

The Chinamwari initiation rite in Zimbabwe: Opportunity or threat to the girl child?

Sarah Moyo and Nyasha Matanda

Great Zimbabwe University, Department of Educational Foundations, Masvingo, Zimbabwe.

Midlands State University, Department of Psychology, Gweru, Zimbabwe.

ABSTRACT: This qualitative ethnographic study explored the effects of an initiation rite conducted in some communities in Zimbabwe known as the chinamwari rite of passage on the girl child. Fifteen girls and ten initiation instructors who were mainly elderly women were interviewed. Snowball sampling was employed due to the invisibility of participants which is compounded by the secrecy and mystery that surrounds this initiation practice. The findings of the study illuminated that during the initiation process the girls are subjected to immense physical pain as they go through labia minora elongation, they are also exposed to inappropriate sexually explicit content and some of these girls drop out of school and enter into early marriages soon after the initiation. This study also revealed that the chinamwari is not merely an oppressive tradition but has its positive contributions towards the wellbeing of the girl child such as training in socio-cultural norms, menstrual management, delaying early sexual debut and other life skills. While the malignant aspects of the chinamwari rite of passage need to be exposed and discarded, positive aspects can be identified and retained as a way of empowering the girl child.

Keywords: adolescents, cultural practices, girl child, Initiation rite

I. INTRODUCTION

Initiation rites are a common occurrence across the globe. According to Schlegel & Barry (1979) in a study on 184 societies around the globe, approximately 36% of the worldwide societies have initiation ceremonies for boys, while 46% of them hold puberty rituals for girls. Rites of passage are rituals that mark or accompany the important changes in the life cycle of individuals such as birth, puberty, marriage and death Nhlekisana (2017). These cultural practices have mainly been documented as detrimental to the well being of individuals especially the girl child. This paper explores the impact of an initiation rite known as the chinamwari on the girl child in Zimbabwe. It highlights the pitfalls and promises of this rite of passage and explores the possibilities of making use of such traditional platforms to empower the girl child.

II. BACKGROUND TO STUDY

Rituals that mark the transition of individuals from child hood into adulthood are not a rare occurrence around the world, especially in Africa. A ritual is a customary observance or practice, it is an aspect of humanity, it is expressive, symbolical or communicative (Bell, 2009). Schlegel and Barry (1979) define initiation rituals or puberty rites as ceremonies of the transition from child- hood into the next stage (in most societies, an adolescent stage), as some social recognition, in ceremonial form. According to Munthali & Zulu (2007), puberty rites mark the transition into a sexual world. This study focused on one such initiation rite known as the "chinamwari". In Zimbabwean there are communities that observe the chinamwari ceremonies which are carried out in winter when the young girls are less involved in agricultural activities and the initiates go into camp away from the village.

Chinamwari literally means 'with the gods' hence what people do during the initiation is for their ancestors which are their gods, it is an initiation process in which a girl is mentored into womanhood (Maringira, 2007). In Zimbabwe, chinamwari is traditionally associated with ethnic groups like the Chewa, Lemba, Shangaan, Ngoni, Venda and Tonga but with the advent of urbanization and intermarriages the practice

has spread to other ethnicities. This practice is common in Southern Africa with each country having its own unique rites for instance in Malawi, girls aged between 10 and 12 are initiated through a ritual which forces the initiates to have sex with very old men (Vincent, 2006).

The chinamwari rite of passage is an initiation process where girls are mentored into womanhood. In the chinamwari teachings, there are various subjects taught such as sex education, proper conduct as a woman, menstrual care and other life skills. These activities are meant to equip the girl child for the roles she is expected to undertake in society. Various researchers have documented the negative effects of initiation rites on the girl child. Cohen et al (1996) stipulate that these traditional practices emanate from the entrenched beliefs and views of the role and position of women in the society. Some Tanzanian girls interviewed by Rehema et al, 2014 blame initiation rituals as the cause of early engagement in sexual relations (mentioned by 54% of the interviewees), early childhood marriage (30%), and early pregnancies (39%). In Kenya, pre-marital sex after the puberty rites is organized among the Kikuyu ethnic group (Rehema et al, 2014). In the north-eastern part of the Central Africa, initiation rituals are preliminary of marriage, and therefore, uninitiated girls giving birth to children are considered real horror by the Bemba of Zambia (Klepp, Flisher, Kaaya, Press, & Town, 2008).

III. METHODOLOGY

The research was qualitative in nature. The researchers made use of a qualitative research design so as to gain insight into understanding the impact of the chinamwari practice on the girl child. The qualitative research can be defined as a process of systematic enquiry into the meanings which people employ to make sense of their experiences and guide their actions, (Coolican, 2004). Ibid further asserts that a qualitative research is multi-method in focus, involving an interpretive, naturalistic approach to its subject matter. This means that qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to interpret phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them.

Kvale (1996) propounds that the research design provides the glue that holds the research project together. To add on to the above, he articulates that research design includes the aims of the research, the final election of the appropriate methodology, the data collection techniques one intends to use and the chosen method of data analysis, interpretation and how all this fit in the literature. In this study an ethnographic design was adopted. Ethnography is the study of social interaction and culture groups, whether these groups are defined as societies, communities, organizations or teams (Reeves et al, 2013). The central aim of ethnography is to provide rich, holistic insights into peoples' world views and actions, as well as the nature of the location they inhabit (Hughes 1992). According to Hammersley (1985) the task of ethnographers is to document the culture, the perspectives and practices of the people in these settings with the aim of getting inside the way each group of people sees the world.

The researcher opted for snowball sampling because the principal participants, the girl children and elderly women who are initiation instructors are a hidden population who prefer to remain anonymous in the community. The chinamwari is shrouded with secrecy and mystery thus making the snowball sample the most suitable. This sampling method has its merits in the chain referral process that allows the researcher to reach populations that are difficult to sample when using other methods; process is cheap, simple and cost efficient and needs fewer workforce. According to Parker, C., Scott, S. & Geddes, A (2019) due to its networking characteristics and flexibility, snowball sampling has become a popular means of recruiting research participants when seeking access to hard-to-reach populations. They further state that such potentially unobtainable populations can have low numbers, be geographically dispersed, be unrecorded or inconspicuous, feel stigmatized and/or desire anonymity, be particularly sensitive and vulnerable, and require a degree of trust in order to become a willing participant. The participants in this study were easier to access using the snowball sampling procedure.

IV. DISCUSSION AND FINDINGS

In carrying out the interviews, the researchers discovered that at first most interviewees were reluctant to reveal the explicit details of what happens at the chinamwari initiation ceremonies. However, on probing further, the interviewees revealed the details after being given the assurance by the researchers that this was strictly educational and that confidentiality would be observed and anonymity assured.

It was noted that the chinamwari is also known as the 'komba' initiation rite. The word komba in the Shona language means ripe hence the ceremony is meant to transition girls from childhood to womanhood making them "ripe" for life and marriage. One elderly chinamwari instructor pointed out that it is the prime responsibility of designated elderly women to partake in initiating the young girls into adulthood. However, before the girls attend the ceremonies, it is the girls' mothers or aunts who suggest that they go, after observing that the girls have reached their menarche hence are ready for the rite of passage. She stated;

“We teach the children from the age of 10 about life skills, good manners, how to respect elders, menstruation and other issues to do with adolescence.”

According to a sixteen year old married initiate, the first step taken when the girls get settled at the ceremonial grounds was to have their labia minora elongated. Instructions were given by the elderly women, with use of demonstrations which were to be copied. They were offered some form of lubricant and powder that was supposed to be applied on the labia while they stretched them. She added that this was a rigorous exercise where one experienced excruciating pain since they were supposed to pull the labia minora to an expected length. One initiator also highlighted that it was unexpected for a girl to get married without having pulled at the labia minora as this was a necessity for marriage.

“You cannot call yourself a woman without the qualities that make you one. If you are a woman and you do not have the elongated clitoris, you should strive to address that inadequacy. You see if your husband then meets a woman with them he will not come back to you.”

One twelve year girl reported that the pulling subjected them to swellings and itching due to the traditional lubricants that were given. Physical pain was described by the young girls as part of the initiation process.

One rural initiation instructor explained that the ceremonies are carried out in winter when the young girls are less involved in agricultural activities and there is less domestic work to do. Initiates therefore go away from the village in isolation for three months and no relatives are allowed as camps are off limits to outsiders. On the other hand, an urban initiator stated that their course only takes three weeks and is done during school holidays. She further said that their initiation schools also cater for older married women.

“Although we start training the girls at the age of ten, we also take married women who have not had the advantage of going through the initiation.”

Sex education is also part of the training of the girl children at chinamwari. The girls reported that they are taught explicit sexual moves and how to please men during sexual encounters.

Another component of training of was that of menstruation management. The girls are taught on managing menstruation and basic hygiene issues. An initiator remarked,

“The girls are taught on how they have to change their sanitary pads regularly, how to dispose of used sanitary ware and the importance of hygiene.”

Another girl also confirmed that the initiation rite helps the young girls to understand the process of menstruation and what it entails in terms of hygiene. There are life skills taught to girls where they learn the basic roles of a woman in society, she said. These roles include respect for the husband and her in-laws. In addition, an elderly initiator remarked that socio-cultural norms that include dating, sexual conduct, self-reliance skills, and the use of African herbs are part of the initiation curriculum for the girls' benefit.

It was also pointed out by the participants that the initiation camps create a platform to discuss the biological changes taking place in their bodies which would have been considered a taboo back at home. It is at these rites that they are taught to abstain from sex and to place value on keeping their virginity. A thirteen year old initiate acknowledged that they were taught to preserve themselves for marriage and learn to take care of their bodies.

One initiate also postulated that the rite gives them status in society. She stated,

“You see, when girls are initiated, their families carry out celebration ceremonies welcoming them into the community of womanhood.”

As such, she remarked that they were no longer seen as minors but capable women. Initiation can thus act as an empowering female initiation ritual.

One of the urban initiators who took part in the study stated that the chinamwari rite allows the young girls to learn the origin of their tribes, history, language and culture such that they gained a sense of belonging and an understanding of their roots and origin.

The initiation instructors stated that they teach their learners how to wear traditional beads when engaging in sex. They said,

“Clever women adorn themselves with beads, these serve as sex toys to their male counterparts. In some cases, the beads have a sound like a traditional musical rattle which adds to the woman's sexual attraction.”

On the same note, a fourteen year old initiate indicated that they were taught to perform sensual dances. She described the process as follows;

“The music is played and an elder woman dances to the rhythm of the music. All the trainees must then imitate her movements. As the training progresses the sessions become more intensive as the trainers have one on one sessions with the girls.”

The curriculum of these initiation schools is hinged on sex education which is quite explicit in its contents, taking into cognisance the ages of the girls attending these passages of initiation, such approaches may be psychological harmful. On the other hand life skills are also imparted in these initiation camps such socio-cultural norms training, avoiding early sexual debut, education on menstrual management and hygiene. The following Fig 1 highlights the themes and sub-themes that emerged in this study.

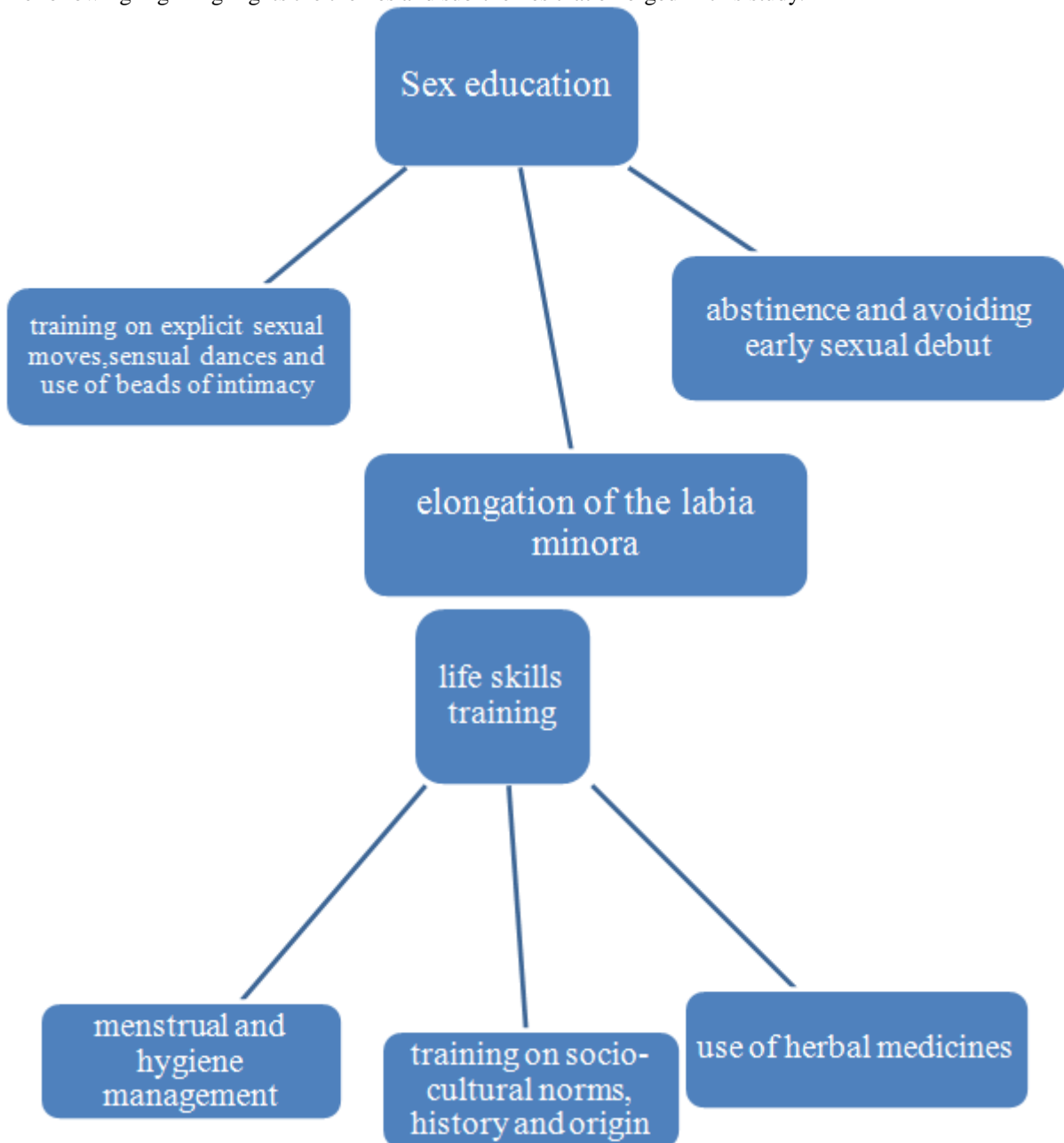


Figure 1: emerging themes and sub-themes in the study of the chinamwari initiation rite of passage for young girls.

While girls are somewhat empowered during the chinamwari rite, the negative effects are evident. Firstly the elongation of the labia minora is a painful process as the initiates have to use force to pull their clitoris. Vincent (2006) articulates that girls are subjected to severe vaginal pain, urine retention and may

develop long term effects like loss of sexual appetite. Such traumatic experiences might result in long term psychological effects. The girls are taught to abstain from sex but the very same content taught on sex in these initiation schools might lead them to trying out what has been learnt. The chinamwari rite infringes on the educational right of these girls. In some communities the young girls miss out on school during this training and some usually drop out after the training. Carr (2006) articulates that the gap between male and females' access to education also leaves girls in life long positions of economic and social disadvantage. It was also noted that most young girls are forced to undertake this exercise violating their right to make decisions on issues affecting them.

V. CONCLUSION

The role of this traditional initiation ceremony is rather conflicting, on one hand it instils significant socio-cultural values in the young girls and is a useful mechanism in the transition of adolescent girls into womanhood however on the other hand it exposes the girl child to traumatic experiences as well as promoting sexual adventures upon finishing the training which puts the girls at risk of contracting HIV and AIDS, unwanted pregnancies and early marriages. The negative effects of the chinamwari are clear and the need to eliminate them from society is unquestionable nonetheless these initiation rites provide an important platform through which adolescent girls may be engaged in a productive and healthy manner. These existing traditional practices can be put to good use instead of frowning down on everything cultural and traditional. It will be vital to revisit the sex education content and making it age appropriate. The explicit topics of sexuality can be removed without vying for the total elimination of initiation schools. Chinamwari initiation communities can be sensitized on the value of educating the girl child so these ceremonies are not conducted during school days. These initiation schools offer an already existing platform for engaging with adolescent girls. There is need to utilize this platform so as to give adolescents proper advice concerning sex, sexuality and sexual reproductive rights. Other experts in the formal sector can also be part of these passage of initiation rites, facilitating discussions so that accurate and appropriate information is provided to the young girls. In the long term, all-inclusive sex education should be made part of the school curricula such that teenagers become empowered with information on their reproductive health rights and on pertinent life skills.

REFERENCES

- [1]. Bell, C. (2009). *Ritual theory, ritual practice*. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- [2]. Carr D, (1997). *Female genital cutting: Findings from the demographic and health surveys program*. Calverton, MD: Macro International.
- [3]. Coolican, H. (2004). *Research methods and statistics in psychology*. (4th ed). London: British Library Cataloguing In Publication Data.
- [4]. Cohen, R.J, Swerdlik, M.E and Phillips, M.E (1996). *Psychological testing and assessment: An introduction to tests and measurement*. California: Mayfield Publishing Company.
- [5]. Hammersley M. 1985. *Ethnography: What it is and what it does*. In: Hegarty S, Evans P, editors. *Research and evaluation methods in special education: Quantitative and qualitative techniques in case study work*. Windsor: Nefar-Nelson. pp 152–163.
- [6]. Hughes CC. 1992. ‘Ethnography’: What’s in a word–Process? Product? Promise? *Qual Res* 2(4):439–450.
- [7]. Kvale, S. (1996). *Interviews: An Introduction to qualitative research interview*: London: Sage Publications.
- [8]. Klepp, K.-i., Flisher, A. J., Kaaya, S. F., Press, H., & Town, C. (2008). *Promoting Adolescent Sexual and Reproductive Health in East and Southern Africa* Edited by.
- [9]. Maringira, G. (2007). *Shangani initiation ceremonies in Zimbabwe: Traditional practice and the spread of HIV & AIDS: Consultancy Africa intelligence*.
- [10]. Munthali, A. A. and Zulu, E. M. (2007). The timing and role of initiation rites in preparing young people for adolescence and responsible sexual and reproductive behaviour in Malawi. *African Journal of Reproductive Health*, 11 (3), 150-167.
- [11]. Nhlekisana, O. B. R. (2017). From childhood to womanhood: puberty rites of !xoo girls of zutshwa. *Journal of Language and Literature*, 11 (17), 31-41.
- [12]. Parker, C. ,Scott, S. & Geddes, A (2019) *Snowball Sampling*. SAGE Research Methods Foundations. doi:10.4135/
- [13]. Reeves, S.,Peller,J.,Goldman, J., & Kitto, S. (2013) *Ethnography in qualitative educational research: AMEE Guide No. 80*, *Medical Teacher*, 35:8, e13 65-e1379, DOI: 10.3109/0142159X.2013.804977
- [14]. Rehema, M., Verhan, B., Emmanuel, M., & Douglas, M. (2014). Effects of Initiation Rituals to Primary and Secondary School Girls in Morogoro Rural District. *International Journal of Innovation and Scientific Research*, 6(1), 9–17.

- [15]. Schlegel, A., & Barry, H. (1979). Adolescent Initiation Ceremonies: A Cross Cultural Code1. *Ethnology*, 18(2), 199–210. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3773291>
- [16]. Vincent, L. (2006). Report on virginity testing in South Africa: Re-traditioning the post-colony. *Child Health and Sexuality*. Pretoria: South Africa.

**Corresponding author: Sarah Moyo.*

Department of Educational Foundations, Great Zimbabwe University, Zimbabwe.