

'Kufa kwa jongololo nkhusiya mphete': A critique of gender injustice procreation cultural practices of the Sena of Malawi

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The central argument of this article is that *kufa kwa jongololo nkhusiya mphete*, a concept that is used to encourage procreation amongst the Sena people of Nsanje District in Malawi, is a dehumanising concept for the barren men and women, in the context of HIV and AIDS and gender justice, where men and women need concepts that affirm life in all its fullness. The study uses feminist cultural hermeneutics as a tool to analyse dehumanising cultural practices, through the examination of three Sena cultural practices.

Contribution: The study also questions the methodology used to engage indigenous knowledge, a methodology that denies traditional communities the right to maintain secrecy on some treasured indigenous practices. At the same time, the article argues that no protection should be afforded to indigenous practices that dehumanise the lives of people on the margins of power.

Keywords: *jongololo*; women; Sena; life-giving; life-denying; children; cultural practices; indigenous knowledge.

Introduction

In the Sena¹ language, *kufa kwa jongololo nkhusiya mphete*² is a metaphor for motherhood or fatherhood identity after death, because when a *jongololo* dies, it leaves behind its exo-skeleton segments, which are in the form of many rings. As indicated by Kanyike (2011:83), 'an individual is simply not alive, if he or she is not engaged in transmitting life to another human being'.

In the Sena language, *mphete* means ring. Therefore, a child is likened to a ring. The aim of this article is to critique the practice, emphasis and the value attached to having children. Oduyoye (1999:113) affirmed this by stating, 'In Africa, it is at one's death that children count most, for reproducing the human race is seen as a religious duty. One is not really a full and faithful person until she has a child'. Whilst Oduyoye was referring to having at least one child, in the concept *kufa kwa jongololo nkhusiya mphete*, the value of a man and woman is connected to having many children – just like the skeleton segments of a *jongololo*. This is confirmed by the Malawi Human Rights Commission (MHRC) (2006:13), that in Malawi, the status of a family is measured by the number of children a family has. Moreover, concepts like, 'May you bear children like bees! May you bear children like calabash seeds!' (Kalugila 1977:21) are used to pressurise men and women to bear many children. Therefore, in the Sena culture, a father or a mother will only be valued, recognised and remembered in her community, according to the number of children he or she left behind. This is echoed by Kanyike (2011) who stated that:

Procreation is an essential aspect of being alive, and personhood was the attribute of living, reproductive people, to be alive, to be a person, one had to generate children biologically. (p. 83)

Whilst the concept of *kufa kwa jongololo nkhusiya mphete* addresses both men and women, Masuku (2018:3) stated that in most cases the emphasis is more on women than men because women are the ones who give birth to children.

1.The Sena people are originally from Mozambique, and they speak the Sena language, also known as Chisena. This tribe practices a strong patrilineal system, whereby marital residence is at the husband's maternal home and inheritance is through the father. The Sena culture is one of the most dynamic in Malawi and the people are skilled musicians. However, the Sena people are culturally very conservative, and they strongly value birth and death cleansing rituals, as well as widow inheritance and polygamy, amongst others. The majority of Sena were converted to Catholicism during the colonial era, under the influence of Portuguese Christian missionaries. Despite this influence, some of the Sena still believe in ancestral spirits and a god called mbona. They pray to him and offer sacrifices when the district experiences a dry spell. Therefore, cultural practices and perceptions are common and very important to some of the Sena people.

2.This is a Sena metaphor for Sena people who live in the southern region of Malawi. *Kufa* means death, *kwa* means of, *jongololo* means a millipede, *nkhusiya* means leaves and *mphete* means ring. Therefore, *kufa kwa jongololo nkhusiya mphete* literally means 'death of a millipede leaves rings'. In other words, it also means when a millipede dies it leaves its mark or identity in the form of a ring.

Note: Special Collection: Women Theologies, sub-edited by Sinenhlanhla S. Chisale (Midlands State University, Zimbabwe) and Tanya van Wyk (University of Pretoria).

As pointed out by the Senior Programme Manager of Population Services International (PSI) (2007):

[T]he belief is when you get married the best thing that people would want to see is the wife conceiving, then you must have a baby, that means that it is a complete family.

In contrast, Molefhi (2008) argued that as much as women are under a lot of social pressure to procreate, so are the men. This is because of the status a man in the society that is 'further enhanced by the number of children he has' (Masuku 2018:5). Because of the societal pressure, the woman tends to have children at any cost although both man and woman long to be remembered as ancestors. As pointed out by Pottow (1990:145), 'having children who grow to maturity also assures the perpetuation of her house and thus, her status as an ancestress in the life hereafter'.

According to Kuudzala (2019:8), 'Valuing the significance of procreation is certainly true in some tribes like the Yao, Lomwe, Chewa and Sena from Malawi'. The valuing of children amongst the Sena people is connected to their belief that death is not the end of human life, because there is life after death in an invisible world, which is close to that of the living (Mbiti 1991:128, 2015:122). Mbiti referred to the dead who are still remembered, as the living dead. Amongst the Sena, the living dead are women and men who have procreated. This study will show that in the Sena culture, there is more pressure on women than men regarding procreation as a means of being remembered as an ancestor. In this regard, Mbiti (1990) has stated:

[W]hen a woman that has not given birth to a child dies, in the eyes of African society there will be nobody of her own immediate blood to 'remember' her, to keep her in the state of personal immortality: she will simply be 'forgotten'. (p. 110)

Methodological considerations

According to Terre Blanche et al. (2006:123), the researcher is the main tool in collecting and analysing data. In the case of the current study, content analysis was used as a tool for gathering and analysing the existing data. As stated by Neuman, content analysis 'is a technique for gathering and analysing the content of the text' (2006:321–322). Moreover, Neumann (2006:323) stated that content analysis also includes: books, newspapers, magazine articles, speeches, official documents and advertisements. However, in the current study, various databases were researched in order to obtain articles, dissertations, theses and books on the following: the cultural practices of the Sena, feminist hermeneutics, infertility, motherhood identity, the importance of ancestors and barren women. The researcher reviewed literature in order to develop a clear understanding of: (1) rituals to ward off barrenness, (2) *nthema* or 'bonus wife' and (3) *fisi*. Titles and abstracts of articles researched were critically evaluated for relevant information concerning the current study. Before going into the details to analyse the above-mentioned Sena beliefs and practices, it is necessary to discuss feminist cultural hermeneutics as used in the current study.

Feminist cultural hermeneutics framework

Musimbi Kanyoro (2001) and Mercy Amba Oduyoye (2001), founding members of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians (hereafter Circle), have described the methodology of feminist cultural hermeneutics. Kanyoro (2001:162–165) argued that feminist cultural hermeneutics is a multidisciplinary tool used by scholars from Africa to analyse African beliefs and culture, biblical beliefs and practices and other religions found on the African continent, from a gendered perspective. Gender analysis helps to understand how societies are organised and how power is used by different groups of people. Furthermore, Kanyoro emphasised that gender analysis seeks to identify injustices and to suggest that societal correction is necessary, especially of beliefs and practices that are dehumanising to the people practicing them. Thus, Oduyoye (2006:9–10) strongly pointed out that it is not enough simply to analyse culture without reference to the people who maintain the culture and on whom the culture impacts. It is also necessary to monitor how the beliefs and practices of a particular people are adjusted and modified over time, depending on their usefulness to the communities that practice them.

History is full of examples where Africans themselves have modified cultural beliefs and practices to meet new challenges in life. A good example is Shaka, who stopped the initiation of Zulu boys in the 18th century when he was attacked by his enemies at a time when his fighting men were undergoing circumcision (Bryant 1929:642). He wanted his soldiers to be ready to fight at all times. However, in the 20th century, King Zwelenthini, a Zulu king, brought back the circumcision of men in the face of a new challenge, HIV (Phiri & Nadar 2012:138–154). Thus, feminist cultural hermeneutics also looks for positive cultural practices and beliefs in order to affirm them for their ability to protect life.

In line with the dynamic nature of African culture, Kanyoro (2001:162) concurred with Oduyoye, by calling on both African men and women to revisit their cultural practices and to analyse them with regard to how they are promoting the well-being of the society practicing them. In doing so, Oduyoye strongly believed that the hermeneutics of culture directs women not to take things for granted by uncritically following traditions, rituals and norms, as if they were unchangeable when found to be dehumanising. Bearing this call-in mind, traditions, rituals and cultural practices such as *kufa kwa njongololo nkhusiya mphete* need to be critiqued to discover whether or not they are liberating for all those affected by their practice.

Edet (2006:25–39) stated that the questions that should be asked are: do these rituals oppress women or promote their welfare, and what are the negative and positive points of these rituals? African cultural hermeneutics takes the agency of women seriously (Oduyoye 2001:14). Women must be able to tell stories of what is wrong in a cultural practice and

suggest ways on how it can be changed. They must also be able to speak the truth to those with power, those who decide which cultural beliefs and practices are kept and which should be discarded. Developing skills to lobby decision makers is significant in this context. We now turn to the three Sena practices of procreation that define women and that therefore need to be interrogated for their dehumanising or life-affirming abilities.

Three Sena practices of procreation

Amongst the Sena, there are three cultural beliefs and practices that exist to protect the community from barrenness and to promote procreation. The first being rituals for the prevention of the spirits of dead barren people from becoming ancestors. The second is the practice of *nthena*, a 'bonus wife', who is a relation of a barren woman and brought in to 'cover her nakedness', or shame. The third is the practice of *fisi*, a man brought in secretly to bear children on behalf of a husband who is not able to impregnate his wife (Chirwa & Chizimbi 2009). These cultural practices will be analysed using feminist cultural hermeneutics, which provides a framework to critique culture and to affirm the dignity of life for women and men. Amongst the Sena people, being barren is viewed as something that is caused by an evil spirit or the spirit of one of the family members who died barren. Therefore, a ritual is performed to ward off the evil spirit of barrenness.

Rituals to ward off barrenness

The first step towards warding off the barrenness in the Sena people involves a ritual that is performed to prevent the barren spirits of both men and women who died without bearing children from becoming an ancestor. This was confirmed by Shorter (1975) who stated that:

There are large numbers of deceased who never become ancestors, children, barren women or sterile men, cripples and social drop-outs, people who die far away from their homeland, outcasts and those who in any way incur social censure or disapproval. (p. 126)

Moreover, Mulambuzi (1997) stated that the childless would be eliminated from becoming ancestors. In Sena culture, when a family is visited by the spirit of the dead barren person, they perform rituals to chase the spirit of the barren person out of the family or community. The spirit of the barren person is not welcome because it perpetuates barrenness in the family. The ritual involves one of the family members holding a burning piece of a specific wood and chanting the name of the deceased barren person. The rest of the family members follow behind the person holding the burning wood and join in the chanting. It is the smoke and the chanting that chases away the spirit of the barren person. The burning wood is placed at the nearest four-way crossroad as the final stop of the procession. In this way, if the spirit of the barren person attempts to return, it is confused by the crossroad.

Furthermore, some families do not name a child after a deceased barren person, as it is perceived as pronouncing a curse upon the child. As explained by Mbiti (1975:87) and Parrinder (1969:80), the naming of a new baby in the African tradition is an important occasion, because names are given to the child according to the circumstances of birth and resemblance to the parents, grandparents and the ancestors. Naming of the baby is one of the ways of saying that the baby is welcome in the family and in the community (Mitchell 1977:26) or that an ancestor has returned to the family or community.

The treatment given to the spirit of a barren person is difficult to reconcile with African concepts, such as: 'it takes the whole village to raise a child' and 'yours is mine and mine is yours'. These are concepts that are inclusive and have 'unbroken circle' as Taylor (1963) called them. It does not make sense when these inclusive concepts do not accommodate barren men and women, and yet experience has shown that barren people are part of the community that contributes to raising children in the village. 'It takes the whole village to raise a child' is a lovely African concept as indicated by Katharine Hill (2016):

African culture recognizes that parenting is a shared responsibility – a communal affair – not just the concern of parents or grandparents, but of the extended family. Uncles, aunts, cousins, neighbours and friends can all be involved and all have a part to play. (n.p.)

As strongly argued by Van Balen and Bos (2009), childless couples do participate in the world of the children of their relatives and friends in different ways. Why, then, is it that the same childless people who helped raise children of their relatives and friends are not part of the community's memory when they die? This is why Kanyoro (2001) stressed that gender analysis seeks to identify injustices and to suggest that societal correction is necessary, especially to beliefs and practices that are dehumanising for the people practicing them. It is important that concepts like 'it takes the whole village to raise a child' are affirmed, so that barren men and women feel as a part of the community. Masuku (2018:7) explained that the motherhood identity is the preferred and cherished identity amongst many African women. This is why 'a childless woman will stop at nothing to get a child' (Masuku 2018:3). The next section focusses on the second cultural practice that is *nthena*, or 'bonus wife'.

Nthena or 'bonus wife'

The second cultural practice of the Sena to consider in this study is called *nthena*. According to Chakanza (2005:78), the MHRC (2006:24), and Hope (1999:69), *nthena*, or 'bonus wife', is practiced amongst the Sena, when a married man is given a younger sister or niece of his wife to be his second wife. There are three occasions when *nthena* is practiced. According to Masuku (2018:4), the first reason is when the wife is barren. If the family of the wife likes the man and they want to keep him in the family, they offer him a younger sister or niece as a second wife, so that she can have children on behalf of the

first wife. Chibambo (2009:41) explained that the children born from the younger sister or niece are said to belong to the barren woman who becomes part of the unit raising the children. Moreover, Chibambo (2009) stated that children born from the practice of *nthena* address the first wife as mother and treat her like their own biological mother. At the same time, they treat their biological mother like their elder sister or aunt.

However, when the barren wife dies, she is still not accepted in the community of the living as an ancestor because every African marriage calls for procreation (Bahemuka 2006:120). This is when the concept of *kufa kwa jongololo nkhusiya mphete* concept comes into play. The barren woman raised the younger sister's children as her own, but when it comes to remembering her, they cannot do it, because she did not die like a *jongololo*. She did not leave her mark like a *jongololo*. Therefore, the stigma of not having given birth remains with her. As indicated above, there are rituals performed to chase away her spirit of barrenness. In contrast, her husband will be remembered as an ancestor, because the children of the younger sister or niece are his biological children. In this case, the system has solved the problem of ancestorship of the husband but not that of the first wife. In the Sena culture, the barren man is not treated the same way as a woman is treated. Actions of ill treatment of a barren man are indirect when compared to a barren woman. Even though when he dies and he will not be accepted as an ancestor; this does not come out as strongly as the way it comes out when a barren woman dies. This is why Kanyoro (2001) argued that gender analysis helps to understand how societies are organised and how power is used by different groups of people.

The second occasion for practising *nthena*, according to MHRC (2006:24), Chakanza (2005:78) and Hope (1999:170), is when the family of the wife want to show appreciation to their son-in-law for being a hard worker and a good person, who is well behaved and takes good care of his wife and her extended family. Such a man could be rich or not. In this case, the first wife has her biological children and the younger sister or niece comes to add to the number of children by bearing more children for the good husband. Moreover, 'If the husband is rich, the wife may want to protect the wealth by letting her younger sister join her so that the man does not marry elsewhere' (MHRC 2006:24). The elder sister protects the wealth of her husband at the expense of the younger sister or niece.

The third occasion for the practising of *nthena* is when a man has been good to his in-laws and the first wife has died. The parents-in-law do not want him to take a second wife from another family. Therefore, they give him his wife's sister or niece to keep him in their family (MHRC 2006:23). It is assumed that such actions prevent wealth from going to a different family (MHRC 2006:24). Chibambo (2009:40) pointed out that the second wife is also there as a mother figure to take care of the children of her deceased elder sister. In most cases in which *nthena* is practised, the second wife is underage. In this light, Chibambo (2009:40) raised

the question of how the second wife is going to be a mother-figure in the family because of to her age. If a mother figure is needed, why not get someone who is mature enough to care for the orphans?

Whilst the practise of *nthena* is culturally appreciated, because in the case of barrenness, the younger sister or niece is said to have 'covered her older sister's nakedness', Amoah, Akitunde and Akoto (2005:38) argued that the majority of the girls taken are underage and not old enough to give consent to such marriages. James, in Oduyoye (2004:150), noticed that the practice of marrying girls as young as 12 is still widely prevalent in some parts of Africa. This is confirmed by Siwila (2011:14), who conducted interviews with 12 girls in Zambia who were involved in child marriage and married to older men. Many countries, including Malawi and Zambia, have declared child marriages illegal for the following reasons:

1. Any sexual encounter below the age of 16 years is considered rape because the girl is not old enough to give consent.
2. The body of the girl is not mature enough to handle pregnancy – which is the reason for the marriage.
3. By getting married early, the girls' chances of advancing in their education are cut short – as less-educated girls, they are not ready to make informed decisions.
4. Most of the girls who get married early become victims of domestic violence, including being infected with HIV. They have no hope of escaping because they feel they do not have other alternatives (Amoah et al. 2005:38; MHRC 2006:78; Oke 2005; UNICEF 2009).

Therefore, the practice of *nthena* has more negative aspects than positive ones when considering its impact on the child, who has been given away as *nthena*. In the Sena culture, there is no fixed age for a girl child as to when she can be given to marriage. Normally, some of the girls are given away as *nthena* after their first menstruation, which means that some girls are given to marriage as young as 13 years, in order to fulfil the concept of *kufa kwa jongololo nkhusiya mphete*. Moreover, *nthena* has destroyed the future of some of the younger girls. Given a chance, some of them would have been in a better position than being *nthena*. Being a *nthena* generally results in loss of education for the young girls. They are also at a higher risk of being infected with HIV, because the girls cannot ask the brother-in-law/husband to wear a condom, because it would be perceived as being rude; growing up in an African society the younger people are taught to respect the elders in all aspects of life. Asking the brother-in-law/husband to wear a condom, would be against the mission of fulfilling *kufa kwa jongololo nkhusiya mphete*. *Nthena* is a difficult position for a girl child to be, because the child has been robbed of her childhood's development process (Amoah et al. 2005:37), by being introduced to the position of adulthood at a younger age. This adds to her health risk because the body of a girl child is not mature enough to carry a baby at her age (Amoah et al. 2005:37). Yet, the Sena culture sees her as a saviour of her sister and her brother in-law. Tauzi (2006:65) explained that one of the

village chiefs in Nsanje said that *nthena* is phasing out due to HIV and AIDS, because girls are refusing to be taken as *nthena*. However, the research that was done by Dr Pazvakavambura and Wanjau (2015) in 2010 showed that Malawi had the highest rate of child marriage in southern Africa. Somehow, the practice of *nthena*, influenced by the concept of *kufa kwa jongololo nkhusiya mphete* may have contributed to the given high rate of child marriage in southern Africa. Amongst the Sena, child marriage, forced marriage or polygamy is disguised by using the word *nthena* because it is perceived as the younger sister helping the older sister, and therefore as not 'harmful'. In light of the above discussion, child marriage, forced marriage, polygamy or *nthena* are unjust practices that work against the well-being of the girl child (Chibambo 2009:62).

Nthena also has a negative impact on the barren woman and first wife for whom it is designed to help. It is argued here that the barren woman is traumatised by this experience because her infertile state is highlighted by bringing her younger sister as *nthena*. Psychologically, she is affected for not having children and for bringing her younger sister or niece to sleep with her husband. This does not change her infertile situation because the children will still belong to her younger sister. Even if she treats them as her own biological children, they are still not her own. The feeling of not having the experience of a biological child will always be there. Some women accept *nthena* for the sake of not wanting to lose their marriage. As indicated by Mbiti (1969:133), that divorce was the alternative solution when marriage did not produce children. There is also stigma associated with divorce and singleness. For a barren woman, it would therefore be a double dehumanisation being barren and divorced.

In the Sena culture, the barren man is dehumanised just as the barren woman. This point is further discussed in the next section that is about the *fisi* meaning and its practices.

Fisi

The third cultural practice considered in this study is that of *fisi*. In Chichewa which is a national Malawian language, *fisi* is hyena. In the Sena language, *thika* means hyena too. However, for the purposes of this study the word *fisi* is used in the context of the practice of *fisi* and refers a man or woman who is chosen by the family of the deceased to perform a sexual ritual for cleansing (Hope 1999:169). As the person performing the ritual operates at night, as does the hyena when stalking domestic animals in a village. There are different types of *fisi* custom, namely: for procreation, for birth-cleansing, for the initiation of girls and for death-cleansing (Jana 2003:25). In this study, only one concept of *fisi* will be discussed, which is key for this study, this is when a man is infertile. Hope (1999:169) and Page (2014:4) explained that when a man is infertile, *fisi* is used in order for the wife of the infertile man to be impregnated by a third party. The husband's next of kin is the one who is asked to impregnate the wife of the infertile man Habel (2001:114).

Sometimes the husband is told about the arrangement, but in most circumstances, he is not. Instead, he is sent away (Masuku 2018:4) or the elders wait until the man has gone on a trip so that *fisi* can have a chance of having sex with the wife. The husband's infertility is kept a secret, unlike the case of a barren woman. As stated by Ngcanga (1987:5), in the culture of the Sotho people, a woman who does not bear children is *nyopa*, but there is no such word for an infertile man, because the man is regarded as the dominant partner in a marriage and is seen to have no shortcomings. It is the woman who has to meet the demands of both the man and the community. In compensating for the infertility of the man, the woman is literary raped, yet *fisi* is not considered as rape. The woman is under the control of the community because she has no say in the whole situation (Msimang 1990:311). This is pointed out by Masuku (2018), 'in reality the woman is subjugated by society'. The man who is sent away or whose wife is laid by another man is also controlled by the community as well, especially when he has to believe that the children are his when they are actually not. Once again, all is done in the name of the cultural concept, *kufa kwa jongololo nkhusiya mphete*.

The wife of the infertile man is warned by her husband's family that she will be visited by a man at night, when her husband is not at home, but that she should not scream. She does not know the man beforehand, and she has no option to refuse or to tell her husband. The man performing *fisi* continues coming to the house in the dark until she becomes pregnant, and as long as children are needed in that family (Hope 1999:169). In concurring with Hope (1999), Masuku (2018:3) stated, 'the majority of women are not in a position to refuse to engage in extramarital sex in order to conceive because of the pressure from society to have children'. As the man performing *fisi* is nameless and faceless, all the children belong to the family of the infertile man and his wife. When the arrangement is made, the woman is unaware. The culture in which a person grows up in does not prepare the person to know what happens under what circumstances. This is why Oduyoye (2001) argued that women must be able to tell stories of what is wrong in a cultural practice and suggest ways on how it can be changed.

Girls and women who have gone through these experiences are traumatised by the institutionalised rape. Firstly, what they share is the fact that they have no say in the matter. Even though the infertile man is not raped, he too has no control over the matter. However, the custodians of such practices maintain that they are performed for the good of the community, for ensuring procreation. Secondly, all the women and girls exposed to this sex ritual are in danger of contracting sexually transmitted diseases, including HIV.

Thirdly, whilst the desired outcome is procreation in the case of the wife of an infertile man, regarding the young wife, or *nthena*, unwanted pregnancies may occur and also in the case of the first wife. In the case of the woman whose husband is infertile, in addition to being raped, she feels violated and dehumanised by being forced into a sex ritual with a man

who is not her husband. At the same time, she has to live with the guilt and the secret of rape for the rest of her life, just to achieve the concept of *kufa kwa jongololo nkhusiya mphete*. In Rachel NyaGondwe Fiedler's (2005) research on ritual sex, she found out that such cultural practices continue to be practised amongst Christians. This therefore introduces the concept of adultery and the sin of sex outside marriage for all those involved.

Each society has a way of preserving its indigenous knowledge through its custodians. Usually the royal families, chiefs, initiation school teachers, family elders, traditional healers and religious leaders are classified as preservers of a people's tradition. In the Sena culture, such traditions are still mainly preserved in concepts, songs, stories and practises often passed on orally from one generation to another. Whilst concepts like *kufa kwa jongololo nkhusiya mphete* are known by many amongst the Sena, the meanings and the activities that sustain the implementation of such practices remain a secret.

Indigenous knowledge and preservation of cultural practices

Most of the cultural practices addressed in this study are shrouded in secrecy. That is why offense is taken when secret practices are written in books or are exposed through the media. This is what Dlamini (2006) had to say concerning the view of broader society regarding the media and the issue of culture in Swaziland:

The media in Swaziland is too free and responsible for damaging the image of the country internationally. In their view the media is disrespectful and abusing its freedom by exposing issues that should not be addressed. (p. 176)

This opinion is because of a society that still strongly holds onto its culture: traditional and cultural rules force journalists to tread carefully and cautiously when conducting their duties (Mabuza 2007:68; Mamba 2005:99; MISA 2007:4). Most of the people involved in the implementation of such cultural practices are taken by surprise when they are the subject of them, because they are not aware of all the intricacies of such practices.

This raises the question: why so much secrecy if the cultural practices exist for the benefit and protection of the community in which they originate? It may be argued that secrecy is maintained as part of the mystery of the cultural practice. As confirmed by Tong (2010):

Conceptually, secrecy provides a form of protection that may either already be part of an existing custom, for example where certain sacred rites or practices are known only to certain members of the community. (p. 161)

On another level, secrecy has become a method for survival especially after the introduction of Christianity amongst the Sena in the 19th century. For a long time, the custodians of the traditions refused to be converted to Christianity, so as to maintain the space needed for the preservation of the indigenous knowledge. Over the years, the African Initiated Churches have developed amongst the Sena. This has

produced hybridity in the indigenous knowledge or has provided a means to be Christian but to still maintain the indigenous knowledge. The practitioners of cultural practices like *kufa kwa njongololo nkhusiya mphete* and *nthena*, readily read the Biblical stories of Abraham, Sarah and Hagar, because the stories speak to the same practices of how to turn barrenness into procreation through a younger woman.

However, it is the advent of HIV that has resulted in a wider exposure of African indigenous cultural practices to the greater world, because of these same practices perpetuating the spread of the virus. In contrast, Muula and Nazombe (2014:18) have found out that some of the African indigenous knowledge can play a role in HIV prevention. This is why the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians has committed to research and publishing on life-affirming and dehumanising practices.

The practices of *kufa kwa njongololo nkhusiya mphete*, *nthena* and *fisi* fall within the scope of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians' focus areas. Topics on violence against women, which the World Health Organization has identified as a health issue, and on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) agenda, especially Goals 3² and 5³, have continued to highlight the suffering of women and girls under the guise of cultural practices.

Raising awareness of the danger of cultural practices that are dehumanising has gone a long way towards stopping such practices. However, success is ensured only when activists and governments work in partnership with the custodians of cultural practices. In such partnerships, familiar language is used and emphasis is placed on the promotion of life-giving cultural practices.

People tend to resist change that comes from outside. Whilst working with the cultural custodians through consultations, where listening to one another with respect is promoted, success is ensured. Questions, such as what are the custodians saying about such dehumanising cultural practices, or why do such dehumanising cultural practices exist, should be asked. Sometimes, cultural practices are condemned without understanding or investigating why they are being practiced. For example, with regard to the concept of *kufa kwa njongololo nkhusiya mphete*, and the *nthena* cultural practice, they were perceived as being both life giving and providing dignity to barren women. It is also important to take into account that at the time of the institution of these practices, people were not very much aware of as they are today and there was no HIV and AIDS, which are a threat in this age. As argued by Moyo (2007):

What may not be disputed, however, is the idea that the ultimate goal of traditional African morality is the promotion of human welfare. Anything, which promotes human welfare, is considered to be good. What does not is bad. (p. 133)

2.SDG 3: Health and well-being to ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages.

3.SDG 5: Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls.

Therefore, for barren Sena women and men, the practices of *nthena* and *fisi* were the only way to have children during earlier times. Adoption was not part of African culture; even today it is not all that common. So, the practices of *nthena* and *fisi* were the only ways that were not harmful to barren women and men. Once again, transforming dehumanising practices is the work of the community at large, not just activists. As pointed out by Oduyoye, Kanyoro and Edet (2006), people who practice dehumanising cultural practices have the ability to transform them. Therefore, change will only be relevant if it comes from within the community. This was noted by John Ollielo (2005:27) when he asserted that if change has to take place, it must come from within and not from outside. It is imperative that people from outside should be guided by the custodians of culture.

Conclusion

This study has demonstrated how the concept of *kufa kwa njongololo nkhusiya mphete* is dehumanising to barren Sena women and men. This is in contrast to the values of those who introduced it, who thought that they were bringing dignity to a barren woman and man by making it possible for her/him to have children. It has been demonstrated that although this concept encourages both married men and women to have many children, the pressure is undoubtedly more on the woman as she has to agree to her younger sister or niece coming into her home as *nthena*. Through the practice of *nthena*, a barren woman and man acquire the status of a mother and father, even though when the woman dies, she does not take on the status of an ancestor, as opposed to the case with man, her husband. This raises the question of why the woman is not recognised as an ancestor when the whole system is designed to give her the dignity of being a mother. There is no instance wherein the practices of dehumanising them to be ancestors were challenged considering that the barren women and men may have lived. This is why the author has undertaken this study to critique the practices.

The study has also shown that an infertile man is protected by culture through the deployment of the practice of *fisi*, whereby the husband is secretly assisted to bear children with his wife. Whilst *nthena* is publicly visible, this is not the case with *fisi*. The dignity of the infertile man is protected by a code of secrecy, which does not apply for the barren woman. The woman is the dehumanised party in order to cover her husband's infertility. The woman also takes a health risk when she is raped by *fisi*, whose HIV status is not known to her. The study has shown that the practices of both *nthena* and *fisi* fall under the category of dehumanising cultural practices that need to be transformed. This is in order to affirm the lives of the barren woman, the girl who comes as *nthena* and the wife who is raped by *fisi*. The process of transforming this kind of gender injustice requires a multi-sectional approach that involves the partnership of intergenerational men and women, traditional leaders, government law makers, social workers and religious leaders. Whilst child marriage is now illegal in Malawi, a multi-sectional approach is also needed to enforce this new law.

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Author's contributions

L.T.C. is the sole author of this article.

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