

Covering and uncovering Secrets and the construction of gender identity among the Kunda of Zambia

Annette Drews

De vrouwelijke inwijdingsceremonie chinamwali bij de Kunda in Oost-Zambia is een geheim ritueel. Mannen mogen niet weten wat er gebeurt. Dit versterkt de gender identiteit en positie van vrouwen. Tijdens chinamwali vieren vrouwen hun seksualiteit zowel als een middel ter versterking van hun eigen autonomie en het welzijn van de gemeenschap. Wanneer een vrouw haar seksualiteit inzet voor het aangaan en onderhouden van heteroseksuele relaties draagt zij bij tot de groei van de gemeenschap. Terwijl de machtsongelijkheid tussen mannen en vrouwen door de geheimen van de chinamwali gedeeltelijk wordt opgeheven, wordt de machtsongelijkheid tussen vrouwen onderling hierdoor eerder benadrukt en zelfs gecreëerd. Door hun geprivilegeerde positie hebben slechts de oudere vrouwen toegang tot alle geheime kennis. Tegelijkertijd kunnen zij hun macht en status binnen de gemeenschap vergroten door manipulatie van de geheime kennis. Relaties tussen mannen en vrouwen en tussen vrouwen onderling worden gestructureerd door het strategisch bedekken en onthullen van lichamen, objecten, taal en kennis zoals dat tijdens de vrouwelijke initiatierite gepractiseerd wordt.

“They can go ahead. They can drum as much as they want,” the Secretary of the Reformed Church in Zambia told me. “But if they think that they can be bigger than men, then they are mistaken. Once I heard an old woman tell that young girl behind the fence of the seclusion hut ‘Now you can handle any man.’ That’s too much. They have to stop that, otherwise we, I mean the church, will forbid this kind of activities.”

Chinamwali or *chisungu*, the female initiation ceremony among the Kunda, a horticulturist-hunter group populating the Luangwa valley in Eastern Zambia, is a secret puberty ritual. Men are excluded. And so are outsiders. Who is considered an outsider is defined by the context, the interpretation of the context through the participants and a complex set of rules structuring relationships among women. Different parts of the ceremony are open to different groups of women. All women, even the uninitiated, can participate in the less secret performances of dancing and drumming. Instructions are only given in the presence of the initiated women. Alone the elderly and most knowledgeable women are present during the *niwambo wamkulu*, the ‘big

tradition'. The mother of the neophyte, as well as non-related women, are excluded from the hut when the *namkungwi* and the *phungu*, the ritual instructors, give their personal advice to the *ndola*, the neophyte. The question is how the covering and uncovering of knowledge within the cultural performance of the female initiation ceremony reflects and constitutes male/female relations and relations among women in the context of Kunda society.

The Kunda

The Kunda are a small matrilineal group who migrated at the end of the last century from the Congo-basin to the Luangwa valley in the Eastern Province of Zambia. Among the Kunda, also people from other, mainly matrilineal groups like the Chewa, the Nsenga and the Ngoni are living. Their language, Chikunda, is almost exclusively used in ritual settings. Otherwise, the inhabitants of the Luangwa valley speak a local variant of the lingua franca of the region, Chinyanja. As subsistence farmers, the Kunda cultivate maize, beans, groundnuts, rice and sorghum. On an ideological level, they consider themselves hunters. Despite the fact that the importance of hunting for the survival of the Kunda has decreased due to both general modernization processes and the management of natural resources by the National Park and Wildlife Services, men still hunt buffaloes, wild pigs and different kinds of antelopes on a more or less regular basis.

The Kunda trace their descent through women. A child belongs to the clan of its mother and is under the authority of its mother's brother. On marriage, the groom moves to the homestead of his bride where he has to work for his in-laws in order to legalize his marriage. After the initial uxorilocal residence of the couple, the parents of the wife may allow the son-in-law to take his wife home. In the valley approximately 25% of the couples lives virilocally.

Gender relations are structured by two, conflicting types of discourse. On the one hand, men and women are considered equal. They fulfil complementary tasks in society which are equally appreciated. Women are central because kinship is organized through them. As wives and mothers, women establish most of the relationships which constitute Kunda society. Women are prominent in the business of healing where they can acquire a high status as healers. On the other hand, men are privileged with regard to highly valued political roles. They have more access to posts with formal authority. Within marriage, the man is considered the head of the household.

As in most cultures, age is highly respected among the Kunda. Within social relationships, age is the most important factor for the establishment of a hierarchy generally overruling factors like gender, wealth, or professional status.

The material for this article springs from my research on pregnancy and birth which I carried out between March 1989 and July 1992 in Kamoto in the Eastern Province of Zambia (see Drews 1995). I developed my arguments with the help of my field notes on the seven initiation ceremonies in which I participated. In four instances, I made recordings (including one video recording), transcriptions and translations of the performance. In this context, I would like to mention Kratz's (1988) study on

womanly transformation in Okiek initiation which was most inspiring for my theoretical outlook on ceremonial analysis.

Chinamwali

Somewhere after her first menstruation, every girl has to undergo the initiation ritual which consists of three main parts. The first part is the seclusion. In former days, the girl was locked up for two to three months in a house where she was instructed on matters concerning family relations, sex, marriage, health, fertility and household activities. These days, the seclusion lasts for the period of a holiday, on average three weeks. The *ndola*, the neophyte, sits barely dressed with a ragged cloth around her hips on the floor with her eyes cast down, while the participants perform their teachings. The *anankungwi*, the mistress of ceremony, orchestrates the different genres of teaching. There is dance, drumming, songs and little spots of drama. Often these genres mix.

Although the *phungu*, the personal advisor of the neophyte, has the task of explaining the message of a certain song or play to the *ndola*, all women can give their interpretation of the *mwambo*, the 'tradition', the teaching to the girl. Often this leads to a lively discussion about norms and morals. After the period of seclusion, there is 'the big day.'

On a saturday, all girls and women from the area gather to celebrate the final coming out of the neophyte. The morning is filled with dancing and singing. Many girls and women volunteer to demonstrate their aptness to perform sexually provocative dances and also the *ndola* has to show what she learned in this respect during the time of her seclusion. A lot of songs and dramatized performances are then repeated in the presence of the mature, initiated women. This is also the time of the public humiliation of the neophyte, if she has displayed anti-social behavior in the past. People are asked to ventilate their complaints about the girl and if there are any, the neophyte will be reproached in a harsh way, water will be thrown on the floor of the mud house, and she will be kicked in the mud by the other women. They will step on her, seemingly mercilessly, even kicking her in the face. After this symbolic killing, the neophyte will be helped to get up again and the party continues. Towards the end of this instruction period, some women, the 'outsiders' will be asked to leave the hut for the performance of the *mwambo wamkulu*, the ritualized seduction. After that, only the *phungu* and the *anankungwi* will stay with the neophyte. The other women gather outside in the yard with the men for the final part of the *chinamwali*: the bringing out of the neophyte. The elders will come out dancing with the *ndola* covered with big pieces of cotton material. The *ndola* is then placed on a mat with her mother and the instructresses next to her. She is now said to 'be like her mother'. Many speeches, especially from the male folk, follow. In former times, this was the moment of shaving. Today, this tradition is only remembered by putting scissors on the head of the *ndola*. The visitors then have to bring their gifts, mainly money, to the girl and her teachers, which they place at their feet. At that occasion, the girl gets new clothes from her father. While the audience is dancing, the girl will go and change and then dance for everybody in her new clothes. The *chinamwali* comes to an end with a *phwando*, beers and a big meal for everybody.

Since Malinowski we have come to see ceremonies as pragmatic and purposive social action. In this light, *chinamwali* serves to teach the initiate about the behavior she is supposed to display as grown-up woman and full member of her community. Yet, as Richards (1956) claims, the message is not new at all, not even to the neophyte. The instruction is more like a repetition. *Chinamwali* functions to re-emphasize and re-create the social norms to all participants. Ceremonies like *chinamwali* "...produce historical and cultural continuity as well as changes within that continuity" (Kratz 1988: 25).

Before formulating abstract and seemingly far-fetched anthropological comments on cultural practices of others, I would like to focus on what participants acknowledge as their ceremonial ends. According to the Kunda, *chinamwali* makes a girl 'like her mother'. As the girl has not given birth yet, this is an important statement about the gender-identity of Kunda women. A girl becomes a woman, a mature member of her community not through motherhood, as in many other cultures, but through her ability to be a wife, socially, practically and above all sexually. This perception of womanhood is in line with the general gender identity among horticulturist-hunter groups as outlined by Collier and Rosaldo:

Women's rituals, by contrast, have much less to do with the creation of life than with health and sexual pleasure. It is not as mothers and nurturers that women win ritual status, but rather as sexual beings; cultural conceptions of women acknowledge their role as participants in the heterosexual relationships through which adults organize and manipulate mundane cooperative bonds (1981: 276).

"In *chinamwali* we teach the girl how to please a man; how to be a good wife, and how to make a man enjoy sex with her," an old woman once told me. Isn't this statement an example of the dominant discourse of gender-inequality? Why should men feel threatened by the *chinamwali*? Why should men be against *chinamwali* when this ceremony serves as a powerful instrument of female subordination? But ceremonies do many things at once, as many things are done at once during ceremonies. Like other cultural forms and events they can carry contradictory purposes and interpretations simultaneously. Contradictions in society as we find them also in gender-relations "are embodied in cultural forms and emerge in cultural performance" (Kratz 1988: 4). The tension between men and women unfolds in the contradictory gender-discourse just as much as in the performance of *chinamwali* itself. What annoys men most about *chinamwali* is the fact that women keep their knowledge secret, while it is exactly this secrecy which serves as a source of pride and power for the women. Therefore, I would like to concentrate on performative action where the role of secrecy is constitutive for the understanding of gender identity. But in *chinamwali* women do not only hide their knowledge from men, they also hide it from each other. As this covering and uncovering of knowledge serves to structure the relationship of women with men and with each other, I will focus on different kind of secrecy within the initiation ceremony, namely the covering of the body, objects, and language. As I do not want to come up with a generalized common culture with 'unofficial' versions homogenized out, I will describe the context of knowledge production when turning to particular examples.

Secrets

One of the definitions of 'secret' given by the Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary says "explanation, way of doing or getting something, that is not known to some or most people." Things done in secrecy are done among those who are allowed to know it. These definitions point to the main characteristic of a secret, namely that it is known at least to some people. Something that is not known at all is not a secret. At best it is a mystery, if it at least startles the curiosity of a sensitive observer. At worst, it is nothing but a void or a gap in our (human) knowledge. There is nothing that we may want to know because we do not even know that there is something to be known. A secret, on the contrary is known to some people (for whom it is not a secret), and we know that they know. We just do not know what they know. This is why the act of keeping secrets is an essentially political act. The keeper of a secret integrates or marginalizes individuals or groups according to his/her own motives. Integration and marginalization of groups can be achieved by many means, the manipulation of secrets being just one. Yet strategic covering and uncovering of knowledge is one of the most powerful acts for the structuring of social relationships, including gender relations.

The covering of the body

"Women know a lot of things. But they do not tell us. They share their knowledge among themselves. What they do during *chinamwali* is removed from our sight," Mr. Mvula, my language teacher, tells me. The exclusiveness of *chinamwali* plays an essential role in the establishment of a positive gender-identity for women. Women are conceptualized as both knowledgeable and powerful. Their activities are beyond the control of men. The exclusion of men from the ritual emphasizes the physical boundaries between men and women and defines women as a distinct group within society. By the virtue of being secret, *chinamwali* serves two purposes for the establishment of gender identity. On the one hand it opposes women to men and on the other hand it enhances the solidarity of women amongst themselves. Women are unified as a group through their participation in the ritual. They are inside the initiation hut whereas the men are outside. Inside the hut, the *ndola*'s (almost) nakedness marks her vulnerability and her dependency on the other women. There is nothing she can hide from the other women. As a group they are one. To the men, however, the women's bodies are 'covered' by the walls of the ceremonial house and will only be 'uncovered' in the final ceremony of the 'coming out' where men and women celebrate together. *Chinamwali* not only stresses the opposition between the sexes but also their complementarity. In the end, men and women come together in the festivity of the *phwando*. The *phwando* can be interpreted as an image of men and women joining hands through their contribution of distinct but equally essential services and products. Men and women celebrate equally the integration of the *ndola* as a mature member of their community.

The *ndola* is now 'like her mother.' She has achieved her status not through procreation but through the proof she has given of her social and sexual abilities. She will contribute to the growth of society not through politics – which is ideologically the domain of men – but through the establishment of heterosexual relationships. She will

gain access to male labour and goods important for herself, her matriclan and society in large through the successful handling of her sexual powers. By wearing the cloths of her father, the *ndola* acknowledges the role of men as providers. In *chinamwali*, the *ndola* 'earns' the father's cloths through the proof she has given of her social and sexual abilities, just as in later life she will earn a man's financial support through sex. In the West a woman loses status and respect through this kind of exchange because of the devaluation of the body (with regard to the higher qualities of the mind) and the negative moral connotations of female sexuality. Among the Kunda, however, a woman gains status through her sexuality. If she does her job well, she energizes her husband who will be motivated to work harder in order to please her and her relatives. Female sexuality is a source of pride and power which enables women to transform society through the establishment of alliances.

Many of the acts of covering and uncovering *chinamwali* are symbolical and their function is mainly metacommunicative. It is not important *what* is covered or uncovered but *that* it is covered or uncovered. The act of making secret confers a surplus of meaning on the content of the ritual performance and thus gives extra weight to its message. The covering and uncovering of the *ndola*, the neophyte, is an example of such a symbolic secret. Everybody in the village knows the girl who is being initiated. Her identity cannot be concealed by covering her under a pile of blankets when bringing her to the hut of seclusion. Nor does anybody wonder who might be under the *chitenje* (the material of a wrap-around-skirt) when the old women lead the *ndola* out of the seclusion hut to a tree somewhere in the middle of the village before removing the *chitenje* in the act of the 'final bringing out.' One might argue that the covering and uncovering of the neophyte is not done for the sake of secrecy but for the sake of something like an extended seclusion, which according to Mbiti symbolizes "the concept of death and resurrection: death to one state of life and resurrection to a fuller state of living" (1969: 115). But symbols are never unequivocal. As possessors of multiple meanings, symbols can be interpreted in many ways. Yet, I would not like to call the covering of the neophyte an 'open secret' as this term wrongly suggests the existence of clearly marked boundaries between a 'real' secret (as something hidden) and an 'open' secret (as something widely known). In my opinion the difference is relative and secrets only vary in transparency. The degree of transparency reflects contradictions inherent of society just as much as the manipulation of secrets constitutes social relationships.

The covering of objects

On the 26th of August 1989 I was invited to a *chinamwali* of Rose's sister Jane. Rose is a dresser of Kamoto Hospital where I live. She is also the best friend of Mary, my research assistant, a mother of four.

Although *chinamwali* is a secret ceremony, Kunda women are willing to share a great part of their secret knowledge with female cultural outsiders. As a matter of fact they feel proud to do so. Women consider *chinamwali* as the core of their civilization. Sexual knowledge transforms humans from primitive beings into full, socialized persons. Kunda women perceive the sharing of knowledge on sexual matters with

people from other ethnic groups as a mission which will enable others to improve their society. Allowing anthropologists like me to participate in the initiation ceremony, emphasizes the Kunda's sense of cultural competence and even superiority. I was encouraged to spread the Kunda teachings among my own people, although there was some ambiguity with regard to men. Preferably men should know about the secrets of *chinamwali* through their wives. As this channel of communication would be impractical in my case, the women said that writing about *chinamwali* would be a good alternative.

On Rose's invitation, Mary and I go to the neighbouring village where the ceremony is held. A *chinamwali* usually celebrated for only one girl, but during Jane's ceremony four girls, all from one family, are initiated. When Mary and I enter the hut, the four girls are sitting on the floor, their legs stretched. Their heads are bent, their eyes downcast. They wear a *funga*, a very short piece of cotton material around their waists and white bras. In the middle of the room, there is a big piece of cloth covering some objects. Many women try to squeeze in. For the sake of privacy, the windows remain shuttered. It is dark in the room and the air is bad. It is very hot. The elderly women sit around the cloth. It is noisy, but eventually everybody sits down and the rhythm of the drums supersedes the noise. The old women start dancing together with the initiates around the cloth. After a while everybody takes a tip of the cloth, slowly lifting it up while dancing round in a circle. In the semi-darkness of the room, I can hardly recognize the objects. But the older women draw me closer to the centre. "Have a close look," they are whispering from all sides. As if I could read the meaning of the objects from their outer appearance! I see a wheel with spokes made of wet, grey clay. On the wheel are white, red and black spots. In the centre, on the nob they have placed many pumpkinseeds standing up making it look like the fur of a hedgehog. Next to the wheel are other objects of clay: two sticks, two little grinding stones, three stones with a little pan on top, and on a plate a piece of clay with feathers stuck into them. All objects are taken and put in a cupboard except for the wheel which stays on the floor.

The *anamkungwi* takes one *ndola* and dances with her on the heels around the wheel. At times, they use their hands for support. The *phungu* dances with the next *ndola* until all four have had their turn. Then the *phungu* takes the thumb of the *ndola* and presses it on the nob of the wheel. The onlookers throw coins on the wheel. The *phungu* shows the girl how to move her fingers: with her thumb and her forefinger she has to walk from the white spot to the red spot and then to the red spot, always coming back to the centre, until she passed the whole circle. Whenever the girl makes a wrong move, the *phungu* hits her slightly and corrects her movements. Apparently, the girls have not done this exercise before and they make a lot of mistakes. After all girls have walked with their fingers around the wheel once, they sit around the wheel with their *phungu* (every neophyte has one). Then they start to dance on their heels, leaning on their hands. With their feet, they tread down the wheel. After its destruction, they make a ball out of the clay and put it on a plate. Somebody comes and pours water on the place where the wheel has been before. The *anamkungwi* starts another dance on her heels and hands on the spot of the wheel. Her buttocks are close to the floor, but the *anamkungwi* makes sure that her dress does not become wet. The *ndola* who follow her

example, however, must mop the floor with their buttocks. The *mwambo* (tradition) of the wheel is over and other dances, songs and plays follow.

As I did not get the meaning of this *mwambo*, I later asked Mary for an explanation. Here follows a fragment from the (translated) interview I had with her three days later at my home.

A(nne): What were these objects under the cloth?

M(ary): They were the *chilango*, which also means 'punishment.' The wheel represents the nakedness of the woman. The red spots stand for the menstruation, the white spots for the time when the woman stops bleeding, and the black spots are the pregnancies of a woman. The nob of the wheel is the image of the woman's genitals. They are in the middle and this is where you have to come back every time. The two fingers which the girls used to walk around the wheel signify the union between a man and woman, their coming together in intercourse. When the girls placed their fingers on the wheel, the other women wanted to bless them, wishing them luck in their lives as women. Therefore they threw the coins. The meaning of the wheel was explained to the girls by their *phungu*. Every girl has her own *phungu*. That is the woman she went to see when she first menstruated. During *chinamwali* the *phungu* will whisper the meaning of the *mwambo* or the *chilango* in the girl's ear, so that she knows.

After having explained to me the meaning of many more *vilango* (plural of *chilango*) which I had seen during Jane's initiation ceremony, Mary asked me not to reveal these secrets to anybody. This was a real secret, a *chinsinsi*! As I outlined before this prohibition refers to cultural insiders, people living in the Kunda community, people who could use the secret knowledge to enhance their status in society. *Chinsinsi*, if you look at the root of the word, means in Chinyanja 'the big inside of the inside' which exactly reflects what secrets are about. I got confused: "But this is the secret of all women, I can tell this to other women, can't I?" "No," Mary explains to me

because these days people do not want to share their knowledge. They are just jealous. There are even *phungu* and *anamkungwi* who just move their lips when they are supposed to explain the meaning of a certain *chilango* to the girl. Girls are not instructed well any more these days. But when it is found out that the *phungu* wanted to keep her knowledge for herself, she will not receive her payment. If she did her job well, she might even receive a dress or a *chitenje*. But well, it is not what it used to be. In my time, I was secluded for three months. I was only allowed to cover myself with a *kafunga*, the bark of a tree, nothing else, let alone a bra. No, we women then were really united. Now, the elders want to keep the information for themselves just for the sake of status. The more difference in knowledge, the better for the one who has more knowledge, because they gain even more respect and power. This is why the *anamkungwi* wanted the public to believe that they were dancing a real old song and tell them: "No we don't tell the meaning of it. This is from very long ago." No, these days they can uncover the objects, but not their knowledge.

Vilango are symbols; symbols not only of the knowledge they represent, but on a metacommunicative level they also function as a symbol of the knowledge of the elders. By lifting the cloth, they can be revealed, the knowledge of the elders can be shared. The *vilango* are seen by everybody. The message is clear: all women are one,

they belong to the same group. But as in all groups there is a difference in power and status amongst its members. And because *vilango* do not speak for themselves, their meaning has to be explained. As the elders have the knowledge of the *vilango*, they will use their privileged position to increase their status. The solidarity amongst women ends where age hierarchy becomes more important. Whether or not the elders are willing to share the secret will depend on their evaluation of the situation. By keeping the secret, they can enhance their own status. But for the good of the community, and in the final analysis for themselves as well, the elders must share at least part of their knowledge.

The wheel ceremony stresses the centrality of the woman's genitals as the means to establish and maintain heterosexual relationships. The *mwambo* of the wheel also points to the fact that, although sexuality is central, there is no escape from the natural rhythm of menstruation and motherhood which are part of the gender identity of a Kunda woman. A stable conjugal relationship gives a woman access to male products (money) and labour. She also gains status within her matriclan because she provides the group with extra man-power. Man-power is crucial in the Kunda society where the sons of a matriclan leave their home and live with their wives after marriage. The shortage of men in a matriclan can only be corrected when the daughters bring in their spouses. While the young woman increases her status through marriage, she is at the same time subjugated to both the man whom she has to acknowledge as her superior and the elders of the matriclan who use her sexuality to keep an extra male-worker. The age hierarchization between women is constituted and reflected through the covering of objects and the covering of meaning, the refusal of the elders to give the appropriate interpretation. The power of the elders is also expressed through the fact that the neophyte must walk with her fingers where the elders say and the humiliation of having to mop the floor with her buttocks.

The covering of language

Acts do not provide the observer with clues about how they are to be interpreted. Speech acts, on the contrary, interpret themselves due to their reflexive structure. The illocutionary part determines through a pragmatic commentary how the utterance should be decoded. Speech acts make comments on the intention of the speaker. But this performative sense of a speech act is only revealed if the listener speaks the same language and enters the life-world which is shared intersubjectively within one speech community (see Habermas 1990: 60-61). The use of marked codes like a secret language, however, counteract this naive assumption of the intersubjectively shared life-world of a speech community. Language competence, just like knowledge and power are seldom shared equally within communities. The question then is why the elders should use Chikunda in the *chinamwali*-songs while this is not understood by the girls to whom the message of the song is directed. Competence in religious or secret language reflects and creates power. I would like to argue here that in the communicative setting of the *chinamwali* the Chikunda songs cease to be speech acts, acts which partly interpret themselves. The referential focus of the text of the songs is obscure and so is the intention of the speakers. As there is a sound, rhythm and music, however, the song turns into an ordinary act, something that happens without offering a clue for its

interpretation. As an act, the song serves as a symbol of the power of the elders. Just like the *chilango* of the wheel can be seen, but not understood without explanation, the words of the song can be heard but not understood without the explanation of the elders. Singing the song in Chikunda is similar to lifting the cloth from the *chilango*. It uncovers part of the knowledge of the elders, while at the same time reminding the girl of her dependency of the elders for the full understanding of the secret. On this level, the secret of the *chilango* and of the song serves two purposes. First, it establishes the authority of the elders and second, it marks the content of these secrets as sacred and extremely valuable. When Misozi, the daughter of one of the nurses of Kamoto Hospital was secluded, I heard the following song:

Katewatewa kwalume anabvene tewa londo. Aliye walanga tewa.

I understood what most of the readers of this article will have understood: nothing. Misozi, on the other hand, must have got at least a faint idea of the subject. Alume is a word that appears in many other Zambian languages, not Chinyanja however, for 'man.' *Anabvene* could also be guessed meaning 'of somebody else' (*wa wina* in Chinyanja). So Misozi might have known that the song was about the husband of somebody else, of another woman, not hers. The meaning of the song, however, had to be explained to her, just as Mary explained it to me. A woman is not supposed to treat a male friend like a husband. If he is the husband of another woman, you should not please him. You should not make yourself beautiful for him, dance or cook for him, but especially not have sex with him so that he forgets his wife at home. It is only friendship that you share with that man, not marriage. If you did such a thing, you never learned your lesson well during *chinamwali*, Mary told me. The secret of the language was uncovered for the sake of solidarity amongst women. And if not solidarity as such, then at least the limitation of the destructiveness that springs from sexual competitiveness. As in *chinamwali* the power of a woman as a sexual partner is celebrated, this message is essential. A woman must not misuse her powers, but use them for the good of the whole community by creating legitimate sexual relationships. The use of Chikunda underlines the importance of this message.

While the use of Chikunda enhances the value of a certain message, the absence of language, that is absolute silence, marks a performance as 'holy.' In *chinamwali* there is only one performance like this, namely the *mwambo wamkulu* ('the great tradition'), the ritualized fore-play. Its sacredness is also underlined by the fact that it is more secret than other rituals during *chinamwali*. Before the *mwambo wamkulu* starts most women must leave the room, especially the girl's mother. Only the *anamkungwi*, the *phungu* and some of the eldest and most respected women of the community stay for this part. In the *mwambo wamkulu* not even drums are heard. There is a solemn silence when the *ndola* enacts the sexual techniques she has learned during her seclusion. Although the performances of erotic dances and the knowledge of various positions for intercourse are part of the *mwambo wamkulu*, the main part of it consists of the so-called *kutyole* ceremony. *Kutyole* is the ritualized massage, washing and shaving which serves as a fore play and should be practised by a couple at least once a month after the woman's menstruation. *Kutyole* is reciprocal: the man shaves the woman's pubic hair, the woman

shaves the man's. As such it reflects the symmetry prevalent in Kunda gender relations. In *chinamwali*, first the *ndola* lies or sits down while an old woman rubs her body. Then the *ndola* has to show what she learnt and treat one of the old women as if she were her husband. The penis is mimicked by a piece of cloth between the old woman's legs. The massage is more or less real, while the washing and shaving are merely acts. If the audience is satisfied with the *ndola*'s performance, they will make sounds of ululation which also communicates to the women outside that the girl has passed the examination. The ululation marks the end of the most secret part of *chinamwali*. From then on, the participants recover their language (except for the *ndola* who has to remain silent until she is given coins in the final 'coming out' ceremony). In the *mwambo wamkulu* the woman is celebrated as the 'Sexy Partner' (see Collier and Rosaldo 1981: 302). This ritual stresses her gender identity as a competent and able member of her community. The secrecy marks the message of the *mwambo wamkulu* as the core of the Kunda cultural knowledge. The sexual competitiveness of women which is enhanced in this *mwambo* is tempered by additional teachings as for example in the song *katewatewa*. A woman should use her sexuality not only to increase her own power but above all for the good of the community.

Conclusion

The secrets of *chinamwali* play an important part in the construction of gender identity among the Kunda in two ways. Through the exclusion of men, a positive conception of womanhood is created and enhanced. By means of its exclusiveness, *chinamwali* celebrates women as knowledgeable and competent members of the community. As expressed in the remarks of the Secretary of the Reformed Church and Mr. Mvula, men have their reservations concerning the display of womanly power in *chinamwali* mainly because they feel that they have lost territory in their traditional domain of politics due to the centralizing efforts of the modern national state. The fact that only women are allowed to participate in *chinamwali* delimitates the gender boundaries and enhances female solidarity. The use of secrets within the different rituals of *chinamwali*, however, undermines this solidarity at the expense of the existing age hierarchy. Central contradictions in society are embodied in ritual events in different forms. Sometimes they are partly resolved through the ceremonial performances, whereas at other times the ritual serves to perpetuate existing contradiction mainly through mystifying them. There are three central contradictions in Kunda society which are addressed in *chinamwali* namely the contradiction between individual and community, between men and women and between the generations. The ethnographic material from the *chinamwali* ceremonies suggests that the first two of these contradictions are partly resolved through the female initiation ceremony, whereas the third is accentuated.

In *chinamwali* women's equality with men and her power are stressed but not as a value in itself. (Just as much as a man's power cannot be self-servant). The celebration of a woman's sexuality should not only serve the purpose to enlarge her own autonomy but also to strengthen the community. In the initiation ceremony a woman is taught how to use the power of her sexuality in the interest of the group. She builds society through

the establishment and maintenance of sexual relationships. Through marriage, a woman not only gains a man's emotional and financial support but also provides her matriclan with an extra male worker. In return, her status and autonomy within the community increases.

The priority given to men in public affairs is counteracted through the secrecy of the female initiation ceremony. The contradiction in Kunda gender discourse where gender symmetry is postulated in the presence of accepted male dominance emerges in the celebration of *chinamwali*. The contradiction between male's superiority and women's equality is resolved by making both claims subservient to the common goal of the establishment and strengthening of social networks.

The ritual discourse in which the contradiction between men and women and between the individual and community are resolved is dominated and manipulated by the elderly women who gain from this unifying discourse autonomy, labour and power.

Autonomy

Through their self-conception as strong, powerful and knowledgeable, women gain a positive gender identity which will eventually enable them to live autonomously also outside a heterosexual relationship. Women demonstrate this autonomy when they grow older and decide to free themselves from their subordination in marriage through divorce.

Labour

According to Kratz (1988: 25) the evocative power and intensity of ceremonial experience "lends legitimation to the tradition, which becomes 'natural', an unquestioned way of seeing and acting in the world." In this way, the concept of male dominance expressed in the ritual discourse of *chinamwali* makes the 'social' work of women (pleasing men) look natural. With such gender concepts, the elders' daughter will serve their son-in-law more willingly who will then stay and render his bride service to the elders.

Power

Chinamwali partly reproduces the structure of Kunda society. The strengthening of social networks contributes to the political stability of a society in which elders enjoy an increasingly privileged position.

Secrets contribute on the one hand to the resolution of one contradiction (gender) while on the other hand to the crystallization of another (age). This is so not so much because secrets are a sign of power but because they create power. Secrets are used in one case to balance the scale of uneven relationship between men and women, and in the other to add weight to the already strong position of the elders. Relationships among men and women and amongst women are structured through the strategic covering and uncovering of bodies, objects and language as practised in the female initiation ceremony. The identity of men and women is not only defined by what they know about themselves but also by what they are supposed not to know.

Note

Anne Drews did research on communication about pregnancy and birth among the Kunda of Zambia from 1989 until 1994. She received her Ph.D. from the University of Amsterdam in 1995. She is currently working on a research about the user's perspective on fertility regulation in the Netherlands in collaboration with the Gender, Reproductive Health and Population Policies Project of the University of Amsterdam.

References

Collier, J. & M.Z. Rosaldo

- 1981 Politics and gender in simple societies. In: S.B. Ortner & H. Whitehead (eds.), *Sexual meanings: The cultural construction of gender and sexuality*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 275-329.

Drews, A.

- 1995 *Words and silence. Communication about pregnancy and birth among the Kunda of Zambia*. Amsterdam: Het Spinhuis.

Habermas, J.

- 1990 *Na-metafysisch denken*. Kampen: Kok Agora.

Kratz, C.A.

- 1988 *Emotional power and significant movement: Womanly transformation in Okiek initiation*. Ann Arbor: UMI.

Mbiti, J.S.

- 1969 *African religions and philosophy*. London: Heineman.

Richards, A.

- 1956 *Chisungu: A girl's initiation ceremony among the Bemba of Northern Rhodesia*. London: Faber & Faber.