Becoming Female: The Role of Menarche Rituals in “Making Women” in Malawi

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African women are not problems to be solved. (Nnaemeka 2005)

Menstruation signifies the beginning of adulthood, and the female body's biological changes which allow for reproduction. Around the world it is accompanied by a variety of socio-cultural practices which both celebrate the transition from child to adult, but also fear the onset of sexual activity. At menarche, girls come to understand their reproductive capacities and future responsibilities constituting a 'female consciousness' in direct response to biological functionality (Johnston-Robledo and Stubbs 2013; Allen and Goldberg 2009; Lee 2002). Menarche rituals, and the resulting social and hygienic customs around menstruation (known as menstrual practices), form the basis of a variety of disciplinary practices which come into play during puberty to legitimize certain narratives around female identity and constitute and validate specific modes of being female (Bobel 2010). Menarche rituals and menstrual practices therefore are central to codifying and regulating female behaviour, and consequently manifesting a collective female consciousness.

Significant efforts have been made by Western feminists to understand and critique the process of making women, such as Simone de Beauvoir who famously wrote: “A woman is not born, she is made” (1949, 283). Historically, the biological ability of women to give birth has become one of the ‘most powerful social and cultural constructs of feminine identity’ (Harcourt 2009, 33). As a result, the materiality of the female body is viewed as a driver for why patriarchal societies relegate women to an inferior role within society, that of mother and wife. Such a perspective understands gender as inherently relational, oppositional, and ultimately hierarchal (Dietz 2003; Irigaray 1991). In such a context the normalization of

motherhood is often posited as synonymous and instrumental in women's oppression.

Based on qualitative research methods, this chapter seeks to understand the role that menarche rituals play in 'making women' in Malawi. To be a woman is collectively ascribed, and individually understood, through the active and intelligible performance of menarche rituals, and consequent menstrual practices. Through such traditions girls become women with their newly ascribed gender imbuing them with a locus of power within their communities. This chapter will examine the role of menstruation in constructing and validating female identity within the relevant cultural and symbolic meanings which are attached to it (Young 2004). Cognizant of the politics of western feminist thought, it does not seek to critique the validity of biological determinism or the ontological irreducibility implicit in local gender narratives in Malawi. Rather, it seeks to determine the extent to which menarche rituals in Malawi create a collective female consciousness that governs individual bodies and behaviour, which ultimately cement women's role in society.

This chapter will explore the specific roles that menstrual rituals and practices play in facilitating the integration of girls into social structures and normalizing what it means to be collectively female in this context. It reads these rituals through an African ontological position in order to move beyond understanding African women's subjectivity through the lens of Western gender-based hierarchies and oppression.

An African ontology recognizes the history of distortion and dispossession of African subjectivity and seeks to understand social phenomena and formulate theory which is situated in, and through African centred knowledge (Oyewùmí 2005; Nnaemeka 2005; Cooper and Morrell 2014). Mazama's (2003, 6) model of Afrocentricity emphasizes the significance of moving beyond a historical legacy of colonial oppression on the continent which ultimately creates one-dimensional female figures (Lazreg 2005). Therefore central to an African ontological position is the use of African lexicon and matrices to speak to local phenomena (Cooper and Morrell 2014). Such an exercise is critical to understanding gendered social dynamics in Malawi, and in contextualizing results within this research project. Most pertinent is the importance of the specificity of African discourse and understandings of gender. Lazreg (2005) suggest that in seeking to understand the foreign subject of the African female, we must not fetishize, or exoticize her, but seek to create an intelligible understanding of alternate modes of being female. In recognizing such modes we are able to discern how individuals mediate self-narratives and elucidate a more nuanced understanding of knowledge production around what it means to be female in an African context.

Western feminism has a tendency to read African women's subjectivity in terms of gender-based hierarchies and gender oppression. Oyewùmí (2005) suggests that such a standpoint uses a western framework of gender

construction which implies male privilege and female subordination, while neglecting other forms of social stratification such as race, ethnicity, class, or age (Oyewùmí 2005; Steady 2005). African scholars have sought to challenge this imposed hierarchy on African subjects, and suggest that both men and women in Africa have been inferiorized by the colonial process (Oyewùmí 1997). Hudson-Weems (2003) asserts that men are not the enemy of women in African discourse, as is the case for white western feminism. While Nnaemeka (2005) suggests that abuse of the female body in the developing world can be studied within the context of oppressive conditions under patriarchy, there remains a distinct need to realize that such distinctions in social hierarchy emerged out of the colonial experience and is not an indigenous construct. As a result, not all phenomena regarding female subjects can be understood as gendered experiences, but can be explained by examining a variety of other social practices and stratification (Oyewùmí 1997, 2005, 2011).

By situating menstruation in African narratives and epistemologies (with particular reference to Malawi), one can develop an understanding of how gender comes to be understood at a personal level, through the collective and relational experience of menstruation in Malawi which is guided by social and cultural practices. In this context, the onset of menarche equips girls with the socially gendered expectations for womanhood in her community. While some of the more traditional practices and narratives remain harmful, the process of developing a female consciousness through these rituals serves as a means of gaining community-based power and status, and ultimately enables women to individually and collectively navigate social spaces. In understanding the lived experiences of menstruating women in Malawi from an African ontological position, this chapter pushes us to move beyond viewing women as passive recipients of gendered practices at menarche, rather identifying the ways women actively and passively [re]produce menstrual practices to develop both personal collective notions of gender identity.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

A core tenet of this research is its use of feminist methods as a framework to inform research design, data collection, and analysis, placing women and their experiences at the center of the research. As a methodological approach, constructivist grounded theory enabled experiential knowledge to uncover basic social processes with participants validating findings on an ongoing and iterative basis to become co-creators of the research.

This chapter is grounded in findings from qualitative research conducted in 2016 which used a phenomenological approach to understand how women's menstrual experiences constitute knowledge. Using constructivist grounded theory, and a mixed methods design, 35 participants took part (28 women, and 7 men) through interviews and an open-ended survey using random snowballing sample. Several Non-Government Organization (NGOs)

were used as gatekeepers to participants to enable the researchers to establish a relationship with participants and more easily overcome stigma and taboo associated with speaking about menstruation.

DATA ANALYSIS

All data was coded using NVivo (a qualitative data coding software package) employing multiple layers of coding and categorization to consolidate, analyze, and conceptualize the data. Incomplete data, mostly due to recording and transcription challenges was removed from the data set. The remaining data from interviews and surveys was analyzed using five levels of coding (Hernandez 2009): memos from interviews described first impressions of interviews; open coding allowed for phenomena to be categorized thematically; axial coding related codes to categories using inductive and deductive thinking; selective coding facilitated the process of identifying core concepts and themes to narrate around; lastly theoretical memos were used to link together data, literature, and ideas. A variety of semantic¹ and latent² themes were identified and validated with participants through a ‘cheat sheet.’ This iterative process enabled the researcher to recalibrate the analysis of data and informed the findings sections.

As result three overarching motifs were noted: menarche rituals, menstrual narratives, and menstrual etiquette which each constitute menstrual practices in Malawi. In tandem or individually, they govern how women understand their bodies, and ultimately how they behave. This chapter will focus specifically on the first motif—menarche rituals—and will explore the varying Malawian rites of passage to determine how they create a collective female consciousness that governs individual bodies and behavior. The findings are explored through several key themes: Marking femaleness through menarche; Ascribing gender to girls through ritual; Becoming female through consciousness; Making women through sexuality; and Imbuing power through motherhood. All direct quotations from participants can be found in italics within the chapter.

MARKING FEMALENESS THROUGH MENARCHE

The onset of menarche, and rituals and practices that accompany it, play a key role in producing and governing gender identity in Malawi. They signify and celebrate adulthood while validating certain ways of being female, marking girls as women, and enabling culturally specific, gendered social dynamics. As one informant explained: *“To be a woman, it means that you should have a husband who will take care of you and [your] children. You should also know how to take care of your husband, like in bed.”* Similar to the Gikuyu of Kenya³ (Arnfred 2004) rather than being determined at birth, in Malawi, gender is ascribed and made intelligible to the individual and communicable to the

community at menarche and through a complex process of formal and informal rituals and practices that insert girls in social patterns in society.

Arnfred (2004, 29) suggests that “initiation rituals [are] the ritual celebration of a shared female gender identity” itself. In Malawi, menstruation plays an important role in creating a sense of belonging, and collective identity as a female. It is both a biological and social marker of femaleness, with menarche rituals as a means of “turning” girls into women. It provides the opportunity for girls to develop a sense of their individual, relational, and collective responsibilities as women.

ASCRIBING GENDER TO GIRLS THROUGH RITUAL

‘Ritual is a culturally constructed system of symbolic communication’ with societies cosmologies⁴ embedded in them (Jeyaraja 2014, 1). Rituals have been perceived as a mechanism by which societies can commune with the supernatural or immaterial world, Jeyaraja (2014) suggests that rituals are a means of codifying and regulating the myths and customs of a community. Malawi is a country governed by a set of cosmologies expressed through specific rituals which play an important and influential role in community life (MHRC 2005). They are often used to celebrate occasions, such as in the case of menarche, but also as a tool to formulate and govern social behaviors. In many African societies, rites of passage mark the three main stages of one’s life: rites of separation, the rites of transition, and the rites of incorporation (Munthali and Zulu 2007). Initiation ceremonies are not specific to Malawi; they have been studied in various African countries, most notably in Mozambique, Kenya, and Zambia.

Arnfred (2004, 29) claims that ‘the rituals instruct young women in the rules of decent female behavior such as exhibiting self-control, downcasting the eyes, and displaying respect to men and elders.’ Njambi and O’Brien (2005) proposes that puberty-related rituals are critical in social practice. Young people are prepared and instructed in their new responsibilities as adults, with a particular emphasis on entering the sexual world (Munthali and Zulu 2007). Within this context, menarche rites and rituals are an integral element in constituting women’s place in society (Delaney, Lupton, and Toth 1988). They facilitate the integration of children into social structures, marking them as part of the community.

Menarche rituals are a means of both recognizing and celebrating the sexual maturation of girls and boys in Malawi. They take two main forms: the formal practice of an initiation ceremony,⁵ or more informal rites of passage. Both play a core role in ascribing gender and imbuing women with status. The specific practices depend on ethnic group and religious affiliation and can be performed pre-puberty, or at the onset of puberty for boys and girls, with distinct messaging and purposes.

Munthali and Zulu (2007) propose that traditional initiation ceremonies come in various forms ranging from structured rituals including large numbers of children organized at specific times a year, and others who are loosely organized and adapted to meet the ages and needs of the people or communities involved. For girls specifically, both types seek to mark the beginning of adulthood (marked by the onset of menstruation) and are infused with socio-cultural meanings centred around the roles and responsibilities of their new position in society.

Formal initiation ceremonies play a central role in determining social status, formulating identity, and creating a sense of group unity in Malawi, particularly in rural areas. For girls, they center around defining adulthood in terms of marriage, sexual activity, and reproduction. In different parts of the country formal initiation ceremonies or camps are held to mark girls and boys transition to adulthood by taking children aside from the community and instructing them. There are a multitude of culturally specific ceremonies which are referred to by different names depending on locality: *Chindakula* (in Mangochi), *Maseseto* (in Nsanje), *Masosoto* (in Mulanje), *Chinamwali cha atsikana* (Northern Malawi), *Unamwali* (Chiradzulu) (Johnson 2013).

It is important to note that unlike most Western societies where menarche is seen as the beginning of adulthood, in communities where initiation ceremonies are commonly practiced in Malawi, it denotes adulthood. That is, the ceremony serves to inform the community of the girl's new status as woman. As one informant explained: "*It was the symbol of showing that now you have grown up. Everyone should know.*" Upon initiation, girls are seen as matured and introduced into the community as ready for marriage. At this point, they are often referred to as a *namwali* (bride).

Informal rites of passage also occur across Malawi and are usually centred on community and religious gatherings reflecting a decentralization of rites, rituals, and ceremonies around menarche. While traditional initiation ceremonies are seen by the educated and urban elite as a traditional practice reflecting a "*backward culture . . . they do it in villages,*" informal community or religious-based customs have come to replace formal initiation in many parts of Malawi. These informal gatherings vary across Malawi but are considered more of a celebratory or educational event among kinship groups or religious communities. "*It's not that people do initiation ceremonies like the way they do there in the villages. For us you do it in your own family. So it's not an initiation itself. It's family or religious groups.*"

BECOMING FEMALE THROUGH CONSCIOUSNESS

At the onset of menarche, women play a key role in disseminating information with female relatives, community members, and village elders coming to induct a girl. Where mothers are often the primary source of knowledge regarding menstruation and puberty in Western societies, in Malawi such

a practice is rare. As one informant shared: “*most mothers do not talk about sensitive issues [with their children].*” Whether within the confines of formal or informal menarche rituals, mothers rarely take part in their own daughters’ rite of passage. Across the sample, urban and rural participants spoke of the inability to speak to mothers about menstruation. The two most common sources of knowledge were grandmothers and aunts with older sisters and other females from the community also routinely stepping into assist girls at menarche. “*Some aunties came by, my mom’s older close friends, and they came to talk to me about menstruating.*”

In analyzing the aforementioned experiences through an African lexicon, we are able to discern broader kinship patterns in Malawi. Motherhood or mothering is not confined to biology. How information is distributed regarding menstruating reflects the decentered role of motherhood in the menstrual process. “*I told her about it and she referred me to my aunt who would assist me.*” While it would be easy to understand such experiences as mirroring the deeply ingrained nature of menstrual taboo in women’s psyche, it also speaks to broader local patterns of family and social kinship. The ritual avoidance of mother and daughter in regards to menstrual conversations may be a vestige of a matrifocal society whereby women are not only the figurehead of a family, but also imbued with moral power (Amadiume 1997). Therefore maintaining that status and power requires physical and social separation from those within the family at times. Coupled with the intentional commitment to hand over instruction to other female elders, the work of mothering in Malawi is distributed across the community with biological mothers responsible for moral nurturing, and social nurturing by those within the community at large. Such a practice inducts girls into the community of womanhood as a whole, while reinforcing the notion of her femaleness as relational to those around her.

As previously mentioned, through both formal initiation ceremonies and informal rites of passage, girls become accepted into distinct places within the social structure complete with corresponding responsibilities. It is important to note that this place is not inherently inferior to the place occupied by their male counterparts. Oyewùmí (2005) suggests that the western framework of gender construction implies male privilege and female subordination which does not necessarily apply in an African context. Through this lens, one could argue that the socially gendered dynamics codified upon menarche are not necessarily perceived as restrictive or oppressive. Rather, they are integral to the perpetuation of a cohesive society in which a sense of community, and consequent responsibilities, is of greatest value.

This can be best understood through the core principle of an Afrocentric ontology of commonality or relationality between beings, (Harris 2003). Commonality in this context refers to *ubuntu* or *umunthu*,⁶ which is a philosophy in Southern Africa emphasizing an attitude of community and solidarity (Tamale 2011). It highlights a communal notion of existence which Harris (2003, 114) refers to as ‘we are, therefore I exist.’ This philosophy juxtaposes

a western, liberal, tradition of individualism, with value and worth of individuals in *umunthu* cultures, being relative and relational. *Umunthu* is a way of being, which is deeply ingrained in local ideologies and manifests itself in a variety of social dynamics. Initiation into the female collective is essential to *umunthu*.

Through an indigenous lens, we can come to understand these rituals as forming a gendered practice through which girls come to understand what it means to be female, and symbolic of their inclusion into a community as a whole. As a result of the notion of *umunthu*, a girl's consciousness is only possible through relative and relational interactions with those of the same, and opposite sex.

MAKING WOMEN THROUGH SEXUALITY

Themes of motherhood and sexuality are central tenants to understanding femaleness for Malawian women. These manifest in different ways between formal and informal menarche rituals with religious and ethnic considerations manifesting into complex messaging around sexual conduct and gendered behavior. Though menstruation has marked girls as female, sexuality is central to obtaining social status as a woman. Sexual activity is not only for the purpose of reproduction but also the pleasure of the participants involved. Interestingly, within Malawi, the ability to give pleasure is important to the notion of femaleness, which is rather antithetical to a Judeo-Christian position where by chasteness is one of the highest virtues in a woman.

In formal initiation ceremonies, young women at once become inserted and insert themselves into the dominant patterns of sexuality in Malawi. A particular emphasis is placed upon instructing girls and boys in a variety of social conduct which seeks to enhance sexual pleasure and inform young people how to engage in acceptable social patterns of behavior. Girl initiates are often taught about their roles and responsibilities regarding adulthood, including wifely duties including how to sexually pleasure men, perform traditional dances to attract men, and labia pulling.⁷ Similarly, boys are also taught how to behave in a "*masculine way*" including how to respect elders, and "*take care of their wives*" (including sexual and financial responsibilities). Several participants spoke to the expectations placed on women to both pleasure and "*hold a man*," with labia pulling and "*ritual defloration*" as techniques to prepare for sexual activity, and "*keep a man interested*." Furthermore, traditional practices regarding sexual activity are not viewed as antithetical with Christian teachings with virginity not always viewed as a necessity for marriage. Though participants suggested that sexual skills were meant to be used within marriage, pre-marital sex and subsequent child bearing were viewed as common, and not explicitly frowned upon. In some rural areas girls who have born children were considered more desirable. "*No. It's not important, it's not even necessary. . . . For us, they will go for the girls that are sexually active. Sometimes these men, they could laugh for maybe if you are*

a girl, you're maybe 18 years old and you had never had sex and this man is having sex with you and he finds that you are a virgin. He's going to go in the community, say, 'that woman, just look at her that one, she's just grown up but she was a babe.'

These aforementioned examples begin to paint a picture of how young people in Malawi are instructed in appropriate gendered behavior, with particular respect to relational and sexual conduct. For boy and girl initiates, there is an emphasis on practicing what has been learnt in initiation. *"Once you have been circumcised . . . you are a grown up man and you should actually practice."* Evidence such as this highlights the cultural aspects of initiation ceremonies which encourage young people to demonstrate their adulthood through sexual activity.

Within communities practicing formal initiation ceremonies, ritual defloration, and social exclusion can be a significant part of initiation ceremonies at the onset of menarche

Girls are sexually initiated by a fisi (hyena) after initiation ceremonies in some cultures, in some districts, they talk of that fisi, that hyena man, to be like it's his job, he's an expert, so he's the one who actually has to sleep with several.

The practice of a "fisi," a male adult who has sexual intercourse with newly initiated girls, is practiced most commonly among the Chewa and Yao within formal initiation ceremonies and has been documented in studies (MHRC 2005; Munthali and Zulu 2007). Initiation, and particularly ritual defloration, remain enshrouded in secrecy with initiated girls often instructed, *"not to tell anyone what they have learned or their mothers will die."* Delaney, Lupton, and Toth (1988) suggest that the actual or symbolic act of ritual defloration can be seen in a multitude of cultures around the world and is an integral aspect of puberty-related rituals. Ritual defloration in this context become a means of controlling and facilitating how a girl enters the sexual world. The secrecy surrounding initiation ceremonies is used to reinforce the significance of the ritualistic practice. In doing so, it emphasizes the collective identity and status of those have been initiated and 'become women,' to the uninitiated other. *"They come out of it feeling more woman and there are some girls from my tribe who now feel less woman because they didn't."*

Within the cohort of participants informing this research, almost all referenced sexual activity and sexual behaviour in tandem with menstrual rituals and practices. This suggests that the onset of menarche in Malawi is closed tied to sexual activity with further research needed to understand the positive and negative impact of this on sexual and reproductive health outcomes. Of note, is that while the act of ritual defloration was more commonly practiced among communities who practiced formal initiation ceremonies, sexual conduct remained a recurring theme throughout menarche rituals, menstrual narratives, and menstrual practices in different parts of Malawi.

With informal rites of passage practiced through community-based gatherings or celebrations, information regarding appropriate social and sexual conduct, and hygienic practices were also dispersed to girls. Interestingly, depending on location, some traditional beliefs and customs around sexuality continue to permeate these informal celebrations.

In my setting, there's nothing like initiation camps, but the elders come and they assign you some girls, big girls to now teach you how to start pulling the labia. Pulling of the labia. They start telling you, "Now you have to pull these labia's in preparation for a man. If you don't have this, then you have problems in your marriage. The man is going to do such a thing if he doesn't find this on your private parts," so you have to pull them so you start that kind of process.

There remains a distinct tone of conflict within discourses around menarche rituals, and broader menstrual practices between traditional beliefs and modern narratives. With the introduction of monotheistic religions, there have been significant shifts in socio-cultural practices across the country (MHRC 2005). However, indigenous ways of doing and knowing still remain, co-existing and at times clashing, with more puritanical Christian and post-colonial narratives. This requires Malawians to find ways to navigate between traditional and modern practices, reconciling discord or simply accepting it.

This is demonstrated through the way that religious communities (particularly Christian and Muslim) have taken on the responsibility of menarche rituals in parts of Malawi. Similar beliefs to initiation ceremonies are expressed in these celebrations in terms of social conduct and respect for elders where there is a distinct focus on celibacy and avoidance of sexual activity within Christian-centered rituals. Girls are explicitly told "*they are no longer allowed to play with male friends,*" with an ethos of separation of the genders emphasized except in religious contexts. While sexual activity is technically forbidden outside of marriage, it (and consequent child-bearing) remain a common practice and tolerated among the participants in the research. "*In some rural areas girls who have born children are more desirable, men go for them because they are women who can please a man.*"

This shifting dynamic in menarche rituals illustrates the conflicting messages around the acceptability of sexual activity, as Christian values have begun to erode more traditional beliefs. Munthali and Zulu (2007) argue that Christian groups have developed their own form of initiation ceremonies to instruct young people in appropriate behaviour and expected responsibilities, partially as a response to the explicit sexual content in traditional ceremonies. While religion has played a core role in changing social dynamics, it is not necessarily an individual's religious background which determines the type of initiation or messaging around sex received. Without exploring the complex intersection between ethnicity⁸ and religious identity in Malawi, it is problematic to assume that one plays a more dominant role than another. For example, Munthali and

Zulu (2007) suggest that initiation ceremonies are strongly promoted and adhered to among Muslims, as the largest number of initiation ceremonies are conducted in Mangochi (which has the highest percentage of Muslims in the country). However, Mangochi is predominantly a Yao ethnic region, therefore Muslim and Yao traditions mutually influence local practice of the ritual. Regardless of ethnic or religious background, sexual and social conduct remain core to both formal and informal menarche rituals.

With the rise of Christian tradition across the country, tension has risen in how women experience and express their sexuality. Conflicting messages regarding the acceptability of sexual activity appear to be a by-product of Christian values which restrict sexual freedom outside the confines of marriage, and a reticence around speaking about female pleasure. Yet, traditionally a more flexible mindset enabled greater sexual exploration, as still seen in some initiation ceremonies. Malawian women navigate this tension through different means.

Consequently, for initiated women initiation is a source of pride reflecting their ability to fulfil this requirement of femaleness and validate their female identity. *"They come out of it feeling more woman and there are some girls from my tribe who now feel less woman because they didn't, they're not as cultural and not as trained in those things."*

IMBUING POWER THROUGH MOTHERHOOD

Sexuality and sexual activity is more important than simply pleasuring and holding a male; it can also be understood within the context of the motherhood paradigm. Marriage and motherhood are core aspects of women's identity in Malawi. As previously mentioned, in some Chewa tribes, from the onset of menarche, girls are referred to as *namwali* meaning that they are a bride and therefore mature enough for marriage. Women who do not conform to these standards usually have lesser positions in Malawian society.

They're not counted. If you don't have children, it's like you are, I don't know a better way to say it, but they look at you as somebody stupid. Somebody who is not normal. Similar with the women that are not married.

Within Malawi, Motherhood has great importance to individual female identity, and it is also viewed as a communal responsibility. Achieving motherhood is such a critical element of Malawian culture that within legal tradition the inability to bear children is a legitimate ground for divorce. There is a level of status placed upon women from motherhood and excluded from those who do not have children. This is connected to women's relational responsibility to bear children for her husband and the community, *"if you have no children in the community, a man is seen [as less than]. they want that kind of respect. If you are barren, you are a disappointment."* Childbearing therefore raises the status of both women and men.

The pressures of the motherhood paradigm lingers urgently within Malawi, as a necessary reality for girls to achieve. As Kopytoff (2005, 31) claims 'childrearing is a great weight of realizing female identity.'

In terms of people deciding that, 'I don't want to have kids, I don't want to get married,' I think I have not met a lot of women here who say those things, who give those views. I don't know if it's a Malawian thing or whatever but I think that a lot of African women don't usually, I don't think their mind ever really goes there. It is very rare to find a woman who will voluntarily say that, 'I have made that choice. I don't want to have kids. I don't wanna get married ever and that's just my choice.'

It is important to recognize the ways in which women's power in Africa has been predicated on the logic and centrality of motherhood in African discourse (Amadiume 1997; Dove 2003). Amadiume (1997) argues that while being a wife and mother have been viewed as means of disempowerment for western feminists, in African tradition motherhood is a culturally recognized autonomous unit, and central social category. In realizing the importance of the 'motherhood paradigm,' scholars can begin to recognize that the feminine is not afforded lower status in African society, rather women's power and status emerges from such a position (Amadiume 1997; Chodorow 1978; O'Reilly 2007). The echoes of matrifocality⁹ remain within the motherhood paradigm, that women are invested in power by right of the status that motherhood affords them (Nnaemeka 2005). Though western feminists (Rosaldo 1974; Ortner 1974) may critique that women's power still derives from their reproductive capacity, and limits them to it, African scholars speak to this as a practical conclusion, rooted in the irreducible reality that reproduction remains a biological process that women's reproductive systems enable (Amadiume 1997). As a matrifocal perspective puts women as the central (and most powerful figure) at the heart of the family, motherhood is a source of power. Nnaemeka (2005, 319) highlights the importance of this alternate source of social hierarchy and explores 'the cyclical ordering of social life' in Africa. She claims that status and power ebbs and flows in African societies depending on a number of other factors including age, marriage, and class. Similarly, Oyewùmí (2005) suggests that prior to colonization, gender was not the organizing principle in African society, rather seniority was critical to social hierarchy. Therefore, within the context of menstrual rituals, it could be argued that collectively 'making women' is critical to enabling girls to gain wider social status and decision-making power in Malawi.

Recognizing the historical legacy of the motherhood paradigm and matrifocality in Malawian consciousness, assists in speaking to some of the inherent tensions in menarchal rituals today, and how social patterns of behavior are experienced and legitimized at an individual level. Lee (1994) suggests that menarche becomes a signifier of reproductive potential and embodied womanhood, and as a result it becomes irrevocably intertwined

with sexuality. The findings from this research affirm that women in Malawi obtain power through motherhood. Rather than women being reduced to mothers, through the identity of motherhood establishes their place in the social hierarchy over non-mothers. It affirms what African womanist theorist Dove (2003) argues, that women are revered within the role as mother and bearer of life and as the moral compass of family and society. She is not just a mother in terms of bearing and rearing children, but also a figure-head and central point for social organization and understanding one's subjectivity. Nnaemeka (2005) proposes that full elderhood for women is only achieved once a woman has had a successful pregnancy. The motherhood paradigm illustrates the complex cultural beliefs and social practices which influence how Malawian women orient their individual self-narratives around a collective understanding of the female body and identity. Furthermore, an understanding of the personal self is deeply ingrained within the aforementioned *umunthu* logic, and the social responsibility of the individual to a whole.

It is important to note that using matrifocality as a specific matrix by which to understand everyday practices of gender identity and behaviour in Malawi, differs significantly from reading Malawi through a matriarchal lens. A matriarchal society is that in which power is invested in, and exercised by women. This is not the case in post-colonial Malawi. There is, however, extensive debate over the extent to which matrilineal principles continue to exist in Malawi, and if women exert real power under such social systems (Phiri 1983; Arnfred 2004). Phiri (1983) speaks to the tensions between Malawian traditions, in particular matrilineal principles, and Christian teachings. He suggests that Christian missionaries played a central role in undermining matrilineal customs and practices, particularly around marriage and kinship dynamics. He claims that by the 1960s matrilineage ceased to exist as a social and economic unit in Malawi. In contrast, Johnson (2013) argues that matrilineage remains an important feature of social life, particularly in rural life in Southern Malawi. Rather than assert in favour of either position, this research seeks to draw attention to the vestiges of such traditions and how they remain embedded in cultural institutions and practices, specifically menarchal rituals. While there has been a decline in women's authoritative position, the idea of motherhood remains powerful in cultural imagery and in socializing behavior, particularly around menstruation.

CONCLUSION: LISTENING TO WOMEN'S VOICES

Menstruation, as both biological and social marker, plays an important role in creating a sense of belonging and collective female identity in Malawi. Menarche rituals (both formal and informal) function to welcome and induct women into the social order ultimately creating a sense of group unity among women. Furthermore, the process of becoming female at menarche, and 'making women' through menarche rituals and, are a means of codifying and

regulating female behaviour and bestowing corresponding responsibilities. These enable young people to understand socially gendered dynamics and facilitate their integration into a cohesive and communal society. Therefore within a *umunthu* culture, collective consciousness precipitates individual identity—‘we are women, therefore I am a woman.’

Seen through an afrocentric lens, this process cannot be assumed to be inherently negative, hierarchal, or oppressive. It has different meaning across different social, religious, and ethnic strata with women actively and passively (re)producing these practices in order to navigate social spaces and integrate into social structures over a lifetime. While at menarche girls are passive recipients of this gendered knowledge, they become more active role in [re]producing female identity as they come to induct other girls as they age. Gender in such a context is not static, it is ascribed and enacted by navigating through collective practices and personal meaning including a locus of power which corresponds to their newly gendered body.

This chapter seeks to move beyond theorizing or problematizing African women’s subjective experiences within oppressive gender discourses. It elevates women’s own voices recognizing women as ‘knowers or agents of knowledge about themselves and their menstrual experiences’ (Wood et al. 2007, 44). Its emphasis is on resisting applying western models of gender to the Malawian context that reduce the female experience to men exerting power over women. Rather it asks us to think critically about how the gendered experiences of menstruation in Malawi is historically grounded and culturally bound within an African ontology, In other words, as Oyewùmí asserts: ‘If gender is socially constructed, then gender cannot behave in the same way across time and space’ (2005, 11).

This shift in thinking results in several key findings from the research to highlight a nuanced understanding of the gendered experience of menarche ritual in Malawi. First and foremost menarche rituals enable girls to achieve a state of womanhood with menstruation playing a central role in creating a sense of belonging and collective identity as female. These practices are essential to validating specific modes of being female, with the primary modality of femaleness in Malawi one which is closely linked to sexual activity and motherhood. Learning gendered appropriate behaviors at menarche enables young people to insert themselves into social and sexual patterns in society. Consequently, being ascribed a gender is not necessarily an oppressive practice but a mode of enabling young girls to understand their gender as relational to both other women and men as well as society as whole.

There is much to be gained by situating menstrual experiences within their relevant cultural, symbolic, and ontological contexts, particularly when researching women who have been historically and discursively dispossessed. In feminist analysis of menstruation we must be cautious of our tendency to reproduce the social categorization’s and prejudices that are inherent in society and knowledge production at large (Lazreg 2005). This chapter has sought to disrupt the ways in which *thinking* and *knowing* African women’s

bodies and experiences have become a neo-colonial practice in itself. This is not to suggest that the onset of menarche in Malawi is in some way a wholly empowering experience, rather it reflects a complex social process where women (as individuals and as a collective) come to navigate narrative, meaning, and practice within their own lexicon and matrices. As a result, the process of developing a female consciousness through menarche rituals serves as a means of becoming seen as a gendered being and gaining community-based power and status.

NOTES

1. Semantic themes emerged naturally in conversations with participants using this specific language. For example: taboos, cleanliness, female identity, motherhood, shame, sexuality, and exclusion.
2. Inductive logic has been used to connect semantic themes to the underlying ideas, patterns, and assumptions (latent themes) which was situated within the literature review and theoretical framework.
3. The Gikuyu tribe is a Bantu tribe that neighbours the Embu, Kikuyu woman harvesting tea Mbeere and Meru tribes around Mount Kenya.
4. Cosmologies in this sense refers to beliefs, values, customs, and social practices which order and govern a society.
5. In different parts of Malawi formal initiation ceremonies or camps are held to mark girls and boys transition to adulthood. There are a multitude of culturally specific ceremonies and can be referred to by different names depending on locality: *Chindakula* (in Mangochi), *Maseseto* (in Nsanje), *Masosoto* (in Mulanje), *Chinamwali cha atsikana* (Northern Malawi), *Unamwali* (Chiradzulu).
6. *Ubuntu* is commonly used in South Africa, where as in Chewa it is referred to as *Umunthun*.
7. Labia pulling is the act of elongating the labia minora through manual manipulation (pulling) or physical equipment (such as weights). The results are that is belied to enhance sexual pleasure for men.
8. This refers to both the identification with, and enactment of customs and practices of a particular ethnic group, but also acknowledges the ways in which beliefs from an ethnic group can permeate village life as a result of direct association with that group.
9. Matrifocality refers to a family or social structure whereby the mother is the central figure.

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