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WOMEN'S STATUS IN MARRIAGE AMONG THE BEMBA OF ZAMBIA

Mutale Mulenga Kaunda

Introduction

I was introduced to the name Nyambura Njoroge when I was studying toward my BTh Honours degree at the University of KwaZulu-Natal in 2011. Through my studies, I have been constantly reflecting on her writings and engaging with her passion for African women's status in their cultures, marriages, religions and their empowerment in the time of HIV & AIDS. Six years later, I got the opportunity to meet her when I was at Bossey Ecumenical Institute while attending a three-week interreligious peace summer school. Our engagements and collaborations were strengthened at the Council for World Missions and Evangelism Conference in Arusha Tanzania after I gave the opening keynote address in March 2018. The support I received from her and various other women across the globe was immense.

Nyambura's works exude a passion for African women's status within their cultures, religious spaces and society as a whole. Reading her works brought to me the realisation that Nyambura is an example of an African feminist mentor. She represents the values of relationality and solidarity, values which are expressed in our African Communities where older women walk the path with younger women teaching them the ropes of life in any given situation¹. These values are further influenced, developed and encouraged within the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians which Nyambura not only espoused but also embodies. Having achieved so much as an African woman gives me hope that many African women have the same potential when given a place to stand. Although this chapter focuses on Bemba women of Zambia, I know that Nyambura is passionate about African women across the borders and passionately works toward their liberation.

¹ For the Bemba people of Zambia, an older woman who mentors younger women, especially on marital issues, is known as *nachimbusa*.

This chapter is set to explore the *imbusa*² teaching among the Bemba people and its effects on the status of women in marriage. Mercy Oduyoye (1995b:11, see also Tamale 2005:9) has argued that in Africa, ritual practice is intricately linked to practically every aspect of life: marriage, birth, puberty, death, mourning, politics, war, social roles, religion, kinship structures, identity construction and so on. The connection between ritual and the status of women in marriage is one of the more controversial issues which have been discussed by African women theologians (Oduyoye 1995b:134). I want to explore the various ways in which the marriage ritual is used both as an oppressive and empowering resource. No institution could be considered more significant to Africans than marriage. This high regard and perception of marriage as sacred is what necessitates performance of rituals in which Bemba women were perceived as *cibinda wa ng'anda* (head/owner of the house) in pre-colonial Bemba society (Kaunda 2010:6). This is why it was and still is important for women to be taught by their seniors before marriage on how to live as married women. A young bride is taught by older women for a month or two weeks before her wedding (it used to be longer (six months) in the pre-colonial era).

In a desire to gain a better understanding of the connection between the status of Bemba women in marriage and the marriage ritual, this chapter focuses on one particular cultural initiation rite among the Bemba of Zambia, namely *imbusa*. When one speaks of *imbusa* among the Bemba people, this is clearly understood to signify one of the rituals that have persisted and is resilient through centuries as a tradition of marriage initiation. At the core of this elaborate socio-cultural institution is *banacimbusa* (mother of sacred emblems to be handed down /bearers of traditional teaching aids/symbols), whose role is to mentor young women *muntambi ne fshalano* (time-honoured social values) “in a wide range of sexual matters, including pre-menarche practices, pre-marriage preparation, erotic instruction and reproduction” (Tamale 2005:9). In a sense, the young woman receives instructions on how to keep her marriage. She is taught how to treat her in-laws and especially her husband. Without undergoing *imbusa* teaching, a bride is seen as unfit to handle marriage and she can never become a *nacimbusa* and can never be invited in a place where the *imbusa* teaching is taking place because she is *chitongo* (untaught or uncultured). During *imbusa* teachings, every married woman shares her

² *Imbusa* are sacred emblems/visual aids handed down to Bemba brides before the wedding.

knowledge with the young bride, through their experience of marriage, Bemba women offer experiential guidance to the young bride in preparation for her marriage. The institution of *imbusa* has in many ways exhibited resilience and tenacious adaptability in the context of modernisation and globalisation, but has also shown continuity in the different contexts of the Zambian Diaspora.

This chapter begins with a brief explosion of *imbusa*, explicating the significance of the ritual among the Bemba people. A short historical evaluation of the institution of *Imbusa* is then provided. Finally, the role of *imbusa* within Bemba society is discussed.

A Brief Exposition of the *Imbusa* Ritual

The *imbusa* ritual is also often referred to as *ukuombela ng'anda* (ritual performance for a viable home) which follows after *ukucindila icisungu* (dancing for the wonder of initial menstruation) recognised by Bemba, known as women's rituals. Njoroge (1997) demonstrates that when attention is not paid to women as intrinsic beings, the destruction of their God-given identity and human dignity is imminent. *Imbusa* was initiated to give women that power to go through life being assertive and in solidarity with other women and to hold on to their identity as heads of homes among the Bemba. This is the Bemba women's identity that has, however, suffered some scars due to misrepresentations and misinterpretations along the way. The ritual is in schematic or naturalistic forms of paintings; *imbusa* teaching is taught through songs, proverbs, pottery, paintings and dance. Mushibwe (2009), writing on the Tumbuka people of Zambia, affirms that the Bemba speaking people of the Northern part of Zambia use schematic forms of drawings during the initiation ceremonies. The common drawings of pictures and models called the *imbusa*, an artistic array of a variety of symbols, models and drawings using the three colours red, black and white, can never be understood unless *banacimbusa* or *uwaombelwa* (a woman who has gone through the teaching) explains them. Victor Turner (1969:7) rightly affirms that "it is one thing to observe people performing the stylised gesture and singing the cryptic songs of ritual performance and quite another to reach an adequate understanding of what the movements and words mean to them". Mushibwe (2009) observes that these secrets are well guarded by all women who have gone through *imbusa*. Mushibwe feels that this is what ensures the reproduction of the

women's own suppression and reinforcement of male superiority. Lillian Siwila (2011:18) cautions Mushibwe's point above when she states that:

The teaching on secrecy in marriage is so intense that some of the proverbial songs sung for the bride during the wedding are to tell her to keep secrets in her marriage. As much as this helps to keep the integrity of the community and the marriage, this teaching has also contributed to the silencing of women even when there is abuse in the family.

Siwila further argues that this culture of silence among women is so strong in Zambia that it has contributed to the oppression and suppression of women. However, Mushibwe (2009:118) generalises and argues that "throughout Zambia, and in all its ethnic groupings, cultural traditions continue to relegate women to inferior roles". Mushibwe feels that while good morals are taught with "crafty intention" and there is nothing wrong with some of the roles or skills such as respect for the elders or good eating habits and so on, nevertheless, to train women to consider the opposite sex as superior subjects upon whom they can depend, and themselves as inferior objects, has psychological implication that can lead to the development of a subordinate temperament in married women that respects the opposite sex with veneration. For Mushibwe, this kind of socialisation or teaching could lead to inequality and lack of reproductive freedom for the woman. There is some truth in Mushibwe's argument, because among the Bemba people, the woman is taught not to expose marital problems to outsiders, however, there are procedures taken should there be grievances in the marriage. Firstly, the woman has to speak to her marriage mentor, *nacimbusa*, regarding the grievances and there is time to iron out issues. In fact, elsewhere, I have noted that:

Interestingly, Rasing (2001: 50) had years earlier noted that Bemba women were agents of their own sexuality as they would question a husband if they doubted their husband's fidelity and would take him to a traditional court if they were not satisfied with his response before, they would sexually satisfy him (Mutale Mulenga Kaunda 2017:29).

Yet Mushibwe (2009:129) seems to suggest that the ritual be done away with because it "could have a negative impact on the attitude of the female child towards her academic education". This suggestion seems to give an inferiority status to the ritual and side-lines the significance of *imbusa* as the basis of Bemba cultural identity. Contrary to Mushibwe's subtle analysis which produces a model that depicts *imbusa* as a tool for the socialisation of women to docile obedience, some sympathetic anthropologists

and theologians (see for example Hinfelaar 1994, Rasing 2001, and Kaunda 2010) argue that *imbusa*, in the pre-colonial and missionary Bemba culture was the basis of gender balance. Rasing (2001:58), writing on *imbusa* initiation, has argued that “gender division concerning work was neither strict nor static, but changed depending on the situation”.

For Rasing, Bemba women were not made ‘invisible’ by *imbusa* but by the impact of colonial rule and Christianity. Earlier existing gender relations changed to a significant extent, especially with regards to matrilineal and matrilocal organisation of Bemba society. In fact, Rasing (2001:23) argues that the Western stereotyping of *imbusa* teaching as “expressions of internalised oppression of women”, was based on wrong assumptions. Rasing (1995:15) feels that the *imbusa* ritual “does not denote inferiority as represented by some analysts to mean before the introduction of Christianity into Zambia”. David Schoenbrun (2004:254), writing on “gendered themes in early African history”, observes that “the study of matrilineal societies, especially in this part of central Africa, has been very important for undermining the view of universal male dominance”. Indeed, it helps to unveil the ways in which this “hegemony remained partial and contested” (Wright 2004:413). In this sense, Mushibwe’s (2009:110) argument that a ritual such as *imbusa* “involves manipulation and canalization” of women into subservient roles in marriage is not entirely accurate. What may be substantial is the fact that Bemba women are both custodians of traditions and at times have been “agents of their own subordination” (Rasing 2001:13). Nevertheless, the ritual “has much potential to help improve and safeguard life, and with this in mind, it may need improvement and development (Fiedler 2005:8). It is this awareness that necessitates that an empirical inquiry is done in order to hear the views of the women who have undergone the *imbusa* teachings.

The Nature of the *Imbusa* Teaching

During *imbusa* teaching, “almost every article used, every gesture employed, every song or prayer, every unit of space and time, by convention stands for something other than itself. It is more than it seems, and often a good deal more” (Turner 1969:15). Rasing (1995) reveals that *imbusa* is a symbolic activity which is taught through action, language, and images to explain and affect the Bemba world-view and specifically what it means

to be an adult and a married woman in the community. *Imbusa* itself refers to both the drawings on the walls and the clay models or pottery that are moulded on the floor (Corbeil 1982). These drawings and clay models which include dots and stripes are worked in three colours: red, black and white (Mushibwe 2009). This observation was made much earlier by Audrey Richards in her book on the *Chisungu* initiation ceremony among the Bemba people in 1956. According to Richards (1956, see also Rasing 1995), the first colour is red which represents the menstrual blood (*Kumweshi*), it is a warning and couples are taught not to have sexual intercourse during this period. The wife has to put up a symbol of red beads in the bedroom for the husband to know that she is menstruating. The second colour is black which represents death and sickness in the family, a time when again, couples are to abstain from sex for fear of death. This colour is also associated with the pubic hair which should not be disposed of carelessly after shaving³. Within the rite, there is the teaching on how a wife should shave her husband. Brides are told that they need to shave their husbands' pubic hair. Rasing (1995) argues that this instruction is attached to the pottery drawing of a razor and soap, meaning that a woman has to shave her husband and he in turn should reciprocate. The first time this is done, the wife shaves her husband and then the husband reciprocates. This means that only a wife can shave her husband and vice versa. Should the wife shave herself, it can lead to divorce because she may be considered to have been shaved by another man (adultery). The third colour is white which symbolises purity and fertility. It represents the cervix and safe periods when couples can enjoy sexual intercourse, which results in offspring. These three colours summarize the teaching of *Imbusa* (Richards 1956; Corbeil 1982; Rasing 1995). Rasing (1995) further highlights that blood, sex and fire may symbolise constant danger because failure to comply with the societal warnings and norms is believed to cause diseases. In addition, Rasing reveals that the initiation rite has three phases: the separation, the liminal and the aggregation phases. The separation phase is symbolically secluded which signifies that the initiate is moving from an early phase into another in the social community or structure. The intermediate phase, which I will briefly focus on in the ensuing section, is called the liminal phase and is the most crucial and could

³ One of the rituals in marriage among the Bemba is that of spouses shaving each other's pubic hair and it is an important ritual, the only time one shaves him/herself is upon agreement. When one shaves without liaising with the other, it can be considered as the one shaved is having extramarital affair.

be considered as the main phase. The third phase is aggregation, a stage at which the rite of passage is concluded. This marks the end of the initiation process when the initiate comes out into the open, confirming her new status. She would have been accepted as a woman and is therefore, expected to behave in line with customary norms and ethical standards (Rasing 1995:34).

The Liminal Phase

The liminal stage is the most critical phase of the initiation ceremony. It is during this period that the girl is refashioned into a new person. The characteristics of this phase are ambiguous because the initiate passes through a cultural realm that has none of the attributes of the past or the coming state (Rasing 1995:34). The liminal stage is also the longest. According to Rasing, the young woman is stripped naked or wears only a slip of clothing to demonstrate that she has no status or property. Her nakedness also serves to humiliate her, for she is made into a non-person; she is teased and treated badly in order to make her strong in dealing with all disappointments that life may bring to her (Rasing 1995:36). I concur with Raisin's interpretation and would also like to add that nakedness symbolises that she has no status as she is in the liminal, but nakedness is not something to be ashamed of. A nubile bride is taught and shown her sexual agency as a married woman. She is taught that she can take charge and actively participate during sex with her husband. The young women at this stage "must be a *tabula rasa*, a blank slate on which is inscribed the knowledge and wisdom of the group or society in those respects that pertain to the new status" (Rasing 1995:36). Mushibwe (2009:134) observes that both Mbikusita-Lewanika (1979) and Rasing (1995) are in agreement that "the ordeals and humiliations have a physical and emotional nature". Yet Rasing (1995:36) also feels that the process "has an ontological value; it refashions the being of the initiate". Maria Rosa Cutrufelli (1983:155) perceives such a process of initiation as:

Instilling an attitude of submission to man into women's hearts by making them accustomed to the notion that they were born to take second place in society. During the ceremony, the girls are told that from now onwards their task is to procreate and attend to their husbands and their homes, and any other task is forbidden to them. These initiatory rites, surrounded as they are by an aura of mystery and religious solemnity, have

such a devastating psychological impact on the girls that they are mesmerized into a blind acceptance of the indoctrination through a traumatic experience bound to affect them for the rest of their lives.

The whole process seems to be setting women up for subservient roles in their marriage. As claimed by Cutrufelli (1983), women are made to uncritically and unquestionably accept teachings of terror and hence, the dominance of men could be accepted as the right thing, despite its oppressive nature. Indeed, it can have psychological repercussions on the self-perception of a young woman in marriage. Tamale (2005: 6) argues that the initiations are fraught with inconsistency and inconclusiveness and the main theme includes subservience, “manipulation and the control by women”. There is the absence of dialogue in the process of transmitting the teachings and this makes the teacher or *nacimbusa* active and the bride passive. This is the down-side to the *imbusa* teaching. It is not based on a dialogical framework which is liberating, but a domesticating model which, according to Paulo Freire (1996), is disempowering.

In the *imbusa* process, the bride is not supposed to look up at the people instructing her. Some of the characteristics expected of the bride are, submissiveness, to learn in silence, to be passive and humble and to obey the instructors without question. Such characteristics constitute what is regarded as an ideal and traditionally moulded woman (Mbikusita-Lewanika 1979, Rasing 1995, Tamale 2005). However, Rasing (2006:6, 7) argues that the songs and emblems that are disempowering to women in their marriages are contested by other songs and emblems that empower women to rebuke their husbands for immorality and to have control over their sex life. Thus, the ambivalent nature of *imbusa* comes to the fore depending on who is teaching or even interpreting it, it can seem disempowering or empowering. One may argue that this is not enough and that the teaching must be empowering right from the start.

It is in the liminal stage where aspects of sexuality are taught. The young woman is taught the technique of sex dance which involves wriggling the waist while standing and this is meant to help her to sexually satisfy the husband (Fiedler 2005:32). It is here that women are taught various positions they should assume to give variety to the ways they have sex with their husbands (Fiedler 2005:32). This is the central theme that runs throughout the initiations. In addition, the young woman is also encouraged to lengthen or elongate the labia minora (*ukwangala*, literally means “playing”). Rasing (2010:4) asserts that from young age girls are taught to play (*ukwangala*) with their genitals and this is done for the purpose of

sexual enjoyment when they are married or for them to know their bodies well. *Ukwangala* is the disguised term for *ukukuna* (elongation of labia minora). Usually, girls would be encouraged to go into the bush to find herbs that they would use to elongate their labia. The first time, the paternal aunt or grandmother would teach the girl how to pull/elongate her labia and after that initial instruction she will go to the bush or to her room with her friends to continue the ritual. Rasing (1995:31) alludes to the fact that labia elongation is very important and older women encourage girls to elongate before their initiation. If a girl had not elongated her labia, *nacimbusa* would go to the extent of even beating her because it is a disgrace for a girl to not have elongated labia by the time they reach marriage age. It is believed that the man enjoys sex with a woman who has elongated labia minora. Mushibwe (2009:130) feels that the lessons the brides are taught during this period are ambiguous. Citing Chondoka, Mushibwe (2009:132) says “a common element in the teachings stresses sexual rituals, caring for the husband and his family members, lessons in childbearing and childcare due to the fact that it was a requirement to marry and to have children”. Rasing (1995) believes there is a clear teaching that empowers women to become subjects of their destiny as the ritual puts emphasis not only on the power and authority of senior women, but also on their personal power and self-respect as taught women. Rasing further argues that one critical issue that is emphasised throughout the ritual is “self-reliance”. Nevertheless, satisfying the husband sexually seems to be emphasised in the teaching. Jonathan Kangwa (2011:18) opines:

African women theologians have largely condemned the idea of women focusing too much on satisfying their husbands. They argue that women are turned into sex objects to satisfy their husbands thereby making them more vulnerable to HIV (Phiri 2003:10). Fiedler (2005:32) has however, argued that men are also taught to satisfy their wives in sex during their initiation rites.

Richards (1982:51) refers to this as “the dilemma of a matrilineal society in which men are dominant but the line goes through the women”. Rachel Nyagondwe-Fiedler (2005:31), writing from the Chewa context in Malawi, argues that it is necessary to uphold cultural values that encourage women to have power over sexual affairs. This is crucial, especially in the context of HIV.

The Role of the *Imbusa* Teaching among the Bemba

The *imbusa* teaching is a significant rite for women who are about to enter into marriage. It is a transitional ritual which is perceived as a means to cross boundaries, changes in time and social status (Rasing 1995:34). It is usually assumed that the bride is a virgin before she is married. The initiation rite takes one or two months to complete. As soon as lobola⁴ and preparations for the wedding are made, two months prior to the wedding, the *imbusa* teachings commence. The *imbusa* teaching is a place where a woman is primed into becoming what an ideal married woman ought to be. Within this space, older women who have undergone *imbusa* pass their experiential knowledge to a bride regarding what is expected of her in marriage. Should she behave differently there would be consequences, one of which is being sent back to her marriage mentor for further teaching. This becomes disgraceful to the girl's family; therefore, women strive to follow the teachings religiously.

Rasing (2004:279) defines initiation as “a rite of transition and sets out the basis for adult life by constructing a new identity for a woman”. This means that the *imbusa* teachings as an initiation rite or rite of passage, mark the transition from childhood to adulthood, as well as from being unmarried to being married for Bemba (and other Zambian) women. The young bride is secluded in a house or room where she and her *banacimbusa* spend the time in marital counselling and teachings. Rasing (2004:278) has similarly explained that women's initiation rites are “an intrinsic part of traditional culture and society” and have been performed by experts for a long period of time. These rites are not only significant or in existence in traditional/rural societies in Zambia, but urban educated women in Zambia also equally emphasise the value of the *imbusa* teachings. While not disputing the significance of the teachings such as *imbusa*, Oduyoye (1995a:134) has argued that ritual is a key site through which women's subordination is maintained and enforced within African society. Oduyoye (1995b:11) further argues that the ritual is so significant that “an individual's path through life is monitored, marked, and celebrated from even before birth to death, and thereafter the events in the life of a community echo this same cycle”. Indeed, the whole life of an African is marked by ritual after ritual. Yet, it has been observed that women undergo many more rituals in comparison to men (Oduyoye 1995b:16).

⁴ Gift given to the bride's family as assurance that the man will marry their daughter.

When looking at the women-centred nature of the ritual, Rasing (2001:23) is right when arguing that initiation rites are significant in the “construction of female identity, pride, autonomy and meaning”. The point of concern lies on the identity constructed and what the women make of it. Mushimbwe (2009:130) argues “the initiation rite is an ideology-based set of practices whose aim is to reproduce young women who are well established in the customs of their forefathers and who would later on pass these customs down to their children”. Thus, for Mushimbwe the significance of the initiation rites is therefore, “to introduce the young girl to adult life or womanhood, although the full status of real womanhood would only be acquired after one had given birth” (2009:131). Similarly, Rosemary Edet (1995:26, italics mine) articulates:

Women's rituals in Africa fall under ritual ideology which aims at controlling, in a conservative way, the behavior, the mood, the sentiment, and the values of women for the sake of the community as a whole. Much of the concern is to instruct, to direct, and to *program individuals as they enter upon new tasks*, and to stabilise society by preventing individuals from straying too far from the roles they have assumed.

The teaching is depicted here as a mechanism for domesticating women in the ways of the community. Through the ritual, the dos and don'ts of the community are reinforced. It is a double-edged sword for me, because depending on who is teaching *imbusa*, it can be used to subordinate women in marriage or empower them as agents of their lives. In short, through *imbusa*, the Bemba community seeks to bring not only social coherence and stability, but the teaching is “needed also for social experience in time, for change, for interaction” (Dallistone 1986:219). A teaching like *imbusa* is meant to stir action and bind together a social group of women. Thus, there is a way in which *imbusa* could be utilised to promote social transformation rather than it being a mere cultural preservation of status quo. Therefore, *imbusa* has been perceived to be necessary for maintaining an intricate balance of life in the community and it is meant to preserve the normal order of societal life (Rasing 1995, Rude 1999). It is the medium of understanding the world around and a mechanism for renewing and reconciling or making things right (Edet 1995:26). Among the Bemba people, the *imbusa* ritual has several aims. Here I only discuss two of them, that is *Imbusa* as a mechanism for community counselling and *Imbusa* as a mechanism for community solidarity.

***Imbusa* is a Mechanism for Community Counselling**

The *imbusa* initiation rite is a strategy or method used by the community for premarital teaching and on-going marital counselling of women viable for marriage. It is not only the bride and *nacimbusa* who benefit from this institution, but it works as a marriage enrichment program where every woman who has undergone the ritual has an opportunity to refresh their lessons. Yet, the counselling is a secret, as it can only be revealed to a woman who is entering into marriage (Rasing 1995:38). It is a very marital specific type of teaching. One hears such statements as ‘marriage is not for children but adults’. This means that a mature person who is ready for marriage is the one that undergoes the teachings. The women are not taught in the form of sermons or lectures, as a methodology of marriage counselling in community, *imbusa* teaching uses songs, proverbs, drums, stories, and pottery moulded on the floor and painted on the walls to pass the message. Everything that needs emphasis is made visual so that it can be easy for one to remember. This teaching is based on community praxis. It starts with the marriage experiences of the community which are developed into theory. When women receive teaching from the initiation rite, they go and put their lessons into practice in their marriages where they formulate their own theories based on their own experiences. These personal theories are brought back to the teaching space where they also pass on information as they have experienced the teaching in praxis. The teaching is therefore, cyclic in nature. One gets the teaching, goes and lives it in marriage and comes back to teach another woman by showing how the teaching has worked out in their marriage.

***Imbusa* as a Mechanism for Community Bondedness and Solidarity**

Looking for a particular kind of marriage (life-giving), Bemba women sought a way to prepare themselves for marriage because a woman is central to marriage thus, the special and secret teachings are for women. Virginity is emphasised on the woman’s part through the wisdom passed from generation to generation via *imbusa*. This can be done by those who have gone through the teaching and have become much more experienced. Mushibwe (2009:118) explains that a woman is to follow such

teachings strictly if she is to be accepted as one of the initiated/taught/cultured ones. Further, Mushibwe (2009:118) explains that following such teachings is a way of solidarity with other women in the community and society. Rasing (1995:39) asserts "information, understanding and experience is needed to ensure the correct performance" of the rite. Senior women, who collectively hand down wisdom to young brides, are those with immense experience and whose marriages are established, and their services are financially rewarded (fees). Rasing (1995:39) further notes that conducting these rites means accepting serious accountability that the marriage will be a success as the initiate will follow through the teaching.

What prompted the *imbusa* teaching is the desire for the Bemba women to develop viable and life-giving marriages. Thus, *imbusa* is seen as a mechanism to protect themselves and prepare to make the marriage work and last. Bemba women stand in solidarity concerning marriage and mentor each other to have better marriages. Mushibwe (2009) elaborates that women need each other's loyalty in order to stand in solidarity in the community. Therefore, as the teaching goes on during *imbusa*, everyone participates in mentoring the young bride as well as remind themselves of the value of these teachings. Similarly, Rasing (1995:80) states that the teaching is for the initiate as well as *ifimbusa* (All women involved in the teaching). In this way, it is noted that women keep learning and re-evaluating their experiences in marriage as they pass these on to the younger women and learn from the other *banacimbusa* and married women. It is an experimental kind of learning that leads to developing new ideas and theories. Every woman invited is involved in teaching and learning. By being invited, one should be able to share their own experiences and thus, pass on information to the young and fellow married women; in this instance, *nacimbusa* only facilitates the teaching although she takes an active role and controls how the whole process should work out. As soon as one is initiated and married, she will be invited to others' *imbusa* teachings and she should be able to participate in the teaching because she also becomes a teacher to others after her initiation. *Imbusa* is an inclusive teaching space for women. Even those who eloped or were cohabiting (which is still seriously condemned), would be welcome to such a learning and teaching space, only if they decided to formalise their relationship through marriage.

Conclusion

The main purpose of this chapter was to give a brief exposition of the *imbusa* teaching and to provide an explanation for the connection between the status of Bemba women in marriage and the ritual. I have demonstrated the ambivalent nature of the *imbusa* ritual. On the one hand, the *imbusa* teaching encourages self-esteem and self-reliance on the women involved, while on the other hand, because of its non-dialogical method of teaching, it disempowers women. Nevertheless, the ritual remains crucial among the Bemba people because it is one of the rituals that have persisted and endured through centuries and it is carried even to Bemba women in the diaspora as authentic premarital teaching.

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