

# “I Am Because of What I Know I Have”: A Descriptive Analysis of Chinamwali in Preparing Women for Womanhood, Sexual Life and Reproduction

by

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## Abstract

Anchored to the African feminist ideological framework, this article is drawn from a study conducted on *chinamwali*, the female initiation rite of the Chikunda. Specifically, the study sought to examine the influence of the rite on the social life and status of the women in this community. The study sample comprised 30 participants including 15 women who had undergone initiation; 5 women who had not undergone the rite; 5 ritual instructors; and 5 men. Using narratives to understand how women negotiate their space in relation to *chinamwali* in particular, and in relation to gender, sexuality and positions of power and social relations in general, thus, this study demonstrates the extent to which the Chikunda women construct their transformed female identity and sexuality.

**Key words:** Zambia, Luangwa, Chikunda, *chinamwali*, initiation rites, gender, sexuality, African feminism

## Introduction

This article examines the extent to which the Chikunda women construct their gender and sexual identities through *chinamwali*, and how this in turn influences their social status within the community.

The Chikunda, a matrilineal ethnic group found in the Luangwa district of Zambia, practice an initiation ceremony for girls interchangeably called *chinamwali* or *chisungu*, a customary practice performed when a girl experiences her first menstrual period. There is no difference between the terms *chinamwali* and *chisungu* as they refer to one and the same practice hence, for uniformity, I will use the term *chinamwali* to refer to the initiation practice.

The aim of the ceremony through the symbolism of menstruation is to transform a young girl into a woman (see: Drews 1995: 103; Richards 1982; 52; Udelhoven 2006: 87). Among the Chikunda, the rite is practiced either at the onset of puberty or when a woman is about to enter marriage, or at both stages. In the case where the ceremony takes place at both stages, the two stages may be separated with instructions at the onset of puberty focused on general matters like cleanliness during menstruation, and those relating to marital duties deferred to the time before marriage. This article focuses on the *chinamwali* practiced at the onset of puberty.

African initiation rites such as the *chinamwali* where women are expected to learn about practices such as labia minora elongation, to learn to show respect, and to be expected to function as heterosexual, subservient wives, persist in some parts of Africa because of the need for women to conform to cultural norms of what it is to be a woman and to avoid being stigmatised. Though historically, there have been contestations on how sexuality, particularly female sexuality has been viewed from a western-centric point of view as noted by researchers such as Thomas (2003: 22), Kanogo (2005:77), and Tamale (2005), what this means for womanhood is that questions arise about the significance of such gendered practices which are framed as cultural or traditional in a post-colonial African context. I agree with the assertion that we should be careful not to brand all African traditions as harmful, because there is a thin line between harmful culture and valuable practices such as women kneeling for men and elders (Akumi 2018: 1), which are also taught in *chinamwali*, and symbolise respect, and are no different from other representations of respect found around the world such as bowing or removing a hat before greeting an elder. This example is useful in revealing on-the-ground debates surrounding female initiation rites, and motivated me to undertake the study of how the Chikunda construct their lived realities from their understanding and experience of *chinamwali* which forms the basis of this article.

To begin with, it is important to give an understanding of female initiation from an African feminist perspective. The aim is to give an understanding of the overarching theory of the study which foregrounds the experiences of women and guided the whole research process. It is also to frame our understanding of female initiation in Africa within the broader power relations between women, and between men and women. I will then describe briefly the historical background of the Chikunda and their location in Zambia. Next, I will give a summary of the methodological approach taken and then conclude with a summary and analysis of my findings.

## **Female Initiation from an African Feminist Perspective**

I believe that for a study on a traditional African female practice to be meaningful, it is necessary to engage the African feminist theoretical perspective to examine analytically the lived realities of women through the articulation of their voices, and to make recommendations towards promoting their social lives and status in the larger community. This was done after reviewing the historical eras of feminism, and the western originating feminisms, namely Liberal, Radical and Marxist feminisms. When weighed on merit, as opposed to African feminism, I found that these feminist theorisations share similarities with African feminism, particularly in their global goal to address women's inequalities.

However, as has been noted, it has been said that western epistemologies have generally failed to take into account local cultural realities in their explanations for phenomena which affect indigenous people (see: Ampofo 2004; Ogundipe–Leslie 1994; Aidoo 1998; Walker 1983; Nnaemeka 1998; Hudson-Weems 1991).

From the findings in the study of *chinamwali*, a girl becomes a woman through this socially constructed process. Thus, I found the discourse on feminist theory relevant to the study as it considers the relationship between culture and the constructions of sexuality and gender identity. The feminist discourse has expanded in scope by looking at practices that occur in the “private sphere”, such as female initiation. Topics on the female body have generated exciting research by feminist scholars such as Mackinnon (1989), Tamale (2005, 2011), and Arnfred (2004), who have focused on the female body as the site where representations of difference and identity are inscribed. They have also explored tensions between women’s lived bodily experiences and the actual meanings inscribed on the female body. In this context, some research has examined female initiation as a practice linked to patriarchy and the need to control women and their sexuality (see for example: Kamlongera 2007; Diallo 2004; Machera 2004). Mackinnon (1989: 113), in her theory of gender as a theory of sexuality, says that the social meaning of sex (gender) is created by the social objectification of women where they are targeted as objects to satisfy men’s desires. As a result, gender hierarchy is tied to sexualised power relations where men occupy the sexually dominant positions and receive sexual favours from women who occupy sexually submissive positions, and who should in turn give sexual favours to men.

Since *chinamwali* is a traditional African practice, I turned to insights by feminist scholars who identify themselves with African feminism, arguing that African women’s problems are unique to African people as their cultural heritage defines every facet of their lives including their position in society. African feminist thought can be said to be influenced by a third wave of feminist thinking as it places emphasis on context with regard to how women experience patriarchy, and as has been noted by Ukpong (1995: 4), is specifically a response to the African context. In general, the premise of African feminist theory is that African social and cultural experiences are not reflected in those of the West and that those from the West fail to take into account African cultural realities (see for example: Ebunoluwa 2009; Mangena 2003; Ampofo 2004). Therefore, this African feminist perspective is useful to the study of *chinamwali* as it acknowledges the influence of culture in shaping African women’s gender and sexuality identity, as well as serving to oppress them. This perspective also offers a broad understanding on the construction of African women’s identity.

Female initiation rites which are seen as a powerful institution that shapes a person’s sexual and gender identity, have received attention from various scholars, including feminist scholars (see: Arnfred 2004; Diallo 2004; Tamale 2005, 2011). Indeed, these scholars have sought to undertake exploratory studies on the practice, contributing to the body of knowledge on female initiation from a feminist standpoint, enabling us to understand the significant role of female initiation practices in the construction of sexual and gender identities.

For example, African feminists acknowledge the centrality of motherhood and scholarly work has been done to emphasise this aspect. From the findings in the study, child bearing or the ability to be a mother is seen as an important aspect of being a woman – a key aspect to the construction of a woman’s identity. Similar to what Mungwini (2006: 206) notes among the Shona of Zimbabwe, a woman’s ability to bear children is an important aspect of womanhood among the Chikunda. Applying the perspective to the study allowed a critical feminist framework to the study of *chinamwali* as it meant I could explore how socially constructed expectations of women contribute to shaping their gender and sexual identities.

## **Brief Historical Background of the Chikunda**

The Chikunda are believed to have emerged from the slave armies of Portuguese *prazos* or estates first established in the late sixteenth century (Isaacman & Isaacman 2004: 36). Isaacman (2000: 110,118) reports that the Chikunda had been military slaves in the *prazos* where they played a critical role in the establishment of a Portuguese political and commercial presence in the Zambezi hinterland. However, with the disintegration of the *prazo* system in the middle of the nineteenth century they fled from Mozambique and settled in the margins of the Zambezi river in Malawi, Zambia and Zimbabwe. In Zambia, the Chikunda are found in the Luangwa district, in the eastern part of Lusaka Province, bordering Chongwe district to the West, Mozambique to the East, and Zimbabwe to the South.

## **Methodological Approach**

This article is based on data collected in a study on *chinamwali*, the female initiation rite of the Chikunda community in Zambia between 2016 and 2017. The study sought to examine the influence of the rite on the social life and status of women in this community. The article examines the role of *chinamwali* in the construction of womanhood and preparation for sexual life and reproduction, by analysing participants’ construction of their lived realities in relation to the initiation rite in particular, and their gender and sexual identities in general. As traditional female initiation practices are deeply rooted in societal culture and traditions, and are experienced within a local context, the approach that I adopted in the study was a “feminist research practice” (Kelly 1988: 6) which includes reflexivity, or locating oneself within the research question; drawing on one’s experience as a woman; and acknowledging the problems of power and control. Furthermore, as the aim of the study was to gain an in-depth understanding of *chinamwali*, feminist methodological tools were used to collect data as advised by Wadsworth (2001:1); Reinharz (1992: 18 – 18); Reid (2004: 9); and Moore (1986: 92), as well as to analyse the data collected as Wuest (1995: 132) suggests. Working from a feminist perspective entailed having direct interaction with the participants (Wadsworth 2001: 1; Reinharz 1992: 18-19). Therefore, in order to generate an in-depth understanding of the women’s experience of *chinamwali*, narratives and in-depth interviews were used as an approach to collect data.

Through the narrative approach, the Chikunda were given a platform to narrate their experiences and feelings, and to reflect on the meaning and values of the significance of *chinamwali*. In-depth interviewing was also used so that I had face-to-face encounters with the participants and so that the interview was directed towards understanding the participant's lives, experiences and situations as expressed in their own words (Reinharz 1992: 18-19; Rubin & Rubin 1995: 31). The approach was also used to explore the perceptions of participants in relation to female initiation to enable me to gain an in-depth understanding of the phenomena, as Maynard and Purvis (1994: 11) suggest, foregrounding the subjective experiences of the people concerned, is fundamental to feminist research. In order to meet the objective of the study, a sample of thirty (30) participants was selected as follows: fifteen adult women who have undergone *chinamwali*, and who constituted the main research participants. In order to fully address the knowledge gap regarding the role of initiation, five ritual instructors, the *aphungu* who are the personal advisors to the initiates were engaged. In addition, no literature could be found that compares non-initiated to initiated women, and it is also not known whether there is a difference in the submissive, obedient and subservient behaviour of the initiated and uninitiated women as experienced by men, therefore, five uninitiated women and five men were selected.

## **Ethics**

As the research involves human beings, I endeavoured to ensure that respondents were informed about the purpose and goals of the study and that informed consent was sought (Reid 2004: 9; Babbie and Mouton 2001: 407). Everyone who participated in the study gave their consent freely, without being coerced or unfairly pressurised to do so. In this regard, participants were required to sign a consent form which detailed what the study was all about and what their participation entailed. As it is important to protect the identity of participants, ethical issues were taken into account in the form of anonymity and confidentiality. Therefore, to ensure anonymity of participants, pseudonyms were used (Neuman 2014: 154). For confidentiality, a register of real names and contacts was kept apart from the transcripts. Tapes, notes and transcripts were kept in secure places where only I as the researcher had access and will be discarded when there is no longer any need to keep this research evidence. *Chinamwali* is a secret puberty ritual where the teachings to the *namwali* are not open to uninitiated women and to men (Drews 1995: 101). From the beginning, I acknowledged that *chinamwali* teachings are secret and that they are not to be shared with anyone. I also observed that because of this, it was not easy for some women to share their experiences completely. However, by using a feminist approach, I allowed the women to tell their stories in their own way, and this allowed them to reflect on their stories and experiences of *chinamwali* that they may not ordinarily have shared with those who have not undergone the initiation rite.

## Chinamwali and the Construction of Womanhood

Initiation rites involve the construction and definition of gender roles and identities (Kangwa 2011: 21; Siachitema 2013; 22; Jules-Rosette 1980: 390), and they can be either “life-giving” of “life-denying” to women (Kangwa 2011; 21). First of all, it is clear that *chinamwali* like other female initiation rites is a rite of social maturation where a girl is transformed into an adult through a process that legitimises her “new” gender and sexual roles. What is also clear is that, *chinamwali* teaches a young girl how to internalise her gender and sexual identities through a process of enculturation, because it is through this process that a young woman learns what is culturally acceptable behaviour of what it means to be a woman. Thus, while authors such as Rasing (2001); Kangwa (2011); and Siachitema (2013), describe the female initiation rite as a process through which a girl’s gender roles and identity as a woman are constructed, they do not show whether or how this impacts on her status. What is required then, is an interrogation of what impact this “new identity” has on a woman’s status.

My interpretation of *chinamwali* is that it reinforces women’s collective identity as women because for a young girl to be initiated means to be allowed membership in the group of knowledgeable women. Generally, what the narratives expose is that *chinamwali* plays a role in shaping a woman’s identity, firstly as a Chikunda, and secondly, as a Zambian. This is perceived from two points of view: first, that a girl becomes a woman because she is different from those that have not undergone this initiation rite and second, that she becomes a woman because of the knowledge that she acquires or gains from the process. In discussions on the question of the role of *chinamwali* in shaping a woman’s identity, most participants agreed that it is going through *chinamwali* that differentiates them from other women because as shown in the following excerpts, Patricia, aged 45 said, “... every Chikunda woman should undergo *chinamwali* to show that she is different from other women.” Another response that was common is that from Anna, aged 24, who said, “that is our sign [as Chikunda] – it shows that you are now a [real] woman.” Maybin, a young man aged 25, supported this view but went further to explain that it did not matter that one did not go through the *chinamwali* rite in particular, to become a woman; what mattered is that for one to qualify as a woman, one should have gone through an initiation rite. He explained that, “my wife is not a Chikunda – she is Soli by group– she went through the Soli initiation rite - because to be a full woman, one has to undergo initiation.” Another man, Censio, aged 43, was of the opinion that, “yes, any woman who passes through this tradition is a real woman – everygrou has their own traditions – we have our own and they should respect it.” In other interviews, some participants were of the view that, one’s identity as a woman is dependent on the knowledge that one has acquired as a result of having gone through the rite. Faustina, aged 35, said, “a real Chikunda woman is taught – she goes through these things – for her to be a real woman she must know the *mwambo wa achikunda* (Chikunda tradition).” She further told me that the reason one becomes a woman is that, “because you know the *miyambo* (traditions) of a real Chikunda woman.”

Other common views were such as the one raised by Juana, aged 47, who said, “I feel that I am a true Chikunda woman – *chinamwali* made me into a real woman - I feel proud that because of *chinamwali*, I am a real woman”. Today, Jane, aged 37, insists that she is no different from the women that have undergone *chinamwali*, though she is not knowledgeable of some *chinamwali* teachings and traditions. She says, “I belong here, so even if I have not undergone *chinamwali* I am still a Chikunda woman – maybe there are just some things that I do not know – I don’t know.”

What I found problematic was the emphasis that for one to become a ‘woman’, a “full woman”, a “full human”, one must undergo the rite. Most of the participants intimated that a Chikunda woman needs to go through *chinamwali* to become a woman. Thus, aside from attaining an identity, *chinamwali* also serves to fulfil a social obligation to belong to the “women’s membership”. As Jane, further said, “to tell you the truth, I feel that I am not a full woman because of the things that I do not know.” Delphina aged 23, told me, ‘it is my identity – if you do not go through it you are not complete – you are not a complete Chikunda woman – that is how I feel.’ It may also be true that *chinamwali* like other female initiation practices offers a woman respect and acceptance in the community (Matobo et al 2009: 105-113). These examples show that the initiation rite plays a role in shaping a woman’s identity, and has an impact on a woman’s status, and as will be seen, will have a bearing on the constructions of power and social relations.

## **Chinamwali and Marriageability**

During the interviews, most of the participants commonly identified with the notion that the chances of a woman’s marriage were linked to whether or not one had gone through *chinamwali*. As Francesca, 48 said, “.....I don’t know – but I think when a woman has gone through *chinamwali* men become more interested in marrying you.” To amplify this aspect Patricia, aged 50 said, “I am sure it is helpful. Yes, men prefer a girl who has undergone *chinamwali* because she will have respect.” Similar to these sentiments, the practice of foot binding (Monagan 2010: 172) which I have discussed earlier, was seen as an erotic fetish to men so that women that did not engage in it, in addition to risking social scorn, also limited their marital prospects. Thus, apart from limiting their physical movement, this practice also had an impact on the women’s space.

Some women indicated that *chinamwali* not only increased their chances of marriage, but also helped in building stability within the marriage set up. Jane, aged 37, who did not undergo *chinamwali* felt that though she is married, she feels that the initiation rite is important to maintain peace and stability in a marriage because as she explained, “I feel that I have missed out on a lot and this has brought problems in my marriage because sometimes my husband scolds me for not knowing some things – and it hurts me – but what can I do now – a long time has passed but I am learning.”

*Grace, aged 55*, explained, “it has helped me to stay in my marriage for this long – I was married when I was 16 but I am still here – there is peace in my marriage and my home because I do everything that I was taught.”

This notion was not only limited to one being a potential wife but was also seen to have social repercussions – as one’s acceptability within the wider community to some extent was seen to depend on whether one was a “taught” woman or not. As *Estelle* in the extract below, explained,

...about increasing a woman’s chances of marriage, I would say yes because a family may prefer a girl who has undergone *chinamwali* as they are assured that she will keep her home. But as you know, nowadays our sons just pick any girl without knowing her background but as a family, yes we would prefer a woman who has gone through *chinamwali*.

*Phenia, aged 56*, told me, “who will marry a *chipuba*, (a fool)? Men want to marry a woman who is taught otherwise they will say, look at that woman, she does not know anything – and you will be a laughing stock in the village.” From the interviews with the men, however, there were two perspectives: first although they indicated that they would marry a woman who had not undergone *chinamwali* out of love, there would be problems. Second, they in turn would not encourage any man to marry a woman who has not been initiated because in their view, such women do not have respect. *Protazio, aged 52*, said, “Yes I would have married my wife even if she had not undergone *chinamwali* because I love her – but I know that there would have been no harmony – there is no way you can live with a woman in harmony if she has not been taught how to live with people – it is not possible.” Another man, *Censio, aged 42*, said, “I can marry her if I love her but there will definitely be problems in the home and as a family you cannot progress – you go backwards because that woman will have no respect.” *Clement, aged 45*, said, “there would be no peace in the home because they do not know how to respect a man – you know that a woman who has been initiated has been well brought up.”

These examples demonstrate how Chikunda women have established their space within the culturally defined boundaries of what becoming a woman, and by extension, a wife should entail. What is problematic then is the implication of one being perceived as “not a full woman when one is not taught”. Furthermore, there are penalties for non-adherence to these requirements, as not being a “full woman” will be met with disapproval from the home, as well as within the community. As *Manabe (2010; 146 – 148)* says, culture determines how members of the community think or feel, as negative attitudes towards tradition may cause tension or rejection by others or one may not be taken seriously. This lack of acceptance, as could happen in one not undergoing *chinamwali* has the potential to impact on one’s space as it could lead to feelings of inadequacy or low self-esteem.

From the narratives it is evident that a woman's space seems to be determined by one's ability to become a "wife" – a status attained through marriage. This space is protected by adherence to certain requirements such as respect for a man, and other requirements such as labia elongation and other techniques that will be discussed in the following section.

## **Chinamwali and Sexual Attraction**

One important theme that emerged from the narratives is the key role that *chinamwali* plays in making a young woman desirable and attractive to the opposite gender. Another theme constructed around the issue of "eroticism and sexual pleasure", where a woman is taught to be a good wife or to be able to attract a husband through her ability to please him sexually. As Mary, a ritual instructor said, "about increasing a woman's chances of marriageability, I would say yes, because a man may prefer a girl who has gone through *chinamwali*, because he is assured that she will keep the home." This is also evident among the Shangaan of Zimbabwe (Chikunda et al 2006: 150), where it is said that during the *Khomba*, the female initiation rite, a young woman is taught that to be "successful" as a good wife and a good daughter in-law, one of the indicators is that she should be able to please her husband sexually. These female initiation rites have similar cultural significance to the *chinamwali*. Therefore, in this section, I will examine the narratives of the participants within these contexts. To begin with, I will look at how *chinamwali* has been perceived as a necessary condition for marriage.

It is said that women's and girl's sexuality is a preoccupation of patriarchy as male interests inform the shape that sexuality takes (Kamlongera 2007: 85), and as Drews (1995: 104) observes in her account of female initiation rites, the young girl is taught how to give pleasure to a man sexually. In a study on *fisi* (hyena) culture, as practiced in some female initiation practices in Malawi, Kamlongera (2007: 85), says that the practice shows that the ceremony serves male appetites or that of the future groom. In *chinamwali*, as we have seen in the previous chapter, the young girl is "inspected" to confirm that she has correctly elongated her labia minora, and that by the time she leaves the seclusion, she should have perfected the art of "dancing in bed". It thus becomes evident that these aspects form a critical part of *chinamwali* education. The experiences on this journey to becoming a woman happen as the *namwali* is separated from her family and is under the guidance of the *aphungu* who enhance the continued performance of these rituals. In that way, they serve as a means by which a young woman constructs her "sexual identity". To demonstrate this, I will elaborate on the leanings on labia elongation, the art of dancing in bed, and wearing beads.

Labia elongation is a practice that is encouraged among young girls from around the ages of 9 and 10. The reasons advanced for engaging in this ritual are many, and include for example, that it is a sign of maturity, that it gives sexual pleasure to men, and that a woman will be perceived as a complete woman whose upbringing complies with tradition.

However, in contrast to the above what is common from the interviews is that they play a key role in the process of a young woman's initiation to female sexuality. The importance attached to this ritual is very significant and symbolic to the extent that it dictates a woman's "acceptability" and recognition in the society at large, and in particular to one's husband, or male partner. As Maria, a *phungu* put it,

If a girl does not have them – we will help her to start pulling them using herbs until the required length is achieved – that is the essence of being a woman – otherwise it will be a problem when she is married because the husband will think that she has not been taught – this is a shame.

Faustina, aged 35, added, "your husband will laugh at you – and you will embarrass your family." Monagan (2010: 171) in discussing the issue of shame states that men and women both experience shame, but that for women, it is a state of inferiority and "otherness" which involves the perception of oneself as a lesser creature. Conversely, the practice enhances a woman's self-esteem. In the initiation rite for girls among the Venda of South Africa, Manabe (2010: 26-27), reports that the rite also involves labia elongation which is believed to be a "sexual appetiser", and a pleasurable and useful exercise, especially for men. Women who have elongated labia minora are perceived, and also perceive themselves as being more desirable than those who do not. They also perceive themselves as having the advantage of being married and sexually satisfying to men. While these sentiments were also expressed among the participants, it becomes evident that the female body then becomes a site on which a number of societal expectations. As Grace, aged 35 put it, "this is a woman's home – without them you are not a woman. Your husband will definitely send you back home to be taught". Phenia, a *phungu* put it this way, "every woman should have them – they are for the men to play with to enjoy – they hold his manhood so that he does not slip in and out- so without them you are not a real woman." As Bordo (1997: 90) argues, "the body is a medium of culture – it is a powerful symbolic form on which hierarchies are inscribed and reinforced and thus, a locus of societal control. This notion is explored in the texts above, where the female body is seen as the site of patriarchal hierarchies. It expresses the objectification and power over women that patriarchy exerts, and which is continually negotiated throughout her life. The practice of labia elongation also shows how women's bodies are seen as objects of men's desires and has an obvious impact on a woman's status, as they become dependent on their bodies for recognition and acceptance because without the elongated labia she is "a fool", "not a woman", and by implication, not a "full human being."

A recurring theme in the narratives which is intimately linked to the discussion on elongation of labia above, is that of the art of dancing in bed. I will explain this briefly. I was told by some women during the interviews that during seclusion, the initiate is taught how to dance in bed in preparation for her future role as a wife.

Maria, a *phungu* told me that, “we also teach a *namwali* to dance, *mwambo wa mu ng’anda* (bedroom rituals), which a woman must perform for her husband in the confines of the marital room.” Faustina, aged 35, explained, “you are taught to dance (in bed) – not to just lie there like a log.” At the end of the seclusion, it is expected that the *namwali* will have perfected this art, because not to do so will mean that she is not a “woman”. This aspect is also linked to the issue on the control over female sexuality which I have discussed.

Other than their symbolic meaning, the beads that are worn around the waist are believed to “excite” men. In the narratives I was told that aside from the role that they play in controlling a woman’s sexuality, through the “power” that they give to a woman to monitor sexual relations, they are also “pleasurable” to men. Patricia, aged 43, told me, “they also told me to wear beads (around the waist) – they are very important for a woman to wear because they excite them.” As Grace, aged 35 said, “they also taught me about the beads – they are important for every woman because that is what differentiates a woman from a man – and the man can play with them to feel nice.” Once again, we see here how a woman’s body is seen as a social construct marked by societal and cultural ideals of femininity. There are several ideas that are encapsulated in these narratives; they equate “femaleness”, “womanness” with objectification, and are also subtler ways in which the female body is seen primarily as a gendered object which should be maintained, controlled and monitored solely for a man’s pleasure.

## Conclusion

This article examined the extent to which the Chikunda women negotiate their space in relation to *chinamwali* in particular, and in relation to gender and sexuality in general. It should be noted that the analysis of *chinamwali* presented in this article is by no means exhaustive as it is only investigated from two themes: construction of womanhood; and preparation for sexual life and reproduction. The findings in the article show that *chinamwali* plays a key role in shaping the identity and sexuality of the Chikunda women as it is a process that prepares them for their gender and sexual roles, and is an avenue through which lessons on their expected role are conveyed. From the women’s stories, the lessons in *chinamwali* prepare a girl for her future role as a mother. The rituals performed to ensure that she is able to bear children in the future, emphasise this aspect. I agree with Oduyoye (1999: 116) that the emphasis on motherhood relegates women’s role to childbearing and has the potential to impact on their status, because not to be able to bear children would mean that one is not a full woman, and by implication, nor a full human being.

Furthermore, from the findings, *chinamwali* seems to reinforce the idea that initiates are ripe for marriage through the lessons taught, as explained above. This data suggests that even though some of the girls are very young at this stage, the promise of marriage seems to be the primary objective of this transition to adulthood. I find that this has the potential to limit the girl's chances of attaining an education, further limiting their prospects of becoming independent adults, and also confirms the notion that one needs a man in order to be a full human being.

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