

Beads of agency: Bemba women's *imbusa* and indigenous marital communication

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In this article the author argues that indigenous Bemba women of Zambia used their culture of symbolic communication for marital sex agency. African women are often portrayed as not having agency and negotiating power when it comes to sex whether in marital or casual relationships. However, through *imbusa* teachings, Bemba women of Zambia had the negotiating power and agency over their sexual desires using indigenous beads as a marital communication tool before Christianity, interaction with various cultures, and colonial activity infiltrated the institution of *imbusa*. Missionaries were consistently and insistently invading the space of *imbusa* claiming the need to be made aware of what was being taught. Missionaries claimed that they wanted to prepare a manual for new arriving priests so that they would include Christianity to the teachings in order to teach the Bemba women Christian ways of marriage. As a result, much of the indigenous *imbusa* teaching was portrayed as demonic and Bemba women needed to disregard them in order to be Christian married women. Using symbolic interactionism, this article will demonstrate the teachings of *imbusa* that gave Bemba women agency to express and negotiate their sexual desires in marriage. Bemba women had a ritual of hanging beads on the wall or placing them on the bed at certain times in their marriage. For instance, when they were menstruating, they hung red beads which was to communicate that they were not available for sexual relations.

Contribution: This article contributes to the African indigenous cultural understandings and positions held by indigenous women prior to their interactions with diverse cultures and religious views. Contemporary indigenous women can leverage some positive feminist approaches from within the culture.

Keywords: beads; communication; *imbusa*; sexual agency; symbolic; Zambia.

Introduction

Imbusa is a rite of passage for Bemba women as they prepare for marriage – a young bride is taught over a period of 2 weeks to 3 months prior to the wedding. *Imbusa* in indigenous Bemba understanding is a feminist philosophy of life and worldview through which life is perceived. It is within *imbusa* that sexual agency for marital sex is taught, and therefore, the author will constantly draw on *imbusa* teachings because this is the space where the teaching on beads as agency is taught. There is empirical research on *imbusa* as a premarital rite of passage by various scholars; for further reading see Richards (1956, 1982 and reprinted in 2021); Rasing (1995, 2001, 2004, 2021); Haynes (2012, 2015); Kaunda (2013, 2016, 2021) and Mukuka (2018), just to mention a few. Anthropologists and missionaries pioneered the work on initiation rites in Africa and other regions. This article explores the communication through beads using literature and will show that there is a scholarly gap in research on indigenous forms of agency for women.

The colonisation of Africa was a well thought-out plan that has lingered decades after the physical colonisation ended. And as Marcus Garvey stated in his speech in 1937, his words were popularised by Bob Marley in a song titled Redemption song, 'Emancipate yourselves from mental slavery, none but ourselves can free our minds' (Mendy 2020). These words reveal that the impact of colonisation and slavery was not only physical but also impacted psychological and emotional spheres of life. Hinfelaar (2007) establishes that there was intense planning for the colonisation of Africa.

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A Conference held in Berlin had precipitated what became known as the scramble for Africa. The continent was being carved up to become the colonial possessions of the Great Powers of Europe. Livingstone, and a number of Protestant missionaries, had travelled extensively through un-charted territory and had enthused Scotland with the idea of a Christian conquest of Africa summarized in the motto of the three C's: Civilization, Christianity and legal Commerce (p. 7).

Time was spent on planning and engaging ideas of the colonial project and how to have it effectively. Dube (2012) bemoans that:

African communities and their lands were, of course, neither consulted nor invited to the Berlin Conference. The participants were Western European powers, traders, and their missionaries. Africa, surrounded by numerous suitors, did not have the choice to choose a suitor nor to refuse one. (p. 3)

This invasion into Africa meant that the indigenous religious aspects of Africa were also invaded, and as Dube (2012:2) aptly and candidly determines, 'the African continent was being penetrated by the West, its male subjugator, and inseminated with western seed to give birth to the westernised African'. Spaces that only allowed initiated women such as *imbusa* were invaded by white male priests and altered the rites and teachings therein. Hugo Hinfelaar (1994:3) who was a Catholic priest – one of the white fathers in Zambia – wrote about the prayers that were offered during initiation rites and cites evidence as coming from women during their initiation rites. This is a clear indication of white fathers invading the all-women *imbusa* space among the Bemba. Hinfelaar (1994:3) further demonstrates that the early missionaries had altered the religious space of the Bemba people despite it already starting to change as the government began to be centralised. Women were stripped of their role as religious leaders and men were placed for training as priests. The western priests had the three C's in mind as they invaded various spaces in Africa, and part of the Christiansing was to make sure that certain aspects of African indigenous culture and worldviews were rendered redundant. It is ironic that often African women are portrayed as docile and submissive in their marital relationships with regard to their sexual desires and expressions. Missionaries thought that Africans – particularly women – were oversexual. What missionaries did not recognise was that the space where women engaged in solidarity for marriage was a safe space for women to empower each other. In the *imbusa* teaching space for instance, it is important to teach the young brides all the minute details. In 1988, Mohanty argued that in the Western eyes, women from developing countries are represented as overly oppressed and poor; therefore, it has often been concluded that they cannot have agency. While African women are represented as docile, they are also ironically oversexualised in representation. Mohlabane and Tshoedi (2021) argue that:

[I]ndigenous knowledges on womanhoods in Africa are submerged under eurocentric universalisms. This calls for deconstructive decolonial African feminist analyses for revealing, interrogating and rectifying persistent colonial biases that plague constructions of womanhood in identity construction.... (p. 45)

The indigenous cultural perspective of African women's agency is usually not seen or ignored and misunderstood. African cultures have checks and balances of the society and ways of holding people accountable for misdemeanours. It is believed in various African cultures that calamities and disasters befall the entire community when certain wrongs are done, whether by an individual or collectively by the community. And that is why there are checks and balances in African communities to ensure that harmony and symbiotic relationships play an important role in these cultural symbolisms. (*Imbusa* are sacred emblems using visual aids that are handed down to Bemba brides before the wedding. Simply put, these are premarital teachings for Bemba brides by married women and a Bemba feminist philosophy of life.) As premarital teachings, *imbusa* gave women the negotiating power and agency over their sexual desires using indigenous beads as a communication tool. Missionaries consistently wanted to be allowed in the space of *imbusa* space claiming the need to understand what the rite was about in order to prepare the new priests for these rites as argued by Corbeil (1982), and also as an opportunity to teach Bemba women the Christian ways of marriage. Hinfelaar (1994:ix) also noted that his book's aim was to 'make known to a wider public some of the findings not only for academic, but also for pastoral purposes'. As a result, much of the teaching was portrayed as demonic and Bemba people were made to believe that they needed to disregard them to identify as Christian married women. Using symbolic interactionism, this article will demonstrate beads as an aspect of *imbusa* teachings of that gave Bemba women agency to negotiate their sexual desires and expression in marriage. Bemba women had a ritual of hanging beads on the wall or placing them on the bed as well as wearing beads around the waist at particular times in their marriage. For instance, during her monthly menstruation period, Bemba women would hang red beads on the wall, wear red beads around the waist, or place red beads on the bed, which was to communicate that she was not available for sexual relations. White beads were hung when the flow of menstrual blood was over to indicate that the woman was ready for sexual relations. Christianity disadvantaged Bemba women of this negotiating power and agency by demonising beads without giving any symbolic alternative to a culture whose worldview has strong aspects of symbolism.

For Bemba people, communication is not only verbal but symbolic as well; symbolic communication carries much meaning and may override the verbal communication at times. This does not mean that the Bemba couples never spoke or verbally communicated. In the Bemba cultural worldview, verbal communication was not as impactful as the symbolic indigenous communication tool of beads or other forms of communication. And because *imbusa* is a philosophy of Bemba life and worldview, symbolism is important. All churches teach *imbusa* to young brides in Zambia; the Pentecostals have taken out certain teachings they claim to be demonic, ungodly, outdated and pagan; and the beads are part of the teachings that have been removed from *imbusa* in churches (Kaunda 2016). Bemba women held three important community positions in precolonial times: *cibinda wa ng'anda*

[head of the home], *kabumba wa mapepo* [creator and/or initiator and priest of prayers] and *nacimbusa wa chisunga* [guardian of tradition]. These three positions were important and women needed *imbusa* to be prepared for these tasks ahead of them as married women. Hence, being *cibinda wa ng'anda* [priestess of the home] meant that women needed their forerunner to equip them with knowledge on how to take responsibility and live as women with such an important status. Hinfelaar's (1994) interpretation of the title is true:

[T]he deeper significance implies that the woman was the maker and priestess of the home-shrine. According to legend, man originally lived in grass shelters. It was the woman who taught him how to use the clay of the termite-hill to construct a mud and wattle house. (p. 12)

As *cibinda wa nga'nda* [priestess of the home], Bemba women had responsibility over all rituals that were important for the spiritual and physical well-being of the family and community.

Bemba women were also known as *kabumba wamapepo* [enabler, initiator and/or creator of prayers]. The term *Kabumba* also describes God as *kabumba wa mweo* [creator of life]. The interesting aspect of God being creator is that in the Bemba myth of creation, God the creator also equipped a woman with procreation capabilities at puberty. This position meant that Bemba women had the power to interact with the transcendent when the community was struck by calamity and disaster. In fact, Hinfelaar (1994:16) argues that when disasters such as epidemics, pestilence or droughts struck, access to the transcendent would only be reached through women. Bemba women were also *Nacimbusa wa Cisungu*; as custodians of Bemba tradition, their responsibility was to pass on this teaching to younger women through *imbusa*. *Nacimbusa wa cisungu* can be interpreted as 'protector of the miraculous event'; Bemba people have two separate rites for young Bemba women. When a girl has her first menstruation, she goes through *icisungu* [the wonder] and she is called *nacisungu*; *icisungu* is a rite where a Bemba girl is given wisdom of navigating life as a woman who has received adequate training and awareness from *bana cimbusa* [tutors]. The term *icisungu* derives from *icisungusho* [a miracle]. *icisungusho* also translates as surprise which is due to the perplexity of the first menstrual blood for the girl. Bemba people celebrated *icisungu* because the miracle had happened and the girl received the divine gift of feminine sexuality from *Lesa* God.

The implication is that the responsibility of educating the young women in these three positions was a Bemba married woman's duty. Hinfelaar (1994:18) indicates how the mentor and/or mentee relationship between *nacimbusa* [*imbusa* tutor] and *nacisungu* [pubescent girl or bride] was an important one because *imbusa* teaching is an on-going process. *Imbusa* and *icisungu* were a compound teaching in precolonial era because often the girl would be married as soon as she reached puberty. In contemporary times, these have become two distinct rites; at *icisungu*, girls are taught about hygiene and brief ideas on sexual reproductive health.

In order to create harmonious living between couples, certain symbols of communication were passed down to young brides during *imbusa*. Arising from Bemba married couples' experiences, beads were viewed as an effective communication system with regard to sexual relations. The article will discuss a search for effective sex communication in marriage for Bemba women and men beyond symbolism. Hinfelaar writes a paragraph about beads and associating them with parenthood. This may be the translation he was given by the women because teachings in rites carry multiple meanings, and the initiated women are the ones who have all the meanings.

Beads are not about menstruation but sexuality, whether the woman is biologically ready or not ready for sex, she can hang those beads for a longer time. Hence, the beads were used as tools for communicating a woman's sexual availability or unavailability in marriage. It is important for a Bemba woman to have beads, especially waist beads, as they play various roles within the home. It is important to note that despite forces trying to eradicate certain cultural aspects, they remain resilient even today. Bemba women still wear *chisasa* or waist beads because they symbolise women's agency and identity. It is argued that in west African countries, Ghana for instance, 'the beads signify wealth and aristocracy, as well as femininity' (Ableloadedng 2020). This explains why the beads are worn on top of the clothing, it is a display of one's wealth or the wealth of the family she is married in. There are of course varied reasons and varied uses or significance of the waist beads; some of the uses are that waist beads are worn as a symbol of femininity and sensuality. This means that, as stated earlier, only the partner, lover or husband has the honour of seeing them fully. Waist beads are worn as a sign that a woman is of marriageable age or is actually married.

The literature shows that there has not been much written about beads as symbolic marital and sexual communication and agency for women. Moyo (2005) has written on a similar subject among the women of Malawi and the importance of beads in marriage as empowerment for women. What is written is often in relation to the entire women's initiation rite but not the role of beads in marriage in the full sense and that women were given beads during initiation rites. The aim of this article is therefore to present the importance of beads among the married Bemba people as a tool of sexual agency within marriage.

In certain African cultures, beads would be strung with bells, showing that a woman was still virgin at the time of her marriage. Sometimes waist beads could be worn as a weight measuring device. When a woman starts to gain weight, she would notice the beads tightening and she would have to decide whether she wants to lose some weight or just change the beads. There is varied symbolism that is associated with beads. Most, if not all, African cultures wear beads for various reasons, among them, as a display of wealth, community status, leadership positions, political power, spiritual power

and so on. Babies also get adorned with waist beads during naming ceremonies; sometimes beads would be worn around the neck, ankle and wrist, and these symbolically represent various meanings for both adults and babies.

Theoretical framework

Using symbolic interactionism, this article foregrounds the fact that Africans engage the world through symbols in their everyday life. Symbolic interactionism is regarded as conceived by the sociologist, psychologist and philosopher Mead, around the 1800s; although he never used the concept, Herbert Blumer, his student, coined the term after publishing Mead's class notes into a book (Blumer 1962). Max Webber and others also built on the theory as a sociology theory that underscores the meaning behind human behaviour. It is argued that symbolic interactionism originates from the American philosophy of pragmatism and specifically from the work of Mead, as a practical approach of understanding social interactions (Nungesser 2021). People tend to behave in particular ways due to the meanings they have given to certain things; these meanings are results from social communication and beliefs. Symbolic interactionism alludes to people's use of their dialect to make meaning from images and gestural communications. Most Africans still use symbolism in their ways of communication; language and naming is symbolic for instance. Symbolic names are given to persons; for instance, names that define a particular person or what was happening around the time a person was born. When a couple has twins among the Bemba people, the first twin is called Mpundu – this is the name of a fruitful tree that bears fruit throughout the year; it is called mupundu tree (*Parinari curatellifolia* fruit). This means that the couple is fertile. The second twin is called Kapyia, meaning ripened; together the twins are called *ba Mpundu* [twins] and their mother is called *bana Mpundu* – [mother of twins]. This mupundu tree bears much symbolism for Bemba marriages. When a couple gets married, they perform a shaving ritual on their wedding night (shaving each other's pubic hair). They mix their pubic hair and bury it under the mupundu tree as a symbol of seeking for fertility. Even in terms of sexuality, symbols are used in various ways. This article focuses on how Bemba women use beads symbolically to communicate with their spouses in relation to sexual availability and unavailability.

Symbolic interactionism emphasises that human interaction and actions are often symbolic in meaning making. Haralambos and Holborn (2008:12) claim that 'symbolic interactionism is concerned with interaction, which means action between individuals'. Human beings need social interaction in their everyday life with other humans and with the environment. Bemba people took this step further by including certain elements to represent what they need to communicate. This means that, as the Bemba people interact socially, they take into account the symbols that culture has centred on for communication and harmonious, symbiotic relationships because it is constructed by people's perceptions and worldviews (Mukuka 2019). Symbolic interactionism

focuses on the reality that individuals construct by creating shared social definitions of their settings (Thomas 1969 [1923] and Berger & Luckmann 1966). Beads among the Bemba have a shared social meaning; they easily distinguish the beads that are worn around the waist, which are called *chisasa* from other beads. These beads communicate a great deal symbolically.

Beads of communication

Mohlabane and Tshoedi (2021) have succinctly shown that:

[I]n taking up the African feminist contention that 'African womanhood' is a colonial construct, I illustrate that through the processes of political-economic colonisation in Lesotho, a particularised Christian conjugal-type womanhood was created and remains a fixed, potent standard according to which *methepa* are marginalised. (p. 42)

Colonialism in general created a particular womanhood for African women, not only in Lesotho but also across the African continent. This means that for Bemba women their instruments of communication in a marital setup were paganised, and in order to 'civilise and Christianise them, they needed to do away with beads a symbol of communication and communicate verbally instead. Mbewe (2022) explains that:

Missionary work and converting Africans to Christianity was premised on prohibiting competing African religious practices and customs. Despite this prohibition of certain indigenous practices, the missionaries took a strong stance of salvaging such practices and cultures. The intention was to legitimise their ethnographic work and eventually position themselves as the protectors of, and experts on, African culture. (p. 3)

Corbeil (1982) was one of the white fathers in Northern Zambia among the Bemba people; he has written a book titled *Mbusa: Sacred Emblems of the Bemba*, where he argues that it was important for priests to be allowed in all women space so that the priest can learn what is taught in order to christianise the teachings for Bemba people to have Christian marriages. Further, he argues that:

[A] number of powers were available to women or a woman's family. These were altered by colonialism and the arrival of Christianity, which diminished the role of the bride/wife while elevating the role of the father/husband. (Taylor 2006:92)

In the Bemba myth of creation, a woman was given a bead by God; God gave the woman a stone for industry and science; beads are made of stone as noted by Hinfelaar (1994). The preparation for a wedding among the Bemba takes quite some time as there is need for the bride to be taught her role in the home; within this teaching of *imbusa*, she is given agency which is passed on from the ancestors by older women. The bride is taught about the sexual aspect of a marriage while she is also taught about the relationship with in-laws, budgeting, communication, Et Cetera. The aspect of *ubulungu* [beads for the waist] *chisasa* is taught as well and *bana cimbusa* [marriage instructor or tutor] and the paternal aunt string the beads for the young bride, but they also take

one from their own *chisasa* and give it to the bride. She is given the wisdom of the colours of the beads so she can be aware of the significance of the beads, the colours and the purpose of both. Beads carry important meaning in marital communication among the Bemba. The mother of the bride seeks out a woman of good standing in the community or another town to be *nacimbusa* [marriage tutor for her daughter]. This identified woman then seeks other married women whom she works with to make teaching a success. This is one way in which a Bemba woman's identity is affirmed; the waist beads embolden that identity and enforce the agency of married Bemba women. The beads were a symbolic communication of their desires as well between the couples. Kaunda and Kaunda (2021) note that Bemba:

[W]omen must negotiate two seemingly conflicting worldviews – traditional and modern hat cannot be easily synthesized. Women are expected to function as both culturally informed and modernized, depending on the circumstances. (p. 32)

To use beads as a tool for marital sex communication would be perceived as traditional and backward while to talk about sex verbally would be considered modern. Unfortunately, verbal communication has led to many intimate partner deaths and often there has not been enough empowerment for women on marital verbal communication in the rites. Symbolic communication with beads was easier and did not misconstrue any message being sent forth. During a follow-up research among the Ndembu of Zambia 10 years after her initial research, the Ndembu people have a similar rite of passage for girls and women similar to *icisungu* and *imbusa*. Turner (1987) laments:

I found that Christianity and nationalist modernization had been devouring the ancient culture like a plague – a plague full of the best intentions but in fact the agent of tragic destruction. My original story was no longer true. For ten years there had been no spirit dancer, no spirit children beads; girls' initiation had been seriously reduced and had lost its major symbolism. Under attacks from the missions and the rationalist government school system ... Scant forethought was being given during girlhood to the approaching event of initiation. (p. 62)

In the name of christianising the rites, certain agency was eroded for women who needed it. Furthermore, the two symbolic communicative ways that beads play in the sexual agency of Bemba women have been discussed.

Available or not available (beads)

Beads are used as a form of matrimonial communication even in modern-day Zambia, women are still taught beads' communication in *imbusa* and mostly in rural Zambia. For African women and men, waist beads symbolise sensuality and symbolically represent femininity, spirituality, identity and fertility. Among the Bemba people, a woman is secluded for a period of time to be instructed in the art of marital sex, sex rituals and family responsibilities of a married woman through *imbusa* rites. Kaunda and Kaunda (2016) bring out distinct ideas on the role of initiation rites alluding to the fact that a Bemba woman is empowered through the teaching of

imbusa. They also contend that in the Bemba cosmology, apart from a woman having control over her sexuality, she also has her control and power to determine when to have sex or to abstain. This is symbolically presented through the use of three symbolic bead colours – white, red and black with each bearing its meaning when communicating to the husband. A woman hangs red beads on the bedroom wall and wears red beads around her waist, bringing awareness to her husband that she has her menstrual flow and would not be available for sex as long as the red bead is hung on the wall, and she has red beads around her waist. In the light of the previous varied views, it is noteworthy that symbolic communication played an important role in marital settings as well as other settings for Bemba people. In addition, according to Kaunda and Kaunda (2016), the woman's sexual power shares similar characteristics with that of a female elephant that yields the power through its sexuality, suggesting that initiation rites are a form of conduit and significant strategy against sexual abuse, belittling and manipulation of the female sexuality and the female body. Women's sexuality exudes power, and it is this power that societies often try to 'contain' through constructing ways that women are regulated such as women's and girls' chastity being overemphasised than men's and boys'.

While symbolic communication would at times override verbal communication, they intersected and there were times that verbal communication would override symbolic communication. For instance, infidelity is an issue that would need verbal communication, and this was often initiated by the women. Rasing (2001:50) argued in the early 2000s that Bemba women had agency over their own sexuality; they would question the husband if they suspected him of infidelity. Furthermore, there was a traditional court where the men suspected of infidelity would be taken if the wife was not satisfied with his response when questioned about infidelity. All this was done before they would resume intimacy. Hugo Hinfelaar (1994:11) argues similarly that Bemba women would deny their husband sex until satisfaction and mutual understanding was reached regarding the suspected infidelity. If the woman was not satisfied with the man's explanation, the red bead would continue to hang and there would be no marital sex. Verbal communication would take place and if the husband confessed to having engaged in extra marital sex and was remorseful, the symbolic communication would take place in form of a cleansing ritual performance, symbolically bringing healing to a breached marriage and betrayed spouse. This ritual is only performed by a couple that is married. Symbolism is an important aspect of the Bemba worldview and even *imbusa* uses much symbolism in its instruction methodologies. *Imbusa* is taught using songs, proverbs, pottery, paintings and dance, just to mention a few. Poewe (1981) notes that:

[T]he favourable position enjoyed by Luapulan women vis-à-vis control over resources owes much to three factors; female control over reproduction, female control over critical resources and matrilineal ideology reinforcing the cultural and structural centrality of women. (p. 33)

Symbolism and speaking in idioms, proverbs, storytelling and riddles are all aspects of Bemba communication approach and have also been used during *imbusa* teaching.

Beads for contraception and foreplay

Therefore beads are used for fertility and sometimes for contraception. Beads are often never rarely neutral artefacts in Africa; they usually communicate and signal something – they are worn visibly as a sign of status or concealed as a concealed yet detectable motion to a husband, partner or lover.

Beads – especially waist beads – are strung by paternal aunts and grandmothers (maternal and paternal grandmothers). Paternal aunts play an important role in Bemba girls' lives, especially as they relate to menstruation, puberty, marriage and childbirth. Among the Bemba, as among other cultures, sex is appreciated as a meaningful cultural component and therefore, sex education begins in early childhood and continues throughout life. When it is time for a Bemba woman to get married, lessons and instruction are given to the young bride in *imbusa*, paternal aunt, maternal and paternal grandmother can attend the teachings, but the bride's and groom's mother cannot attend. The three important women in a Bemba woman's life then sit together and string waist beads for her; they also each take off one of their own waist beads and put it among the bride's waist beads. Some of the beads are for contraception – as long as a woman wears those particular beads during intercourse, she cannot conceive. According to Bamigbola (2021) who interviewed women in Nigeria, the beads are usually laced with herbs that help to prevent pregnancy. And in Nigeria, there are more traditional ways of contraception such as laced bracelets, rings and waist beads. The essence is to wear these ornaments before sex in order to prevent conception.

In Nigerian and some South African cultures that wear waist beads, the beads are often worn on top of their traditional clothes. However, as practiced in Southern Africa, Zambia and Malawi (see Moyo 2005), for instance, women and girls usually wear the beads underneath their clothes; the beads are like undergarments. These can only be seen by a lover or husband; in fact, if another man sees the waist beads, it's equivalent to him having sex with that woman. Beads play a sensual role during intercourse especially during foreplay. Among Bemba married women, beads are a form of lingerie that excites a husband. And the colours of the waist beads usually have varied meanings. The relevance of what colour beads is worn and when is taught during *imbusa* premarital teachings by *banacimbusa*. These same colours of beads were instrumental in Bemba women's sexual agency within their marriage and the beads were used as a negotiating tool. A Bemba woman is taught to take charge of her marital sex life; she is an active participant and is in the

lead of the sexual act. She takes charge and her spouse follows; her sexual satisfaction is as important as that of her spouse. The beads are a part of the sexual act as the spouse uses them as a tool during foreplay. These beads also embolden the identity of Bemba women as married women who know how to negotiate their sexual agency. Beads seem to have some power to attract sensual feelings in men when worn around the waist by women and makes women's waist even more attractive and sensual.

Hinfelaar (1994:5–11) shows that during the stringing of waist beads, Bemba women also 'smeared herbs that provided a distinct connection with the women because of its symbolic act associated with parenthood and procreation'. According to Mukuka (2019), traditionally,

[S]tringing and wearing beads established a connection to the Bored Stone (*ilibwe*) or *icupo* (marriage). This meant that *ubulungu/chisasa* (beads) which women wore around their waist was used as a sexual tool and stimulant during fore play. (p. 131)

Among the Bemba, sex is not only physical but also spiritual and is sacred, which is why a marriage never ends even at the death of a spouse. Rituals have to be done in order for the marriage to be terminated at the death of a spouse. It is not 'until death do us part' for the Bemba, it is until the remaining spouse is cleansed that the marriage is officially and customarily over. Beads played the role as a symbolic communication tool among Bemba couples and these practices have undergone a process of change due to Christianity and 'civilisation'.

The subordination of beads that were a tool of sexual agency, the subordination of women's sexual desire and the subordination of women have had a negative impact on the understanding of Bemba women's sexual agency. Due to some of the changes around marital rites, women were disproportionately impacted because their symbolic negotiating tool was taken away and it was deemed demonic or outdated. Agency is not in the beads, but the beads were a media through which agency was symbolically taught. The wearing of waist beads has now taken a patriarchal angle where women have to attract their spouses with the waist beads and as an enticing stimulant for foreplay. The important aspects and symbolic roles that the beads played are no longer in existence.

Conclusion

While it has often been said of African women as being docile, christianity and 'civilisation' robbed them of their cultural agency such as waist beads that have undergone some major rejection and then being re-embraced by Christian women. Some of the aspects about waist beads that were rejected continue to be rejected. For Bemba people whose worldview is based on symbolism, communication needs balancing between symbolic and verbal communication especially in marital communication.

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