

# *Infunkutu*—the Bemba Sexual Dance as Women’s Sexual Agency

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## ABSTRACT

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The article argues that *imbusa*<sup>1</sup> among the Bemba people of Zambia is not only a ritual and ideological space in which women engage in premarital teaching of young brides, but also an important site for sexual expression. The traditional sexual dance (*infunkutu*) is analysed to demonstrate how it has functioned as an instrument of subverting the domestication of the female body. The article demonstrates how sexual dance contributes to Bemba women’s sexual agency by removing female sexuality from the confinement of private, heterosexual spaces and into the women-only, semi-private spaces. In *imbusa*, women teach each other the art of deriving sexual pleasure from erotic encounters.

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## Introduction

This article attempts to open up the debate on how *imbusa* spaces play an important role in promoting Bemba women’s sexual agency. Like in other societies, sexuality plays a key role in Bemba society and women are rigorously prepared for this. In the Bemba traditional thought system, sexuality is perceived as essential for human health, which includes the physical, mental, emotional, social and spiritual wellbeing of women and men.<sup>2</sup> In this regard, the article explores how *infukutu* (sexual dance) in *imbusa* provides women with liminal spaces for unregulated sexual dialogue and uncensored explicit demonstrations of sexual mastery while also creating their own subjectivities.

- 1 *Imbusa* is a premarital teaching for Bemba women, see a detailed review below on cosmology
- 2 For detailed discussion Thera Rasing, ‘HIV/AIDS and sex education among the youth in Zambia: Towards behavioural change’, *Leiden, Netherlands: African Studies Centre* (2003), <[www.ascleiden.nl/pdf/paper09102003.pdf](http://www.ascleiden.nl/pdf/paper09102003.pdf)> (accessed 05 Feb. 2016). Thera Rasing, *The Bush Burnt, the Stones Remain: Female initiation rites in urban Zambia* (Hamburg/Leiden: Lit Verlag/ASC, 2001). Audrey I. Richards, *Chisungu: A Girl’s Initiation Ceremony Among the Bemba of Zambia* (London: Tavistock Publications Ltd. Faber and Faber. 1982); Audrey I. Richards, *Land, Labour and Diet in Northern Rhodesia: An economic study of the Bemba tribe* (London: Oxford University Press, 1939).

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Since sex is considered a significant element of the cultural fabric among the Bemba, sex education is a life-long learning process which begins in early childhood and continues through life. As early as eight<sup>3</sup> years, girls are encouraged to play with their genitals to get familiar with all their body parts and to facilitate sexual intercourse at a later age. They are taught how to make contractions with their vagina as well as how to elongate their labia minora in groups—giving them a sense of kinship and encouragement. The elongation of the labia is believed to increase sexual pleasure for the couple and to help in child birth.<sup>4</sup> This allows the girls a foretaste of sexual pleasure before marriage, including the teaching that it is normal to ejaculate and to have an orgasm by pulling the labia.

In *African Sexualities: A Reader*, Sylvia Tamale speaks of the functions of labia elongation among the Baganda women of Uganda in a similar way. She argues that labia elongation introduces girls to ‘the act of self-stimulation or masturbation and thereby leading to the discovery of other erogenous zones’.<sup>5</sup> The girls who were unable to pull their labia could receive some help from their friends and even grandparents. The current cultural limitation that comes from discrimination against certain sexualities seems to have played little or no role in the experience of labia elongation or in the sexual dance discussed below. In Bemba traditional thought, sexual satisfaction for both women and men was a concern of the whole community. The community was involved in the entire ritual teaching of the bride during *imbusa*. In addition to celebrating female sexuality through the rites of *icisungu* and *imbusa*,<sup>6</sup> on the morning after the wedding night the entire community would celebrate the consummation of marriage with music and the traditional dance of *infunkutu*.<sup>7</sup>

## ***Icisungu* and *Imbusa* in Bemba Communities**

The Bemba people of the Northern, Muchinga, Luapula and Central Provinces of Zambia are the largest ethnic group in the country.<sup>8</sup> The Bemba pre-colonial social structure was matrilineal, matrilocal and monogamous, based within a

3 Eight is a tender age at which a girl can elongate her labia without difficulty compared to when she is a little older.

4 Rasing, ‘HIV/AIDS and sex education among the youth in Zambia’, 4.

5 Sylvia Tamale, *African Sexualities: A Reader* (Cape Town: Pambazuka Press, 2011), 265.

6 For a detailed discussion see Richards (1956/82) and Chondoka Yezenge, *Traditional Marriages in Zambia: A study in Cultural History*. 2nd ed. (Ndola, Zambia: Mission Press, 2001).

7 *Infunkutu* is a noun and its verb is *ukufunkuta* which is the action; *ukufunkuta* is the act of dancing *infunkutu*.

8 I am aware that these ethnic cultures are different although they share most values and beliefs. In this article, I employ Bemba people to include the following communities: Bemba, Chishinga, Tabwa, Ushi, Mukulo, lala, and the Lunda of Mwata Kazembe.

well-entrenched matrilineal system of organisation. Unlike in patriarchal cultures, in Bemba cosmology ancestry is traced through the woman's line.<sup>9</sup>

According to the Bemba creation myth, female sexuality was given by *Lesa* (God<sup>10</sup>). In the beginning, *Lesa* created two genderless beings. *Lesa* gave to one of them two parcels with the command to open them only after they had reached mutuality and oneness. In the unfolding of time, one of the parcels started to emit a bad odour. The being that was carrying the parcels threw it away and opened the other. Immediately thereafter, the disobedient being was endowed with *ubwaume* (maleness). Seeing what had happened, the second being returned to *Lesa* and was bestowed with female sexuality.<sup>11</sup> Unlike in the biblical worldview in which the fall is blamed on the woman, in Bemba cosmology, it was the man who disobeyed the Creator. Thus, God granted women the secret of giving life (procreation), as well as the social status of *cibinda wa ng'anda* (heads of the house), and the spiritual status of *kabumba wa mapepo* (the creators of prayers; priestesses) and *nacimbusa wa cisungu* (liminal guardians of virgins).<sup>12</sup>

### *Icisungu as girl's first miracle*

The Bemba culture has two distinct rituals for young women. The first ritual is for girls at their first menstruation and is called *icisungu*; a word derived from the noun *icisungusho* (a miraculous event). The girl's experience of her first menstruation is celebrated as *ukuwa icisungu* or *ukuwilwa ne cisungusho* (a miracle), through which the girl receives the divine gift of feminine sexuality from *Lesa*. But it is also a miracle/*icisungusho* due to the girl's astonishment at her first menstrual blood—for nothing prepares her for the first menstrual blood.

Since the ritual once took part in the forest, the girl was perceived as being on a journey from the forest into the village with *nacimbusa* (her liminal guardian). Out of the liminality of the Divine as well as the dark and cold forest, she brought new life into the village. For this reason, menstruation is regarded as *kumpepo*

9 In Bemba cosmology, blood is passed on from generation to generation through the woman. The man's semen merely activates the fetus—hence children belong to the mother. In this culture, the father has no right over his children.

10 For detailed explanations on Bemba deities, core beliefs and customs see the forthcoming article by Mutale Kaunda and Chammah Kaunda in the *Journal of Southern African Studies*.

11 Hugo F. Hinfelaar, *Bemba Speaking Women of Zambia in a Century of Religious Change (1882-1992)* (Leiden, New York, Köln: E.J. Brill, 1994), 6-9. For a different version of this same myth see Clement M. Doke, *The Lambas of Northern Rhodesia* (London: Harrap, 1931), 228; Edwin Smith, *Knowing the African* (London: Lutherworth, 1946), 120.

12 Hinfelaar, *Bemba Speaking*; Chammah J. Kaunda, 'Reclaiming the Feminine Image of God in *Lesa*: Implications for Bemba Christian Women at the Evangel Assembly of God Church in the post-Missionary Era', *Journal of Constructive Theology*, 16, no. 1 (2010), 5-29.

(coldness) or *kumfifi* (darkness). Through her menstrual blood, the girl petitioned the Supreme Being for empowerment in her religious and social role of obtaining the gift of life: children. Immediately thereafter, the initiated girl was expected to get married—hence in traditional communities, *imbusa* was part of *icisungu*. Today, however, *imbusa* refers to the premarital education given to the bride in preparation for marriage.

### *Imbusa as preparation for marriage*

The ritual of *imbusa* is a rite of passage given to young women a month or a few weeks prior to their wedding. Practiced by almost all ethnic groups in Zambia, the ritual involves older married women giving indigenous wisdom, explicit sexual lessons and other homemaking skills to the young woman before entering into marriage.<sup>13</sup> As a semi-private space exclusively for married women, *imbusa* creates safe-spaces where women empower each other about sexuality and marriage longevity.

Due to the sacredness associated with female sexuality, these lessons are communicated in symbolic terms. *Banacimbusa* utilise indigenous methodologies including songs, dance, riddles, folklores, kitchen utensils, methods of preparing certain types of food, and so on.<sup>14</sup> Although various things are taught to a Bemba bride in *imbusa*, the sexual dance of *infunkutu* is central to the ritual since it is a celebration of the divine gift of female sexuality planted in the Bemba myth of creation mentioned above. In other words, through *imbusa/cisungu*, the Bemba myth of matrilineal ancestry is re-enacted.<sup>15</sup>

*Imbusa* is etymologically derived from the word *imbaso*—a chiselling tool for making wood artifacts. From this perspective, *imbusa* is a process designed or tailored to chisel and carve out the woman to bring out her divine status as given by Lesa.<sup>16</sup> In this worldview, women's sexuality is a divine spark entrenched within the woman's body and can be activated through music and dance. In addition,

13 See, Naomi Haynes, 'Change and *Chisungu* in Zambia's Time of AIDS', *Ethnos*, 80, no. 3, (2015), 364-384; Alfred Chongo Mupeta, 'Communication as Factor in The Perpetration and Prevention of Domestic Violence Against Women among The Bemba People of Mwamba's Village in Kasama District', Unpublished Master's Degree in Communication for Development, (University of Zambia, 2014).

14 Mutale M. Kaunda, 'A Search for a Life-Giving Marriage: The Imbusa Initiation Rite as a Space for Constructing Wellbeing among Married Bemba Women of Zambia,' Unpublished MTh. Diss., University of KwaZulu-Natal, Pietermaritzburg, (2013), 2.

15 For detailed discussion of the myth charter see Kevin B. Maxwell, *Bemba Myth and Ritual: The Impact of Literacy on an Oral Culture. American University Studies, Series XI I Anthropology / Sociology*, vol. 2 (New York: Peter Lang, 1983)

16 For detailed discussion on the explanation of the term *imbusa* see Kaunda, 'A Search for a Life-Giving Marriage'.

*infunkutu* brings the dancer in direct connection with *banyinefwe* or *ifikolwe* (ancestress) who are the guardians of sexuality. Since *ifikolwe* were the first to receive the secret of sexual dance from *Lesa* (God) and were the first to perform it, *ifikolwe* give an ancestral blessing to the bride through the *imbusa* ceremony. During the ceremony, this divine gift is ritualistically re-enacted through music and dance.

In Bemba cosmology, sexuality is central to the various responsibilities entrusted to women by the Supreme Being. Aside from possessing the power to be the subject of her sexuality, a Bemba woman has the freedom to choose when to have sex or to abstain. In traditional society, this freedom was communicated through three beaded bracelets of different colours. The first one is red, which represents the menstrual blood (*kumwenshi* or *kumaluba*).<sup>17</sup> During the period of menstruating, Bemba women abstained from any sexual intercourse. The wife put on the red bracelet to alert the husband that she was menstruating. The second is black, representing death, sickness and whatever marital issues that required couples to abstain from sex until they were mutually resolved. The third is white, which symbolises purity and fertility. It represented the cervix and safe periods when the couple could enjoy sexual intercourse as much as they could.<sup>18</sup>

These symbols are still used in their literal sense and they empower women to take charge of their sexuality. In addition to passing on indigenous sexual knowledge from generation to generation, in *imbusa* women celebrate the power and the divine gift of female sexuality.<sup>19</sup> Further, through *imbusa*, women establish ways of empowering each other through critical solidarity. As Karla Poewe argues in *Matrilineal Ideology*, Bemba women value their sexuality and solidarity as well as survival strategies have been established to ensure attaining sexual pleasure from intercourse with men.<sup>20</sup>

## Theoretical Underpinnings

African women scholars have argued that African female sexuality is the site through which patriarchal oppression is imposed and perpetuated in post-colonial

17 *Kumaluba* means blooming literally; it meant that the young girl had bloomed when she reached puberty and that *Lesa* had endowed womanhood on her. When a Bemba girl reached puberty, she was put in isolation in order to be cleansed of childhood while being initiated into adulthood. During this period, *nacisungu* would only eat uncooked food without salt; in short, she was only allowed to eat food that has not been on the fire.

18 For detailed discussion on traditional sexual communication see: Richards, *Chisungu*; Rasing, *The Bush Burnt*; Kaunda, 'A Search for Life-Giving Marriage'.

19 Hinfaalar, *Bemba Speaking*.

20 Karla O. Poewe, *Matrilineal Ideology: Male-Female Dynamics in Luapula, Zambia* (London and New York: Academic Press, 1982).

Africa.<sup>21</sup> Sylvia Tamale writes, ‘Sexuality is a key site through which women’s subordination is maintained and enforced in post-colonial Africa’.<sup>22</sup> While Tamale’s point is varied, the mainstream feminist commitment to critiquing patriarchy in African cultures pays little attention to female resistance of patriarchal oppression in some African cultures such as the Bemba.<sup>23</sup>

Unlike within patriarchal cultures, the Bemba religion was controlled by women.<sup>24</sup> Writing about the role of women in Bemba cosmology, Kapya Kaoma rejects feminists Anne Nasimiyu-Wasike and Ketu H. Katrak’s classification of Alice Lenshina Mulenga—the founder of the African Initiated Church ‘Lumpa Church’, which boasted of over 100,000 members in colonial Zambia—as a ritual male. On the contrary, Kaoma maintains that the Lenshina movement should be understood from ‘the traditional religious context of the Bemba, which was centred on women’.<sup>25</sup> He writes,

[Lenshina] operated in a religio-cultural context in which women occupied cultic positions and powers. Bembas attribute their origin to a female cultic Queen, Mumbi Makasa, who is believed to have come from heaven. Since Bemba traditional religion is female centred, Alice fit into this worldview when she took the name Lenshina (Regina); the very name her followers would be identified with.<sup>26</sup>

Mumbi Makasa Liulu is the mythological ancestress of the Bemba people. It is believed that she had ears as large as an elephant and was mysteriously discovered in the forest embodying the divinity as well as the animal and human worlds. For this reason, she is accredited with ultimate powers over the mysteries of the sky, the forest/land and the waters. Unlike in patrilineal cultures, Mumbi Makasa was not a vulnerable woman. According to Bemba mythology, the Bemba earthly king who found Mumbi and later married her is the one who became vulnerable to the power of the sacred Queen. This understanding affects how Bemba cultures

21 Mercy Oduyoye and Musimbi Kanyoro eds., *The Will to Arise: Women, Tradition, and Church in Africa* (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publication, 2006); Sylvia Tamale, ‘Eroticism, Sensuality and ‘Women’s Secrets’ Among the Baganda: A Critical Analysis’, *Feminist Africa* 5, no.1 (2005), 9-36.

22 Tamale, ‘Eroticism’, 10, see also, Patricia McFadden, ‘Sexual Pleasure as Feminist Choice’, *Feminist Africa* 2 (2003), <[http://agi.ac.za/sites/agi.ac.za/files/fa\\_2\\_standpoint\\_1.pdf](http://agi.ac.za/sites/agi.ac.za/files/fa_2_standpoint_1.pdf)> (accessed 24 Nov. 2015); Charmain Pereira, ‘Where Angels Fear to Tread? Some Thoughts on Patricia McFadden’s ‘Sexual Pleasure as Feminist Choice’’, *Feminist Africa* 2 (2003), <[http://agi.ac.za/sites/agi.ac.za/files/fa\\_2\\_standpoint\\_2.pdf](http://agi.ac.za/sites/agi.ac.za/files/fa_2_standpoint_2.pdf)> (accessed 24 Nov. 2015).

23 Isabel A. Phiri and Sarojini Nadar, ‘Going through the Fire with eyes Wide Open: African Women’s Perspective on Indigenous Knowledge, Patriarchy and Sexuality’, *Journal for the Study of Religion*, 22, no. 2 (2009), 2-22.

24 Karla Poewe, *Matrilineal Ideology: Male-Female Dynamics in Luapula, Zambia* (Academic Press: New York, 1981).

25 Kapya John Kaoma, *Raised Hopes, Shattered Dreams: Democracy, the Oppressed, and the Church in Africa (The Case of Zambia)* (Africa World Press: Trenton, 2015), 144.

26 Kaoma, *Raised Hopes, Shattered Dreams*, 140-141.

perceive procreation as well. Whereas men are critical to procreation, the product of sex belongs to the mother.

It is critical to note that Mumbi Mukasa Liulu's sexual agency is re-enacted in the ritual of *imbusa*. Ethologists argue that female elephants are in control of their sexuality and 'often very choosy about whom they pick for mate, often waiting four years before they pick a partner'. A female elephant 'cannot be penetrated unless she grants access; she signals' her acceptance of the male and her readiness for intercourse by urinating. Female elephants are therefore not sexually vulnerable to the male. By re-enacting this myth in the sexual dance, it can be argued, Bemba women seek to reclaim the elephantine power of their sexuality. They also have the power to take control of their sexuality like their elephantine mythical ancestress Mumbi Makasa. The Bemba women are an example of African women's strategies of resistance against sexual denigration, commodification as well as the objectification of female sexuality and body.

Christine Mushibwe and Patrick Mumbi independently frame *imbusa* and *infunkutu* within the neo-colonialist patriarchal model of oppression.<sup>27</sup> They argue that the ritual and the dance only exist for the sexual satisfaction of the male—and are thus oppressive to women. In this argument, women are portrayed as passive sexual objects dexterously controlled to perpetuate patriarchal demands of procreation. This argument, however, ignores the role of *imbusa* spaces in subverting and empowering women to resist the patriarchal domination of women.

But as already noted, the woman's *infunkutu* (sexual dance) is sacred. It is a form of worship, a means through which they communicate with the Supreme Being. It is also the means of expressing the beauty of female sexuality. When the woman danced for her husband and both were sexually satisfied, the hope was that the Supreme Being, the Creator would respond favourably by giving her children. It was the woman through her dance who was entrusted with the power to bring life into the world and thereby extend the family. In her social and spiritual status as both *cibinda wa ng'anda* (head of the house), and of *kabumba wa mapepo* (priestess), the woman mediates between the man and the Supreme Being, *Lesa*. In this regard, the sexually charged dance in marriage unites the couple and the Supreme Being, resulting in the sacred gift of children through the female body.

That said, *imbusa*, though planted in traditional cosmology, has been modernised to meet the needs of post-colonial Zambia. Women have not only deftly mastered the art of dancing their sexualities, but they also continue to reinvent, renovate and reconfigure it to the post-colonial socio-political and

27 Christine P. Mushibwe, 'What are the Effects of Cultural Traditions on the Education of women? (The Study of the Tumbuka People of Zambia)', Published Doctoral Thesis, (University of Huddersfield, 2009); Patrick Mumbi, 'From Fixity to Flow: Empowering theories in gender studies', *FENZA Documents* (2011), 1-7, <[www.fenza.org/docs/mum/mumbi\\_from\\_fixity\\_to\\_flow.pdf](http://www.fenza.org/docs/mum/mumbi_from_fixity_to_flow.pdf)>(accessed 24 Nov. 2015).

economic realities. Although Bemba female sexuality expresses indigenous ways of eroticism within the post-colonial context, *imbusa* is nonetheless ‘holistic and not compartmentalized into neat piles but more fused together’.<sup>28</sup>

## ***Imbusa* as the Locus for Construction of Bemba Female Sexuality**

*Imbusa* spaces play an important role in both the public and the private life of the Bemba women. While colonial officials and missionaries were highly suspicious of *imbusa* and negatively regarded it as immoral,<sup>29</sup> Bemba women continued to uphold this empowering tradition. Since precolonial times, trusted women or tutors called *banacimbusa* play an important role of guiding the girls (*imbusa*) in understanding their sexual role in marriage and the community.<sup>30</sup> The literal translation of the term *banacimbusa* would be a woman ritual (liminal) guardian. However, the close interpretation is that *banacimbusa* are ritual tutors or experts in traditional marital wisdom.

In addition, *imbusa* spaces are neither public nor private but rather semi-private spaces (also termed ‘parochial realms’<sup>31</sup>) which give admittance to women with certain social status but who are not ‘strangers’ also.<sup>32</sup> Ray Oldenburg terms such spaces ‘third places’—distinguishable from work and home.<sup>33</sup> Among the Bemba people, *imbusa* as semi-private spaces play a distinctive role in the social life of women. Despite the assault from colonial and post-colonial forces and urbanisation, *imbusa* as safe spaces for women’s sexual agency has refused to die. Since the colonial times, women have subversively preserved this female-empowering cultural ritual—thus saving *imbusa* from both colonial and Christian annihilation. As Mutale Kaunda argues elsewhere, *imbusa* spaces play a unique

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28 Njoki Wane, ‘African Indigenous Feminist Thought: An Anti-Colonial Project’, in *The Politics of Cultural Knowledge* eds. Njoki Wane, Arlo Kempf and Marlon Simmons (Rotterdam: Sense Publishers, 2011), 7-21, 7.

29 Hinfelaar, *Bemba-Speaking*, 60.

30 Audrey Richards, *Chisungu: A Girl's Initiation Ceremony among the Bemba of Zambia* (London: Tavistock Publications, 1982); Rasing, *The Bush Burnt*; Joseph Corbeil, *Mbusa: Sacred emblems of the Bemba* (Mbala-Zambia: Moto-Moto Museum, 1982).

31 Joel Stillerman, ‘Private, Parochial, and Public Realms in Santiago, Chile’s Retail Sector’, *City & Community* 5, no. 3 (2006), 293-317.

32 Lyn H Lofland, *A World of Strangers: Order and Action in Urban Public Space* (New York: Basic Books, 1973); Keith N. Hampton and Neeti Gupta, ‘Community and social interaction in the wireless city: wi-fi use in public and semi-public spaces’, *New Media & Society*, 10, no. 6 (2008), 831-850.

33 Ray Oldenburg, *The Great Good Place: Cafes, Coffee Shops, Community Centers, Beauty Parlors, General Stores, Bars, Hangouts and How They Get You Through the Day* (New York: Paragon House, 1989)



role in the construction of the Bemba female body and sexual subjectivities.<sup>34</sup> In short, *imbusa* provides diverse social networking ties for Bemba women, thus creating a sense of belonging and solidarity.

As the women's initiation rite, *imbusa* is an important rite of passage for Bemba women before they marry. It is a 'transitional ritual which is perceived as a means to cross boundaries, changes in time and social status'.<sup>35</sup> In post-colonial Zambia, for example, *imbusa* has been Christianised—whereby married older women Christians employ this traditional method of sex education to educate brides before marriage. But as shown by Naomi Haynes, traditional and cultural teachings are employed in this female-only liminal space.

When writing about Bemba dance, one cannot avoid *infunkutu*. It is the indigenous dance publicly danced in various social and religious contexts. Like any culture, however, Bemba tradition and sexuality have been affected by patriarchal cultures within Zambia as well as by colonialism, Christianity and globalisation. This means that while the tradition of sexual dance continues for Bemba women, some aspects of *imbusa* have not remained the same as they did in pre-colonial Africa.

The ritual of *imbusa* involves verbal teachings, drum beating, singing and dancing as Audrey Richards has observed.<sup>36</sup> The dancing, however, is not only for joyful amusement, but also a teaching methodology as explained below. *Amafunde yambusa* (teaching of *imbusa*) 'are not only significant or in existence in traditional/rural societies in Zambia, urban women in Zambia equally emphasize the worth of the *imbusa* initiation'.<sup>37</sup> Although Thera Rasing contends that since *imbusa* is the woman-centred rite, it aids the 'construction of female identity, pride, autonomy and meaning',<sup>38</sup> in this critical rite, Bemba women are also skilfully taught sexual agency. While *banacimbusa* are the key teachers, the rite is open to all initiated women as long as they are ready to teach and showcase their sexual skills to new brides. In this space, every initiated married woman in *imbusa* is both a spectator and a participant. Even the most reserved and shy woman who might not talk about sexual issues in public, in *imbusa* spaces is liberated and empowered to share her sexual skills and wisdom. In *imbusa* spaces, women openly articulate their own sexual pleasures and longings as they engage in both slow and rough sexual dances. But they also function as safe spaces to enable the divine spark of female sexual subjectivity while advocating sexual pleasure for women in marriage.

34 Kaunda, 'A Search for Life-Giving Marriage'.

35 Kaunda, 'A Search for Life-Giving Marriage', 13.

36 Richards, *Chisungu*, 58.

37 Kaunda, 'A Search for Life-Giving Marriage', 13.

38 Rasing, *The Bush Burnt*, 23.

Although the rite of *imbusa* has various social teachings, the bedroom or erotic dancing (*infunkutu*) dominates the entire ceremony. The teaching of *infunkutu* to *imbusa* (brides) takes up most of the time because a woman is instructed on how to sexually satisfy herself and her husband. Included in *imbusa* are techniques on female ejaculation and reaching orgasm. And since *imbusa* is the female-only space, women freely share their sexual skills with *nabwinga* (bride) in anticipation of her role in transferring such knowledge to future brides. Aside from challenging the belief that Africans don't talk about sex, *imbusa* dismisses the notion that sex education is foreign to Africa—for the Bemba, sex education is a life-long learning process.

### ***Ukucindila Nabwinga* (Dancing for the Bride)**

The ritual of dancing *infunkutu* for the bride (*ukucindila nabwinga*) is an important Bemba rite of passage employed to resist heteropatriarchy. *Imbusa* also it takes away the belief that female sexuality only exists for the pleasure of men. Men have been known to dominate female sexuality, but in the space of *infunkutu* Bemba women demonstrate that they are agents of their own sexuality, making the ritual resistant to male dominance. *Infunkutu* helps women to engage in uncensored dialogue and in constructing their own meanings about female sexual desire and satisfaction. The dance 'is created by beating very small drums which can fit between the knees. T[he] basic rhythm is accompanied by the clapping of hands, dancing and singing. This type of music is mainly performed at traditional wedding ceremonies'.<sup>39</sup> In *imbusa*, the dance is mostly used as a way of teaching the art of erotic love making to the Bemba bride. This is not just a mere dance, but 'sexual acts [that] can be sexually overpowering for the men'<sup>40</sup> if they had access to *imbusa*. In other words, *infunkutu* is an explicitly erotic dance meant to bring to both women and men 'physical and/or psychological satisfaction and enjoyment'.<sup>41</sup>

The Bemba women are unashamedly sexual and sensual enthusiasts who give detailed sexual instructions to brides in the art of deriving maximum erotic pleasure in sexual interactions during *imbusa*.<sup>42</sup> They freely and unapologetically talk about different sexual positions, too. Within the dance, women affirm their

39 Malama Katulwende, 'Zambia's *Kalindula* Music: Of Death, Drums and Poetry at 1,' (2011). <[www.theculturetrip.com/africa/zambia/articles/zambia-s-kalindula-music-of-death-drums-and-poetry](http://www.theculturetrip.com/africa/zambia/articles/zambia-s-kalindula-music-of-death-drums-and-poetry)> (accessed 17 Nov. 2015).

40 Mumbi, 'From Fixity to Flow', 4.

41 Anne Philpott, Wendy Knerr and Vicky Boydell, 'Pleasure and Prevention: When Good Sex Is Safer Sex', *Reproductive Health Matters* 14, no. 28 (2006), 23-31, 23.

42 Poewe, *Matrilineal Ideology*, 66ff.

power and ability to act on behalf of their own sexual needs, desires, and wishes with other women.<sup>43</sup> Justine Sibomana and Jorrit Meulenbeek who attended one of the rituals noted that when different sexual positions were introduced, some women would freely say, 'I am going to try this with my husband tonight', or complain that 'My husband never likes it when I do this'. Thereafter, *banacimbusa* 'would give some more tips and tricks on how to do it better'.<sup>44</sup>

Contesting John C. Caldwell, Pat Caldwell and Pat Quiggin's argument that African sexuality is all about procreation,<sup>45</sup> the Bemba believe that sex was given by *Lesa* first for enjoyment and then for procreation.<sup>46</sup> For this reason, Bemba women are taught to have as much sex as they can without even worrying about the baby that might be crying. In Bemba cultures procreation, though important, is never viewed as an end in itself but the benefit of sexual pleasure. If pleasure is the primary goal of human sexuality, it follows that *imbusa* space has room to accommodate diverse sexualities as opposed to heterosexuality alone.

In *imbusa*, sexual education is full of explicit demonstrations and inventive instructions in sexual life. The sexual dance moves change according to the song and the sound of the drumbeat. The bride is told to imitate different sexual positions as women dance in a sexually arousing manner and caress themselves in a self-pleasuring fashion. The purpose of imitating the moves is to help the bride's waist become flexible as she changes different sexual positions for maximum sexual pleasure. In this space, women are free to strip naked or just remain with underwear or cycling shorts in order to efficiently teach the young brides how to wriggle their waists. Since the waist is wriggled completely independent of the rest of the body, experienced women would often stand behind the novice and hold her thighs to help her learn to only move the waist. As Sibomana and Meulenbeek write, 'the way lovemaking was turned into a series of dance moves made it more abstract and fascinating to watch. It was nothing like a porn movie, but more like being in a theatre and watching a fine art performance'.<sup>47</sup>

Women also discuss female anatomy and how to derive full sexual pleasure from sexual interactions. The dance may involve a demonstration of one girl lying

43 Kaunda, 'A Search for Life-Giving Marriage'.

44 The experiences of Jorrit Meulenbeek are narrated in the article written by Justine Sibomana and Jorrit Meulenbeek, 'Women's Initiation in Zambia: Dancing in Bed', *Inter Press News Agency* (January 12, 2011), <[www.ipsnews.net/2011/01/womens-initiation-in-zambia-dancing-in-bed](http://www.ipsnews.net/2011/01/womens-initiation-in-zambia-dancing-in-bed)> (accessed Nov. 17, 2015).

45 John C. Caldwell, Pat Caldwell and Pat Quiggin, 'The Social Context of AIDS in sub-Saharan Africa', *Population and Development Review* 15, 2 (1989), 185-234.

46 This is confirmed by the research that was done by Mary M. Chewe, 'A comparative study of Catholic and Bemba marriage educational programmes in selected Parishes of Lusaka District and their impact on marriage and family life', (Doctoral dissertation, University of Zambia, 2013). For more discussions see also Poewe, *Matrilineal Ideology*.

47 Sibomana and Meulenbeek, 'Women's Initiation in Zambia'.

down with one of the older women on top. Sometimes an older woman may wear something that looks like a penis to demonstrate the sexual act between a man and women. In her empirical study of *imbusa*, for example, Mutale Kaunda discovered that in some instances, *banacimbusa* bring commercial sex workers into this space to teach brides contemporary sexual dances and love-making styles. Such styles function as refresher courses for married women on sexual moves and dance.<sup>48</sup> The involvement of sex workers shows that while the notion of tradition remains intact at its theoretic level, the practice of tradition is dynamic and fluid; it changes with time. *Imbusa* may seem intact and changeless to the practitioners, but in its current practice it has undergone transformation since tradition is experienced in the present and not in the past. This raises a question: can the changes taking place in the *imbusa* facilitate acceptance of the sexual minorities in Bemba cultures?

Whereas the young bride is taught the art of the sexual dance, *imbusa* offers space for the celebration of female sexuality and demonstration of female sexual powers. Sometimes women 'parody men's sexuality by symbolically playing men's sexual acts'.<sup>49</sup> But they also critique the male world and laugh at a man who cannot sexually satisfy his wife as *mukolwe* (a premature ejaculating male is referred to as a rooster). In this case, a bride is taught how to assist her husband by serving him food such as cassava (root or tuber and leaves) and peanuts which are said to be libido boosters in Bemba cultures. A bride is also taught on certain sexual position that would help prolong her husband's ejaculation.

The sexual activity that happens in *imbusa* may not lead to actual same-sex intercourse. However, contemporary studies show that individuals can have sexual arousal and can experience sexual orgasm without any physical contact.<sup>50</sup> Sibomana and Meulenbeek's argument that Bemba women explicitly and intentionally teach sexual dances/positions and do not engage in the actual sexual contact with each other is only true on a superficial level. On a deeper level, however, there are same-sex activities that take place in the *imbusa* space. This may be true when we consider the Bemba saying *ukufunda umwana kufikapo* (to teach a child, one needs to hit the point) which means teachers have to go to the actuality of the phenomenon so that they leave no stone unturned. This saying demands that *banacimbusa* 'hit the nail on the head' and 'not beat about the bush'. Moreover, these dances may not lead into the actual sexual act in *imbusa*, but

48 Kaunda, 'A Search for Life-Giving Marriage.'

49 Mumbi, 'From Fixity to Flow', 4.

50 Virtual sex is sexual activity in which two individuals arouse each other by transmitting sexually explicit messages. There are different types of virtual sex, namely, digital remote stimulation, camming over video chat, cybersex, phone sex, sexting and many others. For detailed discussion on virtual sex, see Lizzie Zucker Saltz, *Crafting Romance* (Athens: Athens Institute for Contemporary Art, 2009); Brett Lunceford, 'Sex in the Digital Age: Media Ecology and Megan's Law', *Explorations in Media Ecology* 9, no., 4 (2010), 239-44.

the question is whether the explicit nature of these sexual dances could lead to same-sex desires among women beyond the *imbusa* spaces. Is there a possibility of some Bemba women continuing same-sex relations as a result of their *imbusa* experiences? These are some of the questions that can be explored empirically in order to establish the possibilities.

## Bemba Female Sexuality, Colonial Christianity and Subversion

Historians and anthropologists discovered that the Bemba women's dance with its explicit expression of sexual acts drove the Roman Catholic White Fathers<sup>51</sup> and their Protestant counterparts mad.<sup>52</sup> Missionaries considered *imbusa* as 'immoral and offensive to the human nature.'<sup>53</sup> Specifically, White Fathers viewed Bemba sexuality rites as repulsive, primitive and dangerous. Colonial officials equally viewed Bemba sexual rites as too liberal—thus unacceptable to Christian civilisation. To civilise an African, the missionary and colonial authorities sought to curtail these 'immoral' dances—to no avail.

Since missionaries did not distinguish *infunkutu* from prostitution, they perceived Bemba women's sexuality and bodies as potentially dangerous and 'seductive' to white heterosexuals. Yet it was white males who lacked the capability to control their sexual desires. Missionaries imposed the Victorian era sexual passivity and patriarchal submission upon Bemba sexuality—something that still influences the perception of the female body. In the post-colonial African context of HIV/AIDS, for example, some scholars have generally perceived heterosexual women in some African societies as essentially sexual partners of men rather than as sexual agents in their own right.<sup>54</sup> Bemba women are said to love sex because they are given erotic instructions to actualise the sexual desire.<sup>55</sup> This in itself gives Bemba women a level of sexual agency be it in heterosexual or same-sex relationships.

The missionaries' rejection of African sexuality is not limited to the Bemba. From different regions of Africa, scholars have documented the hostile attitudes of missionaries to African sexuality. Missionaries demonised and classified the customs and rites associated with African female sexuality as primitive vices and

51 Hinfelaar, *Bemba-Speaking*, 60.

52 Walima T Kalusa and Megan Vaughan, *Death, Belief and Politics in Central African History* (Lusaka: Lembani Trust, 2013).

53 Signe Arnfred, *Sexuality and Gender Politics in Mozambique: Rethinking Gender in Africa* (Oxford: James Curry, 2011).

54 See for example Sylvia Tamale, ed., *African Sexualities: A Reader* (Cape Town: Pambazuka Press, 2011); Phiri and Nadar, 'Going through the Fire with eyes Wide Open'.

55 Poewe, *Matrilineal Ideology*, 66.

immoral acts.<sup>56</sup> The ritual ‘obscenities’ and gender ‘anomalies’<sup>57</sup> were wrongly termed as ‘primitiveness’, ‘darkness’, ‘disorder’ and ‘demonic.’<sup>58</sup> Female sexuality was also a threat to the colonial and missionary project—female sexuality rites were said to be a hindrance to the civilisation of Africans. In an endeavour to save Bemba women from ‘animalistic sexuality’, for example, missionaries imposed the Victorian conception of sexuality upon the Bemba community culture.<sup>59</sup> As Jenny Dagers explains, ‘the effort to convert African women to Christianity transformed the religious and sexual lives of African women converts’.<sup>60</sup>

According to Diane Richardson, race and gender are interconnected in the colonial racist discourse. Nonetheless, the colonial racialisation of sexuality had different implications for African women and their male counterparts.<sup>61</sup> Within colonial racist discourse, Henriette Gunkel observes, ‘white’ female sexuality was measured through, and its limits discernible in relation to, African female sexuality. Gunkel writes, African ‘female sexuality was at once outside of, but at the same time constitutive of the purity of white female sexuality’.<sup>62</sup> In this regard, the African female body ‘was termed as unfeminine’,<sup>63</sup> while *infunkutu* was perceived as heightened sexual immorality—resulting in associating African female sexuality with prostitution. Caldwell et. al. shared this wrong argument when they associated African female sexuality to female prostitution in the 1980s.<sup>64</sup>

## ‘Bed Dancing’ as Women’s Sexual Agency

Bemba women have protected *imbusa* from colonial and post-colonial policing of sexuality. To this day, through *imbusa* women reclaim their sexual agency in

56 Signe Arfred, ed., *Re-Thinking Sexualities in Africa* (Uppsala: Nordiska Afrikainstitutet, 2004); Signe Arfred, *Sexuality and Gender Politics in Mozambique: Rethinking Gender in Africa* (Oxford: James Curry, 2011); Chammah J. Kaunda and Cheryl Potgieter, ‘Betrayed by Cultural Heritage: Liminality, Ambiguous Sexuality and Ndembu Cultural Change—An African Ecclesia-Ethic of Openness’, *Alternation Special Edition No. 14* (2015), 22-44

57 During the teaching of *imbusa*, *banacimbusa* or *alangizi* among the Nsenga/Chewa/Nguni cultures would make a symbol of a penis and pretend to be ‘men’ in order to illustrate sexual skills to the bride.

58 Heike Becker, ‘Efundula: Women’s Initiation, Gender and Sexual Identities in Colonial and Post-Colonial Northern Namibia’, in *Re-Thinking Sexualities in Africa*, ed. Signe Arfred (Uppsala: Nordiska Afrikainstitutet, 2004), 35-56, 42.

59 Henriette Gunkel, *The Cultural Politics of Female Sexuality in South Africa* (New York, London: Routledge, 2010), 42.

60 Jenney Dagers, ‘Transforming Christian Womanhood: Female Sexuality and Church Missionary Society Encounters in the Niger Mission, Onitsha’, *Victorian Review*, 37, no. 2 (2011), 89-106, 89.

61 Diane Richardson, *Rethinking Sexuality* (London: SAGA, 2000), 133.

62 Gunkel, *The Cultural Politics of Female Sexuality in South Africa*, 42.

63 Gunkel, *The Cultural Politics of Female Sexuality in South Africa*, 42.

64 Caldwell, et. al. ‘The Social Context of AIDS in sub-Saharan Africa.’

both rural and urban areas as Sibomana and Meulenbeek witnessed in 2011 in Lusaka, Zambia. They explain, 'Some of my fellow students [brides] and teachers [*banacimbusa*] would really get into it [sexual dance], almost as if they were actually in the act... Shy and reserved as Zambian ladies may be about these issues in public, inside this room the atmosphere was amazingly free and open'.<sup>65</sup> Thus, *the liberation which women experience in imbusa space is a symbolic resistance to the prevailing social order in which Bemba women can return to the superior status they held before colonialism subjected them to patriarchal domination.* While Bemba women are forced to maintain secrecy about sexuality in public spaces, through *infunkutu*, women secretly subvert patriarchal domination.

In her post-colonial ethnographical research, Naomi Haynes similarly noted that Bemba women are open about marital sexual issues in *imbusa*.<sup>66</sup> This openness is due to the fact that *imbusa* continues to retain a level of autonomy from heteropatriarchy. In *imbusa*, women are at liberty to showcase their sexual skills and arouse each other through explicit instructions.<sup>67</sup> They find freedom to express their sexuality in *imbusa* because it is woman-friendly and exclusively female space.<sup>68</sup> The question is: how does *infunkutu* promote women's agency? And how does it empower women to subvert the patriarchy manifested in sexual domination? Or do such sexually explicit dances sexualise and objectify women?

Signe Arnfred contends that 'frequently in a western context, sex is perceived as a site of male power and female subordination'.<sup>69</sup> Taiwo Oloruntoba-Oju shares Arnfred's observation when he writes, 'in many parts of Africa ... customs continue to place severe restriction on the actualization of female sexual desire, while the man is not subject to such restrictions'.<sup>70</sup> These arguments, however, are at odds with the Bemba worldview in which women's sexuality is never restricted. As Margaret Chipara and Gibson Ncube observe, sexual dance 'presents itself as a symbolic space, where women can fight against the debilitating patriarchal conception of women's bodies and sexualities'. Accordingly, Whitehead and Kurz argued that through sexual dance the 'female subject is constructed as empowered

65 Sibomana and Meulenbeek, 'Women's Initiation in Zambia'.

66 Naomi Haynes, 'Change and *Chisungu* in Zambia's Time of AIDS', in *Ethnos: Journal of Anthropology* Vol 80(3), (2015), 364-384.

67 As a female-only space, the only people who would be uncomfortable in *imbusa* are initiates and first time guests, just as Sibomana and Meulenbeek were. However, when they looked around the room, the rest of the women were quite comfortable in discussing the subject just like any other subject. Sibomana and Meulenbeek, 'Women's Initiation in Zambia'.

68 Unless invited, men are prohibited to attend in *imbusa*. The only man invited is usually the groom because he has to perform certain tasks.

69 Signe Arnfred, 'Sex, Food and Female Power: Discussion of Data Material from Northern Mozambique', *Sexualities*, 10, no. 2 (2007), 141-158, 141.

70 Taiwo Oloruntoba-Oju, 'The Social and Cultural Construction of Desire and Pleasure', *Sexuality in Africa Magazine Monographs* 6, no. 1 (2010), 3.

through her access to control and choice'. Thus, despite the colonial and post-colonial embracement of heteropatriarchy, women have preserved *imbusa* and *infunkutu* from annihilation.

*Infunkutu* is actually a liberative frame of Bemba women's sexual agency. Whereas it is modified to suit the sexual dance and positions, in public spaces *infunkutu* dancers wriggle their waists. When *infunkutu* is performed in public, it helps to blur the boundaries between the semi-private spaces of women in *imbusa* and the bedroom private spaces 'in as far as the female body and its sexuality and eroticism are concerned'.<sup>71</sup> In fact, *infunkutu* is now danced to in churches—something appalling to Westerners. Nevertheless, when *infunkutu* is danced in public spaces, it has no sexual connotations to it.

The argument that in women-only spaces such as *icisungu* and *imbusa* women are instructed to give pleasure to their husbands may be true in some cultures. Nonetheless, in *imbusa*, women are also taught proactive sexual agency—they have to be tactical in the sexual act regardless of who initiates it—the husband or the wife. But women are also taught to take control of the positions they are comfortable with during sexual intercourse. This agency, however, offers only relative liberation and power to women due to the colonial and Christian patriarchal oppressive forces operating in Zambia today. Despite its values of solidarity and support, *imbusa* does not elevate women's 'status or influence in political, social and economic realms that shape power relations', to use Jennifer Wesely's words.<sup>72</sup>

## Some Final Observations

Unlike female exotic dancers who commodify their bodies and sexuality 'to earn a living through particularly objectified and sexualized constructions of their bodies',<sup>73</sup> Bemba women's sexual dance is entrenched in the following aspects:

First, a Bemba bride is taught to be active and not passive in the act of marriage. She is a full and equal participant in marriage. She has to learn the erotic skills because she is not only a participant but also in charge of her sexuality to derive pleasure from the sexual encounter. In this case, *imbusa* has the potential to move the society from preoccupation with procreation to the pleasurable nature of sex. This is at variance with the argument that in Africa, sex is meant for the satisfaction of the man. Among the Bemba, sex is for the satisfaction of the woman, too.

71 Margaret Chipara and Gibson Ncube, 'Dancing with Power: Does Erotic Dance Empower or Commodify Women?' *BUWA!* (2014), 70-100, 73. <[www.osisa.org/buwa/regional/dancing-power-does-erotic-dance-empower-or-commodify-women](http://www.osisa.org/buwa/regional/dancing-power-does-erotic-dance-empower-or-commodify-women)> (accessed 24 Nov. 2015).

72 Jennifer K. Wesely, 'Where am I going to stop?: Exotic Dancing, Fluid Body Boundaries and Effects on Identity', *Deviant Behaviour* 24 (2003), 483-503, 487.

73 Wesely, 'Where am I going to stop?' 483.



Second, the dance empowers Bemba women to initiate and get maximum pleasure from sexual intercourse. In a heterosexual intercourse, a man may initiate the sexual act, but the woman takes charge and leads the way. In fact, every celebration of *imbusa* is an opportunity for the community of married women to have some kind of refresher course in sex dance so as to ensure they get maximum pleasure in sexual relationships. If sex is centred on pleasure rather than procreation, it follows that the Bemba culture can accommodate individuals who derive sexual pleasure from same-sex relationships. In other words, can *imbusa* and *infunkutu* facilitate the acceptance of sexual minorities in Africa?

Third, a woman is taught to be comfortable with her body. This is why the older women would strip naked or only remain with underwear or cycling shorts. They have to teach the young bride to be comfortable and confident with her body. By being in control of her body, the woman is empowered and becomes an agent of her own sexuality.

Fourth, a woman's sexuality is powerful as it connects human life and spiritual realities. The dance of *infunkutu* links the woman with the spiritual world, the ancestress and the Supreme Being, who are the givers of female sexuality. Unlike in the Bible where the Creator curses the women with the words, 'I will make your pains in childbearing very severe; with painful labor you will give birth to children. Your desire will be for your husband, and he will rule over you' (Genesis 3:16), child-bearing is a sacred and noble act through which the woman grows her community in the Bemba worldview.

Fifth, the often repeated claim that sex education is foreign to Africa is highly misleading. As this article demonstrates, sex education is critical to community wellbeing. From childhood to puberty to marriage, a Bemba is given explicit instructions on sexuality. In Bemba traditional culture, for example, early child sex education was given by the grandparents. Grandmothers instructed their granddaughters and sometimes their grandsons, while grandfathers gave instruction to their grandsons. The religious and political opposition to early sex education in schools and others spaces is contested by the Bemba traditional rituals discussed in this article.

Finally, Bemba female sexuality as celebrated through sexually charged dance remains a dynamic force in contemporary Zambia. The sexual dance is the means of expressing the beauty of female sexuality and female agency. Although this agency is limited in scope as it does not translate broadly into political and social dimensions, it nevertheless empowers women to enjoy sexual pleasure and to choose how to express their sexuality.