



## How the Church Frames AIDS

### RELIGIOUS CONTEXT IN MALAWI

Malawi is a very religious country; around 77% of the population is Christian, 15% Muslim and 8% practice traditional African religions (Barrett et al. 2001). Among the Christians, 25% are Roman Catholics, 20% are Protestants and 17% are members of African Independent Churches. Evangelicals and Pentecostals are on the increase, particularly in urban areas, and together account for about 32% (Jenkins 2011). Evangelicals and Pentecostals are less numerous in rural areas than in urban areas, and Muslims are largely concentrated in the South of the country. These figures are estimates and are provided by national denominational organisations rather than based on representative surveys of national populations and therefore may be incorrect (Trinatopoli 2006).

Gathering data on religious affiliation is further complicated by the syncretic nature of religion in Malawi which results in hybrid religious groups that might not reflect denominational characteristics as in other parts of Africa. In Malawi, Christianity and traditional religion are often combined (P44). This means that the line between Christianity and tradition is often blurred and African conceptions of politics and religion do not always separate the Church from the State (Patterson 2011, p. 3).

A Member of Parliament told me:

But after Christianity, there has been another level of Christianity which is the, they call themselves the indigenous Christian churches. They are Christians but they have taken aspects of the Chewa tradition and said no no, we have we have our own way of looking at God's revelation but they emphasise a lot on the Bible and I am not an expert on that but I can tell you about the Chewa traditional religion. One God, monotheistic, that one is really highly developed and when you read it and you look at Christianity there is hardly much difference, but the way the Christians, the missionaries came, they had to demonise it, that this is primitive; it's not the right way of looking at religion but actually no, they believed in one God and called him different names but who doesn't call God different names? The Jews call him all kinds of names, the Christians call him all kinds of names, why should the Chewa not call it that, because God showed all his power in different forms. And they called ours ancestral spirit worship, no, they never worshipped the spirits. They looked at the spirits as intercessors to God, God was looked at as the supreme spirit. When you die you become a spirit, so you are nearer God so you can communicate better with God so you pray to God straight, directly, and then afterwards you call upon your ancestors to intercede for you, to pray for you. The Christians also do the same and now pray for Mary, what are they, are they alive, they are dead (laughter). So actually you can go through the tradition, the Chewa traditional religion quite similarly, I wish they had understood it and then say yes this is how you believe, it is quite correct, but the transformation of your belief into Jesus as the universal saviour, that would have gone very well with the Chewa. But they said stop, no, once you become a Christian, you stop everything. And that to my mind, and I am a Christian, my father was a Christian, but I think a lot of Malawians have really, are not what we say we are, because they can't take this out of us, they can't, we are still a Chewa. (P5)

Here we see a divide between those that combine African Traditional Religion (ATR) with Christianity and those that only practise Christian beliefs. The elite perceives themselves as such because they have rejected

ATR in favour of Christianity as taught by the missionaries. This illustrates how a divide has emerged internally to Malawi and how this has, in turn, shaped the perceptions the elite have of the rural populations who they see as backward because they still practice traditional religion so to be enlightened is to reject tradition. ATR is difficult to define primarily because it is lived and not preached and followers are preoccupied with the practice of ATR rather than theory; therefore there is no single, simple and precise definition to describe it. Mbiti (1970) provides a useful summary of where to look for and find ATR. He suggests rituals, ceremonies and festivals; shrines, sacred places and religious objects; art and symbols; music and dance; proverbs, riddles and wise sayings; names of people and places; myths and legends and beliefs and customs. Bascom and Herskovits (1962, p. 3) argued that despite the intensity of Christian missionary efforts and the thousand years of Muslim proselytising which have marked parts of Africa, ATRs continued to manifest everywhere. This was seen in the worship of African deities, the homage to ancestors and the recourse to divination, magic and other rituals.

Using broad categories of African Christian churches provided by Gifford (2004, p. 10), the estimated number of Christians categorised by churches in Malawi at the time (2001) with a population of 10.9 million was: Orthodox 4400; Catholics 2.7 million; Old Mission Protestants (Mainlines) 2.37 million; New Mission Protestants (Faith-Mission and Pentecostals) 130,000; Old Independents (African Indigenous) 2 million; and New Independents (neo-Pentecostals and Charismatics) 1.46 million (Barrett et al. 2001). As we can see from these figures, Catholicism is the most popular type of Christianity with New Mission Protestants the least popular with a large percentage of the population still practising traditional religion. As this paragraph demonstrates there are many different types of Christianity in Malawi and within each type, variations exist. For example, Pentecostals vary greatly and many congregations may have local autonomy from other churches but there can be a considerable hierarchy within individual organisations (Patterson 2011, p. 79).

However, as we have seen through my interviews there is an overlap between ATR and Christianity. The idea of 'divine punishment' is common to ATR and Christianity and resonates with 'transgressing taboos' (Lwanda 2005, p. 120). Some Christians, although criticising cultural practices for spreading HIV, accepted 'conservative' or formative aspects of ATR. Lwanda (2005) makes the link between medicine and Christianity and ATR and posits the view that in rural and peri-urban

areas, disagreements between Christianity and western medicine and ATR and traditional medicine were solved by cultural dualities as opposed to hybridity or cultural subjugation (Lwanda 2005, p. 83). He argues that:

Many core cultural beliefs, now embedded in village localities, were not significantly challenged by colonial or Christian assaults; they had been placed out of the colonial gaze. The invisibility often gave the impression of, and was mistaken for, indigenous practices dying out under the over-whelming and inhibitory nature of colonial governance. Dualism enabled many Maravai to survive colonialism without experiencing ‘dissolution’ or ‘fragmentation’ (mental illnesses resulting from cultural alienation or maladjustment) (Fanon, 1970, p. 7 and p. 77) a more common experience among educated elite who, unlike the more culturally secure villagers, had to confront the cultural dichotomy head on. (p. 84)

Patterson makes a similar point but related to the use of anti-retroviral drugs. She points out that while some churches are suspicious of ARVs, God can be the only true healer. Some churches then combine the use of ARVs with spiritual healing (Patterson 2011). However pastors may also use prayer, exorcism, fasting or traditional herbs to drive the virus from the believer’s body (Becker and Geissler 2007, p. 11). This example shows how a tension exists between spiritual and biomedical approaches to treatment.

District Interfaith AIDS Committees (DIACS) exist in Malawi and there are 32 in total, comprising 12 members from different churches at district levels. The DIAC nominates a chairperson, secretary and treasurer to run the committee. At the district level, activities for faith-based HIV/AIDS programmes take place which are run through the local churches of each faith group. The Malawi Interfaith AIDS Association (MIAA) has trained all DIACs and have linked them to the District Assembly. Religious leadership is generally male, although some of the evangelical Malawi churches are led by women but the wider social structures they promote are still patriarchal despite a female figurehead. The Protestant and Roman Catholic churches focus on behaviours—fidelity and abstinence, for instance—as a means to prevent STIs; in other words, the focus is placed on the maintenance of a heterosexual status quo with emphasis placed on women as the homemakers and child rearers as the model most likely to see low infection rates. However, some critics think focusing on behaviour change alone, rather than changing its context, results in bad policy decisions (Barnett and Parkhurst 2005).

A study by Trinitapoli (2009) examined religious teachings and influences on the Abstain, Be Faithful, use a Condom (ABC) approach of HIV prevention in Malawi. She presents an overview of the topics religious leaders in rural Malawi formally address in their weekly religious services. Over 88% of religious leaders reported preaching about morality (generally); and over 70% preaching about sexual morality; AIDS and illness (generally). Furthermore, 95% of religious leaders reported that they advise their members privately to stop promiscuity yet only 27% reported talking to members on an individual basis about the use of condoms (Trinitapoli 2009, p. 203). Religious leaders generally tend to be male. Some evangelical churches in Malawi are led by women, but the wider social structures they foster are still patriarchal despite having a female leader (Rankin et al. 2006). Soothill's research examined women's empowerment in Ghana's Charismatic Churches (Soothill 2011). During her fieldwork, participating in women's activities of three charismatic churches in Accra, she discovered that in contrast to Ghana's older mission-style churches (predominantly Catholic, Methodist and Presbyterian), the charismatic churches embrace the concept of women's leadership and cast aside traditional barriers to women becoming pastors and church founders. Although the ratio of female to male pastors is still low and the men still dominate the movement in practice, the 'spiritual equality' of believers is a cornerstone of the charismatic discourse on gender (p. 84). Soothill goes on to say however that women in position of religious leadership has not reversed patriarchy.

I collected newspaper articles on HIV/AIDS spanning 10 years during my fieldwork such as the one presented above. Many of them conveyed negative messages concerning AIDS and that condoms are 'useless things' and how everyone 'should kneel before God in order to be protected'. This viewpoint, from a biomedical and feminist viewpoint, is dangerous as it ignores the social reality of male sexual behaviour. The heavy emphasis in religious and public discourse on the importance of women as nurturers fails to acknowledge that the problem predominantly lies in the construction of masculinity that associates sexual prowess with a hyper-masculinity that in turn is desired (Gilmore 1990). A concept of religious morality has clearly been employed in these advertisements. Such messages clearly deny that male promiscuity is both normalised but also legitimised by and through hegemonic constructions of male behaviour. Such religious beliefs ironically promote unprotected sex and have been considered to hamper HIV prevention programmes (Caldwell et al. 1999).

Gama (2000) reported that Malawi's Council of Churches condemn the distribution and use of condoms to prevent HIV transmission as immoral since the government's doing so is tantamount to supporting promiscuity. According to the Church in Malawi, condoms are not 100% effective in preventing infection, noting that the only way to protect oneself is strict monogamy or abstinence. Church leaders make it clear that although non-governmental organisations (NGOs) distribute condoms, they will not distribute or condone their use. This widespread antipathy to condom use has not helped discordant couples, nor has the occasional policy of requiring HIV blood tests before marriage and then refusing to marry discordant couples. A study by Kaler (2004) of the percentage distribution of themes in negative evaluations of condoms in Malawi showed that 16% ( $n=7$ ) reported that using condoms is against God's will. Religion clearly influences people's behaviour and Chaves (2002) suggests three types of religious organisations are thought to influence the behaviour of individuals: congregations, denominational organisations and religious non-profit organisations. However, there are more than three. Churches are often seen as civil society actors and in the 1900s, donors and scholars were looking for agents of political change and socioeconomic development that were independent of the perceived corrupt and inefficient African state (Bratton 1989; Harbeson et al. 1994; Gifford 1998; Patterson 2011). Furthermore, the problems with structural adjustment policies led Africans to identify new alternatives to the state for services, such as religious organisations (Jenkins 2007). According to the Gallup News Service (2007) religious organisations are the most trusted organisations in African civil society due to their links with communities, with 76% of respondents in nineteen countries in sub-Saharan Africa saying they had most confidence in these groups, followed by the military (61%) and financial institutions (55%). They had least confidence in their governments (44%). Gallup further reported that channelling foreign aid through local religious organisations would bring more optimism to African citizens than channelling it directly through the government.

There has been an increase in donor interest and funding of religious groups in development and donors have paid more attention to religion since the United Nations Declaration on HIV/AIDS in 2001 at the General Assembly Special Session on HIV/AIDS. The Declaration mentioned in the previous chapter refers to 'religious factors' that are imperative for HIV prevention and that faith-based organisations

provide important leadership in the fight against AIDS (UNAIDS 2001). Dominant donors have taken different approaches. For example, the USA under the Bush administration, approached the issue from a conservative right's view and adopted the ABC approach which echoes the Church in Malawi; that abstinence and monogamy are the only way to reduce AIDS. Perhaps this is why the USA does not put money in the basket funds in Malawi but established the US President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR) and adopted the ABC method as its primary prevention strategy against the sexual transmission of HIV, focusing on Abstinence for youth, including the delay of sexual debut and abstinence until marriage; Being tested for HIV and being faithful in marriage and monogamous relationships and Correct and consistent use of condoms for those who practise high-risk behaviours. This is in contrast to the British government's approach and was one of the main differences between the UK and the USA concerning funding AIDS programmes. DFID adopted the Sector Wide Approach (SWAp), which is supported by a group of development partners and comprises a mix of projects, pooled funding and sector budget support. There is no official definition of the SWAp but it usually adheres to the following:

- All significant funding agencies support a shared, sector-wide policy and strategy, which has clear sector targets and is focused on results;
- A medium-term expenditure framework (MTEF) or budget supports this policy;
- Government provides leadership in a sustained partnership;
- Shared processes and approaches for implementing and managing the sector strategy and work programme are agreed, including reviewing sectoral performance against jointly agreed milestones and targets; and
- There is a shared commitment to move to greater reliance on Government financial management and accountability systems. (Pearson 2010, p. 13)

Since the establishment of the SWAp, DFID has increasingly provided support through Sector Budget Support (SBS) and General Budget Support (GBS) instruments as well as funding service delivery projects off-budget, but under the SWAp which are Banja La Mtsogolo (BLM), which provides family planning and sexual and reproductive health services in a Joint Financing Agreement with Government and other

donors; and Voluntary Services Overseas (VSO) which manages a large volunteer programme (Pearson 2010).

Catholic opposition helped to bring about democratisation in Malawi, where the national bishops' pastoral letter of 1992, 'Living Our Faith', distributed to parishes across the country, was the first public criticism levelled against the one-party rule of Hastings Kamuzu Banda, and a turning point in bringing him down. Opposing post-colonial authoritarian regimes, the Church helped bring about democracy because of its political ideology of human rights and democracy. Philpott (2004) shows how the Catholic Church in Malawi spoke out against human rights abuses and poor governance in 1992. The church is therefore seen by local people as an important and positive force for change, making the views of its leadership highly influential.

Next, I show how the elites in Malawi churches have a key role in portraying cultural practices as negative and blaming them for the spread of HIV. The church has been key in distorting the impact sexual cultural practices have, linking them directly to AIDS.

The NGO Tearfund, a UK Christian relief and development agency, funded a meeting organised by the Evangelical Association of Malawi to 'use pastors to influence behaviour change and put a stop to cultural practices such as *kulowa kufa*, *fisi* and *kuchotsa fumbi*'; the practices to which I refer throughout this study. Here we see an oversimplification in the analysis of the link between cultural practices and AIDS. The article reports that abstinence and faithfulness among married couples will stop the spread of HIV, which contrasts with the article's conclusion, and the argument that cultural practices need to be stopped; however, the cultural practices listed do not involve married couples.

The following is an extract from an interview with PS the Member of Parliament who talks at length about the role of Christianity versus tradition:

Aah, we aah, have been looking at the negative aspect of the cultural practices, and the government, the church, aah everybody international aah always writing about what is negative. (P5)

He talks about a particular dance which is part of the initiation ceremony for the *fisi* practice said to spread HIV and he says "this great dance has caused a lot of problems to the early missionaries because they didn't understand it, but it has persisted, it has never been broken and over 150 years it is continuing". (P5)



This is an example of how the missionaries have not been able to change the culture. He goes on:

From the Christian leaders aah, it's a hangover from the early missionary perception that traditional customs are unchristian and in order to become a Christian, you had to renounce your membership or your practice of these... actually non-Christians are called *akunja*, *akunja* meaning outsiders, those who are outside the grace of God, whatever it is, as if God only created a certain people (laughter). Aaaah, when you do see one, aah, like try at the very first meeting to, to, to make, put your fact clearly that you are looking at it sympathetically, you respect what they ... whatever they will tell you, and if it is a secret and you don't want it to be defiled, I will respect it or whatever. Aaah then they will tell you a little bit more. But I have to be quite frank with you, you are not a Chewa, they will never tell you everything, but at least enough for you to see the logic, aah and see why certain things are done in certain ways.

I am quite radical about it ... we cannot allow this to happen, if our girls die, what will happen to the community, they were very concerned. But if several times you bombard them with 'change your habits' this is not good, a chief is a chief, miyambo he is the custodian of (laughs) this is undermining his own power. They will, they will respect you because it is the government, but you have not won their hearts. Aaah, where we, one of the objectives is to try to explain the Chewa customs, traditions, religion, art, culture, aaah dances to other Chewas as well as to other people. And we have, we hope that eventually we can have a radio station so that we can have our discussions freely without looking over our shoulders see whether our donors like it or not.

But there is a lot of misunderstanding, a lot of ignorance, a lot of very early condemnation of the issues by people who don't understand, who don't know anything. Lastly, I wanted to, I mentioned that there would be some issues of the positives, in this short paper it is not published, but it's just some of my thinking. I, I, from what I have told you about the responsibility to the community, that is very positive, very powerful for our concern, and therefore, following on to that, there are institutions with traditional, traditional institutions which have been set up which we can utilize, I mentioned may be one or two, I mentioned one, it is here. It is here. One is the marriage counsellors, when the family starts, the woman has, has a *nkhoswe* as her counsellor, her sponsor so to speak. For a life time. The man also has his, these are the people who were there in the marriage negotiations. They start right at the beginning and if there are any problems, the family wants to discuss they call on these two people, one or two of these people. Now that's an institution which is almost,

which is only working now at the actual wedding. When the wedding is there, they say who is the *nkhoswe*, when they go in church they say who is the *nkhoswe*, who is the *nkhoswe* for this woman, who dadadada! That's the end. But that is the institutions traditionally which was there to for the young couple to confide, to discuss issues, if there are any problems they would come, that's one. The other, institution is the traditional court, the chief, the *bwalo* where the elders meet regularly. Aah elders means both male and female in the Chewa although they sit separately. But they go to the *bwalo* under the big tree, that also is a consultative forum and many issues are discussed every case, legal case that is that comes there it is resolved at the *bwalo* where the chief sits with his counsellors as judges. So that *bwalo* system can be used. Then the initiation structures themselves, are very powerful educational and training institutions. You know what the boys and girls learn during initiation stays with them the rest of their lives, they never forget them.

And as an educationist myself, I was interested to know how do they teach (laughter) these boys and girls that they don't forget? Yaah, its songs, proverbs, aaa ee sayings, similes. Our cultures are very symbolic. So the explanation of symbols and what it means aah through songs, but also the instruction is almost one to one. And the demonstration, the physical demonstrations are very important. They will tell you the theories et cetera, but then they demonstrate by some act may be if you are talking about death, you would think that they have brought a dead person there, but actually he is not dead, but the way they present (laughter), the young people get the message that you know, it's not something that is light, it has to be respected because the spirit has left the body yes, but it's there. It is another form of existence. So it is very much interesting. I haven't done much work there but it's amazing that they have been very successful in putting ... and then there is the issue of personal training as well because, if it is a girl, they are taught how to cook, how to look after the children, hygiene, how to look after the house, and this is very important.

Secondly, a Christian influence has been deeply assumed that what is Christian is good, and what a Christian says is bad is bad. And many people of our group have become Christians, have grown up like Christians and really even the Chewa, many Chewas that I talk to, don't know about their culture, they are surprised when I give them some lectures on Chewas religion was all about, and they say, but aaah Chewa religion is good (laughter). So the whole history of cultural suppression had its toll and really even in the west when this disease came, they really didn't know how to tackle it. So really nobody had experience. I would really want to jump to the easy explanation and yaah you are supposed to be curious object of the study, and so aaah, I think that's why I said, I think

we missed a point in tackling HIV/AIDS. We would have done a better job. We would have done a better job if we went to the chief, to the nam-kungwi, and explained and had a dialogue with them and told, no one wants their child dead. I am sure that we would have found a very good solution. My wife used to work for UNICEF. (P5)

Despite him explaining about the influence of Christianity, he also makes it known to me that he is a member of the elite. He says as an educationist myself and then talks about his wife who used to work for UNICEF. By associating himself with his wife's position in a UN agency makes him an elite. Furthermore, as pointed out in the previous chapter, elites distance themselves from those communities that observe cultural practices and position themselves in opposition to them as more enlightened—defined as a reflection of ATR and conversion to Christianity.

The following is an extract from an interview with a journalist. I read an article in a national newspaper about cultural practices and AIDS. I emailed him and we agreed to meet at a radio station in Lilongwe. It was only upon arrival when I signed in I learnt that he was a Reverend and that the radio station was Christian. The radio station's mission is to assist the Church to fulfil the command of Jesus Christ to make disciples of all peoples, and to do so by using and making available mass media to proclaim the gospel of salvation to as many people as possible and instruct believers in biblical doctrine and daily Christ-like living. He told me that during the period of sixteen days against gender-based violence, he normally carries out some write-ups focusing on specific areas on the theme that is being set aside that year. I said to him that in his newspaper article he talks about cultural practices. I asked him if he honestly thinks the practices mentioned in his article contribute to the transmission of HIV. He responded:

I think they do because if you look at most of the cultural practices of our concern those cultural practices that either have a stature component or have a component where you know some grievous bodily harm has to be inflicted in order to invoke the power of that particular practice. I mean if you look at *fisi* for instance I mean, its aah surrounding the question of infertility and so in order to resolve that infertility such sexual practice must happen. *Chokolo*, which is wife inheritance, it's the same thing there has to be some sexual activity between the lady and the relation of the dead man, aa same thing with *kulowa kufu*, you find that again it involves ritual sex and so on. Aaah, actually I just pulled a document from

my computer in which we will also see oppression, I think three years ago I attended a faith based leaders conference which was looking at some cultural practices which are fuelling the spread of HIV/AIDS in Malawi. I think this does look at quite a number of areas. If you look at these two the central slide which talk about sexual intercourse as ritual cleansing, sexual cleansing, cleansing a child initiation cleansing so you find that you know the sexual act has quite a very central role in aa in the cultural cleansing process. So aah one, one can't wish away these, one can't trivialize the role of you know, of sexual practices in our cultural practices. If you look at the last line there, sex as a coping mechanism and then where it says *Mwamuna ndi kabudula amathera moyenda, mwamuna sauzidwa*, it kind of justifies the fact that its natural for men to be promiscuous. But the husband, the man uses his common sense and common sense for him his wife alone is not sufficient. How loaded that particular statement *mamuna sauzidwa* may be. If you go to page three, there are 6 coping mechanisms. These are some of the practices one of them that I would like to talk about is *chisweni*, the fourth one. *Nsweni* means that if I have a cousin, *Msweni* literally means cousin culturally there is freedom that you can flirt around because your cousin is not your sister and so there is that kind of social closeness between somebody and their cousins so you find that sexually it becomes very easy for people to sexually relate with their cousins. And then of course *Mitala* is polygamy, aah, polygamy has got a role in the HIV/AIDS. The other talks about sex as a sign of hospitality, and, aah where you pay a visit to a village and then they give you a lady to actually entertain you over the night. So that's aah the actual basis of some of those. *Kusamala mlendo* means taking care of visitors aah *nkhosa amamwa mkaka wa mberere zake...* to say that aah..... okay let me talk about the one which says *wamkachise amadya za mkachisi*. Its got some kind of religious connotation to say that if somebody is working in a temple, he has to eat, he has to take their livelihood within the temple which they are working in and that sometimes is used culturally to say that for instance if I am the chief of the village then I can have access to any woman that I want to have access to, aah and so on and so forth. So this does outline some of those that are quite central in our cultural set up. (P3)

He said that the conference he attended was organised by the Norwegian Church Aid where church leaders were brought together to speak about gender-based violence. I explained that the probability of the girl becoming infected in one sexual act with a fisii is one in one thousand. He said: 'For the young virgin'. I said: 'Well for anyone. And if the person has a sexually transmitted infection, then the probability of catching the virus... is every eight in one thousand'. He said: 'Oh! when

you talk about that statistics you are talking about, for me it's the first time as well to encounter that' (P3). This point demonstrates how he was unaware of the disease's epidemiology. It is also an example of how the church is able to powerfully communicate its message through the media. He then went on to say:

Yaah its clear that those types of messages have come up through quite well, I think the impression created in one way aaah aaah, every sexual encounter, potentially, yah potentially you know, can infect you with the virus. But then, aaa I think the issue is one where we do not want to say ... the messages stem from a technical point of view that if viewed from the information and the moment the public gets the information, aaaaah the public are already threatened then they ... that defeats the whole process of behaviour change ....But to answer your question, it's a, in that scenario of aaah initiation, its chances are that aaah, from just a single sexual act, that doesn't transmit the virus. Perhaps that then calls for a longitudinal research aaah we need the information in Malawi so that we would be able to determine all these claims we are meeting regarding cultural practices that are fuelling the spread of AIDS. If eeeh aaah, can we make evidence based claims. (P3)

In his response, he justifies why he did not know about the disease's probability of infection by arguing that it is better not to tell the public the truth about the disease, otherwise this defeats the process of behaviour change. In other words, he is making points: (i) don't tell the public the truth about the disease and (ii) people will not change their behaviour if they know that the probability of infection is so low. In the quote above, the respondent seems to be patronising the 'other' as he refers to the public as separate from himself and defines them as uneducated. He then went on to talk about the sexualisation of women:

One does see those types of linkages. Aaah some of it is aah in terms of some of the cultural practices, I think, whether they fuel HIV, the spread of HIV/AIDS, personally I think that its very clear that the very practice of them does usually subject a woman to inhumane treatment where the woman is treated more of as a sexual object as opposed to the fact that they should govern their own wellbeing. The observation that is being made in most forums that I have attended is that because we have been too quick to condemn cultural practices, you find that where we are celebrating that they are not being eradicated, they are simply going into hiding. (P3)

I interviewed a District Youth Officer who previously worked as a field facilitator for a faith-based organisation called Family Life and AIDS Education Ministry that trained community volunteers on AIDS based on biblical principles. He said:

people have to understand that HIV cancellation is through spiritual conduct, if they avoid that they are going to prevent from contracting the virus and for them to do that they have to understand that God hates immorality. (P15)

He said that he does not belong to any church as its interdenominational funded by Oikomonos Foundation from the Netherlands (the Oikonomos foundation is a Christian organisation working on development cooperation and works with local partner organisations in Bolivia, Ghana, Indonesia, India, Malawi, Nigeria and Zimbabwe)—a further example of international donors funding religious activities. He said:

We were teaching them that at least as a family, if they enjoy the family life they have to follow the big responsibility, God instituted the family so that the two, the husband and the wife should live happily, what is happening is that the two are not living happily because they have ignored what God has instituted, so we are trying to teach them that, and again if they had heard to what the Bible said about family life, they are also going to avoid contracting the virus that causes AIDS. (P15)

He then went on to explain about cultural practices:

R: There are a lot of cultural practices that are being practiced in Mulanje and Thyolo where we have been working, so we are also tackling that like *kuchosa fumbi*, *chokolo*, how many do you want? *kulowa fisi*... yeah there are many of them.

S: But what are you doing about these practices?

R: For example this *kuchosa fumbi* is practiced during initiation ceremonies, for example after initiation ceremonies they are advised to shake off their dust that is they should have sex. So sometimes we could go to where the initiation ceremonies were taking place and we could advise them that they should stop because it promotes the spread of HIV/AIDS. And again we could go to churches because some of these people who were involved in initiation ceremonies, the *anankungvi*

initiation councilors were coming from the churches, so we could go through the churches and talk to them and say look at what the word of God is saying, advise them on this, and not only that, we could also advise the councilors that if they want to cut the foreskin, they should not use the same razor blade, at least each young man should have his razor blade so that they should avoid contracting the virus that causes HIV/AIDS.

He went on to explain that he trained volunteers from the surrounding communities about cultural practices so ‘they could go and teach others’. In return:

As a token of appreciation, I don’t know what I can call this, they could receive something like we were giving them bicycles which they were using to have their ceremonies in the communities and not only that, sometimes we could give them some soap, flour, salt, fertilizer, maize seeds, not as a payment for the work they were doing but....

I asked about the training that takes place:

S: Okay, do cultural practices come up?

R: Yeah it comes out automatically, we have a lesson on that and some of the cultural practices that I have mentioned come out automatically

S: Why?

R: Some of them are being practiced here in Balaka, so when we take the young men and women for training, we ask them to give some cultural practices that are practiced in their respective areas and what they say it’s what I have already said about Thyolo and Mulanje.

S: So what do you teach them about?

R: Cultural practices, firstly they have to understand what the cultural practices are all about and why are they practiced. This comes in the course of the discussion as a facilitator and the participant.

S: Say for example, I am a participator, what do you tell me about cultural practices?

R: I ask you what cultural practices are being practiced from where you are coming from, so you mention them, maybe you brainstorm about them and then you start to discuss are these good?, if they are bad, how are they bad?

S: So what do they say are good?

R: Of course there are some cultural practices that are good, not all are bad, but for those that are bad like the *Kusasa fumbi*, that one is very

dangerous because it promotes the spread of HIV/AIDS, after the initiation ceremonies, they are told to have sex with the male youth or female youth and in the course of having sex may be the female youth has the virus, she is going to spread that virus to the male youth and if the male youth has the virus, he is going to spread that virus to the female youth.

- S: So let's think about it, you say to young people, what are you trying to advise when they are having sex?
- R: Yeah, if they might not have sex before, they might not spread the virus, but it's not only the issue of HIV/AIDs, there are issues like pregnancy, they can impregnate and on the STIs, we don't talk about HIV/AIDS alone, there are some infections like gonorrhoea, syphilis and others so we discuss about the dangers of such things. If you contract the virus that causes HIV/AIDS at one time or the other you will suffer from AIDS and it will jeopardize your health and as a result of this the future is doomed.
- S: And that's the Ministry of Health (MoH) incorporating cultural practices in your training, what, where do they come from?
- R: It's not the issues of incorporating they were already there.
- S: You have talked about cultural practices, so is it already incorporated in your training manual or...
- R: Yes it's already in our training manual, we have it and you can see it.

Here we see that although he mentions 'good' and 'bad' cultural practices he only tells me about the bad ones that those are very 'dangerous'. It is interesting that the Malawians themselves make the practices exotic as if I will be impressed to hear about them. We go on to talk about geographical areas where the training is conducted.

- S: Do you go to all areas?
- R: Yeah we go to all areas and there are youth groups in all areas. There are some areas where cultural practices are being practiced more than other areas like the areas where there are Yaos, this Kalembo side, Kachinga side, Amidu side and part of Nsamala.
- S: Predominantly it's among the Yao?
- R: Yes! Amongst the Yao.
- S: But other tribes do it too?
- R: Other tribes, off course they do it but not as the Yao do it.
- S: What do you mean?



R: Yaos are doing it much much greater than the other tribes because the other tribes are mixing with other tribes, they have tried to reduce it, but these Yao people, they are difficult to change.

S: Why do you think it's that?

R: I do not know, may be because of the way they were brought up or we just established that these are very difficult to change and we have to follow that, this is what our ancestors, our father were doing so we have to do it. The other thing is that, these people they have problems with school, they do not go to school, you know education also influences once you know to change behaviour so amongst the Yao, you cannot find many people who have gone to school, you will find a 12, or 14 year old female youth is married and is carrying a baby on her back, why.. because of the cultural practices, if you tell them about school, they don't feel the need for them to go to school, maybe because of a lack of role models amongst themselves, there are no role models, they haven't seen somebody who has gone to school who has completed his or her studies and is working or doing fine because of school, for example, myself, I went to school and I am now working, if I was coming from a Yao area they could emulate my example that he is doing fine because he went to school, so such role models are not present amongst the Yaos. Those that could become role models are no longer there, they left a long time ago and they cannot go back to their respective areas to influence their relatives that you people this is what you are supposed to be doing, so you go to them, you tell them about the badness of those cultural practices but because there are no role models amongst themselves, it becomes difficult for them to change. And somebody amongst the Yaos said that, if you are coming here for your lessons, make sure that you are coming with a sharp axe.

S: Why?

R: They said that not many of us Yaos have gone to school so for us to understand some of the things you are talking about it becomes very difficult, so come with a sharp axe and cut all the roots so that we can change our behaviour, so there are a lot of work amongst the Yao.

S: What does the government do to try to make them to go to school?

R: There a lot of schools, they just start from standard one to standard five then they drop and get married.

S: How old do they reach standard five?

R: About eleven or twelve. So those that are doing fine among the Yaos, for example I am from Blantyre and I am working as a teacher I go and settle there, my children are also learning there they are the ones that are doing fine in their studies not the Yaos themselves. (P15)

This interview extract shows how he is portraying himself as an elite and in this case he is blaming the Yao tribe.

One woman worked for the Evangelical Association of Malawi (EAM). She explained:

It's an umbrella organisation of TransWorld Radio, Pentecostal and Evangelical Churches, now almost 82 churches and organisations. The Christian Health Association of Malawi is affiliated, EAM is its umbrella. Its core purpose is preaching the gospel but then it realized that there's a need for social services. HIV/AIDS is just one of the projects, with funding from DanChurch.

When beginning a project we normally conduct research, so we did that in about five districts. We learned about cultural practices, normally known as the *fisi*. *Fisi* for families that don't have children is common in the central region and in the south. Then we have the *fisi* in the Central region for ritual cleansing for girls reaching puberty, the parents look for a man to cleanse her, the girl is supposed to do that just because it's culture. And have it for ritual cleansing, especially in the south, when the husband has died. (P55)

I asked 'What do you do to try to change the cultural practices that are a perceived to be a problem?' She said 'We mobilize the traditional leaders, headmen. For the church it's not difficult, our teaching is based on the Bible, in the Bible we have to wait until we get married to have sex. But for traditional leaders who are the custodians of the culture, we normally conduct trainings'. I asked what do you tell them in the trainings?

The definition of AIDS, how it is spread, which cultural practices spread it. If possible we encourage their wives to attend. If it's a she we encourage the husband to attend. We tell them how they can prevent infection, or if they are infected how they can prevent transmission. We tell them, the parents, that you take a man [for a *fisi*] but you don't have him tested, you don't know what he is. And then the girl gets married. But not to the *fisi* he is just gone. (P55)

Before the training ends we develop an action plan, that helps us in monitoring. If they are really doing what they wrote on their action plan'. Normally they say at the end of the training we didn't know this but now that we know we are going to sensitize our community in an awareness campaign, we are going to involve the youths so there can be some songs on HIV/AIDS, so there can be dramas. It is easy to engage the youth'. (P55)

She said the practices are immoral and that most of the communities where missionaries first came they were the first to stop them. She said that AIDS and cultural practices are parallel issues. ‘For us social workers we would love to identify the issues in whatever we are doing’. Then she talks about stigma in the church, that people who have AIDS are called sinners, ‘the church would say everyone who has the virus is a sinner. But EAM doesn’t want to say this, we don’t want to say *fisii* are immoral. We started working on AIDS prevention in 1999 and cultural practices in 2003 because as we were working with the religious leaders, issue of stigma came out. But the community was finding it difficult to accommodate those with the virus in the communities’. Then there were talks about hunger; that they give out maize. ‘That helped create stigma, since they had to identify as HIV positive to get the maize’. This started to fight stigma. That’s when we started to approach the traditional leaders because they were stigmatising, so they said you traditional leaders are also at fault you are spreading HIV. The question was posed ‘I would think they wouldn’t want you to come to their village?’ ‘No No’, she said. We were going there humbly [she clasped her hands and looked down, respectfully]. We would first meet the religious leaders, and then they would meet with the chiefs’ (P55).

Two people I interviewed showed me the same presentation that was given by the Evangelical Association of Malawi at regional and national church leaders’ meetings. The presentation depicts 20 slides; the first one entitled ‘Evangelical Association of Malawi—Cultural Practices’. The second slide poses the question—what is fuelling the spread of HIV infection in Malawi? One slide then shows the factors that increase community vulnerability to HIV/AIDS and includes cultural and religious practices and lack of biblical sound teaching. The presentation goes on to identify different types of sexual acts which purportedly spread HIV including sexual intercourse for cleansing, sex as a coping mechanism, sex as a factor for hospitality, sex as a factor of entertainment and sex as a treatment or cause of problem (i.e. health problems from not having sex and sex causing cancer).

I interviewed the Coordinator for HIV/AIDS, Nutrition and Health at World Vision, Balaka. She is a qualified nurse. She explained ‘We do advocacy. We also work hand in hand with community leaders, the chiefs, church leaders and faith leaders. Sometimes we just hold a discussion with community leaders on cultural practices in the area and how that, those cultural practices contribute to HIV/AIDS. Sometimes we engage

drama groups to come and just entertain people. We are educating people about the disadvantages of those cultural practices'. I asked if she found that community leaders are willing to change the practices? She said 'You just notice the change in behaviour. What they say. Issues of stigma and discrimination. They wouldn't mix with those people with HIV/AIDS. They would not talk openly. They are freely talking about it now. Normally talking about sexual practices is taboo'. I asked if she had heard the community leaders talking? Firstly she said Yes. I said Are they saying they have changed them? She said No you actually notice them talking. A chief would say something encouraging. I said why do you think that? She said the reason I am saying it is I have actually seen community leaders talking about it (P42).

The above extract is peppered with development buzzwords—'advocacy, stigma and discrimination, change in behaviour'. Buzzwords are, what Williams (1976) called 'keywords': words that evoke, and come to carry, the cultural and political values of the time. Such words are frequently used in the language of mainstream development but it is often unclear what these words actually mean and what they do for development policy. It is therefore significant because the woman is using these words without referencing the meaning behind them. She is demonstrating the use of development policy language but gives no concrete examples evidencing how behaviour change has actually taken place.

The Malawi Interfaith AIDS Association (MIAA) submitted a proposal to UNFPA entitled 'Combating HIV/AIDS through Elimination of Cultural and Religious Practices' and aligned its objectives with those of UNFPA. This is an example of how national organisations adopt the language of international donors to secure funding. In MIAA's proposal, it stated:

Faith-based institutions and organisations could have a profound impact on the HIV/AIDS pandemic when they are properly and adequately equipped with the right skills and knowledge to facilitate their work. Religious institutions as trusted and respected institutions are better placed to play a significant role in the fight against HIV/AIDS. Faith-based institutions can effectively encourage and support loving, just and honest relationships and encourage members of the faith communities to adopt behaviours that renounce and repulse any traits of gender inequality, cultural and religious practice as well as stigma and discrimination that exacerbate HIV transmission by using religious and spiritual teachings in a positive way while at the same time offer compassion and promote

reconciliation. Many Malawians (over 95 percent) belong to most of the faith institutions in the country.

Despite the realization of this critical role that the faith-based institutions could play in the fight against the epidemic, most religious and traditional leaders still do not have the requisite knowledge and skills to wage the war. MIAA Secretariat is requesting financial support from UNFPA intends to strengthen the capacities of the religious and traditional leaders who are the custodian of culture and the congregants to effectively respond to the pandemic. It is expected that through this support faith and traditional leaders and the congregants themselves will cultivate amongst their congregants positive behaviours that also contribute to an effective fight against gender inequality and cultural and religious practices that facilitate HIV transmission.

Using data from desk research and culturally sensitive approaches, the proposed project seeks to conduct some training programmes, social mobilization and advocacy sessions for both religious and traditional leaders and the congregants with the view of building their capacity to play an active and positive role in the fight against gender inequality, cultural and religious practice as well as stigma and discrimination. (n.d., MIAA funding proposal)

MIAA told me that they intended to design a programme called Mpaka Liti. The programme would fight against gender inequalities and social injustices that are deeply rooted in the cultural and religious norms and tradition in Malawi. In this programme, communities and religious institutions will be challenged to realise that it was about time that things needed to change for the better. In addition, the leaders will spearhead a campaign to modify or completely eliminate the major cultural, religious and traditional practices that are driving the HIV transmission in the country. They would also:

‘Conduct training sessions for members of District Interfaith AIDS Committees in basic facts about the theology of HIV/AIDS. This will help to strengthen the capacity of the traditional and religious leaders to assess and analyse their own personal narratives in relation to the intersections between violence and HIV/AIDS) and conduct training sessions for religious leaders and other influential people within the faith institution’. (P52)

The respondent working for World Vision in Balaka told me when I asked: ‘Do you talk about cultural practices and HIV/AIDS?’ She said:

There are many. We have a practice that we call *fisi* – where like I am married and my husband is dead then to drive the evil spirits away I have to sleep with another man. Then there is this belief that for you to be recognised as a man in the society you have to have multiple sexual partners. The other one is..ok..something is... If I am HIV+ when you sleep with an albino the HIV will go away. Yah *Kusasa fumbi* - It's the same as *fisi*. It's where..and some of the beliefs or rather the cultures is like, yah, when I reach puberty, yah, I have to sleep with a man for me to be recognised as a woman. I ask 'Is that part of the chinamwali?' Yes it's chinamwali. When you reach puberty they take you away for some counselling and the like. And at the end they give you a man to sleep with. (P42)

As demonstrated in this chapter in an attempt to change people's behaviours, respondents repeatedly asserted that religious leaders need to be targeted. The following excerpt has been taken from a leaflet I was given when I visited MANERELA+'s office which is a further example of educating religious leaders.

#### **MANARELA+ Leaflet Excerpt**

##### **MANERELA+ Malawi Network of Religious Leaders Living with or Personally Affected by AIDS**

Launched in 2004 by Reverend Canon Gideon Byamugisha. Purpose of MANERELA+ is to prevent and mitigate the impact of HIV/AIDS through the reduction of Stigma, Silence, Denial, Discrimination, Inaction and Misaction (SSDIM) at community and national level.

Specific objectives:

To promote safer and lawful sexual practices and behaviours through the SAVE model.

To improve networking and collaboration among the religious leaders living with or personally affected by HIV/AIDS and the key stakeholders.

The network works hand in hand with stakeholders and other institutions such as MANASO, MANET+, NAPHAM, MIAA, EAM, NAC, Action Aid, Ecumenical Counselling Centre, District interfaith AIDS Committee (DIAC), World Vision International, MAM.

Strategies. The network will fight SSDIM through advocacy, media theological debates or forums, training the religious leaders and other people living with HIV, adherence and peer counsellors training, national retreats, capacity building of the network, gender and human rights mainstreaming and promotion of networking and collaboration, development and distribution of relevant information, education and communication, materials and establishment of district and regional clusters of group therapy.

Working in Mzimba, Mzuzu, Salima, Mwanza, Dedza, Nkhotakota, Machinga and Mulanje. Funding partners: Norwegian Church Aid; The Southern African AIDS Trust and Christian Aid.

I interviewed a Programme Officer working for the Norwegian Church Aid. She has a Master's degree and wrote her thesis on religious leaders and AIDS. When I first arrived in her office, she gave me a copy of the study that the Evangelical Association of Malawi carried out on cultural and religious beliefs and practices. This was the same study the Reverend gave me when I interviewed him at the radio station. It is interesting that out of 3 interviews, three interviewees shared with me that same study. She told me Norwegian Church Aid works on a number of areas on HIV/AIDS. It is working with two partners focusing on HIV/AIDS in the Lower Shire, specifically Chikwawa and Nsanje. In Nsanje they are working with the Episcopal Conference of Malawi and the Chikwawa Health Commission, as she said: 'cultural practices are prevalent there in Chikwawa', so they are disseminating information on 'sensitisation and awareness'. I asked what do they actually do in terms of sensitisation and awareness? She said: 'The Chikwawa Health Commission produces IEC materials like T-Shirts which say on the front 'Let us stop harmful cultural practices'. It works with the Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace through media programmes on the radio as well as trying to emphasise restricting cleansing rites such as *Chokolo*'. Here we see the use of development buzzwords once again: sensitisation and awareness. When I probe her, she responds with 'IEC'. In fact she assumes I understand what IEC means as she uses the acronym. By using these words she is demonstrating that she is educated and familiar with development policy. Coupled by her fluency in which she uses this language, and that she is a Programme Officer working for an international NGO based in the capital, she can be described as a member of the Malawian national elite (P56).

I asked her if she thought these cultural practices contribute to the spread of AIDS? 'Yes in my opinion the effects spread HIV. Young boys and girls get infected. The man who sleeps with the girls, he slept with more than one girl. He sleeps with all girls'. I asked how are the boys infected? 'Circumcision. One razor blade is used. And also how to do sex with a woman after initiation'. She said if we look at prevalence rates, 1 in 10 people are being infected. She also said 'If we look at specific

activities one of the areas being identified is harmful cultural practices. The evidence is the predisposing area' (P56).

Her other argument was that if you take groups of people living with AIDS, one man said that he was the man who had to have sex with young girls and that is how he became infected. This argument doesn't actually weigh up since the man would be having sex with virgins and therefore would not get infected by the virgins. She said that again we need to look at statistics and existing documentation. She said that in urban areas we have antenatal clinics so there are more statistics for urban areas. I said that in rural areas we also have the Behavioural Sentinel Surveillance data. She then argued that people from rural areas come to urban areas so that is how the disease is being spread around and that those from rural areas are bringing it to the urban areas. This is a further example of blaming the rural villager who visits urban areas and then spreads the disease to the elites. She said it is not just an issue of having sex but people having access to information. Information, she argued, is not available. We know this is not true as evidence shows that Malawians are aware of AIDS. She also says 'It is also an issue of poverty. In our culture people are being encouraged to get married early – this is a cultural practice'. She also talked about the issue of being sick where the same razor blade is used and this contributes to AIDS. What she says here shows how she is confusing many issues and is not clear how much of the actual epidemiology of AIDS she is aware of.

Interestingly, one respondent stated:

About the religious groups, they are making progress but the most difficult are the Pentecostal and evangelical group. (P5)

This next section looks at the role of religion and sexual cultural practices to understand why they are still observed despite the increased accessibility of biomedicine and education. The reason why I am addressing this issue is to support my argument—why are the cultural practices being observed—but also the way in which the church is trying to distance itself from the practices therefore presenting itself as more enlightened.

Research conducted by van Gennep (1960) and subsequently Turner suggest that the meaning and significance of religion is entrenched and transmitted through rituals. For Turner (1967), 'ritual' applies to forms of religious behaviour associated with social transitions. According to Longwe (2007), initiation rites form an integral part of contemporary



Chewa culture. She argues that apart from the sociological and cultural importance, it is within the religious context that initiation rites have the most significant impact on Chewa society. Oduyoye (1992) holds the view that African rituals are psychological, spiritual, political and social. According to Turner (1967), the term ‘ceremony’ has a closer bearing on religious behaviour associated with social states, where politico-legal institutions also have greater importance. Ritual is described as transformative, ceremony as confirmatory.

Initiation ceremonies are often used for sex education because in Malawi the mother is not allowed to talk about sex to her daughter. Mbugua (2007) highlights this using data from a study conducted in 1996 and 2003 which examines the sociocultural and religious factors that prevent educated mothers in urban Kenya from teaching sex-education to their pre-adolescent and adolescent daughters. She concluded that sociocultural and religious inhibitions prevent educated mothers in urban Kenya from giving meaningful sex-education to their pre-adolescent and adolescent daughters.

I now quote extensively from Longwe’s book *Growing Up – A Chewa Girls’ Initiation* to give context on why a girl experiences initiation:

When a girl experiences her first menstruation she undergoes a ceremony called *chikule* performed for a smooth transition from childhood to adulthood. The belief among the Chewa is that menstrual blood is sacred and that it has mysterious powers of sustaining human life. Proper rituals must be performed and all taboos observed so that nothing endangers her life and that of the whole community so that she should not become sterile or suffer *mdulo*. Whoever notices the girl’s first menses must inform the mother immediately who in turn informs the grandmother. The chief, as the owner of the *mbumba* and the one responsible for the girl’s initiation, is also informed through his *anankungwi* (instructresses).

The taboos to be observed during the girl’s first menstruation are sexual abstinence for the parents until the end of her menses when the rituals described below are performed. The chief abstains only in the case of a girl who will be initiated at *mkangali* (the chief’s initiation, as discussed below). All informants mentioned that if the parents break the sexual taboo the girl suffers from a disease called *mdulo* or *tsempho*. The symptoms of *mdulo* or *tsempho* are *kutupa masaya*, *kusololoka zala*, *kusanza magazi* or *kutuwu* (swollen cheeks, elongated fingers, vomiting blood or rough dry skin) and eventually the girl dies if not given the necessary herbs to cure the illness. In normal circumstances the girl is given food without

salt and is instructed not to salt any food whenever she is menstruating. The grandmother's role is to take the girl into two or three days seclusion for instruction concerning her menses. The girl is warned of the dangers of having sex during menstruation, and she is instructed on how to take care of the menses so that no one sees the blood, nor the menses linen, called *mwele* or *mbete*. She is instructed to respect her parents, the elderly people and especially the chief. At the end of her menses, the chief provided the necessary herbal medicine, called *kbundabwi*, for the girl to eat in food or to drink with the parents (and the grandmother). Again the chief eats *kbundabwi* only in the case of the special girl who will undergo *mkangali*. After taking the herbal medicine, all are free to resume their sexual activity.

Many informants mentioned that in the past, instead of the herbal medicine the girl was given a man to have sex with at night. Such a man was called *fisi* (hyena) because he came at night as a 'hyena to steal'. The warning for both the girl and the man was as one informant stated 'this must be kept as a secret and that it was just a one time ritual not to be repeated or continued'. Some informants said that this practice was the cause of polygamous families, for some men decided to marry the girl after the ritual act. In some cases it was the cause for premarital pregnancies among girls for some men continued to meet with the girl secretly. However, few informants insisted that the ritual is still practiced in spite of the HIV/AIDS pandemic. Their argument is that the family looks for someone whom they see as HIV/AIDS free, for they claim that the elderly women, just by looking someone in the eyes, are able to identify those who are sick. (Longwe 2007, pp. 41–42)

*Fisi* may be given to a girl to purify her at the end of her first menses. In this case she is tested for pregnancy and not sexual purity (p. 60). However most of the instruction is to 'please' the husband (p. 65). Phiri argued that the importance of female initiation rites is demonstrated by the Chewa, who have four initiation ceremonies for women.

#### CHRISTIAN'S RESPONSE TO THE CHINAMWALI

Research conducted by Turner (1967) and van Gennep (1960) suggest that the meaning and significance of religion is entrenched and transmitted through rituals. According to Longwe (2007), initiation rites form an integral part of contemporary Chewa culture. Longwe argues that apart from the sociological and cultural importance, it is within the religious context that initiation rites have most significant impact on Chewa

society. *Fisi* may be given to a girl to purify her at the end of her first menses. In this case she is tested for pregnancy and not sexual purity (p. 60). Phiri argued that the importance of female initiation rites is demonstrated by the Chewa who have four initiation ceremonies for women and that most of the instruction is to ‘please’ the husband (p. 65). Longwe also talks about meetings with the Baptist church and a group of Malawian leaders talk about a national committee which had meetings to discuss a book that the Church wanted to write. The main argument was on their differences in some traditional customs, especially between rural and urban women (p. 78). Furthermore, female church members reported difficulties with what the church was saying, telling them that practices surrounding the life cycle rituals were unchristian and breaking away from some of these practices for fear of the consequences (p. 102). Sexual purity is not taught in traditional chewa society since girls can be introduced to sex on their first menses (p. 113).

In a document produced by the Evangelical Association of Malawi (EAM) entitled *EAM HIV/AIDS Programme: Baseline Survey Report*, 28 cultural practices were listed which purportedly spread HIV/AIDS, including the *fisi* practice. In the report it stated that:

The irony of these practices is that they are still being practiced with more than 84% record of Christianity, and where all the mainland churches have already had their centenary celebrations of their existence. During the focus group discussions with members of the church, it sounded as if issues of sexual immorality and witchcraft are deeply rooted and imbedded in culture such that the Christian faith cannot get rid of it or have it changed. It sounded as like; the Christian faith is far from transforming a culture. As if to confirm this, during the focus group discussions, the church members were emphasising that these practices can not be changed and people can never stop doing these practices. At one group discussion women lamented that such type of immoral practices are just part of our living, and being given a man for sexual intercourse, whether the woman or girl likes it or not is something that we as women have to live with. As women, the women continued, we are hired a man who is sometimes extremely dirty and filthy to have sexual intercourse with, in which case we have to do it because that is what is expected of us, or else, from the woman’s own initiative, we take the trouble of bathing and cleaning this man before having sexual intercourse with him. Members of the church are practicing these traditions to the extent that some of the hired men and women are leaders of the church at different positions. (EAM Report, n.d., p. 12)

This paragraph reveals the use of moralising language such as references to practices as ‘immoral’ or ‘bad’ without any attempt to clarify the cultural rationales for the rituals. Associated with this is the accusation that people are unwilling to ‘change’, and are portrayed as conservative and backward and that the church is unable to ‘transform’ the culture. It also reveals that women are powerless and are forced to have sex with men and cannot say no. Yet research suggests people are making several changes in their practices both everyday and ‘cultural’ as outlined in newspaper articles (Schatz 2005; Smith and Watkins 2005; Kalipeni and Ghosh 2007).

I interviewed a Community Development Officer working for Balaka District Assembly. He highlighted the importance of cultural issues in rural areas:

Aah you know cultural issues are regarded as very very important behaviour in a village setting. Aaah as a district first of all our aim is to *enlighten the community* on these cultural issues because they have been with these cultural issues since time immemorial. (P14)

This comment demonstrates how he makes the link between cultural issues and rural areas, but also this comment has religious connotations using the word enlighten. It also is an example of educating the other: we need to enlighten them.

The church adopted three stages of traditional rites—puberty, marriage and pregnancy. The traditional instructresses (anankungwi) were replaced with the Christian instructresses. These Christian instructresses worked under the supervision and training of the women missionaries (Longwe 2007, p. 74). Missionaries adopted the initiation rites which were taught to the instructresses. It was compulsory for church members’ children to attend the Christian initiation rite. The Christianised puberty rite included the instruction on the ‘sanctity of the body and the respect due to it, physical implications of puberty, behaviour towards men and elders’. As Phiri pointed out in her observations on the initiation of Chewa women of Malawi:

The public ceremony was held in the evening in a secluded ‘well-lit’ hall within the village, with all the initiates dressed in white. The programme for the evening was: opening prayer, singing of hymns, sharing of Word of

God, some instructions to the girls, welcoming the girls into the group of women by shaking hands, hymn and prayer. (Phiri 1998, p. 212)

Longwe also talks about meetings with the Baptist church and a group of Malawian leaders to discuss a book that the church wanted to write: ‘the main argument was on their differences in some traditional customs, especially between rural and urban women’ (Longwe 2007, p. 78). Furthermore, female church members reported difficulties with what the church was saying, telling them that practices surrounding the life-cycle rituals were unchristian and breaking away from some of these practices for fear of the consequences (p. 102). This point highlights the church’s concern to distance itself from tradition positioning a more ‘pure’ form of Christianity as more enlightened. Sexual purity is not taught in traditional Chewa society since girls can be introduced to sex on their first menses (Longwe 2007, p. 113) and are required not to be pregnant during the time of *chinamwali* whether married or not. *Chinamwali* is not just about sex education but has a deeper religious meaning—establishing fertility for the initiates (p. 113). According to Longwe biblical teaching on good morals:

Will help girls (and boys) to abstain from sex before marriage and to remain faithful during marriage. Jesus brings new life to the Chewa people. He gives added inward empowerment against sexual sin. Against this is a juxtaposition with tradition and trying to modernize a culture. The scriptures teach sexual purity until marriage and sexual faithfulness in marriage. Sexual purity also protects the girls from contracting the deadly disease of HIV/AIDS. (Longwe 2007, p. 113)

She believes that if instructresses consistently carry out Christian *chinamwali* and give continuous instruction to the girls, there should be no room for double initiations—secretly the traditional one first and later the church one: ‘Let the initiates be taught how to live as adults and Christians in society’ (p. 117).

One informant gave his opinion of the *chinamwali*:

Aaah, because of this emphasis on fertility, aah now issues of sex through which they understood, is the way through which the children come, unlike there are some cultures in the pacific, they don’t associate sex with reproduction (laughs), very funny (laughs), but Chewas looked at the

sexual act as part of the creation, reproduction, the continuation of God's power to increase humanity and so it is sacred, it has to be regulated by *miyambo*, its eeh, *miyambo* is translated as customs, but the word customs does not really capture the meaning of *miyambo*. *Miyambo* will also include ethical code in it, and not just a custom, a habit no, aah it's a code, and ethics around the responsibilities to the community. Every *mwambo*, *mwambo* is singular, is for the betterment of the individual, within the community so during this, in this are you have to have all these regulations to ensure that the community increases. (P6)

## CONCLUSION

In this chapter, I demonstrated how Christian religious elites portray themselves as enlightened. They perceive cultural practices as harmful because they are practised primarily, perhaps only, in the rural areas by uneducated backward farmers—those who practise them are not modern. It is not clear whether harmful cultural practices became a priority in Malawi's HIV prevention policies at the beginning of the epidemic or only once NGOs began prioritising ending the epidemic by stopping these practices. Regardless of how the focus on cultural practices deemed to be harmful, it is interesting how the religious elites volunteer information on sexual cultural practices and enjoy talking about them. By referring to the sexual cultural practices at length, they distance themselves from the villagers who supposedly carry out these practices and conveniently apportion blame for HIV/AIDS away from them.

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