed the modifications, raising questions about whether the modified rituals are authentic and still have the same meaning and purpose. Below are some of the views that respondents expressed in relation to funeral rites and puberty initiation rites:

Loss of identity and culture

The respondents highlighted that modifying funeral and initiation rituals creates a sense of loss of identity in them, as they are unable to identify with the wider community, despite undergoing the rituals. Those who experienced the “original” rituals consider themselves as bona fide members of the society, while those who experience the modified ones are viewed as “outsiders.” This is common in puberty initiation rituals. For example, people who participated in traditional puberty initiation rituals that occurred in specific, secluded locations over an extended period of time (like a month) could be seen as legitimate members of that community. However, those who attend Christianized initiation ceremonies might not be viewed as genuine members of the community and could face disdain from others. This is also true about circumcision. Individuals who are circumcised during initiation ceremonies feel the pride of belonging to a particular culture, unlike those who undergo medical circumcision. Additionally, for individuals who miss the rite in their lifetime due to personal reasons or convictions, their cultural life is also often viewed as incomplete. This makes them miss that cultural identity that is considered to be acquired through the rite. Furthermore, they are not socially recognised as adults until they undergo the rite. As noted above, adolescents receive a lot of pressure from their peers and their parents to attend

the 'genuine' rituals, even after the modified (Christianized) ones have been performed on them.

Authenticity of Rituals

There is a feeling among the ritual adherents that the modified rituals are diluted and, therefore, inauthentic. This leads to a sense of inadequacy on the part of individuals upon whom the rituals are performed. For instance, when it comes to initiation rites, such as circumcision, the rituals and the practices associated with them are now done in health facilities by medical workers, without the accompanying traditional rituals. Some adherents in these rituals said they did not feel a sense of belonging. What must be noted is that the circumcision, done in its appropriate place, by the right person (*Ngaliba*), and with the appropriate accompanying rituals, makes the rituals carry a lot of weight. Those who undergo circumcision in the hospital are not recognized as having undergone the ritual or as having moved to the next stage genuinely. Among the Yao, the original rites of *Jando* are more valued than the ones performed at the hospital by medical staff (Ussi, 2004; Makwemba et al., 2019). Consequently, there is always a feeling of inadequacy on the part of the individuals circumcised at the hospital. They feel like they do not really belong to the community of adults. Feeling is an important aspect of ritual, as Quack & Sax (2010, p. 5) state, "Rituals are associated with an internal psychological realm of feeling and sentiment..." The feeling of inadequacy affects the confidence and pride that one can have in his culture.

One woman respondent narrated that by not participating in the traditional initiation ceremonies, she felt that she missed something "big", and she did not consider herself "woman enough", especially when she was among her fellow women be it in town or in the village (Personal conversation, September 2021). Some women respondents confessed that they felt more comfortable sitting around learned people who do not care about these traditional rituals than being around those who emphasize them. One woman stated that it was "psychologically disturbing" to think that she was not woman enough, and unfortunately, she could not turn back the clock. All this demonstrates that the initiation rites perform a psychological role in the initiates. Even the thought of being considered "a child" just because one had not been initiated was "traumatic". In other words, those who do not participate in the initiation rites due to the modification experience low self-esteem, and this leads to shame in the face of their peers who undergo genuine initiation rites. In terms of marriage, girls

who undergo traditional initiation rites are more desirable than those who undergo Christianized puberty initiation. The traditional rites are still seen as the most suitable and the most valued than the Christianized ones (Schroeder et al., 2022).

Rituals are infused with symbolic meaning, and if they are not performed as intended, their purpose may not be fulfilled. In relation to funeral rituals, a study conducted in Karonga found that when rituals are modified during a funeral, people felt that the spirits being warded off may not depart as intended because they may not recognize the new rituals. Therefore, such modified rituals are considered ineffective and equivalent to not performing any ritual at all. One respondent had this to say:

Mmmmm..... Well, it is a concern for many of us that the traditional funeral customs and ceremonies are evolving too quickly. We are unsure if the spirits of the deceased even recognize or appreciate the rituals we perform for them. As a result, we fear that they may not be at peace and could be angered by the changes that we have made. May God help us! (Interview, M6, 22nd September, 2021).

In Karonga, many funeral rituals are performed to ward off the spirits. The bereaved expressed fear that if the “genuine” rituals were not performed, they would face consequences. Some of these consequences include the possibility that the spirits will not settle; they will be restless. When anything goes wrong in society, in the family/clan, people will always point at a ritual that was not properly performed. A good example is the shaving of hair, which is believed to keep the spirits from torturing the living. If a pair of scissors is just laid on the hair symbolically, what it means is that the spirits will still remain on the hair, and this has implications. There is a belief that spirits reside in people’s hair. By shaving hair, the spirits’ residing place is disturbed; hence, they have nowhere to stay in order to be close to their living relatives. This ritual is understood as one way of making relatives forget about the dead relative. Available literature notes that some funeral rituals, such as *kulowa kufa*, commonly practised by the Lomwe, were banned by the government of Malawi to prevent the spread of HIV and AIDs. The communities replaced the ritual with a symbolic ritual, which is done openly, but a recent study reveals that the traditional ritual is still performed secretly (Schroeder et al., 2022). There is still a lot of pressure on the people to conform to what the tradition dictates.

People Live in Fear: Desire for Human Flourishing

During field research, respondents reported that they live in fear because of some modifications occurring in funeral rituals. Death marks a physical separation of the deceased individual from other human beings. This is a radical change, and the funeral rites and ceremonies are intended to draw attention to that permanent separation. Great care is taken to perform the funeral rites and to avoid causing any offence to the departed (Mbiti, 1991). In Malawi, like in most African cultures, it is believed that death completes an elaborate life cycle, a rite of passage that allows the person's spirit to travel to his or her next life or world (Rahiem & Rahim, 2021). Scholars such as Dovlo (1993) and Ephirim-Donkor (2021) state that joining the ancestors at death, especially to become one of them, is the goal of many African people, and Malawi is no exception. It is important to note that in Malawi, a ritual is usually performed so that people can have a safer life, a life free from torture from the ancestral spirits. A study conducted among the communities in Karonga shows that proper burial rites must be conducted for people to be safe and healthy. One respondent narrated as follows:

Okay...My cousin died of COVID-19. Anyway.... Health workers buried her without rituals. We die once....and the rituals must be performed properly. We do not want to be in trouble with the spirits and we do not want to risk our lives. We also want our loved one to have a safe journey.... That's it! (Interview, F6, 22nd September, 2021).

It is believed that failure to perform death and funeral rituals may put both the deceased and the living in danger. Negligence of rituals can lead to death, and the modification of rituals is believed to have some consequences, too. Rituals are meant to protect the living from any negative consequences (Mbiti, 1969). As Jindra & Noret (2011, p. 2) state, "funerals are for the dead, yet intended for the living". If care is not taken, the dead may not go to rest with their ancestors. This, therefore, shows that the rituals that are performed in initiation and funeral rites are not just physical or spiritual, but they do have psychological effects as well, both on the ones the rituals are being performed, and on the relatives involved, both the living and the "living dead". The rituals assure the dead that they will have a good life where they are going. If certain rituals are not carried out, or they are not carried out in totality, then certain stages of the rituals will not be fulfilled. The dead may not arrive safely at their destination, and

this creates chaos. The spirits will not be pleased if the rituals are not perfectly fulfilled. This might be a stumbling block to human flourishing.

Furthermore, people live in fear in communities where the modified symbolic rituals are performed rather than the “genuine” ones. For instance, the symbolic *kulowa kufa* that used to be performed on a widow in the Lomwe culture is now performed without the involvement of the widow herself. Since the ritual was done to cleanse the widow of the spirit or ghost of the deceased, what happens to the ghost? The woman and the community live in fear because the deceased may come back to take the widow or any member of his clan.

As regards initiation rites, people live in fear because they believe that the modified rituals do not really prepare them for adult life. This emanates from the notion that people who undergo modified rituals consider themselves not to be properly equipped. Since initiation rites provide different kinds of education, including sex education, the young ones feel that they will not be able to perform sexually when they get married. For instance, due to the HIV and AIDS epidemic, the ritual of *fisi* was banned, and this implies that there is no way the sexual skills of new girl initiates could be assessed on their performance. Girls who do not undergo such a ritual feel inadequate and afraid that there might be consequences for missing out on both sexual education and the *fisi* ritual. More importantly, the man’s (*fisi*) semen is believed to purify or cleanse the initiate (Maleche and Day, 2011). Therefore, many girls who do not undergo the *fisi* ritual live in fear of the consequences of not being cleansed.

Discussion

As noted above, various ethnic groups in Malawi have made several modifications to their puberty initiation and funeral rites. It is evident that these changes have an impact on both the performers of the rituals and those for whom the rituals are intended. A modified ritual can never evoke the same feelings or emotions as the original version. Therefore, there is inevitably a loss of connection, real or perceived, with the modified ritual in the process of performing it. Rituals are not just repetitive actions or “this is how we do things here,” but have a deeper meaning than the eye can see, and their neglect has consequences. The meanings of rituals appear more pronounced by their absence than their presence. This observation implies the strength of belief. The modification of rituals has called into question the efficacy and significance of some of these practices (Mombo & Mojola, 2022, p. 289).

Based on the responses of the people interviewed and a review of existing literature, it is clear that rituals are considered complete if all aspects that are associated with them are maintained. If people secretly perform a disallowed ritual, it shows that it plays a key role in their lives that the modification cannot accommodate. Chakanza (1995) states that despite the Roman Catholic Church's strict measures to stop the traditional puberty rites of transition for boys and girls, Catholic parents continued to let their children undergo these traditional puberty initiation rites. This shows the value that the parents attached to the ritual. They could not imagine their children growing up without undergoing puberty rituals. Confirming this, Phiri (1995) writes that when the Nkhoma Synod banned initiation rites, the Christianization of initiation ceremonies followed. This happened because there was a lot of pressure from African Christian women and men to have the rites. This transformation of the rites was done because they could not have a vacuum. It is also interesting to note that some parents continued to send their children to traditional initiation ceremonies (*chinamwali*) in secret even when the church had put in place ways to ensure that the Christianized initiation ceremony (*Chilangizo*) worked. For example, there is a penalty of eighteen months suspension from the sacraments for parents who send their children to the traditional initiation ceremonies. Secondly, when a couple wants to get married in the church, the church asks for a *chilangizo* certificate from the girl before agreeing to announce marriage bans. With this requirement, it is mandatory for girls in the Church of Central Africa Presbyterian (CCAP) Nkhoma Synod to attend *chilangizo* (Phiri, 1995, p. 19). The fact that parents secretly continued to send their children to the traditional initiation ceremony shows that the ritual is necessary, otherwise, if a ritual is not necessary, it can easily be modified, or it disappears (Lincoln, 1977).

The concerns expressed by the ritual adherents about loss of identity, living in fear, experiencing pressure, and others are issues that need to be addressed. There is a need to come up with a solution that intersects traditions, Christian practices and conventional ways of dealing with the issues of ritual modification. Change is inevitable, but it is important to understand the motives of the people advocating the maintenance of the rituals. If meaningful changes are introduced to the existing ritual, community members are likely to respond positively to voices from inside the culture, and can easily embrace the changes if they consider them to bring satisfaction. Needless to say, communities, due to various factors, have always adapted to changes in other rituals apart from initiation and

funeral rites. This suggests that it is still possible for people to find meaning, purpose, and authenticity in the modified rituals when they are properly done.

A deep reflection on rituals shows that they are not performed as a routine. They meet specific requirements, and usually, these requirements are tied to people's beliefs. Beliefs do bring fear. There is, therefore, a need to bring solutions that deal with the source of fear so that the communities can have confidence in the modified rituals. Rituals continue to engage the passion and commitment of people who are very strong in traditional religious beliefs because they stimulate their creativity and their emotions. If the rituals are partially performed, there seems to remain a sense of uneasiness, which implies that there is a partial vacuum in the people on whom the partial rituals are performed (Chakanza, 1995, p. 5). This, therefore, calls for a debate on whether the modified rituals still serve the function for which they were established. Somé (1998, p. 146) observes that "because ritual is so deeply connected to our human nature, anytime it is missing, there will be a lack of transformation and healing". If a culture does not draw from rituals, its members will do something else to fill the gap because they have to heal. Consequently, if the rituals are modified, a full or partial vacuum is created.

The truth is that beliefs are still alive, and yet the rituals have changed. The rituals have their own meaning and serve particular functions. Undoubtedly, the omission of such rituals will result in several consequences for the ancestors. The rituals are significant for the community and its welfare. Therefore, it is necessary that the deceased persons are properly treated; otherwise, if this is not done, in the traditional conception of reality, chaos will be the order of the day. Traditional societies may have developed some coping mechanisms. These mechanisms remain an area for further inquiry. There is also a feeling that cultural identity is at risk if the required rites are not observed.

CONCLUSION

This chapter has discussed the modification of traditional and religious rituals and its impact on their adherents. In Malawi, puberty initiation rites and death rites are highly ritualized. As the world keeps changing, people are adapting to the changes, in order to keep up with new developments. However, some modifications of traditional rituals are negatively affecting the adherents to the point of preventing them from flourishing

because they live in fear. Modifications can allow Malawian traditional and religious rituals to adapt to changing social, political and environmental contexts. By incorporating new elements or adjusting practices, traditional and religious rituals continue to thrive and maintain relevance in contemporary African society. Rituals are a result of the beliefs that people have but the modification of rituals also has an impact on the beliefs. It is important to continue the conversation and investigation around the issues raised with regard to the loss of identity, authenticity, and meaning of modified rituals. With more and more rituals being modified due to various factors, it is essential for community leaders to address the people's concerns and find solutions to the concerns.

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