

**THE THEORY OF STRUCTURAL RITUALIZATION  
AND THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF  
GENDER INEQUALITY IN THE  
CENTRAL REGION  
OF MALAWI**

By

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**Submitted to the Faculty of the  
Graduate College of  
Oklahoma State University  
in partial fulfillment of  
the requirements for  
the Degree of  
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY  
December, 2003**

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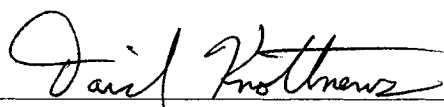
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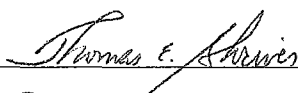
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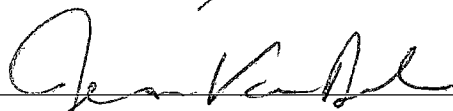
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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Expressing my gratitude to the number of people who have instructed, encouraged, and mentored me during the completion of this dissertation and describing the profound influence they have had on my life is a very difficult task. I will fail at fully expressing my deep appreciation to all those who have helped me accomplish this formidable task. It is my hope they will accept this futile attempt.

To Dr. David Knottnerus, my advisor and committee chair, I express my sincere gratitude for your encouragement, patience, editing, and numerous discussion sessions to enable this dissertation to be successfully completed. Each of my committee members also helped to improve the quality of this study. To Dr. Jean Van Delinder, thank you for the many times you provided me with relevant articles or books that gave me greater insight about the social psychology of gender. I also appreciate your encouragement to include a chapter on the history of the Chewa women. To Dr. Tom Shriver, thank you for your knowledge and expertise regarding the writing of a literature review. Additionally, your insight regarding the analysis of the data was very helpful and kept me on track to accurately describe the details of the methods. To Dr. Fredricque Van DePoel-Knottnerus, thank you for your kind encouragement during this long process. Your e-mailed reminders of my capabilities always seemed to come at just the right time. I also appreciated your expertise in historical data analysis.

To my fellow graduate students, I want to express my sincere appreciation for all the times that you shared the difficulties, frustrations, and small successes during our Ph.D. program. I have only to think of the many times gathered around drinking coffee or Tazo Chai and I find myself smiling at our great dramaturgical analysis of graduate school! I also want to thank the administrative assistants in the sociology department Sue and Barbie, who would calmly put together the raveled pieces of my severely stressed self with seemingly effortless skill. Emergency tasks, needed items, answers to questions, and a kind listening ear were all generously and kindly provided. Thank you.

To Dr. Joe Gryzbowski, I would like to thank you for seeing potential in a rather unlikely returning student. I am grateful for your insistence on critical thinking rather than simple memorization. Part of my survival in graduate studies despite multiple stresses was the skills I learned in your class. You were right working hard is a good thing.

To Dr. Judith Lepuschitz, thank you for your vision. It seems like only yesterday when my educational goals were forced to change and I felt like I must resign myself to a job without fulfillment. Your gift of a positive phrase to embrace as my own changed the course of my life. And now, the phrase, "Good morning, I'm Dr. Carol Minton, how may I help you?" is an awesome reality. I am so amazed how our paths have recently come together again and you have so willingly mentored, encouraged, and listened as I tried to clarify my thoughts during the completion of this dissertation. The many hours you gave to the editing process are deeply appreciated.

To my family - my brother Bob, my niece Lisa, my aunt's Lorene and Cate, thank you, thank you for the many times you encouraged, listened, and comforted me during this journey. I cannot imagine how I would have completed this task without you. I am

especially grateful to you, Aunt Lorene, for your gracious hospitality and the little room upstairs that became my writing retreat. I know you made a sacrifice of our time together to enable me to complete my writing task.

To my dear friends, Debbie, Jonkeeta, and Linda, you have truly brightened my path with your words of encouragement and prayers in my behalf. Thank you for sharing your strength, optimism, and vision when my own so often failed. I was able to complete this portion of my journey with a sense of wholeness because of your friendship.

To my dear children, Patti, Jon, Casi, and Hannah, how fortunate I am that God placed you in my life. The many times of laughter and adventure we shared despite pressing school demands is truly my greatest treasure. This space is too small and my feelings are too big to share, but please know I love you and I am grateful for your support and encouragement as I completed my educational goals. I lovingly dedicate this dissertation to each of you.

I would also like to give special acknowledgment to my key informants and to Rachel who so graciously allowed me to stay in her home. You were right, Rachel. I could never have learned about the women of Malawi staying in a government hostel. Being with you and your boys, attending Bible study, bridal showers, visiting the women in the rural village added an enormous personal understanding of the different experiences of the women of Malawi. Thank you for your kind hospitality to me.

Finally, I would like to express my sincere appreciation to the Women's Giving Circle of Oklahoma State University. Their generous grant helped to fund my travel to Malawi for this dissertation.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

#### **Statement of the Problem**

Routine behaviors, everyday interactions - is it possible seemingly insignificant acts could be a contributing factor to women's inequality in the small country of Malawi? This question emerged from my field notes written while working with a small mission church in Malawi three years ago. One of my initial findings concerned the rigid patterned behaviors that seemed to shape the way women behaved and interacted with their husbands, each other, and with me. These behaviors seemed to go beyond the normal routines that are often observed, but rather they reflected the behaviors of women in a servile position. As my partner and I, with our translator, went to the various homes in two small villages, the way we were greeted, the place where the women sat after they greeted us (on a far corner of the mat), and the women's lack of conversational participation became a predicted, patterned interaction.

In May 2001, I was invited to teach at the Baptist Seminary located in the central region of Malawi. I decided to examine in greater depth and more systematically the ritualized patterns of behavior of the women of central Malawi. Specifically, I wanted to look critically at the patterned behaviors of interaction. My research question may be stated as follows: Why has the apparent unequal access to resources for women in the central region of Malawi continued? My hypothesis suggests there is a possible relationship between the rigid, patterned behaviors I had observed and the creation,

perpetuation and or reinforcement of the apparent unequal access to resources for the women of Malawi.

In my initial review of the literature, I was interested to know if other scholars had critically examined patterned behaviors and their relationship to the social construction of inequality. The sociological literature seemed to suggest that behaviors not only provided a tool for managing the impressions actors' project to others, but also shaped the way actors think about themselves in relation to others. Bernard (1981) found that for women in 18<sup>th</sup> century European society, there were many boundary maintaining behaviors and resources. These often simplistic behaviors enabled those of different classes to affirm their place and precise location in the social structure. Those of the upper class were taught certain manners to observe, specific types of clothing to wear, the appropriate formal conversation in which to engage, and specific ways in which to carry them.

Burn (1996) provided an in-depth look at limitations of the traditional female roles for women. Her research study suggested the typical roles for most women as primary caregiver of children and or elderly parents often limit women's advancement to management positions or full-time careers. Women's roles are "dramatically unequal when it comes to work, pay, status, and power in our society" (Burn, 1996:59).

Beyond roles and spoken words, gestures of notice or regard are socially constructed as symbols of social position. Pate (1994:256) examined micro-level greetings and their importance in daily interactions and means of group identification among African-American men. His research suggested that greetings ultimately provided one means of defining self. Self-esteem was often linked with acknowledgement: "I feel good when people acknowledge me." The young men further

noted that it was an acknowledgement between themselves. "While society may not acknowledge them, they acknowledge each other."

Cooperation and group life require knowing one's position in terms of a complex set of others. Through the process of knowing one's position, identities are created and linked to a particular group or community. As Berger (cited by Pate 1994:118) suggests, "Identities are socially bestowed, socially maintained and socially transformed." Seemingly taken-for-granted behavior is succinctly characterized as a symbolic interactional achievement that significantly develops and maintains one's identity and self or broader social or political ideologies. An expanded examination of the research literature on behaviors and the social construction of inequality may be found in Chapter III.

Recently, social psychologists have found that the available theories which consider social interaction are limited. Social inequality is predominantly defined as the patterned distributions of power, resources, and privilege among sets of actors (Harris, 2000; Scwalbe, Godwin, Holden, Schrock, Thompson, and Wolkomir 2000; Howard, 1994; Hollander and Howard, 2000). Hollander and Howard (2000:348) suggest that the social psychology research literature often neglects how social structural constraints and historical moments shape patterns of interaction. Additionally, the relationship between behaviors and the social context in which they take place are not addressed. These researchers argue the study of social inequality should include possible structural constraints and the role of everyday patterned behaviors. Despite the apparent usefulness of this dual perspective, the theories available seem limited to either macro or micro level

frameworks of explanation. Without consideration, integration, and understanding of both levels of inequality the problem cannot be fully addressed.

Howard (1994) suggests that while the study of face to face interaction has provided a rich understanding of how people perceive their world, the understanding of social structure that shape these face to face interactions is neglected. Several theories emphasize the cognitive constructs of actors: among them ethnomethodology (Garfinkel 1984; Boden 1990), cognitive sociology (Cicourel 1974), and social cognition (Fiske and Taylor 1991). However, little attention is given to the issue of social dynamics that sustain, resist, or transform social interaction.

The theory of structural ritualization (Knottnerus 1997) is a relatively new theory that recognizes the role social cognition plays in the formation of behaviors. It suggests that many behaviors are not performed without a meaningful component or basis; rather, they rest upon and express symbolic meanings or themes. Additionally, these symbolic rituals often play a role in the formation, reproduction, and alteration of social structures. Furthermore, actors may employ or promote ritualized symbolic practices in order to achieve some objective including self-aggrandizement (Knottnerus and Loconto forthcoming). Such practices may occur in the political arena and involve decisions dealing with the use of power.

Preliminary investigations into the social history of Malawi suggest that political or governmental agents strategically promoted certain ritualize practices in order to achieve their political goals of maintaining a colonial or dictatorial social system. The ritualized activities that were manipulated included various practices that controlled or regulated women's lives. Some of these practices were legally codified and politically

enforced. This served over time to perhaps further enhance ritualized hierarchical arrangements between men and women. The theory of structural ritualization will be discussed in detail in chapter IV.

Since this theory provides specific factors for the analysis of ritualized or routine symbolic behaviors, it is very well suited to categorize and analyze the significance of ritualized symbolic practices in the social construction of unequal relationships in a social setting such as Malawi. The use of this theoretical model also necessitates that the data collected for the current study employ multiple methods such as participant observation, in-depth interviews, focus groups, and content analysis of secondary and historical data. These various methods provide a comprehensive pool of data that can be used to determine the importance of ritualized symbolic practices. Each of the methods used will be discussed in depth in Chapter V.

### **Significance of the Study**

Using the demographic variables usually cited in sociological literature and typically reflective of status or hierarchical relationships in sociology, I initially explored various historical and current statistics of Malawi regarding literacy, education, and occupations. Education levels are particularly significant in this country. English is taught only at the secondary level, yet it is considered the official language of the country. All business and official government documents and transactions are written and conducted in English. While the National Statistics Office of Malawi (2000) found an increase in literacy rates for women, the sex ratio for secondary education is still 167.2. Furthermore, more than twice as many men have a university education (See Tables 1 and 2). Although women are now more likely to read and write in the Chewa language,

they are still limited in business and in matters of understanding their rights and privileges. Without being able to speak or understand English, Malawian women are unable to participate in those agencies that have direct impact on their lives.

Tables 3 and 4 compare the sex ratios for men to women in various occupations in 1987 and 1998. In professional occupations there has only been slight improvement from 188.3 in 1987 to 178.3 in 1998. Administrative and clerical positions have shown the greatest increase for women; however, in production, transport, and labor, the gap is widening. While it looks like women are at least faring better than men in agricultural occupation's, they often do not have as large of acreage and do not receive the information or credit that is more readily available to men (Ferguson 1994).

A case study (Miller 1996) of the rural women of Malawi suggests there is a discrepancy between the restructuring of the economy and the lived reality of the women. The results found that women had limited integration into the agricultural market partly due to the customs and traditions they observed. The newly democratic government's programs that were meant to benefit women created more disadvantages for them. In addition to limiting their income, women's lack of information about agricultural work means their main way of providing food for their family is limited and their children suffer serious nutritional deficiencies or die prematurely.

According to the Malawi Social Indicators Survey (National Statistical Office 2000) the rate of underweight children has risen in 1995 to 29.9%. The rate of stunting of under-five's now stands at 48.3% and the rate of wasting (defined by W.H.O. 1992 as weight-for-height z scores below -2 SD of reference population indicator for acute malnutrition) has worsened since 1992 and has increased to 7% of the under-five's.

Further, there is increasing evidence of micro-nutritional deficiencies resulting in 12.8% of pediatric mortality and over 4,000 children in the southern region of Malawi with eye damage. In the most recent statistics from the World Health Organization (2002) Malawi is now the country with the highest infant mortality rate: 182 infants die before their first birthday out of every 100,000 live births. These statistics are particularly disturbing when one considers the numerous, expensive programs implemented by various agencies that have ultimately been ineffective (Miller 1996; Drost 1999).

These statistics indicate the unequal access to various resources for the women of Malawi. Men are more than twice as likely as women to receive a secondary education. This allows men to participate in the market economy, understand the available education materials regarding agricultural improvements, and to partake in the low-interest credit loans for their farms. They are able to read about their rights and responsibilities in government and legal documents. As previously stated, the lack of farming information and health information in general has significantly impacted the health of children.

In this study, I seek to provide an explanation for the perpetuation of women's unequal access to resources utilizing the theory of structural ritualization. I present the argument that due to various social, historical, and political developments in central Malawi, an array of ritualized symbolic practices developed that defined women's unequal relation or rank in regard to males.

This study is especially important for filling the gap in the relevant literature regarding the social constructionist approach to inequality. Moreover, a more thorough understanding and application of the social constructionist position may foster more creative approaches to developmental projects in many third world countries, including



Malawi. As Harris (2000:389, citing Dewey) noted “Through understanding various perspectives, human beings can creatively construct workable solutions to felt social problems.”

The following chapters will provide an in-depth review of the history of central Malawi, the relevant sociological literature, the theory of structural ritualization, the various methods that were used in this study, the presentation and discussion of the findings, and the conclusions and suggestions for further research.

**Table 1: Population Literacy by Sex, Sex Ratio, Age, Year**

Malawi	1966	1966	1966	1987	1987	1987
Age	Literate Male	Literate Female	*Sex Ratio	Literate Male	Literate Female	*Sex Ratio
10+	406,047	193,728	209.6	1,578,364	999,221	158
10 to 14	58,806	42,974	136.8	248,558	230,309	107.9
15 to 19	97,095	59,783	162.4	253,112	208,089	121.6
20 to 24	69,120	35,673	193.8	218,093	171,502	127.2
25 to 34	80,561	29,952	268.9	348,003	195,421	178.1
35 to 44	45,641	13,114	348	228,816	105,284	217.3
45 to 54	28,058	6,660	421.3	133,556	44,950	197.1
55 to 64	15,517	3,226	480	77,904	21,063	366
65+	11,259	2,346	480	68,510	14,203	482.4
Unknown				1,812	400	*

Data from the U.S. Bureau of the Census, International Data Base

\*Sex Ratio is number of males per 100 females

**Table 2: Population Aged 5-29 Years by School Attendance in August 1998 and Sex:**

<b>Level of Education</b>	<b>Both Sexes</b>	<b>Males</b>	<b>Females</b>	<b>*Difference</b>	<b>**Sex Ratio</b>
<b>Total:</b>	5,194,437	2,512,757	2,581,680	68,923	97.3
<b>None</b>	2,795,679	1,245,878	1,549,801	303,923	80.4
<b>Primary</b>	2,165,528	1,120,750	1,044,778	-75,972	107.3
<b>Secondary</b>	230,245	144,061	86,184	-57,877	167.2
<b>University</b>	2,985	2,068	917	-1,151	225.5

\*Differences = figure for female minus figure for male.

\*\*Sex ratio is number of males per 100 females

**Table 3: Economically Active Population Aged 10 Years and Over by Occupation and Sex 1998**

Occupation	Both Sexes	Males	Females	*Difference	**Sex Ratio
Professional/technical	124,424	79,708	44,716	-34,992	178.3
Administrative	7,272	6,184	1,088	-5,096	568.4
Clerical	57,785	40,467	17,318	-23,148	233.7
Sales	236,790	159,549	77,241	-82,308	206.6
Service	126,093	103,883	22,210	-81,673	467.7
Agriculture	3,720,261	1,645,503	2,074,758	429,255	79.3
Production	183,482	159,639	5,854	-153,794	2,727
Transport equipment	3,872	3,671	147	-3,524	2,497
Operators and laborers	49,311	45,033	2,199	-42,834	2,093

\*Difference = figure for female minus figure for male

\*\*Sex Ratio is number of males per 100 females

Source: National Statistical Office, 1998 Malawi Population and Housing Census

**Table 4: Economically Active Population, All  
Ages  
By Occupation and Sex in 1987**

Occupation	Both Sexes	Males	Females	*Difference	**Sex Ratio
Professional/technical	30,413	19,864	10,549	-9,316	188.3
Administrative	3,555	3,385	170	-3,215	1,991
Clerical	41,868	33,599	8,269	-25,330	406.3
Sales	95,388	57,915	37,473	-20,442	154.6
Service	186,764	157,510	29,254	-128,256	880.2
Agriculture	2,679,053	1,188,306	1,490,747	302,441	79.7
Production	83,386	60,201	23,185	-37,016	259.7
Transport equipment	(combined in 1987 with production)				
Operators and laborers	(combined in 1987 with production)				

\*Difference = figure for female minus figure for male

\*\*Sex Ratio is number of males per 100 females

Source: National Statistical Office, 1998 Malawi Population and Housing Census

CHAPTER II  
HISTORY OF THE CHEWA WOMEN  
IN THE CENTRAL REGION OF MALAWI

This chapter will discuss the history of the political structure in central region of Malawi. Additionally, it will help describe the social cultural life of the Chewa people in the central region. This information will facilitate a greater understanding of the meanings and significance of the ritualized symbolic practices found in the research data.

**Pre-colonialism**

During the 16<sup>th</sup> century A.D., Bantu speakers known as the Maravi settled in the area now known as the Central region of Malawi. Later the Maravi came to be known as the Chewa people (Mvula and Kakhomgwa 1997). Of the nine Bantu groups that came to this region, the Chewa people are the largest of the groups and make up 90% of the population in the central region (Sanders 1988). The Chewa people were a matrilineal, polygamous society. The matrilineal nature of the community allowed the young girl the privilege of staying with her family in the village when married.

Early in the region's history, young girls had the right to remarry after divorce or the death of their husband. Polygamous relationships often provided a way for the burden of the housework to be shared. The inherited land given to a bride at marriage was primarily for her and her husband's use, but its ownership belonged to her mother's family. Her mother's eldest brother or uncle controlled the land given to them. In the

event of divorce or death, the bride's husband's relatives could not take the land (Phiri 1997).

Despite the positive aspects of this matrilineal society, young women often were married within the first year following the onset of menses. Part of the instruction and ritual that occurred during the initiation or rite of passage included forced intercourse by the "hyena" of the village or the male instructor. Additionally, polygamous relationships often developed if the young girl was barren or took a long time to conceive her first child. She was often publicly degraded and men had the absolute authority over her. A traditional authority structure existed in the villages and the chiefs and headhunters were typically men (Phiri 1997).

In order to understand more fully the traditional authority structure, it is important to look at the organizational structure of the village. Although there is one large city in the central region of Malawi, rural agricultural villages make up over 80% of the area. The village is called the *mzimba*. There is no central headquarters; however, a chief governs several villages. The honorary owner of the village is the headman, who is typically one of the chief's nephews. The chief, to settle disputes and to set up times for initiations, performance rituals, or funerals within the different villages vests the headmen with power. The second authority is the *tsabwalo*. He is usually the son-in-law or younger brother of the headman. He cares for the grounds before ceremonies and reports any problems or disputes in the village to the headman. He is responsible for the drums used in the various ceremonies (Mwale 1977).

Stratification within the village developed by age and gender, for both girls and boys there was no status given prior to puberty initiation rites. For girls, those rites

included sexual intercourse by a man from a nearby village who was designated by the chief. Status was increased for the young girls who married within this first year and then subsequently conceived their first child the following year. Thereafter, status increased with age, marriage and children. The highest status for women in the village community was to become one of the instructors of the initiates (Mwale 1977)

For young men, status increased with puberty initiation, marriage, and the birth of the first born child. Additionally, those men typically over the age of 40 served as elders. They are experienced in and concerned with the various traditions and customs of the Chewa people. The men ages 25-40 were responsible for the day to day affairs of their family. They were the instructors of songs, dances, arts, and crafts. The young men, who were the initiates or were newly married, learned and practiced the traditions and dances. They were taught to become the keepers of the riddles, stories, songs, and beliefs of the tribe.

Some men become part of the inner governing council called the Nyau. This particular governing body has unique rituals and dances. While part of their purpose serves to frighten the disobedient into conformity, one of their roles is entertainment after initiation or marriage ceremonies. Some of the literature suggests that the Nyau could be cruel in their dealings. Those who tried to undermine their ruling were kidnapped and beaten. When dressed in their animal masks they considered themselves to be the animals they represented and, therefore, not subject to humane laws or codes of conduct (Mwale 1977; Curran 1999).

The head of the female members of the village was called the *namkungivi*. The village headman's niece or aunt usually filled this position. She was in charge of the



female initiation ceremonies and reported to the headman all young women who had begun menses, or who were expecting. Next were the elderly women. Often they were grandmothers called *go-go*. These women were the teachers or instructors. Women ages 25-40 were the ones who led songs, taught young girls, and instructed initiates (Mwale 1977; Phiri 1997).

While Chewa women had some status and freedom within their matrilineal society, they were dependent upon and controlled by their uncles and brothers who had total power over them, whether single or married. Chewa women were not spared from ritual intercourse during initiation, or early marriages. Additionally, they often faced mental torture if barren or single, and were subjected to abusive widowhood rites. Thus, Chewa matrilineal society may also be considered patriarchal (Phiri 1997).

In the traditional Chewa society, the matrilineal lineage consisted of all those who could trace their descent from a common ancestry. This founding ancestor was called the *tsinde*, or the root. The women had the privilege of being the foundation or root of the lineage. Women were seen as the sacred vessel of life and were responsible for the continuation of the community. The women who successfully gave birth were treated as a victor of life, and their husbands made thanksgiving offerings to God. The mothers were responsible for shaping and nourishing the new life. The young mothers worked around the home and socialized their children in the norms of their society. They taught the children about the existence of God, related religious beliefs and their ancestors' through stories (Phiri 1997).

If a woman was barren it was her greatest misfortune and shame. One of the Malawian proverbs states: unhappy is the woman who fails to get children, for whatever

other qualities she might possess her failure to bear children is worse than committing genocide. She has become the dead end of human life. Rituals were performed to ward off evil. If a woman was barren the blame was mostly put on the woman.

Having more girls than boys is preferred in this society. Girls who bear children provide for the expansion of the village. Traditional songs include the message that she who has given birth to a baby girl is rich and to a boy is poor. Finally, being single was unheard of in Chewa society. Girls were prepared at a very young age for life with a man. Men, too, were not allowed to be single. A person was not complete alone (Phiri 1997).

### Initiation Ceremonies

For the Chewa, female initiation ceremonies were considered very important because that was where sex education was taught. Through these ceremonies the girls were taught to take up their future roles as mothers. There were four stages of initiation ceremonies for women and the teaching of these important things was entrusted to the female teachers. The first ceremony marked the end of childhood and the beginning of womanhood called *chinamwali*. It was conducted as soon as a girl reached puberty. It was a very serious occasion for she would be advised to accept the status of womanhood and leave childhood behind. Usually girls during this time were separated from society for about one month. Sexual rites were performed between the initiates and an unknown male to mark the end of the puberty initiation.

Failure or carelessness during the time of a woman's menstruation meant life could be easily taken away. Any girl who became pregnant before marriage was severely punished, yet no one questioned the idea of ritual intercourse. Additionally, due to the

fear of menstrual blood women were denied their full humanity in society – she could not be part of the village leadership (Nyau authority). During menstruation a woman could be bewitched. To help prevent this occurrence, she was not to season her food with salt and was not to pass between men. Required abstinence during menstruation often led men to take a second wife (Mwale 1977).

The second initiation ceremony was performed when the mature girl had found a partner and all the marriage arrangements had been made. The girl underwent sex education, which emphasized techniques for pleasing her future husband. Submission in every way to her husband was taken quite seriously. The girl was told never to argue with her husband and to treat him like a king. Although the man went through the Nyau initiation ceremony, he was not told how to please his wife sexually. After the marriage ceremony there was another rite where the newly weds received instruction on how they were to conduct themselves as married people (Mwale 1977).

Today medical science has shown that pregnancies in girls between twelve and fifteen are very risky for the life of both the mother and the unborn child. Chances are high that neither survives. When the mother survives she has a very high incidence of cervical diseases. In the absence of such knowledge in traditional society, the responsibility for the death of the young mother, or the child, or both, was put on the husband, who underwent unnecessary punishment.

Traditionally men married at an older age because they had to build a hut for the prospective wife. Additionally, the young men would help cultivate and tend their in-laws gardens. These men were seen as workhorses. A man did, however, have the right to choose whom he wanted to marry and could ask his uncle to approach the woman's

parents. He would look for a wife that was obedient, skilled in cooking, and had a good reputation. Women may not approach men in marriage (Phiri 1997; Mwale 1977).

### Divorce

A woman could divorce her husband if he failed to have sexual relations with her. Additionally, she was permitted a divorce if he did not provide clothing for her or if he was beating her often for no adequate reason. If he was infertile or deserted her, or he did not like the wife's relatives she could get a divorce. Additionally, if he did not perform his share of duties like building a house for her or working in her parent's' garden the wife was also permitted to leave him. Nevertheless, women were still very subservient and powerless compared to men in the home (Phiri 1997).

There was social segregation between men, women, and children. Women worked and ate in a group with their children, away from the men. The best food went to the men and the women and the children got second best. When speaking to a man, it was considered rude to look him in the eye or to argue with him. Kneeling to one's elders, especially men, was a mark of respect. The man could divorce his wife if she was lazy, could not cook well, was unfaithful, nagged for no adequate reason, was unfriendly to her husbands relations, or if her babies died. Unfaithfulness on the part of the wife could result in divorce, but not the unfaithfulness of the husband (Phiri 1997; Mwale 1977).

### Widowhood

In the event of the death of a husband, the wife stayed in the house with the dead body until the burial. The mother and widow sat on the mat next to the head of the corpse. All of the men sat outside the house and did not cry as much as the women. During the time of mourning, the women of the bereaved family did not take a bath until

after the burial. Burial took place one or two days following the death and took place in the man's village. Afterwards, there were rituals of drinking medicine, cutting hair, and burning the house to drive off evil spirits. The widow underwent seclusion before being free to remarry. With her own home gone, she had to return to her parent's home (Phiri 1997).

### Religion

The Chewa believed in the existence of a God who was known by many names that describe the elements of wet weather: Leza (sustainer), Chiuta (rainbow), Mphambe (lightening), and Chisumphu (giver of rain). God was worshipped communally in territorial rain shrines. The religious roles of women were very clear and accepted at the territorial rain shrines. Women known, as spirit wives were the controllers of these shrines and here they received messages from God to the communities when in a state of ecstasy.

Women served as prophetesses at rain shrines from approximately 900-1600 A.D. W.H.J. Rangeley (cited by Phiri 1997), who researched the central region of Malawi in the 1950's, mentioned there were priestesses in the region. In some cases the role of spirit medium passed from women to men; however, there were women who stayed at the shrine even with a male medium to serve as the wife of the spirit of *M'bona*. The Supreme Being is mentioned most often as male, but the spirit or god of weather was genderless. People chosen to represent God to the people could either be male or female (Chakanza cited in Phiri 1997).

In summary, these oral historical accounts suggest that among the Chewa of the central Region, women held the highest religious position in society. The principal

intercessors with God on behalf of the community were through women. Some of the religious literature suggests that when Christianity came to Malawi, only men were given leadership positions in the church supposedly in keeping with the culture of the Chewa people. Phiri (1997) demonstrates through her extensive research that women did have leadership in religious worship in traditional culture. The imposition of male leadership was in keeping with colonial Christian beliefs rather than to honor the Chewa culture.

### **Colonialism**

In 1887, Chief Matabele granted mineral rights to Cecil Rhodes, a British financier. This grant led to the formation of the British South Africa Company in 1889. This company proposed to establish and promote trade, commerce, civilization and good government. British control of the region continued to expand. Despite the African uprisings, they founded the British Central African Protectorate in 1904, which was later renamed Nyasaland in 1907 (Sanders 1988).

To establish a peaceful construction of the new British authority, the true chiefs of each district were sought out. Along with the new British laws and policies, tribal law was codified. While traditional law provided a central role for negotiation and compromise, the new code only considered right and wrong. When a law was broken the chiefs were given the power of life and death. Colonial law defined and treated the male as the marital authority and the sole owner of goods, wife, and children. Women possessed a minority status in relation to her husband (Chanock 1985).

### **Education**

Missionaries did bring education to the Malawian people. The curriculum incorporated the Christian philosophies, which included during that time the idea of male

superiority. Additionally, women were not encouraged to go very far in the educational programs since only men were to be trained as religious leaders. Additionally, men were encouraged to develop their farms for profit crops and were provided with seeds and instruction in technology, while women were taught to be docile and to engage in housekeeping and other domestic activities. Racism of course was a component of education. Neither men nor women were to directly associate with whites.

### Religion

Christianity as represented by the Presbyterian Church came as a mixed blessing. Passages from the Bible were used to silence women and prevent their protesting sexism in the church. They were denied leadership roles despite the women's desire to serve God. At the same time there was an elevation of women's personal dignity by eliminating oppressive elements in the traditional initiation ceremonies, bride wealth, child marriages, and widowhood rites. Polygamy was banned; however, nothing was done to alleviate the suffering of the women who had been deserted. Although girls were a financial burden to their parents, the church refused sacraments to men who married women younger than age 16. This created difficulties for the families. The church's position resulted in a struggle between Western culture and the traditional Malawian cultures.

### Cash Economy

The government developed land for the selling of cash crops such as tea and peanuts. Malawian men, leaving the women to work the household land, labored in these large farms for small wages. Additionally, the government offered cash jobs for working in mines in neighboring countries. Women often looked to a variety of resources to

survive including making and selling beer. This, of course, was not permitted by the Synod and these women were refused membership in the church. This left women with almost no positive alternatives. On the one hand she could sell beer or attach herself to a polygamous man and leave the church, or stay in the church and face grave poverty. Because of the tremendous burden of their work, they no longer were able to send their girls to school since they were needed at home. Women seemed unable to change their illiterate status and were literally broken by their increasing workload (Chanock 1985).

### Women's organizations in the Church

Beginning in 1939, churchwomen began to ask for a women's organization that would allow them to have a voice and ministry in their churches. The organization known as *Umodzi*, provided a way to link together all Presbyterian Christian women through yearly conferences. A special uniform was designed to let the other members of the church know that one was part of the women's organization. These uniforms of gray and white became the symbol of "Godly" Christian women. Those who were upstanding members of the church had their family's funerals attended by the women in the organization dressed in full uniform. However, it created a great burden for those in abject poverty. They often could not afford even the head covering. Additionally, scriptures were to be memorized. This was quite difficult for the many women who were illiterate. Women were also scorned and prevented from becoming members if they did not lead an exemplary Christian life. The missionaries assumed leadership positions in the various church organizations and were the ones who determined who was leading this exemplary life. As Ms Phiri (1997) noted, "... missionaries were in control of everything during the colonial era."



In the late 1990's, the women of Blantyre became concerned for widows who typically had all their belongings taken by the husband's family and the women who had been left abandoned from polygamous relationships. The Presbyterian Church, like other protestant denominations, had required men to divorce their wives other than their first wife. The Presbyterian women of Blantyre asked the Presbyterian Church governing body for an alternative arrangement for them. They suggested establishing a center where women could be trained in sewing, knitting, and other crafts so that they could make a living. Additionally, education could be provided to help women gain an understanding of agricultural and nutritional principles, and training in midwifery or nursing. Although to date these actions have not been implemented, the Church did stop the degrading of widows and the stealing of their property. Additionally, training was provided for Christian men to write wills to protect their wives. But these were minimal efforts in the face of overwhelming injustices.

### **Banda's Regime**

In 1964, Hastings Banda, one of the most educated black men in the country, sought to replace the oppressive regime of colonialism. Representing the Nyasaland African Congress (NAC) Banda became the first president and declared himself president for life (Young 1994). The four cornerstones of his government were unity, loyalty, obedience, and discipline. One of his main political platforms was bringing higher status to women. He encouraged and supported the formation of the women's league, which Banda placed under the direction of the MCP (military police). This military police group became known as Banda's men. Refusing to date one of them was considered a serious offense. Additionally, everyone supporting Banda's regime was given a party

card. This gradually became a passport to enter hospitals and receive care, to buy at the major markets, and to ride the mini buses (Mkamanga 2000).

Yet, despite his heavy authoritative hand, Banda claimed that he was the protector and custodian of all the women in his country. Since he cared for them so much, he expected them to be grateful. When Banda came to town, he wanted all the women of the village to dance for him. It became obvious that many of the women were in grave poverty. Banda decided the women who represented him must look good and required the women to dance in uniform. Unfortunately, they still had to pay for the expensive cloth that bore his picture. Additionally, they were not to wear the dress except for the dance and the uniform cloth was changed every one to two years (Mkamanga 2000).

The ceremonial dance itself also created an unfair burden for the women. Since transportation to where Banda was staying required lengthy bus rides, the women began their journey at approximately 4:00 a.m. for a function that wouldn't begin until 2:00 p.m. Then they would receive little food and would be expected to dance as long as Banda wanted. There was usually plenty of cheap beer and often the parties became drunken orgies. Another injustice to women during Banda's regime dealt with polygamous relationships. Polygamy was encouraged and blessed by Dr. Banda. He encouraged men to take more than one wife (Mkamanga 2000).

### Education

Although Banda had promised free education for girls, he failed to mention the type of education available. While Banda received lavish gifts such as cars and vans, the schools in the area were so inadequate they children often met outside. There were few books, pens, or paper. Mkamanga (2000), who lived in central Malawi during colonialism

stated: "Throughout my primary education in the late fifties and early sixties, which was during the colonial period I always had a desk to write on and got free text books, notebooks, pens and ink despite my being in the rural areas of Livingstonia and Chilumba. Yet my children who were all born in the seventies and eighties and lived in the capital city's prime area (Area 12 at the time) when according to Banda the economy was booming, had no chance of such educational facilities as I did."

The girls were expected to be grateful for their free education and were expected to come out to entertain Banda when he came to town. The boys, on the other hand, were permitted to continue with their schooling. Additionally, young girls during the dance performances were exposed to beer drinking and drugs. They would often have to walk home alone in the dark and many sexual assaults took place (Mkamanga, 2000).

### Economy

During Banda's regime, as the illiteracy rate for young girls and women continued to climb, only 4% of this group was eligible to obtain formal employment where reading and writing in both Chewa and English was expected. Additionally, Banda praised the uneducated and non-professional women by appointing them to various government positions while ridiculing those in nursing. The results of these political appointments were women who were ill equipped for the positions. They became observers rather than active participants in developing government policy. The men who were employed and who were well educated ran the government programs. There was an undercurrent of fear for professional women. "The only way to prevent landing in trouble was to be tight-lipped and follow Banda's directives word for word and by the letter" (Mkamanga 2000:57).

## Religion

Banda also controlled and imposed restrictions on various religious groups. The Jehovah Witness religion did not allow its members to belong to any government party. This, of course, did not bode well with Banda. He banned the sect in 1967 and by 1972 mob justice prevailed with beatings and killings in broad daylight of those who still held to their faith. Their places of worship were destroyed and as the Witnesses fled the country the party inherited their business and property.

Many of the other denominations lived in fear as well. The preachers and missionaries were carefully scrutinized and not permitted to speak out against the injustices of women. Others felt the church should simply preach the gospel of Christ and ignore the political environment in which the people had to live (Mkamanga, 2000).

In 1990, the first group of Malawian Women in Theology was organized by the Church of Central Africa Presbyterian (CCAP). At their first meeting they shared experiences and named the various forms of oppression, prejudice and injustice against women in church and society (Phiri 1997). This was the outcome of some of the women in seminary being permitted to attend the Pan African Christian women Alliance (PACWA) in Nairobi, Kenya August 5-12, 1989. The theme of this meeting was "Our time has come." This newly desired liberation within religious organizations emerged to include political freedom which would eventually come in 1994.

## Laws

The establishment of oppressive laws and government policies became resented by the Malawian people with establishment of a democratic government in the border country of Zambia. In 1991, Zambia's dictator for 27 years had fallen. The winds of

democracy were felt most by the oppressed women in Malawi. Malawian women came to recognize that empowerment and status meant that you had the right to voice your opinion in what was happening to you and around you. The impressive titles, so generously bestowed on Malawian women by Banda, were soon recognized to be nothing more than names without power or status (Schoffeleers 1999).

Banda had always declared women as his “mbumba,” or his protected ones. However, women felt anything but protected. Forced to dance to please their dictator, women would perform in the heaviest tropical storms with babies on their backs; pregnant women were asked to buy a party card for their unborn baby. Women came to desire involvement in the discussions that concerned them and their community. To Banda’s dismay, women became involved in the various pressure groups to support multi-party democracy. Despite imprisonment and torture (Peltzer cited by Mkamanga 2000), the women when released would join the efforts again.

Fax machines and copy machines became the way to distribute literature. Although many Malawian women could not read, those who could would share the information. Rather than mere meaningless titles and policies developed by the men of the country, women wanted their capabilities recognized and utilized for the good of the community. During Banda's regime this was non-existent. Even chiefs were reduced to being pawns in Banda's hands, knowing if they disagreed with him they, too, were vulnerable for imprisonment or death. The people rejoiced in the streets, when their country, too, embraced multi-party democracy in 1994.

## Summary

The Chewa people of the central region of Malawi have had a rich and tumultuous history. The literature suggests that prior to the colonization of Malawi the Chewa people were a matrilineal, polygamous society. Stratification developed by age and gender. For women, their rights and duties were taught during the initiation ceremony known as *chinamwali*. The initiation ceremonies more than marked the beginning of adulthood it offered sex education, emphasized the spiritual aspects of fertility, correct social behavior, respect for elders and authority, and the need for endurance of physical hardship. It was the essence of Chewa society. There were curses and punishments included for those girls who were "rude or disobedient" (Phiri 1997: 268). Thus, the patterned behaviors that emerged represented the symbolic themes of respect, duty, and obedience. These behaviors and symbolic meanings were taught to the young girls of central Malawi and they became the embodiment of being a good Chewa woman.

In the early 1900's as the British became involved with trade in this region, the forming of a British protectorate was inevitable. The federation of Nyasaland (Malawi) was formed in 1907. Pachai (1973) suggests that colonialism was a force attacking native societies. In an effort to protect their native culture, the right to continue with Nyau initiations for young men and *Chinamwali* for young women was fervently protected. With the strong Christian missionary influence, some adaptations to the initiation ceremony were made for the new converts to Christianity. Specifically, sexual initiation was abolished. What emerged from this adaptation was the development of a new symbolic theme's for correct social behaviors. These behaviors including kneeling to your husband to receive instructions, complete obedience to him, and feeding him first

now represented being a good Chewa woman and being a good Christian. Social sanctions for disobedience came not only from the traditional authorities, but also from the church.

When independence from Britain was declared in 1964, Banda's dictatorship further codified specific behaviors expected of his women or *mbumba*. Laws were made forbidding women to wear slacks, to use birth control, or to refuse sexual relations with their husbands. Polygamous relationships for men were encouraged – Banda's country would grow from all the children born. Banda's message in uniting the various regions and tribes of the area included doing this for the good of Malawi. Now the women were not only to be good Chewa women, and good Christians; they were to be good Malawians. Banda's definition of a good Malawian included complete obedience to his dictates. Although resentment eventually built among some of the women, the rigid patterned behaviors seemed to remain (Pachai 1973).

The results chapter will discuss in detail the various patterned behaviors that were described and or detected in the focus group discussions, in-depth interviews, conversations with key informants, and participant observation. It will provide an understanding of the symbolic meanings of these behaviors and how these behaviors helped to socially construct and perpetuate unequal access to resources for the women in the central region of Malawi.

## CHAPTER III

### LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter will provide a thorough examination of the research literature on rituals, behaviors and the social construction of inequality. The first part of the review will critically look at the past research on rituals. While the majority of work is not directly relevant to social inequality, there is much work that lays the foundation for the importance of rituals in developing social community and sacred reality. Secondly, the research regarding social cognitive schemas that drive our behaviors will be reviewed. Many scholars including Mead (1934) Goffman (1959) and Blumer (1967) recognized that the symbolic meanings of acts or objects are a foundational part of social interaction. Conversation, gestures and patterned behaviors that have been addressed in the literature will be critically examined. This will also include research that has considered the complexity of social inequality from a social constructionist framework. Finally, the literature that has focused on the different aspects of behaviors or beliefs of Malawian women will be reviewed.

#### **Rituals and Sacred Realities**

Durkheim was one of the first sociologists to argue that religious beliefs are a significant part of a society's social reality. While the truth of a specific religious ideology may be considered by some to be irrational, the significance of the collective beliefs of a social group must not be overlooked. Durkheim (1955:331 cited by Gephart



1999) states “social life, in all its aspects and at every moment of its history, is made possible only by a vast symbolism.”

Specifically, Durkheim (1955:536 cited by Gephart 1999) viewed rituals as important sources of symbolic meaning. Social life is developed through an “interlacing of interaction, social organization, normative regulation and symbolic representation.” These symbolic meanings found in various religious rituals are often part of the collective memory of a society. Their significance is taught and passed down from one generation to the next through various socializing agencies, i.e., schools, religious institutions, or ceremonial rites. As children learn the expected ritualized behaviors and perform them, it unites the children with others who embrace those practices. History, memory, and identity as expressed through various religious rituals are a central part of the conscience collective (Gephart 1999 citing Durkheim).

Some cultures have incorporated everyday acts within the scope of religious rituals. Hancock (1999:21, 26) in her work “Womanhood in the Making: Domestic Ritual and Public Culture in Urban South India,” demonstrates how everyday actions were embedded in religious rituals of the caste system including cleaning oneself, eating, and touching others. She found the majority of women performed a variety of household tasks including housecleaning, marketing, and entertaining guests that were interwoven with various ritualized practices. The women often defined themselves in terms of these specific tasks. Hancock (1999) also recognizes that rituals may be a site where women negotiate change. They may altar rituals slightly to test whether or not these small changes are accepted. Her ideas are supported by other scholars including Goffman (1959), Turner (1969), and Foucault (1984).

Religious rituals are very important in the lives of the women in Malawi and other African countries in sub-Saharan Africa. Writing specifically about the country of Ghana, Oduyoye (1992) found that religion in most African countries has been overlooked by many scholars. It is viewed as an insignificant part of social life. Speaking as an African woman, she wanted to critically look at the roles or responsibilities women have with the various social dimensions of religion and the various religious beliefs which serve or obstruct women's development.

Oduyoye (1992) argues that rites of passage play a major role in African religious institutions whether traditional or Christian. Birth is the first celebrated rite of passage. In Ghana, as in other sub-Saharan countries, there is no physical assault on the child as in some cultures with piercing of the ears or circumcision. Birth is a time to introduce the child to the world and the particular community to which he or she has been born. Puberty, the second rite of passage, is recognized as the passage from childhood to adulthood. This rite of passage into adulthood is typically conducted for young girls by women and for young boys by men. Pregnancy becomes an abomination if it occurs before the puberty rites have been given. Marriage is another time in sub-Saharan African communities where a young person is more fully accepted into the decision making process of traditional authority. There is a public acceptance of child-bearing and the transferring of authority over the woman from the father to the husband.

While there are some differences in the rites of passage for Malawian girls, the significance of them was similar (according to Oduyoye 1992) to the countries in sub-Saharan Africa. Her article (Oduyoye 1992) further suggests that religion and rituals related to religion play a significant part in the giving and taking of power and influence

and the defining of sin and evil. These terms have significant symbolic meaning to those who participate in the various religious institutions. To be defined as sinful is to be viewed by others in the religious community as one to be avoided. Additionally, the various sacraments of the Lord's Supper or belonging to the inner groups of the church are denied to those labeled as sinners. During the various rites of passage including the marriage ceremony, women are given their position in the church: one under the authority of the husband. Additionally, when an act is defined as sin such as a pregnancy before marriage, the church authorities determine who is to blame. Quite often it is the girls who must bear the brunt of shame and guilt.

### **Social Cognition and Behaviors**

The two fundamental assumptions of social cognition theory are: thoughts shape behavior and there are limits to the capacity for human cognition. Due to the second assumption, these thoughts are organized into systems of categorization. One conception of cognitive structures or thoughts is social schemas or organized knowledge differentiated by its content. Roles or persons are understood by knowledge acquired about specific people or roles concerning specific social positions. Language becomes the significant medium for learning about various social categories (Howard 1994).

Ethnomethodology, on the other hand, explores how social life is developed through the interactions and achievements of individuals (Garfinkel 1984; Boden 1990). Under usual conditions, most actors typically do what is reasonable and effective. Cicourel (1974) emphasized that people act on the basis of meanings. What an individual believes forms the mental rules and procedures for behaviors. While ethnomethodology

emphasizes behaviors, social cognition theory recognizes the meanings and mental rules that help actors to decide which behaviors to express (Howard 1994).

Ahlander and Bahr (1995) argue that social cognition is an important part of the traditional roles of women in the home that has been neglected in the sociology psychology literature. Much of the research that has been conducted in this field often works under the assumptions that housework and child care are drudgery or tasks to be avoided or at least more equitably delegated (citing Kamo 1988; Rabuzzi 1982). In their review of current social psychology literature, they found that there are examples of significant meanings given to family work. One of the first themes that emerged from the literature review was love and caring. It represented more than the mere fulfillment of obligations to family, it expressed a moral component.

For some women, household tasks and caring for their children provided a sense of self-worth and fulfillment. One example was the success felt by a mother when she arranged bits of fruit to form a clown's face in a gelatin salad for a special occasion (Ahlander and Bahr 1995 citing Cowan 1976:23). Others described their duties as a "calling." The women interviewed told of the stories and ritual that celebrated their family's identities. The oft quoted phrase "the hand that rocks the cradle rules the world" expressed the ideology that women were called to raise the future generations. This research highlights the importance of recognizing the diverse cognitive schemas that shape women's behaviors. What may seem like drudgery and unimportant tasks to some may have an entirely different interpretation by other actors.

There may also be competing attitudes toward various types of behaviors. Burn (1996) noted that while women may wish that their husbands did more of the household

work, they had competing beliefs that good women take care of the house. While being overwhelmed with the many tasks they must take on with the addition of outside employment, they continue to fulfill both roles while feeling angry and 'bad' (Burn 1996 citing Biernat and Wortman 1991).

These theoretical approaches and research studies suggest that the meanings people attribute to various behaviors are significant. It is often the driving force that perpetuates the taking on of many tasks or the desiring of a specific role that others may find less desirable. The reason for a behavior may be so strong the behavior is performed regardless of the negative consequence to the actor.

### **Patterned Behaviors and Speech**

Patterned behaviors and speech shaped by the repertoire of mental rules known to actors often help create or construct hierarchal social relationships. For women in 18<sup>th</sup> century European society, there were many boundary maintaining behaviors, conversations, and resources enabling those of different classes to affirm their place and precise location in the social structure. Those of the upper class were taught certain manners to observe, specific types of clothing to wear, the appropriate formal conversation in which to engage and specific ways in which to carry themselves. Although for many upper class women their status was quite repressive with all its proper demands; it was also very 'cozy, comfortable and safe' (Bernard 1981).

The repetitive behaviors of actors have also been considered by researchers. The longer one performs specific behaviors or mannerisms the more likely certain patterned interactions come to be defined as normal. Wolf (1986) suggests that with the passage of time habituation takes place and routines seem to be inevitable. Life patterns develop and

the relations between superior and subordinate become normal or even inevitable. Additionally, through isolation or lack of knowledge of acceptable alternative interactions behaviors are more likely to remain the same. Habituation or often repeated behaviors over time create a sense of more security and protection. Women or men in oppressive situations may choose to continue in the patterned relationships especially when there is a lack of perceived alternatives.

The control of conversations may be another symbolic manifestation of power relationships. Kolluck, Blumstein, and Schwartz (1985:34) found that there are implicit rules that govern polite or proper conversation. The ones who interrupted others frequently or dominated conversations were often those with higher status. Therefore, conversation may be part of patterned behaviors that allow certain actors to accomplish his or her goals of interaction or effectively block others from delivering their message. Kolluck et al.'s research suggests that the one who dominates the conversation, who is privileged to interrupt, and who asks questions is often the one with greater authority or status.

Simple acknowledgements or informal greetings provide for some a sense of group identification and means of defining self (Berger cited by Pate 1994). Looking at the micro-level gestures of notice or regard, Pate (1994) found that among African-American men acknowledgement by other African-American men provided positive feelings. While others in society may not acknowledge them, they are pleased that they can give recognition to each other and purposively decide to provide this acknowledgement between themselves. This also suggests that knowing one's status or position in society does not automatically prevent negotiation or a creative sense of

agency about what one can control. It is important, then, when studying social inequality that some of the multi-faceted aspects of interaction be considered.

Access to informal means of power was critically examined by Yuko Ogasawara (1998), in her work "Office Ladies and Salaried Men: Power, Gender and Work in Japanese Companies." She found that although women had a disadvantaged status economically, the ethnographic data revealed they had certain power and autonomy in their home and in the workplace. The interview data revealed that men were very dependent on their wives in the running of the home and were often treated as dependent children. Middle-aged female office workers also gained power in the workplace. They were able to claim central space within informal structures and had more autonomy and influence than the younger men. The ability to have or occupy certain "space" as reflective of power was also discussed by Foucault (1984). Additionally, Simmel's (1950) work suggests there are multi-faceted aspects of economically disadvantaged positions. Women may choose protection or security over more expanded freedoms and find within certain domains of interaction elements of control.

Another aspect of micro-level interaction involves the structural constraints in which face to face interaction occurs. Nader's (1997) research critically looked at actors' decisions when eating certain foods. She found part of the choice required understanding the accessibility of stores for individuals to purchase food. Also, there were differences between actors and their resources that would allow them to purchase certain types of food. Beyond financial ability, there were for some individual's social or normative customs that restricted or required certain foods to be eaten. Finally, large organizations that provided food at the local level were dependent on various means of transportation.

This study strongly supports the need to consider not only micro-level symbolic behaviors but larger macro-level social agencies that may impact them.

These research studies support the thesis that patterned behaviors developed from a repertoire of mental rules help create and shape hierarchical social relationships. Whether through simple courtesies and manners that provide boundary maintaining behaviors or simple acknowledgements and greetings, behaviors and the mental rules upon which they rest matter. Insignificant gestures, so easily overlooked, provide an affirmation of worth. It is important when considering the creation and perpetuation of inequality, to consider the meaningful, patterned behaviors of actors.

### **Women and Gender Roles of Malawi**

There has been some research that has examined the impact of traditional gendered roles for the young women of Malawi. Stromquist and Murphy (1994) found that despite the new government's program of free primary education to girls, girls were the most likely to discontinue their education. In their extensive qualitative study of several rural areas, they found that 68% of the girls reported the need to help with domestic chores while only 39% of the boys did. Additionally, families mentioned the need for their daughters to marry at an early age so they could receive the "bride price" from the prospective groom's family.

In regard to higher education, Phiri (1996) submitted surveys to the female students at Chancellor College in Zomba, Malawi. She found of the 354 students who returned the surveys, 23 reported having been raped, and 67% had been sexually harassed including unwelcome sexual advances. Simply writing the results and presenting them resulted in the researcher's office at the college being damaged, her life threatened, and



her being denied admittance to the women's guild of the Presbyterian Church. Her conclusion—how can young women continue to pursue their dream of college education when they don't feel safe? Other interviews with women in rural areas have noted that girls were discouraged from even beginning secondary or higher education for fear of sexual assault or pregnancy (Ngwira, Kayambazinthu, Msiska, and Kamchedzera 2000).

While in some societies domestic interaction is one area of power for women, Malawian women are often powerless in the home. The control of women's sexuality is one example. Hickey (1999) found from her interviews (N=54) that women would be considered immoral or loose if they wanted to initiate sex with their husband. Additionally, they must never refuse their husbands' advances and must allow their husbands to make the decisions about contraceptive use. When asked about rape and physical abuse, they stated that they were common occurrences. Sadly, the women stated these events were accepted by both men and women in their villages when they felt they were deserved. The belief that women deserve abusive treatment or "ask" for rape is still prevalent.

The complete obedience and subservient role of women in the home has also been studied. Msiska (1974) noted there is no freedom or autonomy for women in their home. Men have all the power. Women must be courteous and obedient, speaking softly. Most importantly, she found that women were often hesitant to change these roles. The author urges: "Let us not be complacent and say these customs are from our ancestors, therefore they must all be good and useful. Some of the customs are notoriously bad and do not fit into our developing world" (Msiska 1974: 46). Yet, it was the developing world and its

impact on the matrilineal society of Malawi that quite likely strengthened some of the subservient roles of women.

Colonialism had serious consequences on the matrilineal society of Malawi. One of the effects of British occupation was the introduction of a cash economy and the almost exclusive use of male labor. As the young men would leave to work the mines in the southern region, women suffered from lack of financial and emotional security and the increased physical burden of managing their farms. With the increasing number of young men eventually deserting their wives, women were instructed with increasing fervor to please their husbands, to satisfy him, and to obey and respect him. In the various instructions found in the Christian and traditional puberty rites of passage were admonitions that if young women failed in their duties they would certainly be left alone (Phiri 1983).

Another consequence of colonialism was the weakening of the mother's family in the marriage relationship. The Christian religion from the west brought with it teachings emphasizing the authority of the husband and father. Women were dependent on their male relatives prior to the influence of Christianity. In the central region of Malawi, the maternal uncle has historically been a woman's authority. Several researchers have noted that the mother's brother no longer exercises this kind of domestic authority or provides the type of intervention in marital disputes that he once did. Husbands are now taking over some of this authority as influenced by Christian beliefs. Women, thus, find themselves with fewer options for communicating their opinions and desires and their authority still under male control (Phiri 1983 citing Roberts 1954; Bruwer, 1955; Makumbi 1974; Kishindo 1981).

There are some aspects of domestic life that do provide a means of communicating a woman's concerns and her conditions. While pounding maize, Mvula (1986) suggests women often gather together and sing creating a verbal strategy to negotiate change within their social environment. Her study found the songs provide a way to have freedom of expression about women's fears and interpretations of social life. The women openly conveyed through musical verse their family experiences. One song conveys a woman's discontent for her husband's laziness: "My husband likes watching soccer. Let's go to the cornfield, No I am ill. Let's go to the shops. No I am ill. Let's go to make love. Sure, I fancy that too. Now, I am fine." The song also focuses on the man's appetite for sexual pleasure and although he is expected to be the breadwinner he pretends to be ill. Although a woman may not have the ability to confront her husband in face-to-face interaction, the songs sung in front of the other women of the village allow her to verbally attack him while not in his presence. In the small rural communities, such verbal messages may provide a method to exert social pressure on the husband.

Another song expresses one form of power women sometimes use to change their husband's behavior: 'My son, my daughter, your father is ill-mannered. Cornmeal is in the house, meaning ashes. Salt is in the house, meaning sand. I'm going to work in Jo'burg, meaning going to a beer party, I've received a money order, meaning a calabash of beer; Today, I'll sleep behind a rock. Today, I'll sleep behind a rock.' This song, the researcher suggests reveals how the woman will punish the man for not providing salt, food or money, she will deny him sexual pleasure with her. In conclusion, the author suggests "these pounding songs seem to become a verbal strategy for negotiating one's

daily experiences in relation to the problems with their husband's behaviors" (Mvula 1986:272).

Beyond the home, women were also restricted in regard to traditional authority. The highest authority in the traditional system is the chief. He rules over several villages and those who rule the individual villages are his male relatives. Chanock (1985:39) noted that chiefs had power of life and death; they ruled not by kindness but by fear. While central Malawi is matrilineal, the traditional authority structure is patriarchal in nature. Aguilar and Aguilar (2001) provided an in-depth look at the hidden limitations of women's roles in the traditional authority system. Although a village is structured around a senior woman, usually a grandmother or great-grandmother, this woman is merely a figurehead. The chief is succeeded by his sister's son. When a district needs a new chief, several of the nearby chiefs will gather. They do not appoint the chief's successor, but rather appoint the administrative assistant to the chief who is chosen from the senior women of the various villages. The chiefs consider which of the older women will have the most knowledge about a particular village. She should be very mature, serious, wise, and a grandmother. Therefore, women who are single or have never born a child or have a girl child who is barren have no chance for even this limited assistant position.

An important role for the woman chosen is to be the keeper of administrative secrets. The chief is responsible for choosing the men of the village who will be the sexual initiator (*fisi*) of the young girls. The woman who assists him must not reveal this to protect the wife of the *fisi*. Additionally, the chief himself may have intimate indiscretions and the administrative assistant will protect the chief by keeping this information private. Additionally, this female assistant will frequently visit with the

women of the village and find out which of the girls have come of age. The chief has the ultimate control of the young girls who reach puberty and makes the decision about their initiation and who their sexual initiator will be. If a young girl is to have a Christian initiation (conducted under the authority of the church without sexual initiation), the chief must still be informed and paid with gifts (Aguilar and Aguilar 2001).

The social construction, symbolic nature, and control of menstruation, motherhood, and the body are often not even mentioned in the research literature about social inequality. Mukhopadhyay and Higgins (1988) suggest many studies are too simplistic and lack descriptive content that would give a broader understanding of gender inequality. Further, the indigenous voices of women should be heard. They should be the ones to provide their accounts of their beliefs, values, and behaviors. This is one of the gaps in the literature my dissertation research will partially fill.

The church is another social institution that provides an important place for women's social interaction. The people in the central region of Malawi have had a long history of various religious practices and beliefs. With the coming of David Livingstone and the impact of colonialism, the Presbyterian Church (CCAP) has become one of the primary religious organizations in the central region. Phiri (1997) provides an in-depth look at the impact of the Presbyterian Church on women in the central region of Malawi. There are two central areas where the church has had a significant influence on women: the Christian initiation ceremony for young girls (*chilangizo*) and the women's guild organization.

According to Phiri (1997) traditional initiation ceremonies with their inclusion of sexual initiation were banned by the church. Those families who allowed their young

daughters to participate could be suspended from church membership and not permitted to partake in the sacraments. Because of the importance of this initiation ceremony to the Chewa, the church decided to permit a new Christian ceremony to take its place. This ceremony would include similar aspects of the traditional ceremony including the instructions for caring for the body, physical implications of puberty, and behavior toward men and elders. It also incorporated the traditional practices of submission to husbands, care of the husband and home, and self-control during mourning. Girls were taught moral standards of the church including the rule that if they became pregnant before marriage they would be denied the sacraments for 18 months. Girls who became involved in polygamous relationships would be denied church membership. While the church initiation ceremony provided one means of protection from sexual initiation, it created and emphasized other traditional norms that devalued or oppressed women. It was now a Christian duty to wash your husband's clothes and to assume all the household work (Phiri 1997; Banda 2001).

The second aspect of the church's influence came with the development of the women's organizations in the various protestant and Catholic denominations. Originally created to give women a voice and service roles in the church which had been previously denied to them, it became an organization that also punished women who were not completely obedient to their husbands or accepting of their traditional roles. Furthermore, while the male leadership embraced the idea of the women's organization, when a female director was appointed over the women's organizations in various churches, she frequently had no office in the administrative organization of the Christian churches. The influence of the church can also be seen in the fact that when some of the members of the

organization tried to organize a peaceful march against the exclusion of single women in the Presbyterian Church, the women who participated were suspended from the women's guild - the name given to the women's organization of the Presbyterian Churches (Phiri 1996).

Recently, Banda (2001) critically looked at the role of Baptist polity in the central region of Malawi and its impact on women. The Baptist Convention of Malawi was registered with the Malawi Government in 1972, but its history goes back as early as 1954 when the Foreign Mission Board sent George Sadler to explore the possibilities of mission work in Nyasaland. In 1959, two missionary couples, the Albrights and Westers, began work in Blantyre. In 1964, a separate mission was formed and they were called the Baptist Mission of central Africa. The mission decided to follow a policy of not subsidizing pastor's salaries and local church programs. Financial aid was limited to establishing necessary institutions and providing partial aid for church buildings.

The Baptist women, who accompanied their husbands, had a major role in defining the Baptist doctrine and its influence on the Malawian women. According to the policy of the Southern Baptist Mission Board, these women were first to be good wives to their husbands and to look after their home and children. Secondly, they were to be supporters to their husbands' ministry (Upton cited by Banda, 2001). The women established community-work in several districts, which was geared to teaching native women how to sew. Their work attracted the attention of many because these classes were free of charge (Garner cited by Banda 2001).

There were no single women missionaries during this period, so the Malawian women were only exposed to the leadership of married women. These roles were

accepted because they were in agreement with the way the culture defined women's roles in the traditional Malawian society. A woman's place was in the kitchen and in areas of teaching. Women were to work with and be instructed by older women as reflected in the Malawian initiation ceremonies.

Rachel, the young Malawian woman with whom I stayed, felt these early roles were ones of equality or partnership between men and women. I wondered if it just seemed natural to her since this is what she had been taught and had observed. As Wolf (1986) suggested, habituation and routines over time come to be seen as normal.

As women sought more leadership positions in the church, women were encouraged to serve in more supportive roles. Within these supportive roles, however, women did find a certain degree of liberty and ability to serve their community. Singing is a good example. Women were permitted to sing on Sundays and at funeral services. Many of the community felt the compassion of these women and respected their efforts (Banda 2001).

During the 1970s, with colonialism abolished and Banda's dictatorship well underway, women looked to formal organizations as one way to unite their fellow Baptist women and demonstrate their worth in the church. As former president Banda's political organization gave him power over the British, so the women's organizations would provide a way of empowerment within the church. This had already happened in the United States. Women within the Baptist churches in the United States sought leadership roles in the church and the Women Missionary Union emerged in 1888 (WMU Manual 1979 cited by Banda 2001). The Malawian Baptist women's missionary organization was



officially called *Umodzi* and its aim was to share the gospel quoting 1 Corinthians 3:9a "For we are God's fellow workers."

The newly constructed women's organization and the training that became established was soon stifled and marginalized at the mission regional level. Although a Malawian National Convention was established (a national representation of the local *Umodzi* groups); its funds were quite low. Despite this, missionaries withdrew funds for women's activities, training, transport, and accommodations to various leadership meetings. Additionally, the booklets used for training had to be paid for by the Malawian women. This produced an undue hardship on the women resulting in diminished participation in the Baptist women's organization (Chirwa cited by Banda 2001). Both *Umodzi*, the Presbyterian Women's Guild, and the different Catholic women's organizations currently seem to have a significant number of women in the central region of Malawi who participate. Women are still frequently seen in their various uniforms representing their particular organization: purple, Baptist, gray, Presbyterian, and black Catholic. Although their authority within the larger administrative organization of the church may have diminished, status and membership in the organization seems prevalent.

The market economy is an area where women have had limited participation. While 85% of the country is agricultural, women's duties have been restricted to raising crops used for personal consumption. This became problematic for the many women who lost their husbands due in part to the increasing death toll of AIDS. The life expectancy in the country has dropped from 46 years in 1994 to 37 years in 2002 (W.H.O. 2003). The increasing number of women who faced the challenge of managing their farms both for domestic use and the labor market found themselves severely disadvantaged.

Berheide and Segal (1994) found in their comparison of male and female-headed small-holder households in Malawi that men were favored in development projects and in virtually all forms of support. Women are often denied access to the farmer's clubs that provide credit and information about enriching the soil, effective pesticides, and access to the formal market economy. This finding was also supported by Miller's (1996) research. He found that women not only had limited access to credit and agricultural information, they also had substantially smaller land holdings. Although the women desired and felt they were entitled to loans and information, they frequently stated they would not speak for themselves in the presence of men. Kaunda (1990) found that women were given almost no opportunity to help develop different policies. Programs favored those with larger land holdings, thereby, virtually eliminating women.

Another problematic area concerns the non-government organizations that are used to provide support to farmers and the type of crops they are growing. One of the non-government organizations (UNICEF) conducted a preliminary survey. Based on the information received, a plant-breeding strategy was proposed that would develop a synthetic mixture of varieties of beans that would perform well and produce high yields across the major bean-growing areas. However, Ferguson (1994) using a combination of qualitative and quantitative research methods found that women from land-scarce poor households usually planted fewer bean varieties. Their needs for specific traits in bean types included fast cooking time and early maturity due to limited firewood and food shortages during the growing season. Because of this more comprehensive research that included women's perspectives and needs, a more flexible breeding strategy was devised (Ferguson 1994).

The studies on the women in Malawi have focused on a variety of issues including the influence and women's participation in the political, religious, and agricultural arenas. What continues to emerge from these studies is women's restricted autonomy and ability to participate in decisions that impact their lives. Their recognition and bestowed titles have proven to be little more than structures without foundations.

In summary, research studies have critically looked at the importance of sacred rituals and religious beliefs in forming a sense of community and also for bestowing power. Social cognition theorists have argued that from social instructions, rules, and modeled behaviors mental blue-prints are formed. These various mental blue-prints are drawn from and guide face-to face interactions. Sociological research has demonstrated further that seemingly insignificant gestures of regard provide a sense of self-worth and identity.

The literature about Malawian and sub-Saharan African women shows that sacred rituals, rites of passage, and patterned behaviors of women have had a significant impact on their lives and gender roles including restricting their ability to acquire positions of power. Additionally, historical changes including colonialism resulted in the weakening of the matrilineal norms, thereby, enhancing gender inequalities. While there are still situations and events that allow for free expression, the literature suggests that women's domestic roles, duties and behaviors have limited their choices and opportunities.

This research project examines and analyzes both sacred and non-sacred patterned behaviors of women in the central region of Malawi that create and perpetuate hierarchical gender relations between women and men. To accomplish this, the investigation will utilize the theory of structural ritualization (Knottnerus 1997). The

theory contains a set of formal concepts and arguments that can provide a basis for a systematic investigation and analysis of the way patterned, ritualized practices contribute to women's condition (and disadvantaged position) in Malawi. The theory of structural ritualization, the methods used, and the findings of this study will be discussed in the chapters that follow.

## CHAPTER IV

### THEORY

This chapter will describe the theory of structural ritualization (Knottnerus 1997), will define the theory's key terms, and will discuss how the theory draws and expands upon other theories within the social psychology literature. Finally, it will demonstrate how Knottnerus' theory of structural ritualization offers a unique approach to understanding the social construction of gender inequalities in the central region of Malawi.

The theory of structural ritualization is concerned with an important aspect of social action or social life: ritualized symbolic practices or routine patterned behaviors that are grounded in actors' cognitive schemas. It focuses on the role that ritualization plays in the formation, reproduction and transformation of social structure in groups embedded within larger social environments. The theory argues that four factors – salience, repetitiveness, homologousness, and resources – play a key role in this process.

The following eight terms represent the core assumptions of the theory. **Action repertoire** refers to socially standardized practices or behaviors which people engage in regularly. The actor's cognitive framework that provides the meaning or symbolic organized representation of an action is said to be **schema driven**. People regularly engage in socially standardized behaviors that have certain shared symbolic meanings for the actors. Knottnerus calls this **ritualized symbolic practice (RSP)**. The **rank** of the ritualized symbolic practice is said to be determined by four factors (each weighted

equally): salience – the importance or prominence of a RSP; repetitiveness – the number of times a RSP is performed; homologousness – the similarity in symbolic meaning and form of the various RSPs performed within a specific cultural setting; and resources – the various materials that are needed to perform the RSPs including human and non-human materials. One other definition of importance before discussing the assumptions of the theory is **structural isomorphism**. This refers to a condition in which social relationships and their organization in an embedded group are similar to the social relations and pattern of organization in a wider social milieu (Knottnerus 1997:267, 268). It is also important to clarify the term embedded group. Embedded groups are “bounded groups nested or located within a more encompassing organized collectivity” (Knottnerus 1997:258).

A family unit is one example of an embedded group. A family is located within a specific geographic location and this bounded group of individuals interacts with others in their immediate surroundings. Further, the specific geographic location in which the family is embedded is influenced by village, city, state, or regional institutional systems which are further embedded within the larger federal government social structures. The theory suggests if the various ritualized symbolic practices (RSPs) are high in rank, the greater the likelihood that the RSPs within the family unit will be similar. This is clarified in the four basic assumptions of the theory.

There are four basic assumptions of the theory relevant to this study. The first, assumes that the four aspects of ritualized symbolic practices (RSP) determine their rank: salience, repetitiveness, homologousness, and the RSP resources. (Salience + Repetitiveness + Homologousness + RSP Resources) = Rank. The equal weight of each

of these factors is the initial underlying premise of the theory. Knottnerus' first assumption suggests that the higher the rank of ritualized practices in terms of salience, repetitiveness, homologousness, and RSP resources, the greater the influence, importance, or effect.

The second assumption of the theory states: Rank shapes actors' schemas in embedded groups. In other words, dominant ritualized practices or those high in rank are primary sources of meanings that actors use in the construction of their own cognitive schemas. The third assumption is that schemas shape actors' action repertoires in embedded groups. Once formed, these mental blue-prints or schemas developed by individuals provide the basis for and influence individuals' actions in embedded groups. These new patterned behaviors become habitualized over time and ultimately become new ritualized symbolic practices. The fourth assumption states the greater the rank of ritualized symbolic practices in a social environment, the greater the structural isomorphism or equivalent organized pattern of ritualized practices between ritualized practices in the environment and the embedded group (Knottnerus 197:267, 268).

As young children grow to maturity within a family unit, they are taught certain norms, values and expected behaviors. Some of these behaviors form routine patterned behaviors that are schema driven or have significant symbolic meaning to the actors. These behaviors developed and emerged from interaction with others within a particular social environment. The theory of structural ritualization suggests that within the larger social environment in which a particular family unit is found, there are patterned behaviors with various symbolic themes that have developed over time. If these patterned, schema driven behaviors are highly repetitive, have similar meanings to each

other (i.e. representing a form of respect or courtesy of one's social group), are prominent or important and have certain human or non-human resources the greater their influence on the children and adults in the family units found within a particular social environment.

Knottnerus' theory draws from and significantly expands upon other theories within the social psychology literature. The concept of rituals is used widely in sociology literature (Gustfield and Michalowicz 1984; Lukes 1975; Goffman 1967; Durkheim 1965; Shils and Young 1953; Warner 1959; and anthropology studies (Hocart 1968; Turner 1967). Generally, the concept has been limited to ceremonial, religious or sacred acts. In this theory, the term ritual has been expanded to include those behaviors that are routine social interactions occurring in a variety of contexts including secular settings. Knottnerus (1997:259) approach is consistent with that of Kertzer's (1988) definition of ritual as repetitive and socially standardized symbolic activities.

The theory's conception of social reality is influenced by the work of Berger and Luckmann (1966). Their phenomenological approach suggests that those patterned interactions of actors in a wider social environment become the objective reality for actors of an embedded group. These internalized beliefs about such taken for granted behaviors become the actors' scripts of their social world. Their immediate face-to-face interactions, therefore, are explained as manifestations of these scripts in various modified forms. Knottnerus (1997:258) uses the phrase "in modified form" to mean behavioral patterns are constructed by actors using their symbolic and social resources that have been given to them. Once these patterned behaviors are established within an



embedded group, the thoughts and actions of the participating members of the group are significantly impacted.

The theory utilized in the present study specifically addresses the topic of macro-micro structural linkages and interaction processes in embedded groups. Building on the works of Giddens (1984) and Sewell (1992), the theory incorporates the significance of routine repetitive behaviors in social interaction and the “institutionalization of social life” (Knottnerus 1997:259). This aspect of the theory may be more precisely summarized in the following manner: when ritualized practices and symbolic patterns in a social environment are strongly accentuated and presented to the inhabitants of an embedded group they instill ‘schema-driven action repertoires’, which are variations of standard practices. The greater the impact of these ritualized practices on actors, the more similar or isomorphic will be their immediate social world and the wider environment in which they are located (Knottnerus 1997: 259-260).

The theory of structural ritualization (Knottnerus 1997) also offers a unique approach for examining the social construction of gender inequality in a specific empirical setting. The sociological literature on inequality has been primarily limited to its measurable extent, degree, and consequences (Schwalbe et al 2000; Hollander and Howard 2000). Since the reproduction of inequality ultimately depends on face-to-face interaction, it is important to examine how social structures are negotiated, modified or perpetuated by micro-level action across social institutional realms (Hall 1995, 1997 cited by Schwalbe, et al. 2000). In the following paragraphs of this chapter, the various social psychological theories used for the study of gender inequality will be examined and their limitations discussed.

Social exchange theory, while widely used and perhaps having had the greatest influence on sociological research, has been limited in its methodological approaches to the study of inequality. Although the focus is on social interaction and power (Emerson 1972), the research frequently uses only an experimental methodology. This obscures the understanding and influence of the social institutions that may affect actors' resources, alternatives, and choices outside the experimental laboratory. The everyday social cues and subtle behavior patterns are removed from the situation. Additionally, the theory generally assumes that actors come to interaction essentially as equals. This neglects the consequences of social position (Hollander and Howard 2000:340, 342).

Social cognition theory has been used to investigate some aspects of social inequality. The two fundamental assumptions of this theoretical framework are that thoughts shape behavior and that there are limits to the capacity for human cognition. The second assumption implies that thoughts are organized into systems of categorization. Roles or persons are understood through these knowledge categories. Language becomes the significant medium for learning about various social categories (Howard 1994).

Attitudes toward women and their gender-prescribed roles and personality attributes were examined by Hollander and Howard 2000 (citing works from Spence and Helmreich 1972; Broverman et al 1972). The limitation of this theoretical framework is the failure to understand the social structural contexts in which interaction occurs (Hollander and Howard 2000). While behavior is recognized to be shaped by attitudes, there has been limited research examining the influences on attitudes from the specific religious, educational, and government social structures where there is a continual interfacing with face-to-face interaction.

One of the strengths of the symbolic interactionist perspective is agency. While one's views, feelings, and mental blue-prints often construct behaviors, behaviors can and do change and are modified through interaction. Blumer (1967) building on the works of Cooley and Mead, argued that people attach symbolic meaning to objects, behaviors and other people. These meanings are developed, maintained and transformed through interaction. However, like exchange and social cognition theorists, there is an assumption of equality in negotiation. Thus, structural power differences may be overlooked when the focus is limited to micro-level interactions.

The theory of structural ritualization considers the role of everyday interaction while also addressing the macro-level resources and institutions that shape these interactions. While incorporating certain aspects of the other theoretical frameworks, it provides unique analytical tools for examining specific social settings and actors' patterned behaviors. Further, it enables the researcher to critically look at these interactions within various domains of social interaction and social institutions. This theory, then, provides a strong explanatory framework for understanding inequality and the unequal access to resources within specific social contexts. Thus, the theory of structural ritualization provided a means to critically examine the social interactions of women in the central region of Malawi.

There exist several studies that have already utilized this theory. In their investigation of the acculturation and marginalization of Chinese Americans, Guan and Knottnerus (1999) focused on the routinized behaviors of actors. They identified different levels of social reproduction which occur among the new generation of Chinese Americans. They also discussed various structural, cultural, and global factors impacting

on these individuals. The different ritualized action repertoires in various social domains including both formal and informal spheres of interaction defined the taken for granted behaviors of the actors.

Using an experimental design, Sell, Knottnerus, Ellison, and Mundt (2000) found the reproduction of social structure occurs even when it is not in the best interest of the group, the individual or the society. The researchers' examined forty-four task groups under three different conditions: a baseline condition in which group leaders observe no task groups; a condition in which leaders observe two groups characterized by hierarchical ritual and relatively authoritarian leaders; and a condition under which leaders observe two groups characterized by lesser levels of hierarchical ritual and procedure. Based on the theories of structural ritualization and expectation states, they predicted that leaders would transform their own groups with similar relationships to those observed. Their results generally support the theories.

In a historical-comparative analysis, Van de Poel-Knottnerus and Knottnerus (1999) found further support of such reproduction. They found male and female youth societies in 19<sup>th</sup> century French elite schools reflected the institutional system in which they were embedded. Although ritualized symbolic practices were not exact replications, they reproduced patterns of behavior and institutional arrangements in the wider social environment.

Strategic ritualization or the specific manipulation of ritualized practices in order to realize certain outcomes was explored by Loconto and Knottnerus (forthcoming). Focusing on ethnic group dynamics and politically sponsored ritual programs, they demonstrated how an interconnection can exist between social power and rituals. This is

especially important when considering social groups controlled by oppressive powers such as dictatorships or colonial rule.

These concepts of the theory of structural ritualization provided a useful framework for observing and analyzing the life of Malawi women. In the present study, after determining the rigid, patterned behaviors were ritualized symbolic practices as defined by the theory, I utilized the factors of rank to critically examine the various RSPs recorded in the data. The salience of the various RSPs was determined by several measures. If the participants in the focus groups or key informants mentioned a specific RSP was important or significant it was considered a measure of salience. Additionally, if the social sanctions resulted in the loss of social status (as determined by the actors') the RSP was considered salient.

Repetitiveness was established by counting the number of times a ritualized symbolic practice was mentioned by the Malawian women or recorded in the secondary data. This occurrence was simply numerically recorded. Further, the specific ritualized practices were categorized as something performed daily, weekly, monthly or yearly. Although repetitiveness is significant, the other factors also contribute to the rank of the various RSPs. A ritualized symbolic practice that was performed only once a year might be highly salient contributing to its overall rank.

The factor of homologousness was determined by the similarity in meanings given to the specific RSPs. Examples like doing your husband's laundry, feeding him first, making sure the house is clean for him all represented (according to the women interviewed) showing respect to your husband. Therefore, the three RSPs were homologous.

Finally, resources were listed that were needed to perform the RSP. In order for the women to conduct the daily activities of motherhood they had to physically be able to bear children. This, in fact, was one of the most coveted human resources for Malawian women. A woman who did not have the RSP resource of fertility meant she faced public shame.

In summary, the theory of structural ritualization draws upon and expands the existing social psychology literature. It provides a unique analytical tool for understanding the formation and reproduction of gender inequalities. The multi-method approach that guided the present research was supported by the theory and was used to collect diverse data regarding the specific symbolic ritualized practices and their rank among the Malawi population within various domains of interaction. These methods will be discussed at length in Chapter V.

## CHAPTER V

### METHODS

This chapter will provide an in-depth look at the various methods that were utilized for this research study. Tracing the dynamic components of gender inequality expressed through the social interactions of daily life within larger social systems is a formidable task. It requires understanding the complexities of personal experience yet recognizing the interconnections of social processes (Nader 1997). In trying to connect the experiences of women and the social systems structuring them (both historical and contemporary), I incorporated a multiplicity of techniques i.e. focus groups, in-depth interviews, participant observation and document analysis that acted as a triangulation to allow comparison of data. Triangulation is the process of drawing one's conclusion from different points or perspectives. This allows a corroboration of evidence from different sources. Smith and Glass (1987) suggest this is one way to establish greater confidence in the results.

Before providing specific details of each research method chosen, I would like to present a brief summary of the participants. There were 3 key informants interviewed, and 6 focus groups conducted made up of 6 women in 4 groups and 5 women in the last group. I had 5 in-depth interviews with some of the staff at the seminary, for a total n = 39. My observations were conducted while I was in the country for 2 weeks in 1998 and 5 weeks in 2001. During the last 4 weeks I stayed in the home of a Malawian family.

## **Participant Observation**

Participant observation was conducted by observing, interacting with and teaching pastors' wives attending the intercession semester at the Baptist Seminary in Lilongwe, Malawi. During the second week in May 2001, twenty-nine women attended the first quarter intercession of course work. Fourteen women had been coming for three years and 15 women were just beginning their first year. The intercession weeks are in mid-February to mid-March, May and October. It takes four years to complete the seminary training. The classes are two hours each and the women typically take four courses. Some of their course work includes reading and writing Chechewa, religious studies, nutrition, and health education. I taught nutrition and a religious course, and attended the literacy course. My goal was to be considered by these pastors' wives as one who wanted to learn and one who had something to teach.

Rubin and Rubin (1994) stressed the importance of these kinds of interventions when doing cross-cultural research. They noted: "Culture defines who is an insider and who is an outsider. To learn about culture, an interviewer doesn't necessarily need to become an insider, but must be allowed to cross the boundary and become accepted as one who can be taught"(Rubin and Rubin 1994:171). To prepare for this part of the research, I downloaded words and phrases in Chechewa from the Internet. I attempted to learn how to pronounce some of these phrases in order to use them in informal greetings and interacting with the women I interviewed. Although the results were quite poor in my mind, the women seemed pleased I had tried to learn the greetings. The women enjoyed trying to teach me the simple phrases of greetings, and I felt it was a positive interactive experience that they could see my struggles with such basic language skills.



This informal interaction gave us the ability to develop a common ground. I believe, being a woman, sharing their religious beliefs, learning some of their cultural values and norms and trying to learn a few words or phrases in their language helped to quickly establish trust. After the first day, we began to feel comfortable with each other. Whyte (1955:296) found the incorporating of greetings in the subjects' language was important in establishing a sense of trust and reducing barriers. "My effort to learn the language probably did more to establish the sincerity of my interest in the people than anything I could have told them of my work and myself."

While teaching at the seminary, I stayed in the housing on campus. Whenever I had a break in my schedule, or in the evenings I would record the things I observed during the day and my reactions to them. During the last 4 weeks of my stay in Malawi, I had been invited to stay with a young woman and her three children. She was working on her master's thesis and graciously allowed me to stay in her home. When she heard from one of the missionaries I was coming and the topic of my dissertation, she e-mailed me, "How can you learn about Malawian women in a government hostel? You must stay with me." I graciously accepted her kind invitation and was given access to many things that would have been unavailable to me without her. I kept a detailed journal of my observations and our informal conversations while I stayed with her.

### **Key Informants**

One of the first key informants for my study was a young man on a college campus who is from Malawi. Through the International Student Association, I was able to contact him about my dissertation. He met with me every Friday for approximately two months before I went to Malawi, to prepare me more fully to understand the culture

and customs. Additionally, I met with his wife for several hours. They both speak English and Chechewa the national language of Malawi. She gave me some additional information about the culture from a woman's perspective, and also agreed to answer the questions to be used in the interview with the pastors' wives to see if they were easy to understand. Her husband had translated the questions into Chechewa and I had her read the questions and then answer in English. This enabled me to know if the questions were understandable and had translated well in to Chechewa. There were only minimal corrections and a copy of the questions used may be found in Appendix A.

Another critical person, who contributed to my work, was a young woman who was currently working on her Master's degree at the University of Malawi. I was given her name from our mission board director. She and I e-mailed several times before I left and then she invited me to stay in her home for two weeks while I conducted my historical and contemporary literature search. As I look back on the project, I realize I would not have had as clear a picture of the data I had collected without her help. Further, she allowed me to use the raw data she had collected for her studies, which included approximately 30 pages of handwritten notes from her observations at a Christian initiation ceremony for girls (the puberty rite of passage).

Because Rachel was a national woman and seen as someone to be trusted, I was able to visit with many of the faculty from the university in their homes and gained insights that they would probably never have shared with a foreigner. I was privileged to attend a bridal shower with Rachel, where I was able to record the instructions given to the bride. Additionally, I was able to visit a village with Rachel where she takes sewing supplies to the rural women. When I had asked if there was anything I could bring from

the United States for her, her request was for sewing supplies for these women. I was pleased I was able to bring 40 sewing kits for her to distribute and was able to go with her to one village where 10 kits were given. When Rachel explained the nature of my visit, some of the women wanted to visit with me about their situations and experiences. It was an extraordinary opportunity. I later recorded the information I learned in my journal notes.

### **Interviews**

My interviews emerged as I met some of the faculty at the seminary who agreed to allow me to interview them. I used some of the open-ended questions from the focus groups, but I also had time to allow the women to share whatever topics they chose. These interviews were recorded and later transcribed. The interviews took place in an available classroom at the seminary, which provided privacy. One of my translators, while teaching at the seminary, was a widow and in seminary training herself. She spoke English well and taught the literacy course I attended. She agreed to visit with me for about 1 hour and shared some valuable insights into the difficulties that she faced when she became a widow.

A pastor's wife who had previously taught the literacy course and a woman on the staff at the seminary were also interested in participating in an informal interview with me. Their information further enhanced my understanding of my observations and conversations with the pastors' wives. Additionally, I interviewed two missionaries who had served in Malawi for over 15 years and had visited extensively with many of the pastors' wives attending the seminary. Bernard (1981:347) suggests that "ethnographic fieldwork stands or falls on building mutually supportive relations with a few key

people". These key informants and the women who agreed to participate in the informal interviews are perhaps marginal in their community in that they speak English and have some leadership responsibilities. However, Bernard also suggests that this can have an advantage in their ability "to be observant, reflective and articulate" (Bernard 1981:347).

### **Focus Groups**

A focus group is a small group (usually under 12 people) for a one-time discussion of a topic. The researcher leads the discussion by asking questions and allowing each of the participants to voice their opinion (Reinharz 1992: 222). Using the guidelines as set forth by Morgan (1997) in his work *Focus Groups as Qualitative Research*, my groups included 6 participants or less. I conducted 5 different groups during the week. Morgan (1997) argues that limiting the size of the group is important because it enables all participants to be able to express their opinions and ideas. The number of focus groups for this project assured that enough data was collected that would provide meaningful insights. The sessions lasted approximately 60 - 90 minutes providing adequate time for discussion while limiting the exploring of too many topics.

Utilizing a "funnel" approach (a compromise between structured and semi-structured questions) allowed the participants to have a broad beginning discussion with a more controlled ending. I began with their early memories of childhood and games they typically played. We discussed the special events for young Malawian girls including *chinamwali* or the puberty initiation ceremonies and their personal experiences. This enabled me to address the specific categories of interest and yet allowed new or different topics to emerge. I was able to use one of the larger classrooms at the seminary to conduct the focus group sessions. The sessions were recorded and later transcribed.

There were several limitations that emerged. There were some time constraints due to the translation of the questions and then the responses. The questions were all able to be asked, but there was little time to explore other issues or ask for in-depth clarification. Despite these limitations, with the other data I collected, I felt confident that the women's responses were similar to the experiences and attitudes of other women in the central region.

### **Document Analysis**

Finally, my study incorporated document analysis. There were several research studies conducted by undergraduate and graduate students from the University of Malawi under the direction and supervision of their professors. Their research, if approved, was placed in the Center of Social Research for the purpose of expanding knowledge about many different topics including specific social problems facing Malawian women. Although these works were not published, there were many studies that included rich ethnographic information.

Using the theory of structural ritualization as the analytical tool, I critically examined the studies and noted any time a ritualized symbolic practice (RSP) of women was mentioned. I further estimated how often the specific behavior might be performed to determine the factor of repetitiveness. The social sanctions or rewards for these behaviors were recorded to consider the salience of the ritualized symbolic practice. I carefully looked at the research documents to learn about the resources (both human and non-human) that might be needed for performing various RSPs. Finally, I examined the documents for any specific mention of meanings given or attributed to the ritualized symbolic practices. This helped me to determine the homologousness of the RSPs that

were mentioned. These various research studies provided information from an insider's perspective. It allowed me to compare the meanings and types of ritualized symbolic practices that were included in their findings with my personal observations as an outsider.

Additionally, there were limited materials that were gathered informally while I was in Malawi including newspapers, primary grade textbooks, fictional stories for young adults, and several Christian magazines with articles written by Malawian women. Again, I utilized the theory to critically look for ritualized symbolic practices (RSP's) that were mentioned, the social sanctions imposed, the number of times a specific ritualized symbolic practice (RSP) was recorded, and any meanings that were given to them. The systematic review of these documents enhanced my understanding of the research problem and provided the type of evidence that could be triangulated with the interviews, informants, focus groups, and participant observation.

### **Analysis of the Data**

**The data obtained from these various sources were reviewed. This included my transcribed notes from the focus groups, interviews with key-informants and in-depth interviews with 5 other women. All the data from these sources had been tape-recorded and then later typed. I carefully read and reread the data, highlighting any reference to behaviors of women. As specific behaviors were noted, they were grouped according to similar categories i.e. behaviors of duty, sexual behaviors, restricted behaviors, and behaviors of social interaction. The data was reviewed again with notations about meanings of specific patterned behaviors. These meanings were compared and contrasted between the various sources of data. Because of**

the cultural traditions including rites of passage, many of the patterned behaviors were taught and specific meanings were given to them. My data included a national research study on the rites of passage and Rachel's raw data from a puberty rite of passage she attended. Additionally, the various religious documents **provided meanings** given to many of the routine patterned behaviors of the women and their expected roles. **After noting the specific behaviors, I then reread the data looking for meanings given to them and highlighted those phrases.**

### **Reliability**

Reliability and validity measures are conceptualized differently in qualitative analysis. Credibility was established by following certain guidelines. Rubin and Rubin (1995) suggest there are three steps necessary during the data collection to help ensure credibility of the research project. First is transparency. This term means that the readers can clearly understand the process of data collection and assess the intellectual strengths, weaknesses, and possible biases of the researcher. The reader should be able to feel confident about the conscientiousness of the researcher. This is accomplished by maintaining careful records of exactly what was done throughout the research process and incorporating thick, rich descriptions of what was seen and felt. Second, there should be consistency. The data should reflect the ideas and responses of the interviewees and when inconsistent statements are made, follow up questions should be utilized. Additionally, probing may unearth coherent reasons for inconsistencies that can provide further understanding of the behaviors or responses of the subjects. Finally, there should be clear communication. The readers should feel confident that the researcher has clearly described the first hand experiences she or he has observed and recorded. Confidence

increases, Rubin and Rubin (1995) suggest, when the written accounts incorporate the thoughts and beliefs of the people you want to understand. Rather than providing summaries by those who have merely observed these individuals, the voices' of those observed is of critical importance. My results were written utilizing these guidelines.

There are also concerns that should be addressed when a translator is employed. A translator was necessary only during the focus group sessions. The Malawian student attending Oklahoma State University and his wife translated the focus group questions from English to Chechewa. I then took the Chechewa questions with me to Malawi and asked one of my translators to translate the questions back to English. I was fortunate that the back translation went very well and there seemed to be no difficulty with the questions. Rather than an exact word translation, conceptual and culturally equivalent words and phrases were used. Recent research suggests this has been more effective than literal or exact translations (Temple, 1997, Bernard 1981).

### **Ethical Concerns**

As in all aspects of social research, the primary goal of this study was to be sensitive to the needs and concerns of the women who participated in this study. I strictly followed the guidelines set forth by the Institutional Review Board of Oklahoma State University. Please find their approval letter in Appendix B. I explained to the women as thoroughly as possible the intent of the study and assured them their participation was voluntary. I was pleased when I learned all the women wanted to participate and were eager to visit with me. I obtained written consent from all the women who agreed to participate in focus groups or those who agreed to be interviewed individually with me in this project.



There was inherent difficulty using translators during the focus group sessions. (All individual interviews with key informants and the women who agreed to individual interviews spoke English. The translators heard the discussion as well as the other participants.) For this reason, the nature of the questions during the focus group sessions was not "sensitive", but rather focused on the typical duties and activities of the women's daily lives (See Appendix A for the questions). The informal interviews with the key informants and other individual interviews were non-structured but focused on the information I was trying to learn in relation to the ritualized symbolic practices of women.

The translators were asked to keep all information confidential and formally signed an agreement to that effect. The tape-recorded sessions were erased as soon as they were transcribed. I was the only one who transcribed the data. The information gathered from the women was used collectively and no individual names or descriptions of the participants were used. I incorporated ways to allow the participants to respectfully refuse to answer any questions or discuss any subjects that would make them feel uncomfortable.

Due to our new friendship, the women seemed comfortable answering the questions during the focus group sessions. The women all told me they had participated in a Christian initiation ceremony as a young girl. When speaking with my translator, I learned that perhaps some had not had a Christian initiation but were possibly unwilling to admit that in a group since a traditional ceremony included the sex act with an unknown man from the village. The Oklahoma State University student from Malawi

also listened to the tapes confirming that the interpreters did not change the context of the responses. This further ensured the reliability of the translations.

### **Limitations of the Study**

This study was confined to the women in the central region of Malawi. My convenient sample included women from the central region who were attending the seminary in Lilongwe, Malawi. Because of the small, convenient sample, this study will not be able to be generalized to all women's unequal access to resources, nor is it an attempt to offer the complete explanation of gender inequality in the central region of Malawi. The immediate benefit of this study was to give voice to those who have been given only limited expression. Additionally, it provided an understanding about how routine patterned behaviors of the women interviewed and observed are perhaps hindering an improvement in women's equal access to resources in the central region of Malawi. Finally, this study contributes to the social psychology literature about social inequality and how it is created, sustained or transformed. Chapter VI will provide a summary of the findings and a critical analysis. The summary and conclusions will be presented in Chapter VII.

## CHAPTER VI

### RESULTS

This chapter provides a presentation and analysis of the data I collected to understand the relationship between the routine, patterned behaviors of women in the central region of Malawi and the creation, perpetuation, and/or reinforcement of their apparent unequal access to resources. Observational notes, conversations with key informants, in-depth interviews, focus group sessions, and research documents from the Center of Social Research (affiliated with Chancellor College in Zomba, Malawi) provided over 1200 pages of data. I initially separated the data I had collected from the research and data that was conducted by Malawian men and women. Additionally, I gained access to a few rich, ethnographic research studies about Malawian women conducted by other foreigners. I wanted to compare the information I obtained to that of other foreigners and to the research conducted by Malawians, to ensure greater reliability of my data. I did not separate the research conducted by Malawians by gender. My primary objective was to distinguish research conducted by foreigners or those considered as “outsiders” to research conducted by the people of Malawi (both men and women), who spoke the language and would have greater understanding of the cultural norms and values.

Applying the triangulation process, I first reviewed the data for any specific behaviors mentioned. Four categories or types of behaviors emerged in the reading and analysis of the data: behaviors of duty, behaviors of interaction, sexual behaviors, and

restricted behaviors. There were a total of 424 references to behaviors. Of these behaviors, 130 were behaviors of duty, 130 were behaviors of social interaction, 72 were references to sexual behaviors, and 85 were restricted behaviors. See Table 5 - 9 for the specific behaviors found within each of the four categories and the different data sets from which they were obtained (personal first hand data or secondary data, whether foreign or national). Table 9 includes a summary of the 4 categories.

**Table 5**

	<b>Total</b>	<b>M</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>F</b>
<u>Behaviors of Duty</u>	130	64	16	50
Housework (general)	18	6	4	8
Cooking	13	8	3	2
Washing husband's clothes	10	6	1	3
Family gardening	6	*	*	6
Gathering firewood (personal family consumption)	9	4	2	3
Feeding	13	5	*	8
Collecting Water	8	6	2	*
Emotional strength	4	2	1	1
Caring for children	47	26	2	19
Working for others	2	1	1	*

M = my data

N = data collected by national men and women

F = data collected by foreigners

**Table 6**

	<b>Total</b>	<b>M</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>F</b>
<u>Behaviors of Social Interaction</u>	130	68	33	29
Speaking in specific ways	7	3	*	4
Kneeling	12	6	2	4
Separate seating	22	14	3	5
Obedience	13	6	3	4
Care-giving	5	2	1	2
Respect general	12	5	4	3
Female knowledge	2	1	1	*
All men	3	2	1	*
Elderly	4	2	1	1
All older women	3	1	2	*
Dress attractively; beautifully; As the man wishes	24	12	9	3
Please your husband	23	14	6	3

M = my data

N = data collected national men and women

F = data collected by foreigners

**Table 7**

	<b>Total</b>	<b>M</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>F</b>
<b><u>Behaviors Sexual</u></b>	72	10	54	8
General	3	*	*	3
Elongation of genitalia	6	2	2	2
Physical endurance	8	*	5	3
Sexual pleasures/dances	10	1	9	*
Sexual initiation	4	3	1	*
Early marriage	14	*	14	*
Pregnancy/children	21	4	17	*
Accept husband's indiscretions	3	*	3	*
Marriage by capture	1	*	1	*
Marks on body to show	2	*	2	*
Attraction				
Foreplay				
Sexual maturity				
Courtesy				
Willing to work				
Can satisfy sexually				

M = my data

N = data collected national men and women

F = data collected by foreigners

<b><u>Table 8</u></b>	<b>Total</b>	<b>M</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>F</b>
<b><u>Restricted Behaviors</u></b>	85	41	3	14
Refusing sex with husband	16	10	4	2
Making important decisions	8	2	4	2
Arguing	1	*	1	*
Speaking disrespectfully	6	1	4	1
Engaging in business transactions	5	2	2	1
Higher education	8	8	2	*
Associations with uninitiated women	4	2	2	*
Using bicycles	7	2	1	4
Equal rights	1	*	1	*
More than one husband	1	*	1	*
Committing adultery	5	2	2	1
Sex when child is ill	1	1	*	*
Talking or asking questions with guests	20	11	6	3

M = my data

N = data collected national men and women

F = data collected by foreigners

<b><u>Table 9</u></b>	<b>Total</b>	<b>M</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>F</b>
<b><u>Combined Categories of Behaviors</u></b>				
Behaviors of duty	130	64	16	50
Behaviors of social interaction	130	68	33	29
Sexual behaviors	72	10	54	8
Restrictive behaviors	85	41	30	14
Totals	417	183	133	101

### **Ritualized Symbolic Practices**

During my personal observations, I did not record in my journal every behavior of the Malawian women, but rather I wrote about the patterned behaviors of the women that especially caught my attention and if I noticed them more than once. Therefore, the numbers are not specific numeric counts, but rather an idea of the number of typical patterned behaviors I observed among many of the women. Additionally, I noted the

number of times these various behaviors were mentioned in both the national and foreign research studies. This type of analysis is consistent with the theory of structural ritualization regarding ritualized symbolic practices defined as those standardized behaviors which people engage in regularly.

The theory of structural ritualization defines ritualized symbolic practices as those patterned behaviors that have certain symbolic meanings for the actors. Through the focus groups, conversations with key informants, and in-depth interviews, I determined what symbolic themes were expressed in these various patterned behaviors. Additionally, these symbolic themes and patterned behaviors were found in the other research studies critically examined. The findings and analysis of each of the categories of behavior will be discussed separately. The rank of each of the categories of behaviors, as determined by the four factors of repetitiveness, salience, homologousness, will also be presented.

### **Ritualized Symbolic Practices of Duty**

Table 5 reflects the behaviors of duty that were mentioned in all of the data sources. It was the second largest category of behaviors represented in my data, and the largest category in the secondary sources. Caring for the children was mentioned twice as often as the other specific types of duty. Although the national data had little to say about the duties of caring for the children, Malawian men and women conducted several studies regarding the impact of pregnancies on young girls. Of the 54 times sexual behaviors were recorded from the national data, 31 were references to early marriages and pregnancy.

During my participant observations, I found many written comments in my journal regarding the heavy work load of the women including caring for children.



Additionally, I learned from conversations with my key informants there were many duties expected of Malawian women. During the engagement ceremony, the future wife must demonstrate that she is willing to work and has the ability to cook well. The young male informant made this comment:

“When you are engaged the man will bring a hoe, machete, mat, a cock, and a goat. This represents he is strong in the land. The woman will bring materials for women: a mortar and pestle, clay pots, and hen. This represents she is not lazy and is willing to work.”

His wife had this to say:

“In Malawi, the marriage isn't the important ceremony. The engagement is the big thing. You must cook for your future in-laws to show you will know how to cook for your husband. The women and girls do the housework, it is women's work.”

Of course, cooking in Malawi is not unthawing a frozen dinner. Food is prepared on an open fire. The water used is obtained from a well anywhere from .5 to 2 km away. A study conducted by the Centre of Social Research in 1991 found the average household of four to five people required four to five trips daily to the water source. They estimated an individual uses 15-20 L of water per day and the containers used for drawing water hold that amount. This means the women spend more time and energy fetching water than on any other activity. The firewood, too, must be gathered and sometimes from great distances. With the recent deforestation problems, collecting firewood has become an arduous task. These difficulties were mentioned by the women in the focus groups. Here are some examples of their statements:

Participants from focus group:

“Early in the morning the women must get the water for cooking. Men who are hard working will help gather water during harvest time.”

“When it is harvest time, work begins very early in the morning. The women must draw water to cook with, and collect the firewood. These days you must travel a long distance to get enough firewood.”

“A difficult thing for Malawian women is the lack of time to rest. They must wash their husband’s clothes and iron them. They must work in their field and if they are a widow they often work in the field of another to get by. Even after you have a baby you only have a short time to rest—approximately two weeks. During that time other women from the village will do your cooking, even to cook for your husband”

Miller (1998) for his master’s thesis interviewed women in the rural areas of the central region of Malawi. His findings also support these specific behaviors of duty required by the women. Note the following observations:

“The families were large. Many hands were needed to provide labor. The young girls took over the domestic chores during harvest. Time working the household plots was limited because the women must collect the firewood for household consumption.”

“Eight of the 10 women interviewed identified domestic work, feeding and caring for children as a ‘pressure’, including the oldest woman who was raising her grandchildren. Domestic work was clearly seen as a woman’s domain. Additionally, workload increased enormously when a child was sick. Energy was needed to nurse the child, yet the women must continue her other domestic duties.”

In another study, two Malawian scholars from the Center of Social Research, Mvula and Kakhonwa (1997) found:

As early as six, girls become responsible for younger siblings and perform heavy domestic work such as drawing water and fetching firewood. Even when the girls are in school, they are still expected to do domestic work, while boys are exempt.

As I critically looked again at these statements, it became clear these duties did not simply involve “things” that needed to be done. Rather, these behaviors, represented specific symbolic themes to the actors, and required women to specifically perform these

duties. During one of the in-depth interviews, the respondent made the following comment:

“The wife is instructed to cook and wash clothes for her husband. The children may help but may not do things for their father; that is the mother’s duty. The husband helps with farming duties only. Initiation instruction includes teaching the young girls about married life so they will understand. It is important that young girls learn to respect and please their husband . . .”

The initiation the respondent was referring to is *chinamwali*, or puberty rites of passage. In Malawi, this ceremony is a time of high importance to the community as a whole. When I asked the women in the focus group sessions “Are there any special ceremonies for girls?” all of the women in each of the focus groups mentioned *chinamwali* as the most significant ceremony for young women in the central region of Malawi. The instructions given during this event resulted in a shared symbolic meaning concerning these particular duties – being a good Chewa woman. The first symbolic theme was further supported by the secondary data:

A song sung during the initiation ceremony included a verse ‘when my husband has not commanded, I do not pluck and eat’. This was symbolic of her obedience referring to Adam and Eve. If a woman is obedient, she will not be deceived. During initiation ceremonies the young girls who performed their cooking lessons badly were physically punished (Chirwa 1995).

Chewa society is closed to the outsider. The social norms are taught during the initiation ceremonies. Women’s work includes cooking, carrying water, caring for the home and the children. Men do the outside jobs of hoeing, building houses, grain stores, and should not interfere with women’s jobs. Women increase in status in the community by going through the initiation ceremonies (showing they are now physically mature), marriage, having children, and keeping their home well. When initiates do not listen to their instructions the Nyau dancers (traditional authority in the central region of Malawi) come to frighten them so they will remember to do as they are told. Instructions to the young initiates include: Don’t keep your husband hungry. You must respect your husband

and be polite and obedient. Your husband must be fed everyday of his life. You must produce children for your husband (Mwale 1977).

These special instructions given during a young woman's initiation were to help her become a good Chewa woman. If you respect and obey your husband you are good. Kachapila (2001) suggested initiation rituals such as *chinamwali* provided a means of preserving endangered social values threatened by colonialism. Despite the fact that the Chewa people had been conquered by 'whites,' they wanted to preserve their identity and values. Obedience to the duties taught during puberty initiation became an important obligation for young Chewa girls to fulfill.

The second shared symbolic theme these duties seemed to represent was that of being a good Christian. I attended a bridal shower at the Baptist church for a young woman who was a friend of Rachel's, the young woman I stayed with in Malawi. The following is an excerpt from my notes taken during that shower:

A woman at the front of the room gave these instructions to the bride. During the telling of the instructions, the other women in the room (there were approximately 50) would often nod their head in agreement and make a sort of "eeee" sound. Rachel explained this was a sound of agreement. 'The Bible says you must obey your husband. You should always remember to keep things tidy at home and your table prepared. Men gather firewood to sell and the women should gather the firewood for the home. Don't leave dirty dishes or cobwebs. Your husband should look forward to coming home, his refuge. If your husband wants flying ants (a delicacy) give them to him. Your husband should control what you eat in your home. Be careful, your husband can leave you at any time. A bad wife results in a polygamous relationship.

During this Christian bridal shower, there were references to such duties as general housework, gathering firewood for domestic use, and obedience. These duties were all considered part of the Bible's teachings and the sole responsibility of the future wife. The doing of these tasks becomes the Christian wife's sacred duty.

Another expression (and influence) of the Christian symbolic theme concerning these behaviors of duty was found in the Christian Women's Organizations. These organizations are part of many of the dominant religions in the central region of Malawi including Presbyterian Churches or CCAP, Baptist Churches, Catholic Churches, and Church of Christ. The Presbyterian religion is the largest protestant group in the central region of Malawi founded by David Livingstone in the early 1800s (National Statistical Office 2000).

The Presbyterian women's group is called the Women's Guild. This organization was written about in depth by a Malawian woman, Isabel Phiri. In her research, Phiri (1996) described the organization as highly desired by Malawian women. It is through membership in the Women's Guild that women can achieve some degree of status and leadership positions in the church. Within the dominant patriarchal structure of the Presbyterian Church (as well as the other protestant and Catholic religions brought from the west), men lead while women are primarily silent parishioners. The Women's Guild organization provides an opportunity for women to perform certain service duties and enables their collective voice to be heard by the Synod's male leadership structure. Ultimately, however, it further reinforces the cultural expectations of household duties as sacred obligations of a Christian woman. An excerpt from the membership requirements includes the following:

The leadership group will observe persons desiring membership into the organization for several weeks. Her attendance at church and her 3 pence weekly contribution for fees for the organization will be expected even during the observation time. Failure to continue with these duties could result in membership being cancelled. Additionally, there are six basic requirements: faithfully giving church pledges, keeping your home clean, keeping your laundry done, training your children in Christian beliefs, and attendance at all church services (Phiri 1996:80).

Once again I noted that keeping your home clean and doing your laundry are part of one's Christian duties. These requirements were also found to be part of the Baptist Women's Organization called *Umodzi*. The Baptist Women's Organization has 7 aims and each of these has to be memorized and followed in order to be a member in good standing: learn the Bible, pray, fellowship, evangelism, giving of your tithe, maintaining a Christian home, knowing God's Word, learning the women's song, and having a Christian family. During the weekly instructions, details are given about what was considered a Christian home. In my interview with Rachel, she informed me that having a Christian home included being faithful to your duties as a wife and mother. That included being respectful and obedient to your husband and making sure your home was clean.

Being part of the Women's Guild in the Presbyterian Church or *Umodzi* in the Baptist church is something highly desired by the women of these various religious denominations. Each of these groups has uniforms that can be worn only by members. When worn, the uniforms publicly symbolize that you are a good Christian. These uniforms are very visible in the small villages. All of the women's organizations in the various denominations have similar uniforms distinguished by different colors. In the Baptist *Umodzi*, the uniform consists of a purple veil (head scarf), white blouse, purple skirt, white shoes. In the Presbyterian Women's Guild, the uniform consists of a gray veil, white blouse, gray skirt, and white shoes. In the Catholic Church, the uniforms are black veils, white blouses, black skirts, and black shoes.

The uniforms are worn at meetings, special occasions, and during the funeral of a member of the organization or her family. In the poverty ridden villages of Malawi where death is a common reality, the public display of Christian women in their uniforms as a

casket was carried to the grave site was seen as a great honor. It symbolically stated that the woman of the family of the deceased was a good Christian and was allowed to be honored by the wearing of the uniforms by the members of her organization.

In a conversation with one of Rachel's friends, I learned she had been denied renewed membership in the women's Guild for wearing slacks. She is a Master's degreed instructor at the University of Malawi, attends church services, and Bible studies faithfully; yet, she was reprimanded and denied membership because of her clothing choices. She said she wanted to fight the decision, but it probably would do little good. It was obvious from her manner and tone of voice that she was quite upset she could no longer be part of this organization despite her many other accomplishments. Even in the urban areas, where this individual lived, the women's organization seemed to be highly valued and sought after.

Being a good Chewa woman in the midst of a changing world is accomplished by adhering to the teachings of *chinamwali*. This is accomplished, in part, by performing specific behaviors of duty including washing your husband's clothes, gathering firewood and collecting firewood. Additionally, the behaviors of duty are incorporated into the various Christian denominations and are viewed as part of one's sacred or Christian duty.

Based on the theory of structural ritualization's definition of ritualized symbolic practices, various behaviors, i.e., doing the laundry, cooking, fetching water, and collecting firewood are ritualized symbolic practices of duty. These duties are routine patterned behaviors that are regularly engaged in and have two primary symbolic themes representing the concepts of being a good Chewa woman and a good Christian woman.

### **Rank of the RSPs of Duty**

The theory of structural ritualization argues that ritualized symbolic practices (RSPs) are influenced by four factors in a social environment: salience, repetitiveness, homologousness, and resources. The greater the degree of these four factors, the greater the rank or relative standing of the RSPs in that social environment. Salience refers to the degree to which a ritualized symbolic practice is perceived to be central to an act or action sequence. In other words, it is concerned with the extent to which a RSP is perceived to be noticeable or prominent. One method of determining the prominence of an RSP is to determine the social sanctions administered whether they involve rewards or punishments. The basic idea here is that the salience or centrality of a RSP is reflected in the group's reaction to the enactment, or to be more precise, failure to enact the RSP. The more salient the RSP, the greater the presumed reaction or sanction that will be administered by the group to the person who does not successfully perform the ritualized act.

A critical look at the data revealed the behaviors of duty of the Malawian women were very prominent and often carried severe consequences if they are not performed. According to the Laws of Marriage and Divorce (1996), there are four duties listed for a wife: cooking properly, fetching sufficient firewood and water for her household, washing the husband's clothes and caring for the young children. Failure to fulfill these duties is just cause for the husband to seek a divorce. A husband also has the right to physically punish his wife "in moderation" for her disobedience (Phiri 1997). As mentioned previously, another negative sanction for the many women involved in protestant religions is the inability to participate in the women's organization of the



church. This denies the women access to the meetings and participating in service groups. Additionally, it denies a "Christian" burial for their loved ones.

There are many positive rewards for fulfilling her duties as a Chewa woman. If she is seen as a dutiful wife, (including bearing children) she could be chosen as one of the *nankunwi* or the leader of the traditional instructors of *chinamwali*. This is one of the highest statuses for women in the Chewa society. According to Mwale's (1977:48) research:

The discussion about the organization of the Chewa society as governed by the *Nyau*, would not be complete without discussing the female role in the organization. Below the *nankunwi*, there are three strata of age groups. The elderly women (agogo) form the top most group from where the *nankungwi* usually comes. They are the custodian of traditions and beliefs of the Chewa women. These women are responsible for advising the leaders or *nankunwi*, assisting in initiation ceremonies and handing down tradition and beliefs to the next age group. The group below this is the middle aged women. These are the ones who are experts at leading and inventing songs, teaching the youths and instructing the initiates. . . . In the lowest stratum we have the new initiates and those married but have not gone through the *chisamba* rite (pregnancy). They attend ceremonies, observe the performances of experts and practice the skills. Below these are both male and female non-initiates. Normally, the non-initiate in the Chewa traditional setting has no status. If one grows past puberty but without puberty instructions, one still remains a child. The initiated normally avoid his company for fear of revealing the secrets in conversations with him. Since this is an embarrassing situation, the young people long for initiation in order to gain status in their traditional community.

The prominence of these behaviors of duty is also reflected in their significance within the women's religious beliefs. In the rural villages, life is rather mundane. There are limited activities and entertainments. The majority of homes (greater than 85% in the rural areas) have no electricity. There are no restaurants, movie theaters, or bowling alleys. Life is simply one's daily chores and the weekly church activities or traditional

ceremonies. Your social world is limited to the area that your legs can take you. Church becomes a valued time of singing and coming together with your friends to visit and worship. Therefore, those ritualized symbolic practices associated with the ability to be in good standing with one's religious community are important to the women in Malawi.

Those who are obedient to their duties as a Christian wife and mother are honored with membership into the women's organization. Members are allowed to wear the uniform of the organization which is easily recognized in the community. Being able to be part of the leadership in one's church is highly coveted. It means being publicly recognized as a good Christian woman. Therefore, the various behaviors of duty are prominent in or central to the life of the women in the central region of Malawi and are, therefore, salient.

Repetitiveness is concerned with the frequency with which a ritualized practice is performed within a social interaction domain. These duties of the women of Malawi are highly repetitive being performed weekly, daily, or even as often as several times a day. In Malawi, there are typically two meals served daily unless the harvest has not been a good one. Preparing the meals requires gathering firewood, getting water, gathering the eggs or vegetables, and making the *nsima* (a main staple food made from corn flour and water cooked over the fire). As discussed earlier, these chores are heavy, time-consuming tasks.

Caring for the children is another duty that consumes a large part of the woman's day. There is little relief for Malawian women in the care of the children except by their older daughters. The total fertility rate using the 1998 census data was 4.8. The central region had reported the highest with 5.3 and the southern region had the lowest with 4.5

(National Statistical Office 2000). Whether walking on the road, participating in church, or going to a bridal shower, women were observed frequently walking with small children nearby, a baby on their back or nursing an infant. Additionally, when a baby is sick it requires a great deal of the mother's time. There are few medications available, and children must often be nursed or attended to more frequently to be comforted. The data indicates that each of these behaviors of duty is considered highly repetitive.

Homologousness refers to the degree of perceived similarity among different ritualized symbolic practices. Each of the various ritualized symbolic practices involving duty expressed two dominant symbolic themes: being a good Chewa woman and or being a good Christian woman. Whether doing her husband's laundry, gathering firewood, caring for the children, or preparing the meal, the women in central Malawi are performing those activities that were taught during Chinamwali as the specific tasks of a good Chewa woman. Furthermore, if the woman is a protestant or Catholic, her dedication to her domestic work symbolically states she is good Christian. Therefore, these tasks are homologous or highly complementary to each other.

Finally, the RSP resources focus on the materials needed to engage in ritualized symbolic practices. For behaviors of duty, the primary resource needed is physical strength. Carrying firewood, water, groceries, and walking long distances requires physical strength. Women with physical limitations are not able to perform their duties and are dependent on their extended family for basic necessities and ultimately have no status in the community. Another physical resource needed is the ability to have children. This will be further discussed in the behavioral category of sexual behaviors. In the Chewa society, having a child is the single most important task of a married woman.

In reviewing the history of the Chewa people living in the central region of Malawi, Phiri (1997:36) had this to say “As the root of a lineage, the woman was seen as a sacred vessel of life. She was responsible for the continuation of her community. ...in a matrilineal society, a woman’s value was associated with having children.” It was of great importance that the women possessed these physical abilities or human resources to carry out the ritualized symbolic practice of having and caring for children. Therefore, the RSP resources of behaviors of duties are usually available contributing to their overall rank.

These ritualized symbolic practices of duty have significant meaning for the women in the central region of Malawi. They contribute to their social identity of being a good Chewa and to their religious identity as a good Christian. These behaviors are high in rank based on the theory of structural ritualization. They are shown to be highly salient, repetitive, homologous, and have sufficient resources. It will be demonstrated later how these highly ranked symbolic practices profoundly impact the lives of the women in the central region of Malawi and help to socially construct (along with the other RSPs) their unequal access to the economic and educational resources typically reflective of equality. But for now, it has been established that RSPs of duty performed by women in the central region of Malawi are high in rank.

### **Ritualized Symbolic Practices of Social Interaction**

There were 130 patterned behaviors mentioned or observed regarding the social interactions of Chewa women. Table 6 lists the specific behaviors of social interactions included: speaking in specific ways, kneeling when receiving instructions, and being

obedient. For instance, respondents from the focus groups provided these comments about respectful behaviors:

“Your uncle teaches you how to give respect to your husband. You should kneel down to hear his instruction or to receive something. When it is finished you should say you have finished this thing. If you could not, you should say ‘I’m sorry I could not get to that place, or could not finish the thing you asked.’”

“In the initiation ceremonies, the girls are taught the honor and respect they should have for older women. They learn it is important to respect and please their husband, all elderly people, and the chief.”

One of the key informants described behaviors that involved being respectful:

“Women are to be respectful to men and especially their husbands. Women shouldn’t brush shoulders with men. They should sit in different places at church, or in other meetings. When you call your husband you should distinguish your voice and show respect to your husband, more than other men. You should kneel to your husband to receive instructions. You must not argue.”

Another key informant had this to say:

“It is important for young girls to learn to respect and please their husband. When your husband’s status changes, you must be willing to stop wearing traditional dresses if necessary. The Bible says you must obey your husband.”

One of my first observations in the country of Malawi was the rigid way the women interacted with their husbands and with me. I was visiting in a rural village in the central region I noted that the women immediately would greet us by placing their left hand at the bend of their right elbow and shake our hands. They would quickly go and get their husbands and then he would come and greet us. The women would sometimes bring us small benches or simply spread out a mat in front of their home for us to sit on. The woman and her child or children would sit on the mat in the far corner, while her husband

sits on one of the benches or on the mat closer to us. The women hardly ever asked any questions or made any comments at all.

These behaviors of social interaction were supported by research conducted by a Malawian woman (Mwale 1977):

The mother and children are usually seated on the floor while the father is in his chair. A woman has a very servile position. She must kneel when she talks to a man. She must look the other way when men pass. She must carry a load when her husband carries no more than a spear. Her husband may beat her in moderation.

In Malawi, textbooks are rare. While examining educational materials in a general store in Lilongwe, the capital of Malawi, I purchased a children's textbook used in primary schools that was similar to other three I observed there. The pictures for one story show a father reading a book. The mother and children are seated on the floor next to the father. Although this was a limited random sample, it seemed to indicate that some of the textbooks in Malawi routinely portray these typical behaviors of how women are positioned in relationship to men.

Additionally, when I attended church services in the central region, men and women sat on opposite sides of the room. If there were only benches enough for the men, the women and children sat on the mat. But what do these behaviors of social interaction represent to the people of Malawi? Again, I examined the various data sources. From Phiri's (1997:113) interviews in the central region regarding women assuming leadership positions in the church, some felt separate places for men and women were part of the culture:

Our culture does not allow a woman to rule over a man. Since three quarters of the members are in the rural areas, this means that the majority of the members are illiterate. The headship of a man is shown even in agriculture. It is the woman who works very hard in the gardens, they

harvest and sell their produce, but it is the husbands who decide on how the profit should be spent. Furthermore, in buses going to the rural areas, it is the men who sit and women stand. The men enjoy dominating the women. Once there is a change in the position of a woman in the rural areas the church will change.

This comment seems to suggest that these types of social interactions are considered part of the Chewa society or culture, but the subtle meaning of the behaviors includes domination. The male is more important and is the leader. As a woman, you are to assume these positions because you are a Chewa woman. When one of my key informants wanted me to take some clothes to her family members in Malawi, she asked her husband to ask me. After he told me about the request, he said “You have wanted to learn what Malawian women are like. Now my wife is acting like a Malawian woman – she asks her husband to make her requests.”

In another description of Chewa society, Phiri (1997:44) discusses the social segregation between men and women:

Women worked and ate in a group with their children, away from the men. The best food went to the men and the women and children got second best. When speaking to a man, it was considered rudeness to look him in the eye or to argue with him. Kneeling to one’s elders, especially men, was a mark of respect.

This idea of being respectful and obedient is seen as an important part of a woman’s Chewa identity and is also reinforced in the teachings of the Christian churches. Because of the significance of *chinamwali* (and its requirement of sexual initiation) many churches including the Dutch Reform, Catholic, Baptist, and Presbyterian churches developed a Christian type of *chinamwali* – *chilangizo* (Phiri 1997). The new rite of passage, however, did not completely liberate women from oppressive customs (Phiri 1997:70).

The missionaries assumed that the level of dignity brought by the changes was sufficient for Chewa Christian women. No consideration was given to the fact that some of the cultural and biblical teachings on attitudes towards men, the purpose of marriage, care of husband and home, and self-control during pregnancy, were not necessarily liberating for a woman.

The important change that it did bring about for young girls going through the Christian ceremony or *chilangizo*, was the additional symbolic meaning of being a good Christian woman to some of the oppressive social customs.

In summary, the behaviors of social interaction including kneeling for instructions from your husband, not asking questions or making comments when males are present, having separate seating in meetings, eating separately, and feeding your husband first are expected, socially standardized behaviors of young women in the central region of Malawi. Additionally, these messages are taught during the most important ceremony in a young girls' life, *chinamwali* or *chilangizo*. These ways of interacting with men are important for a young girl's new status as an adult woman in Chewa society. The behaviors also typify the respectful, obedient behaviors of a good Christian woman. Therefore, the behaviors of social interactions are ritualized symbolic practices as defined by the theory of structural ritualization. They are regular, standardized behaviors that articulate specific symbolic themes.

### **Rank of the RSPs of Social Interaction**

As previously stated, the four factors of salience, repetitiveness, homologousness and RSP resources determine whether RSPs are high in rank. These have been defined and discussed in detail previously. The following section will look at each of these factors in relation to behaviors of social interaction.



I initially examined the data to note statements about the prominence or centrality of these behaviors. The fact that specific types of behaviors of social interaction of women were mentioned or observed 130 times is significant in itself. I would note that this is a conservative assessment (especially behaviors mentioned in my journal notes) because while observed several times during the day these behaviors would usually be summarized and counted as one specific type of social interaction.

Additionally, the salience of the behaviors of social interaction was determined in part by the types of social sanctions given for their performance, whether rewards or punishments. I learned that a woman who is not respectful could be physically punished or prevented from becoming one of the initiation leaders or instructors (Mwale 1977, Phiri 1997). Another devastating outcome is the possibility that her husband would leave her or take another wife. This is an excerpt taken from my notes at the Christian bridal shower that I attended in May 2001:

If you want your marriage to last, let Christ rule in your marriage. If your husband wants flying ants (a delicacy in Malawi), give them to him. Your husband should control what you eat in your home. Be careful, your husband can leave you at anytime. A bad wife results in a polygamous relationship. The bible says you must obey and the woman should not lead in the home. You should make your husband proud.

Being a single woman in the central region of Malawi often results in increasing poverty, diminished food availability, and poor health. Phiri (1997:75) describes this situation:

Deserted women had to bear a heavy economic burden. They became solely responsible for house and children, the growing of crops using primitive methods, and the paying of tax. When men are involved in polygamous relationships, the various Christian churches require the men to divorce all wives but their first. A story was told to me about a man called Tsilzani. A year after his baptism there was a famine. Fortunately, he had a good harvest but he knew that his former second wife and the

children had nothing to eat. This bothered him. He then went to see the Rev William Murray and asked him for advice. Murray suggested that he bring him food regularly and he would deliver it to his former wife. The plan worked well. Yet there were many women not as fortunate as she was and many women and children have suffered hunger.

Miller (1998:76) during his interviews with rural women in the central region of Malawi learned about the difficulties for single women:

Land is without question, a rural farmer's most critical resource. Food is produced on the land, and income is generated, chiefly through cash cropping. Many other resources are also land based. The size of a rural farmer's landholding has a direct impact on the ability of the people to feed themselves and their household and earn an income to provide the basic necessities. In matrilineal societies, a husband's access to land is through the family of his mother-in-law. In such a circumstance, the woman would seem to have an advantage over the man. The results from this study indicate the male respondents had larger plots than the women. The three smallest plots all belonged to women.

The other aspect of salience is the rewards given for these behaviors of social interaction. When a woman is respectful and obedient and a member of a Christian church she is invited to be part of the women's organization (i.e., rewarded). As mentioned earlier, this membership entitles the member to wear the uniform. It is a public reminder of her good Christian behavior, which includes these various ritualized symbolic practices of social interaction such as kneeling to her husband, not arguing, feeding him first, and obeying him. Belonging to the various Christian women organizations is highly coveted among many women in the central region of Malawi belonging to the various Christian denominations. The data strongly suggests these RSPs of social interaction are salient.

The second factor in determining the rank of RSPs is repetitiveness. The numeric count in the tables indicates that they are frequently observed. Indeed, these RSPs of social interaction with men occur on a daily basis for women. Married women frequently interact with their husbands and these interactions are often conducted in specific ways.

For instance, feeding one's husband first and eating outside with the children symbolically demonstrates respect to the man in interaction. This practice typically occurs twice a day for most Malawian women in the central region. An example of this is taken from Miller's (1998:85) study:

Figures indicate during the periods of December through February, many rural people facing food shortages eat less than the typical two meals per day. When the statistics are more closely examined by gender, it reveals that forty percent of women and twenty-four percent of men eat only once a day. As a result of this food deficit women lose between 1.9 and 4.2 kg of body weight.

Even at a great price to their own health, women choose to be respectful and ensure their husbands are fed first. This specific type of interaction is very repetitive, occurring daily. Additionally, women standing or sitting in a separate space from men is part of her RSPs of social interaction. This occurs on a weekly basis as she attends religious services. They also occur intermittently when guests come to visit, when she rides the bus, or attends any public meeting. When a woman speaks to her husband or to any man, she is also to "distinguish her voice" as one of the respondents mentioned. So whether eating, attending church, or speaking, a Malawian woman is repeatedly performing these RSPs of social interaction. This suggests that these RSPs are highly repetitive.

Homologousness is the third factor in determining the rank of the RSPs of social interaction. It is the degree of perceived similarity in the various RSPs of social interaction. Many of the participants in this study mentioned respect, obedience, and pleasing your husband as important attributes of a good Chewa woman. These attributes are also part of the instructions given during *chinamwali* or *chilangizo*. The successful completion of the rite of passage, whether traditional or Christian, symbolizes one's full acceptance into Chewa society. The following is an example of one of the teachings

regarding respect and obedience and the potential consequences to a young woman for failing to conduct herself properly. Banda (2001) recorded:

Just as we were approaching the new stage of initiation, two women dressed in sewn up dry leaves around their waist, but no other clothing appeared. Their body was painted with white, black, and brown round dots. To the young initiates it was a scary sight. As we moved toward those women they sang 'A wild pig, a wild pig, turn there. Madness, madness I had left it stealing, stealing. I had it, I stopped to beat, to beat.' The meaning of the song was to warn the initiates against rudeness. Looking at the initiates, they were very scared. When the women went to the side of the girls so they could move forward, there appeared to be a dead woman on the road. She was the mother of one of the initiates. The initiates believed that she had indeed died. The initiates' cried in sorrow. The young girl who thought it was her mother was crying the loudest. Finally, the instructors calmed the girls down and sang them a song about respecting their mothers, respecting men and their elders-you will bring about the death of someone you love if you do not obey and respect them.

Because of the seriousness placed on this teaching, the RSPs of social interaction are considered a very important part of being a good Chewa woman.

Additionally, these RSPs of social interaction represent those characteristics of a good Christian. The Presbyterian Church supports the complete obedience and subordination of women believing it to be "divinely sanctioned" (Phiri 1997:55). In her book, Phiri (1997:56) cited several passages of scriptures including I Corinthians 14: 34-35, I Corinthians 11: 7-10, and I Timothy 2:11 frequently quoted by the church to support their position regarding women. Phiri argues the texts were read literally and uncritically. The last verse cited by Phiri states: "A woman should learn in quietness and full submission. I do not permit a woman to teach or have authority over a man, she must be silent. For Adam was not the one deceived, it was a woman who was deceived and became a sinner." The other scriptures mentioned reflect similar themes. Phiri

(1997) suggests that in the United States and other western countries the verses were eventually examined more critically and in light of other texts. However, in the Presbyterian Church in Malawi, these texts were the ones used to provide the guidelines for handling women's issues.

Submission and obedience are characteristics taught and expected within the Chewa culture. To be a good Chewa woman, obedience to your maternal uncle and husband is to be demonstrated by the regular routine behaviors mentioned in the data including kneeling to authority for instructions, feeding your husband first, and allowing your husband to make all the decisions in the home. Through the coming of western religions to the central region of Malawi, the symbolic theme of these same patterned behaviors came to include that of being a good Christian. Since these various RSPs of social interaction primarily represent two symbolic themes (i.e. a good Chewa and or a good Christian), they are homologous.

Finally, the theory of structural ritualization considers the RSPs resources needed to perform the ritualized symbolic practices of social interaction. The basic human resources needed for the behaviors of social interactions are the mental capacity and physical strength to perform them. As I critically examined the data, I noted that with the desired behaviors of interaction, there was usually a reference to a husband. This suggests that having a husband, for Malawian women, is one resource that is considered necessary to being a good Chewa and a good Christian. Phiri (1997:119) describes one particular case study:

I was in standard eight (eighth grade year) when *alangizi* (Christian instructor of young girls) approached me to stop my studies and get

married to some nice man who was going for theological education. According to the regulations of the church, he had to marry before he would be admitted for studies. I refused because I liked school and I wanted to go very far with my education and serve God in a more meaningful way with it. However, pressure kept on coming from *alangizi* to get married and become a minister's wife. With tears I gave in and got married. Since then I have not stopped regretting my decision to stop studying. I wish if there was a night school to accommodate people like me. I am now encouraging my children to study.

Chirwa (1995:29) in his work on gender roles and expectations during Malawi's colonial period had this to say:

The moral basis for most of the lessons the girls learnt through the rites of passage dealt with their relationship with men (specifically their husband). This implies that the women expressed their femininity in relation to the gendered association and interaction with masculinity in the wider social order. What is striking in most of the lessons involved in the rites is the frequent reference to the satisfaction of men's desires. It gives the impression, albeit a wrong one, that women lived their sexual life and expressed their femininity in relation to the physical and emotional fulfillment of men.

In a recent study conducted for UNICEF, the pressures on young girls to marry are still prevalent. The following is an excerpt from interviews conducted by Ngwira, Kayambazinthu, Msiska, and Kamchedzera (2000):

Respondents reported that most parents especially mothers in this matrilineal society encouraged their girls to get married once they had reached 15 or puberty for material gains from their son in law. Girls also get married because of peer pressure and what they learn from the initiation ceremonies. According to the teachers in Pimbiri school district, most girls perform very well if not better than the boys before puberty and before they attend initiation ceremonies. Afterward they note a marked withdrawal and girls start dropping out and getting married.

I suggest this information supports the idea that having a husband is one of the important RSP resources of social interaction for women in the central region of Malawi. Therefore,

this resource is a factor that contributes to the overall rank of the RSPs of social interaction.

In summary, the RSPs of social interaction are found to be high in rank as defined by the theory of structural ritualization. First, the various RSPs of social interaction are salient or prominent within the larger environment of Chewa society. They are highly repetitive, occurring many times during the day as women interacted with men and especially their husbands. The symbolic themes of the behaviors, determining their homologousness, are identical to those found for the behaviors of duty, that of being a good Chewa and a good Christian woman. Additionally, the various types of RSPs of social interaction for a Chewa woman primarily involve interactions with her husband. Having a husband, then, is one of the key resources needed for many of the behaviors of social interaction central to women. Each of the factors determining rank of RSPs was present in these ritualized behaviors of social interaction. Therefore, the RSPs of social interaction for women in the central region of Malawi are also high in rank.

### **Ritualized Symbolic Practices of Sexual Behaviors**

Sexual behaviors were mentioned 72 times in the data resources. Table 7 lists the Sexual behaviors for women including specific ways a woman could please or satisfy her husband. Chirwa's (1995:29) study suggested: "...women lived their sexual life and expressed their femininity in relation to the physical and emotional fulfillment of men . . . women's private parts and their bodies were physically invaded and conquered to serve the desires of men in Chewa society." The participants in my focus group sessions mentioned specific sexual behaviors they would do to please their husbands.

Participants from focus groups stated:

We were taught to go to the bush in the afternoon, and to do our girls business—to pull our private parts to satisfy our husbands. If we don't, the women tell us we won't get married.

Girls are taught during the engagement how to respect their husband. They should never refuse to have sex with him unless they are having their period.

After initiation girls are taught to pull or elongate the clitoris and labia minora, so that she will please her husband sexually.

There are many customs that put a woman in bondage such as a husband's brother may have sex with the woman if she is barren to see if she can conceive a child by him. The chief wants the women in his village to have children, they are the producers.

If you have a traditional initiation, a man comes to sleep with the young girls. In this way, he says they are fit for marriage. In a Christian initiation, the mothers must still tell the chief and bring him gifts. That way you are showing him respect and if you get pregnant he will help you. The chief cannot help you if he doesn't know you are mature.

Additionally, the decision to have sexual relations or to use birth control is at the discretion of one's husband. Here are a few of the statements shared by the key informants:

African women are shy to discuss birth control with their husbands. During Banda's regime, a woman could not purchase birth control items without the written consent of her husband. My husband and I discussed having children and family planning. I lived in town and went to a Christian school. We have been married one year and want to wait a little longer to have children. In the village, women do not discuss these things with their husband.

The Chewa people have traditional beliefs and rituals and they are not all pagan. People should be helped to overcome their fear regarding sexual matters. Many women are fearful of being charmed so they cannot have children. They submit to abuse and they never believe they can refuse to have sexual relations out of fear.



The secondary data from the center of social research conducted by Malawian men and women describe some of the more detailed teachings at the chinamwali ceremonies concerning sexual behaviors:

Part of the instructions that are taught during chinamwali (the traditional ceremony) include a woman's acceptance of her husband's indiscretions. 'If you don't open your door when he's been promiscuous, you are risking his life'. Physical endurance is also part of the instruction. The *ankonswe* (instructors) inserted boiled eggs, still slightly warm, gently into the opening of the vagina. Those who cried were punished. They must get used to the eggs, they represent the man's penis. Satisfying men's desires and pleasing and serving men were frequently used during the singing and instructions. The girls were taught to draw certain marks or pictures on their body to communicate with their husband their willingness to give him sexual pleasure like riding a bicycle or car. Marks inside their hands represented their willingness to be courteous (Mwale 1977).

During the initiation ceremonies the girls are taught how to wear the sexual ornaments such as waist beads" After three months and no pregnancy, the girl is talked to by her elders to ensure she is doing what she can. She is to help her husband in the function of producing children, when her husband desires her she should not refuse. Menstruation is the only time she may abstain from her husband. The relatives of the boy arrange for a secret girl to sleep with him. If she becomes pregnant, the family knows the wife is the problem. This sometimes results in the husband taking on the girl who slept with him as a second wife (Chirwa 1995).

The young Malawian woman where I stayed while conducting my research shared with me her raw data from a Christian chinamwali or chilangizo that she was invited to observe. It lasted three days and she took detailed notes. Here is one section from her data that discussed how certain sexual behaviors were taught:

The girls were paired together with cloths tied around their waists. They were instructed to dance and to imitate sexual acts while the other girls would sing "I do it this way in the house, I do it this way with my husband" "While in confinement they (the initiates) learned about the rights and obligations of maturity, sexuality and the physical endurance necessary to please your husband. The young initiates were to move their buttocks on the ground for the length of approximately 10 meters showing

they were physically mature.” If you do not take care of your husband, you will bring problems on yourself. Your husband may leave you and marry another woman, if you look after him well he will stay. “During initiation a song is sung about bearing a child that looks like your father. You must be careful around your father and not see him naked. Incest does occur and the child does not sue and the mother is aware of the act. If the father has sex with the daughter she is taught to be more careful” “The group of younger initiates came into the room the next morning and were singing and full of vigor. Girls who had already gone through *chinamwali* were to show the new initiates how to wriggle their waist during sexual relations. The new initiates were proud to show how well they could perform the sexual dance. A song was then sung about the boys asking the girls if they were lame because her private parts (the labia minora) were elongated. The song continues with the girl saying ‘no I am not lame, they are all mine’. A second song was about her body, it is for her husband. The third song was regarding her pubic hair. The wife should shave her pubic hair so it would not bother her husband’s penis (Banda 2001).

There are several types of behavior discussed in this portion of Rachel’s data along with their symbolic themes. First, these behaviors are taught as their rights and obligations of maturity, specifically for Chewa women. Their failure results in their husband leaving or marrying another woman. They sang about elongating the labia minora. Even the shaving of ones pubic hair is taught as a necessary behavior so the Chewa woman’s husband would not be “bothered” by it.

Another behavior referred to as “opening the door,” represents the willingness of the wife to open the door to her husband, even after his sexual indiscretions. In the *chinamwali* ceremony, Rachel described the drama that was performed to teach the young initiates the importance of this behavior:

“The instructor, *nankunwi*, turned herself into a man at night and came running, knocking at the door of the *simba* (house). Another instructor would be inside playing the role of a wife, refusing to open the door telling the husband to go away to wherever he was. The man kept on knocking until other people in the village heard him and came to the house. They scolded the wife and she opened the door only to find the husband with blood in his hands and all over his body. The idea was to teach the girls the dangers of not listening to their husbands’ complaints

when they get into marriage. One day they will welcome a dead body. The lesson also taught the girls something of the promiscuity of husbands. They go out with other women and come home late at night. However, that should not be the reason for not opening the door for the man because doing so would be risking the husband's life. The wife cannot know what happens to him in the dark of the night (Banda 2001).

The young women are also taught that the cause of their husband's indiscretion is their fault. The following instruction came from my notes taken at a Christian bridal shower: "Be careful, your husband can leave you at anytime. A bad wife results in a polygamous relationship." Kachapila (2001:119) also points out that this attitude is reflected in the teachings of the traditional *chinamwali* stating, "If you did not take care of your husband, the elders told you, you will bring problems on yourself. If you do not take care of your husband well, he will leave and be with another woman. If you look after him well, he will stay with you."

Sexual behaviors within a marriage context include the woman's responsibility for procreation. A good Chewa woman will give her husband many children. This was one of the important instructions of *chimanwali* (Mwale 1977; Kachapila 2001). Isabel Phiri (1997:37) also discusses this in the following passage:

Being barren was considered to be the greatest misfortune that could happen to a woman. John Mbiti (1987) said 'Unhappy is the woman who fails to get children, for whatever other qualities she might possess, her failure to bear children is worse than committing genocide.' This shows that even in a matrilineal society, a woman's value was associated with having children. Thus the personhood of a Chewa woman was not in her own right but in relation to what she could offer to the community in terms of children.

One of the key informants I spoke with had this to say about barrenness: "There are many customs that put women in bondage like the husband's brother can have sex with the woman if she is barren to see if she can conceive a child by him."

The various data sources indicate these specific types of sexual behaviors are considered an important part of Chewa culture. They were taught during both Christian and traditional rites of passage ceremonies, were mentioned by the focus group participants and key informants, and were discussed in the secondary data collected by Malawian men and women.

Further, these instructions and teachings are given during the traditional rites of passage. Therefore, they can be considered symbols of desired behaviors performed by good Chewa women. These same teachings and instructions are also given during the Christian rite of passage. These behaviors are to be performed by good Christian Chewa women. Whether placing marks on their bodies, elongating their genitalia, shaving their pubic hair, or performing special dances for their husbands, these sexual behaviors are done to please and satisfy one's husband. Pleasing one's husband is a symbolic representation of being a good Christian and a good Chewa woman. Therefore, these patterned sexual behaviors are considered ritualized symbolic practices.

### **Rank of RSPs of Sexual Behaviors**

The rank of the ritualized symbolic practices of sexual behaviors was determined by the four factors of salience, repetitiveness, homologousness, and RSP resources. Again, salience refers to the degree to which a ritualized symbolic practice is perceived to be central to an action sequence, or interrelated acts, or is noticeable or prominent. Additionally, as with the other RSPs, I looked for social sanctions (whether rewards or punishments) that were given for their performance.

The negative social sanction for women of not fulfilling the expected sexual behaviors is the possibility your husband would leave you or take another wife. As was

mentioned, a single woman in Malawi is guaranteed a bleak future consisting of constant hunger and difficult work. The positive social sanction for sexual behaviors is the reward of children. Upon the birth of her first child, a Chewa woman achieves a new status in the community. When that reward fails to come, there are more negative consequences faced by the Chewa wife. An excerpt from Chirwa's (1995) research reveals the following:

After a girl has been married for three months and there is no pregnancy, the girl is talked to by her elders to ensure she is doing what she can. She is to help her husband in the function of producing children. When her husband desires her, she should not refuse. Menstruation is the only time she may abstain from her husband. The relatives of the boy arrange for a secret girl to sleep with him. If she becomes pregnant, the family knows the wife is the problem. This sometimes results in the husband taking on the girl as a second wife.

A woman is shamed when she has no children. She is forced to deal with another woman sleeping with her husband. Then she must watch as she carries his first child. Additionally, there is little alternative for not wanting to have a child so quickly; it's expected. The RSPs of sexual behavior have significant meaning in the Chewa culture. Despite the risks of pregnancy at such a young age, rites of passage place a young girl in the position of perpetuating her culture, and being obedient to her Christian faith through marriage and having her first child quickly. Young expectant women do not get the regular pre-natal care needed. Since the child draws from the nutrition of the mother during pregnancy and while nursing, the mother's nutritional status suffers.

All of the specific aspects of the RSPs of sexual behaviors may be said to be salient. They are prominent and play a central role in Chewa culture. By participating in the various specific RSPs of sexual behaviors a young Chewa girl

is pleasing her husband and she is fulfilling her role in her Chewa community – she is contributing to its growth and providing it with new life.

Repetitiveness is concerned with the frequency with which a RSP is performed. Some of the behaviors such as elongation of the genitalia are usually done after undergoing *chinamwali* (puberty rites) until the Chewa girl is married. As one of the participants from the focus groups mentioned, “We were told to go into the bushes to do ‘our business.’ After they are elongated this specific RSP is no longer necessary. However, a woman would be constantly reminded of her changed physical appearance and the reason and purpose for that change.

Frequency of intercourse within marriage was not discussed in any of the literature. Young women are instructed, however, never to refuse their husbands unless they were having their menstrual cycle. This would imply that sexual intercourse for married couples is frequent in nature. Other RSPs of sexual behaviors are evident in rites for expectant mothers. There are several ritualized symbolic practices done during this ceremony. Mwale (1977:60) describes this rite of passage into motherhood:

In normal circumstances, if a girl is pregnant, the *namkungwi* (traditional instructor) waits for her to reach her fourth or fifth month for the *chisamba* rite (motherhood rite). This rite is meant to initiate the expectant mother into motherhood. The expectant mother is usually taught in a special place the things that will be involved in child birth, child care, and the expectations of mothers in Chewa society. Songs are sung on the day the women hand over the expectant mother back to her husband. ‘Please spread, please spread, please spread the mat for the neophyte to sleep.’ This song asks the husband to spread the mats and welcome his wife back home as a mother. The mother-to-be is grouped as a mother from the day after she has undergone the *chisamba* initiation rite.

Since the average woman in the central region has 5 pregnancies (National Statistical Office 2000), this means the special *chisamba* rituals are engaged in frequently. Additionally, these rites are attended by the other women of the village. These rites

provide constant reminders of the significance of motherhood. In general, various practices pertaining to sexual behaviors in the central region of Malawi exhibit high rates of repetitiveness.

Homologousness refers to the degree of perceived similarity of the RSPs within this category. Many researchers have considered the various sexual behaviors described to the initiates during *chinamwali* as symbolizing the need to please or satisfy one's husband (Mwale 1977; Chirwa 1995; Phiri 1997). In the larger context, pleasing or satisfying one's husband is considered an important aspect of being a good Chewa woman. Everything taught during the *chinamwali* is considered the important "truths" or "special knowledge" of the Chewa women, handed down during these ceremonies by the elders who possess this knowledge. Once a girl has passed through these rites, she obtains full acceptance as an adult woman in the Chewa society (Kachapila 2001). Therefore, each of the RSPs of sexual behaviors represents those ideals or characteristics of a good Chewa woman.

Like the RSPs within the other categories, the RSPs of sexual behaviors also symbolize being a good Christian. During the Christian *chinamwali* (*chilangizo*), Rachel recorded in her notes several instructions on certain sexual dances to please their future husband (Banda 2001:239).

The women in the focus groups stated they had all been raised in Christian homes, not necessarily Baptist, and had only participated in Christian *chilangizo* ceremonies. Their reflections about rites of passage including expected sexual behaviors are based on their *chilangizo* experience. So, satisfying one's husband sexually becomes part of the young girl's belief that these specific sexual

behaviors symbolically represent what a good Christian woman does. This was also observed in the teachings during the Baptist bridal shower I attended. Here, the warning is given that if you do not please or satisfy your husband he might leave you or take an additional wife. These different RSPs of sexual behaviors including elongating the genitalia, giving sexual pleasure through various dances, accepting marriage at an early age and early pregnancy reflect the two symbolic themes permeating nearly every aspect of a Chewa woman's life: being a good Chewa and being a good Christian woman. Therefore, this category of RSPs of sexual behaviors is homologous.

Finally, there are RSP resources needed to perform the sexual behaviors. Like the behaviors of social interaction, a young girl requires a husband for the various sexual behaviors. Intercourse outside marriage carries with it negative social sanctions. So while the RSPs of sexual behaviors are taught and expected, they require the women to be married. Additionally, there are positive social rewards including elevation in status when a young girl marries early and becomes pregnant quickly. The additional RSP resource needed for some of the sexual behaviors includes the physical ability to have children. As mentioned earlier, in the central region of Malawi, motherhood is highly desired and expected.

Analysis of the data shows that the ritualized symbolic practices of sexual behaviors are high in rank as established by the theory of structural ritualization and supported by the data. They are repetitive, salient, homologous, and typically



required human or physical RSP resources. The effect of these highly ranked RSPs of sexual behaviors will be discussed in Chapter VII.

### **Ritualized Symbolic Practices of Restricted Behaviors**

The last category of ritualized behaviors that were mentioned or observed was that of restrictive behaviors. As I reviewed the data, I looked for restricted behaviors that were mentioned most frequently. There were 84 restricted behaviors for women mentioned or observed. Some of the specific behaviors listed in Table 8 included: refusing to have sex with your husband, making important decisions, speaking disrespectfully, arguing, obtaining higher education, and talking or asking questions with guests when your husband is present. The specific behaviors and the frequency with which they were stated or observed in the various data sources may be found in Table 8.

Here are some examples of restricted sexual behaviors as mentioned by the different participants in the focus groups:

“The young girls are taught not to refuse their husband to be a good woman.”

“During the engagement you are taught how to respect your husband. You should never refuse to have sex with your husband unless you are having your period.”

“You must no longer play with children (uninitiated girls). You are now a woman.” (Referring to the time after a girl has gone through *chinamwali* or *chilangizo*).

Control of women’s sexuality was also mentioned by a key informant:

There are no laws to protect young girls. If a man wants to marry a girl who is 12 it is legal. The young girl is taught not to refuse to have sex with the *fisi* (sexual initiator in traditional *chinamwali*) or her husband to be considered a good woman.

The secondary data also contained statements about restrictions on not choosing to have sexual relationships with your husband. This portion of the data included two categories

of behavior – sexual behaviors and restrictive behaviors. I included the whole quote again to show the context in which this particular restrictive behavior was placed within the secondary research:

You should not refuse your husband's sexual desires except during menstruation. You are to help produce children. Three months from marriage, pregnancy is expected. A young man will be questioned about performing his duties and a secret girl may begin sleeping with the boy. If the girl becomes pregnant the wife is barren. This is very shameful and the boy may take the girl to become his second wife (Mwale 1977).

Several sources (including Banda 2001, Chirwa 1995 and Mwale 1977) discuss how drama plays a part in teaching the young girls about expected behaviors, their importance and consequences. This particular drama is a good example of how the young girls are taught never to refuse to accept their husband back home after his indiscretions:

Drama's are sometimes conducted during the *chinamwali* to teach specific lessons. One such drama includes a "man" (one of the instructors dressed as a man) would come running and pretend to knock on the door of a home. Another instructor would play the role of the wife and refuse to open the door telling the husband to go away. When the wife finally opens the door she finds the husband covered with blood. The idea is to teach the girls the dangers of not listening to their husbands. Your husband may be promiscuous. He will go out with other women and come home late at night. However, that should not be the reason for not opening the door for the man. If you do that you could be risking his life" (Chirwa 1995).

These types of restricted sexual choices are even part of the Chewa laws regarding marriage. Women are restricted from taking additional marriage partners, but their husbands are not. Furthermore, a husband is not required to get his wife's consent for his second marriage. Young women seem to be the most vulnerable. In the passage taken from *The laws of Marriage and Divorce* (1996), there is an example of a legal case

regarding marriage by capture representative of some of the more severe restrictive behaviors placed on young women:

“A man may enter into an unlimited number of subsequent marriages. A woman cannot enter into a subsequent marriage during the continuance of a prior marriage. In the event she becomes a widower, the *nkhoswe* or marriage guardians may make arrangements for the woman to marry one of her husband’s relatives. The consent of the man’s first wife is not essential for the validity of his subsequent marriage. Marriage by capture: A man having ascertained that a girl was unmarried arranged with his friends for her abduction. When he had had intercourse with her, the man kept the girl at his village, sending his brother to pay the bride price to the girl’s brother and inform him of the abduction. The two brothers arranged a date for a meeting between the family’s marriage guardians. Once sexual intercourse has taken place, the consent of the girl is unnecessary for marriage.”

The following quotes are examples of statements regarding young girls being restricted from participating in higher education. One of the key informants had this to say:

“Families invest their time and money for education in the boys. You want the boy to be the most educated. A girl may marry a boy with more education but a boy may not take a girl with more education than themselves.”

A participant from the focus groups also states:

“Girls are sometimes kept from going to school for fear of unwanted pregnancy. Also the parents of girls are anxious to receive bride money. Girls who are educated are often thought to be involved in witchcraft and the older women will curse them.”

Phiri (1997:119), as mentioned earlier, told of the case study of a young girl who was instructed to leave school to marry a minister and become a wife and mother. With regret the young girl agreed. The UNICEF report (Ngwira et al. 2000) on education levels of young girls in Malawi found that among women interviewed three primary factors kept girls from continuing with their education beyond the *chinamwali* or *chilangizo*

ceremonies: parental lack of value for education, early marriages, and child labor. The following are a few quotes from the respondents who were interviewed:

“Girls get married once they reached 15 or puberty because of the material gains needed for the family. Girls also get married because of peer pressure and what they learn in their initiation ceremonies” (Ngwira et al. 2000:17).

“Girls work both before going to school (sweeping, drawing water and cooking) and after school (cooking and cleaning) assisting their overburdened mother with household chores. This does not give them time to do their homework” (Ngwira et al. 2000:17).

“There is no need to send the girls to school; it isn’t fashionable” (Ngwira et al 2000:18)

Mvula and Kakhongwa (1997) obtained similar results in their report for the Center of Social Research in Malawi. Here is an example from their findings:

“Factors contributing to the low level of educational attainment for girls include long distances traveled to get to school and the fact that girls often begin Standard 1 (first grade) quite late (age 11 or 12). They do not stay at school until school-leaving age due to early marriages and initiations at the age of 15, when most girls will have just achieved Standard 3. The low value placed on girls’ education by many parents means they are able to leave school more easily than boys, and girls are more likely to be withdrawn by parents to help with household chores.”

Additionally, women are restricted from making important decisions. The following are some of the responses from the focus group sessions:

“Important decisions to be made concerning the family garden are made by the husband.”

“Maternal uncles and maternal brothers control the women’s property and crops if her husband is deceased.”

One of the key informants had this to say:

“My husband and I discussed family planning. Most girls do not discuss this, especially those in the village. It used to be against the law for people in Malawi to use birth control, things are changing. Girls are shy to discuss these things.

Even choices about clothing for a woman, are controlled by her husband. The following is an excerpt from notes taken during the Christian bridal shower I attended:

“When your husband’s status changes, you must be willing to stop wearing traditional dresses. The Bible says you must obey your husband and you should not lead in the home. You should make your husband proud.”

These restricted behaviors are ritualized symbolic practices as defined by the theory of structural ritualization. To restate the definition, ritualized symbolic practices refer to the social behaviors which people engage in regularly. They occur throughout social life and can include standardized styles of interaction within a society. Although individuals may not reflect upon and consciously pay attention to these patterned behaviors, they rest upon symbolic frameworks or cognitive schemas (or representations). These restricted behaviors are, according to the various data sources, part of the routinized way that women interact with men. Like other RSPs, they, too, are grounded in the two central symbolic themes of being a good Chewa woman and being a good Christian woman.

#### **Rank of RSPs of Restrictive Behaviors**

The first factor in determining the rank of RSPs is salience. The salience of the RSPs of restrictive behaviors was in part established by the fact they are prominently or conspicuously taught as part of the rites of passage (whether *chinamwali* or *chilangizo*). These rites of passage are considered to be the most important event in a young girl’s life. A woman cannot be considered an adult in Chewa society without going through one of these rites of passage (Chirwa 1995; Mwale 1977).

Moreover, the way a woman routinely interacts with a man is very noticeable in the small villages. As one of my key informants put it, "Everyone in the village knows your behavior." During my visits to different homes in the two small villages in the central region of Malawi, all of our visits were conducted in front of the house. These houses are quite small, usually containing just one or two rooms. Cooking is done outside over an open fire, dishes are washed and placed on a wooden rack, and living rooms are created by placing a mat in front of your house. Ritualized behaviors are visible, prominent, and observed by most members of the community.

Even restrictions on riding bicycles serve as a constant reminder to everyone walking along the road whether they are a visitor or a national. Women have to walk several times a day to collect firewood, gather water, or wash clothes passing men on their bicycles on the way to town. At church, another important activity for the women in the central region, women always sit on the left side separated from the men. All of these are clearly recognized occasions when restrictive behaviors are observed. These RSPs involving restrictive behaviors are very salient.

Repetitiveness refers to the number of times a RSP is performed or in this case is not performed. Of course, it's difficult to determine how frequently one doesn't engage in a particular activity, but certainly some strong inferences can be made. For women who attend church, the restricted seating requirements are observed at least weekly. The importance of not doing certain behaviors is constantly communicated to women when the *chinamwali* ceremonies are performed. These ceremonies are conducted several times a year as young girls in the village reached maturity. Additionally, decisions in any family are made fairly frequently. There are decisions about money or children. These

decisions are made only by husbands, the wife's oldest brother, or her mother's uncles. Finally, the expected restrictions such as eating apart from your husband, occurs at least once daily. Therefore, some of the RSPs of restricted behavior occur quite often while many others are engaged in less frequently. Despite the variation, the repetitiveness of the RSPs of restrictive behavior contributes to their overall rank.

The RSPs of restrictive behaviors are also homologous. The specific RSPs within the category of restrictive behaviors reflect two broad symbolic meanings or themes—that of being a good Chewa woman or being a good Christian. Allowing the man to eat first, to have the best seats, to make the decisions, to ride bicycles, are all ways by which a woman shows respect to her husband. Respect and obedience are the two primary qualities mentioned in the rites of passage that young girls go through to be a good Chewa. Of course, Christian women are told that complete obedience to one's husband is a sacred obligation (Phiri 1997; Banda 2001).

The unique RSP resources needed to refrain from a particular RSP are the physical, mental, psychological, and social skills of women which enable them to exercise self-control, be deferential, know how to follow orders, etc. According to the theory, “the greater the availability of relevant resources the more likely or easier it is for ritualized symbolic practices to be engaged in by actors” (Knottnerus 1997:264). For the women in the central region of Malawi, these resources including the psychological and social skills are modeled for young girls from their mothers and other women in the village. Additionally, they are taught through the puberty rites of passage, *chinamwali*.

These ritualized symbolic practices of restricted behaviors of the women in the central region of Malawi were found to be high in rank. They are salient; they represent

similar symbolic themes making them homologous. Furthermore, these RSPs are repetitive and utilize certain available resources. These factors all contribute to their influence.

### SUMMARY

The data strongly suggests that the patterned behaviors I first observed in the central region of Malawi are ritualized symbolic practices as defined by the theory of structural ritualization. Each of the four categories of behaviors, i.e., duty, social interaction, sexual behaviors, and restricted behaviors are part of a woman's daily, routine activities. They are mentioned in all data sources including participants from the focus groups, key informants, and in-depth interviews. They are also described in my written notes based on my field observations. Additionally, they are found in the secondary research data collected by both Malawians and foreigners.

These ritualized patterned behaviors communicate significant symbolic themes that are extremely important to these women. In fact, for each of the four categories of behaviors there are two dominant symbolic themes: being a good Chewa woman and being a good Christian woman. In an area that has been dominated by colonial powers for nearly 60 years, maintaining Chewa identity is crucial. Despite the efforts of governments and religious groups, the rites of passage are strictly maintained. Although some adaptations in the ceremonies are allowed through the elimination of the *fisi* initiation in the Christian ceremony, the rites of passage continued through colonialism, Banda's dictatorship, and now democracy. It is still widely practiced in the central region and each of the women interviewed felt it is the most important ceremony in a young Chewa woman's life.



Through the various rites of passages (puberty, marriage, motherhood) the women of Malawi achieve a more elevated status in the community. The desire to acquire the state of full adulthood in the society is quite strong. Young girls long to be part of the secret community of “adult” women (Mwale 1977; Chirwa 1995; Phiri 1997). The behaviors taught in these special ceremonies are performed in hopes that someday they too might have the honor of becoming one of the *nankamwi* or initiation instructors.

In the central region, the protestant religions are the most prevalent religious groups (National Statistical Office 2000). For many of the Christian women in the central region, the ritualized behaviors examined here are crucial to being accepted by church leaders as good Christians. Each of the categories of behaviors is central to being a good Christian. Further, these various categories of RSPs are rewarded through acceptance into the women’s organization. This entitles the woman to wear their uniform to public meetings. As she would walk along the road to her church meeting, the uniform provides a symbolic marker that publicly identifies her as being a good Christian. When all of the women in the organization are allowed to wear their uniforms to a funeral, the woman of the household is honored. In a small village where death is so frequent, especially for children, this honor is highly desired by the women. These ritualized behaviors again express two personal and socially important symbolic themes to women. They represent the characteristics of a good Chewa woman and good Christian woman.

After establishing that the patterned behaviors of women investigated in this research are RSPs, the results further indicated they are high in rank. All of the categories of behavior are shown to be salient, repetitive, homologous, and utilizing certain resources. The theory of structural ritualization suggests that the higher the rank of

ritualized symbolic practices in terms of salience, repetitiveness, homologousness, and RSP resources, the greater the rank or dominance of these actions, that is, the greater their influence, importance, or effect. The theory's basic assumption is that the greater the rank of the RSPs the greater their impact on the thoughts and deeds of people and the social relations they form among each other.

The results of this study suggest that these highly ranked ritualized symbolic practices of women in the central region involving duty, social interaction, sexual behaviors, and restricted behaviors have had a significant impact on their thoughts and deeds. These specific practices are explicitly taught and made central to one's identity as a Chewa woman through *chinamwali*. During colonialism, with the coming of protestant patriarchal religions, people strongly adhered to their traditional rites of passage with some modification. These modified rites of passage known as *chilangizo* (because they are now made to be Christian with the elimination of sexual initiation) further impact the thoughts and actions of women. Now, the various categories of RSPs also become sanctified or sacred and central to one's new religious beliefs.

During Banda's regime, some of the categories of RSPs were codified into law, including mandatory dress codes, marriage laws requiring complete obedience to husbands, and the forbidding of birth control without the husband's consent. This further reinforced the already high rank of some of the RSPs of women making them more important within their society. As Banda tried to establish the new independent country of Malawi, not engaging in these specific ritualized behaviors meant you were a bad Malawian citizen and you risked imprisonment (Chirwa 1995; Phiri 1997).

Although Malawi now has a democratic government, the ritualized behaviors expected and taught to the young women of Malawi continue. The symbolic themes of the various behaviors are taught in the rites of passage. These themes are also taught in the various protestant groups that came to the central region. While separate seating is not practiced in any of the protestant religions in the US, it became an acceptable Christian practice in the central region of Malawi. Christian women's groups in the U.S. emphasize community work and supporting mission work overseas; in Malawi, they also place an importance on being an obedient and respectful wife. This, of course, includes RSPs such as doing laundry for one's husband, cleaning the house, gathering the firewood and water, and feeding him.

Recently collected data from focus group participants, key informants, in-depth interviews and field observations suggest these RSPs of duty, social interaction, sexual behaviors, and restricted behaviors are still significantly impacting the cognitions and behaviors of women in the central region. In the next chapter, I will show how these highly ranked RSPs result in the social construction of inequality for women in the central region of Malawi. These highly ranked RSPs have helped to create, sustain and reinforce their position of inequality or unequal access to the materials and knowledge that would directly benefit their physical, social, and psychological well-being.

## CHAPTER VII

### DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

In this chapter, I will briefly review the findings and discuss how the RSPs of duty, social interaction, sexual behaviors, and restricted behaviors have contributed to the social construction of inequality for the women in the central region of Malawi. Additionally, I will present my suggestions for further research studies. It is strongly desired that this information will provide a broader understanding of how seemingly insignificant behaviors that some women regularly engage in, can create, sustain and even perpetuate gendered inequality.

#### Review of the Findings

The theory of structural ritualization provided a means of critically looking at the strongly patterned behaviors of women in the central region of Malawi to determine if they were ritualized symbolic practices. The basic difference between behaviors casually performed or engaged in and ritualized symbolic practices involve two features of RSPs: the symbolic themes that shape and define the behaviors and their regular, routine performance. Thus, ritualization is used in a broader sense to refer to activities that are standardized (and symbolically grounded) interaction sequences and social behaviors that occur in all kinds of contexts whether “secular” or “sacred” (Knottnerus 1997:259). Based upon a systematic and careful examination of the data, I found that the behaviors of women in the central region involved ritualized interaction sequences. These rigid,

highly patterned behaviors were found to have been performed consistently, from before colonialism till the present day (Mwale 1977; Chirwa 1995).

Additionally, these ritualized behaviors communicate significant symbolic themes to women in the central region. For these women, their rites of passage (*chinamwali*) transform them from young girls to the highly valued status of adult women in the Chewa community. The teachings of the *chinamwali* provide these young girls with shared symbolic meanings for various behaviors. Through instructions, dances, songs, and dramas, the girls are told how gathering firewood, collecting water, feeding their husband first, and never refusing their husband's sexual advances, is the way for young women to demonstrate they are good Chewa women. To fail to do so is to bring great shame and dishonor to your parents, your husband, the chief, and yourself.

The sacred and moral implications of the behaviors were further developed and expanded upon during colonialism. With the establishment of protestant and Catholic churches, rites of passage were Christianized. This was done to protect young women from the degrading aspects of *chinamwali* such as sexual initiation, which was in conflict with the teachings of church doctrines.

The new ceremony, called *chilangizo*, began about 1939 in the Catholic churches. However, as Phiri (1997:70) argues, the cultural teachings on attitudes toward men, the purpose of marriage, and care of the husband and home were supported by the church. Part of the cultural Christian church doctrine during the early and mid 1900s in Europe and the U.S. included the complete obedience of women to their husbands and the restricted participation of women in leadership positions (and the making of decisions) in

the church. These western, cultural beliefs profoundly influenced the Christian churches in the central region of Malawi and their church doctrines.

Therefore, as shown in the data, the rigid patterned behaviors taught and expected of young Chewa girls in the central region of Malawi express two primary symbolic themes: being a good Chewa woman and being a good Christian woman. The various pattern behaviors of duty, social interaction, sexual behaviors and restricted behaviors, therefore, represent ritualized practices. The symbolic pattern behaviors that are observed and within this social environment are strongly accentuated and presented to the young girls of this society. The many instructions taught to the young women in the central region of Malawi, whether religious or cultural, instill “schema-driven action repertoires” or ritualized symbolic practices (Knottnerus 1997:259).

Each of the different categories of RSPs was found to be high in rank. They are salient or prominent in the daily social life of the village. There are significant punitive social sanctions imposed on those who do not engage in them. Additionally, such individuals are subject to religious consequences involving a potential loss of status or standing in the church. The various categories of behaviors were found to be repetitive. Most of the duties of the women are daily, burdensome tasks. But the other categories of behaviors are repetitive as well. While some are not daily tasks, they are still regularly engaged in or there are repeated subtle reminders of places they couldn't sit, transportation they couldn't use, or imposed physical changes to “please” their husband.

One of the most striking findings from the data is the similarity in symbolic themes expressed by the different RSPs in each of the categories. Whether doing laundry for their husband or having children soon after marriage, the RSPs articulate two primary

themes: that of being a good Chewa and a good Christian woman. The RSPs in each of the categories are found to be homologous i.e. similar to and consistent with each other. Finally, the RSP resources for these behaviors are very significant. Most of a woman's role in the Chewa society centers on being a wife and mother. There are specific RSPs that are exclusively for women of adult status who are married and have children. Without a husband, or the ability to conceive a child, a woman holds no status and is considered herself only a child (Mwale 1977; Chirwa 1995). Therefore, resources such as these along with various cognitive, physical, and social skills are quite significant and contribute to the overall rank of RSPs.

In sum, the RSPs of duty, social interaction, sexual behaviors, and restricted behaviors of women in the central region of Malawi are found to be high in rank as determined by the four theoretically defined factors. As the theory suggests, these highly ranked RSPs have a significant impact upon the thoughts and deeds of the women and with those they interact. These ritualized symbolic practices are regularly engaged in by women in the central region and have been taught to their daughters from pre-colonial times to the present. Additionally, in some of the formal groups that have emerged in recent decades, particularly the Christian women's organizations of the various Christian denominations, the RSPs of duty, social interaction, sexual behaviors, and restricted behaviors are incorporated in to their teachings.

### **Social Construction of Gender Inequality**

The main focus of this chapter is to provide an understanding of the specific ways the various RSPs of duty, social interaction, sexual behaviors and restricted behaviors socially construct and influence women's unequal access to resources, i.e., those

materials and items essential to the physical, psychological, and social well-being of Chewa women. There are three primary resources where women are significantly underrepresented: education, certain occupations, and farmer's clubs that provide specific agricultural information and credit. This section will discuss how the various RSPs of duty, social interaction, sexual behaviors and restricted behaviors significantly impact young girls' decisions to continue their education, their abilities to choose certain occupations, and their access to farmer's clubs.

### Education

The RSPs of duty and RSPs of sexual behaviors appear to have the greatest impact on young girls' and their educational attainment. In a study conducted by the WORLD BANK (1996), parents in the rural areas of Malawi stated that the need to rely on girls for domestic work was one of the greatest constraints to sending their daughters to school. A poignant example of this dilemma comes from an interview with a fifteen year old girl named Manis (Stromquist and Murphy 1996:23):

Manis comes from a large family, having five older brothers and two younger sisters. She gets up at 6:00 a.m., sweeps the house, and makes two or three trips (twenty minutes each) to draw water from the well. After school she does the dishes and draws more water "whenever required," sometimes into the evening. On Fridays, she does not attend school. She takes maize to the mill for grinding. She is also absent from the classroom on the days that she feels her clothes are dirty and she cannot wash them because there is no soap. None of her brothers helps at home. Manis is fifteen years old and now in grade 3. She had an initiation rite at age eight and another last year. She remembers being told then that she should be a good mother and take care of her children. She left school in 1991 because her family could not pay expenses. She came back this year because she heard that no fees are required. In her view, "education is important because later you can secure a job, be independent, and help your family. If you are not independent, you have to ask people for money, you cannot buy what you want. If a girl is educated, she becomes knowledgeable and marries later; but first she gets an education. I am not interested in marriage. I have friends who are married and have problems:



they don't have soap or clothing; they have children and are not able to feed them." Manis is getting low grades because she came back after several years. She would like to complete grade 8 and become a teacher.

While economics certainly play a part in this young girl's lack of education, the ritualized symbolic practices of duty have also significantly constrained her opportunities. Additionally, Manis mentions that the specific domestic duties are for her and her other sisters rather than her brothers. This is consistent with the findings of my research.

The difficulty and constraints of RSPs of duty in obtaining education was also noted in a recent UNICEF study (Ngwira et al. 2000:17). From their focus group sessions, they learned that the heavy work load of women which required young girls to work was one of the factors that prevented young girls from continuing their education. Some of the comments mentioned by the participants stressed that girls work both before going to school and afterwards to assist their mothers with such chores as sweeping, drawing water, and cooking. Additionally, they have to walk long distances to mill maize.

Despite the government's effort to abolish tuition fees for girl students in 1992 and 1994, girls continue to have significantly lower retention rates in school (Stromquist and Murphy 1996). While this helped significantly with initial enrollment, as with Manis, the continuation of educational studies is still inhibited by the tremendous work load of the young girls. Although opportunities have increased, these RSPs of duty taught to the young girls in their rites of passage, whether traditional or Christian, through various stages of socialization at home, in their interactions with others, and even in their churches has perpetuated the significant meanings associated with them. The statistics for

lower educational levels for women in the central region of Malawi are in part due to the high rank of the RSPs of duties.

The other ritualized practices that seem to contribute to lower educational levels are the RSPs of sexual behaviors. Almost half of the RSPs of sexual behaviors mentioned, dealt with early marriage and the early conception of the first child. In that regard, Stromquist and Murphy (1996:27) found that the most common reason girls drop out of school was pregnancy. This is also supported by the UNICEF study. Ngwira et al. (2000:17) found that mothers in the central region of Malawi encouraged their girls to get married once they reached 15 or puberty for the material gains they will derive from their son in law. Girls also get married because of peer pressure and what they learn from the initiation ceremonies.

While economics played a part in the parents' encouragement for early marriage, the teachings of initiation ceremonies that are mentioned in my research suggests that they, too, are a contributing factor. The participants in the focus group sessions I conducted clearly stated that initiation ceremonies are quite significant for the young women in the central region. The specific teachings of the ceremonies were also discussed in detail from the research conducted by Malawian men and women. These teachings include the shame and misfortune of young girls who did not marry and have children.

Isabel Phiri (1997:37) a woman from the central region of Malawi also discusses this in the following passage:

Being barren was considered to be the greatest misfortune that could happen to a woman. John Mbiti (1987) said 'Unhappy is the woman who fails to get children, for whatever other qualities she might possess, her failure to bear children is worse than committing genocide.' This shows

that even in a matrilineal society, a woman's value was associated with having children. Thus the personhood of a Chewa woman was not in her own right but in relation to what she could offer to the community in terms of children.

Additionally, the decision to have sexual relations or to use birth control is at the discretion of one's husband. These statements reveal an underlying belief system that places marriage and children as central to a young girl's life. These ritualized beliefs and behaviors establish her position as an adult in Chewa society. Yet, these are the very behaviors that limit her abilities to further her education.

### **Occupations**

Women's limited educational opportunities also significantly influence and limit a woman's occupational choices. Since all business transactions are conducted in English, women's limited education restricts their opportunities to be able to work in certain occupations. English is not taught until the secondary level. It is at this level when the significant drop in girl's attendance occurs. The most recent statistics on educational levels in the central region reveal the following percentages in educational levels for men and women. Of the 1,664,188 males living in the central region, 27% have not attended primary grades, 63% have completed up to eighth grade level, 10 % have completed up to high school level and less than 1% (7,241) have attended the university. Of the 1,694,062 females in the central region, 38% have not attended primary grades, 56% have completed up to eighth grade level, 5 % have completed up to high school level and less than 1 % (2,944) have received a university education (National Statistical Office 2000).

In my field notes, I noted that there were no women in the open markets selling goods; there were only men. The data also revealed young women are taught that certain occupations are for men only. At the bridal shower I attended, the instructions to the new bride included: "Men gather firewood to sell and the women should gather the firewood for the home." The secondary data also revealed the same traditional restrictions for Chewa women: "The men were allowed to work for paid labor in the mines" (Chirwa 1995). Mwale (1977) also mentions this Chewa belief system: "A woman's jobs include cooking, carrying water, caring for the home and the children. Men do the outside jobs and must not interfere with the women's jobs."

With the primary responsibility for the children required of women, this further limits her choices. Caring for children is an overwhelming task and very physically demanding. Research studies regarding the women of China suggest their increased opportunities for advancement in certain business positions were because of the one child policy in China. The results suggested that the women of China were not as overburdened as American women with their physical burden of multiple pregnancies and childrearing (Hong 1987).

The findings of this study demonstrated the significant meaning and symbolic themes of the various categories of behavior engaged in by Malawian women. Despite limiting their opportunities for certain occupations, the young girls are encouraged and expected to perform all the household duties, and to welcome early marriage and pregnancy. The physical demands and time requirements of household duties and caring for children hinder women from engaging in wage labor.

## **Agricultural and Nutritional Resources**

Access to agricultural resources is another crucial resource for women in the central region of Malawi. Miller (1996) found many women had limited access to this resource because of what he termed "cultural restraints". One such custom he observed was women's silence in the presence of men. This is especially constraining when speaking in an assertive manner is necessary in the farmer's clubs. As Miller (1996:86) stated "...the only direct encounter many villagers have with the government is through the farmers clubs. The agricultural officers in these clubs are the lowest rung of the administrative ladder. This is the level at which the village inhabitants and their ideological perceptions interface with the government and its plans and policies." Additionally, it is through these clubs that women could have access to credit support. However, credit is generally limited to cash crops and women have typically been restricted to domestic production.

RSPs of restrictive behavior significantly impact women's access to farm clubs and agricultural credit resources that could ultimately contribute to the production of better and more nutritional crops. The RSPs of restrictive behaviors that were found in the data include limitations placed on making important decisions, engaging in business transactions, acquiring higher education, and talking or asking questions with guests. Women's restrictive speech which is a dimension of good behavior for women and a form of their respect to men has prevented women from accessing the support and help they need. Moreover, their limited education results in limited reading skills in their Chewa language and a complete lack of understanding anything written in English.

Programs targeted to help rural farmers improve their crops and provide them with much needed credit neglected the women because of the many RSPs of restrictive behaviors placed on them. Kaunda (1990) found that in the Kawinga Rural Development Programme, women's contribution and exposure to innovations that would have improved what programs are developed is quite limited. It is not surprising that less than 4% of the women obtain credit for programs designed to assist farmers with cash crops. Yet it is the credit that provides fertilizer to improve crop quality and tools that enable the work to be done easier and faster. Without hearing the voices of women, farm clubs inadvertently restrict their help and support to those larger cash producing farms typically headed by males.

Seemingly insignificant behaviors and everyday patterns of social interaction have significant negative impact on the lives of the women in the central region of Malawi. Perhaps because of their seeming insignificance these patterned behaviors have been overlooked and are not considered when government agencies develop plans and programs to assist rural farmers. Without realizing or recognizing the entrenched RSPs of duty, social interaction, sexual behaviors, and restricted behaviors, agencies created to enable farmers to access information and credit are inaccessible to women.

Finally, another example of the impact of restricted decision making is found in women-centered nutritional education programs. Women were given lessons on how to make their food more nutritious for their children; however, they weren't always allowed to put into practice what they had learned due to pressure from husbands and other men in the community (Drost 1999 citing Kurth 1989). The Tulinde Nutrition Project, recognizing some of the past failures of nutritional programs, hired Nancy Drost, an

educational sociologist, to explore the social, gendered practices impacting malnutrition. Based upon her research, the facilitators of the program decided to include men and traditional authority leaders in the educational process. It successfully implemented dietary changes that increased levels of vitamin A, iron, and zinc in children (Drost 1999). The Tulinde Nutrition Project demonstrates how a sensitive understanding of cultural norms, including those standardized patterned behaviors that people engage in, is necessary if nutritional dietary improvements are to be changed through intervention efforts.

### **Summary of the Social Construction of Inequality**

The data has shown that RSPs of duty, social interaction, sexual behaviors and restricted behaviors have serious negative effects on three important aspects of women's lives in the central region of Malawi. Education, a basic resource that fundamentally impacts all other areas of life, is essentially restricted by RSPs of duty. A woman is so overburdened with her duties that she often needs her daughters to assist her. Thus, they are routinely prevented from receiving an adequate education. Due to RSPs of restrictive behaviors, including those limitations placed on career choices, women continue to support their sons' rather than their daughters' education. Again, these restrictions are part of a woman's Christian obligations and her core self or identity, that of being a good Chewa woman.

Additionally, RSPs of sexual behaviors, specifically those involving early marriages and early pregnancy, physically limit women's pursuit of education and career opportunities. A woman in the central region of Malawi, with her lack of English and limited reading skills, is further disadvantaged in her access to agricultural and nutritional

information. The alarming statistics showing the poor health of women and children despite many attempted programs and policy changes, attest to the neglect and failure to understand the significance of RSPs in the many different parts of a woman's life. These statistics and the experiences of women examined in this study, overwhelmingly demonstrate the need to consider and learn about the significance of ritualized practices in their lives.

According to the Women's International Network News (2003), Malawi has one of the highest levels of HIV or AIDS in sub-Saharan Africa. Unlike other countries, in Malawi, 60% of those infected are female. The Women's International Network News (2003) suggests it is gendered cultural practices in Malawi that are a significant factor in the AIDS crisis among women. This research study also supports the significance of cultural practices and found that for some of the women in the central region of Malawi, these cultural practices represent being a good Chewa and a good Christian. It is understandable, that the behaviors that seem so obvious for us to change or discontinue, would be problematic for young women in Malawi. Therefore, open communication between traditional authority, religious leaders and educators is essential. Like the nutritional program developed for Malawi (Drost 2000), HIV/AIDS education will have to include presenting ideas and programs to the chiefs, village headmen, nkonswe or instructors of the puberty rites of passage, and pastors. Since women give great respect to authority, those in leadership positions must come to understand and support safer sexual practices that can be part of a good Chewa identity and a good Christian identity.



## **Recommendations for Future Research Studies**

This research study focused on the social psychological aspects of gender inequality in the central region of Malawi. This does not mean, however, that other dimensions of social life are not deserving of attention. For instance, attention should be given to the role of economic factors from a conflict perspective. The data suggests that while RSPs of duty, social interaction, sexual behaviors, and restricted behaviors play an important part in the development and perpetuation of gender inequality, there are certainly economic aspects of the rites of passage that contribute to their maintenance. Additionally, poverty in the rural areas has created a number of conditions that constrain women's choices and opportunities.

This investigation of categories of RSPs in the central region of Malawi suggests the relevance of a comparative study examining other regions of Malawi. For instance, the northern region has more patriarchal tribes. Are there similar or different highly ranked RSPs for women and men in this region? How do RSPs for women in the central region differ from the southern region where there is a greater Muslim influence? Did those of the Muslim faith embrace the same RSPs as did those who were Christian? Research examining such issues could shed further light on the commonalities and differences within Malawian society and the nature of gender inequality in this country.

A final area of possible research could include cross-cultural comparisons. For example, in the caste system of India, there exist a number of rigidly patterned behaviors engaged in by social actors. Are these ritualized symbolic practices, and if so, what do they mean to actors and how important are they? How might they socially construct and constrain the lived unequal reality for women there? I believe a thorough understanding

of the ritualized symbolic practices of women in many different empirical settings will better enable us to explain how gender inequality is created and maintained. Such an understanding will help provide new insights into the development of programs and policies implemented to help women. This is another implication of this research that warrants further attention and effort.

This research has examined the role of ritual in Malawian society and its impact on women and gender inequality. It is hoped this study will encourage more research and pragmatic efforts aimed at improving the lives of women and men in less developed and impoverished regions of the world. Collaborative solutions based on the understanding of the cultural beliefs and ritualized behaviors could provide more successful outcomes of policies and programs.

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## Appendix A

## Focus Group Questions

When I was a young girl in the United States, I stayed at home with my mother until the age of 4. My grandparents, aunts, and uncles lived far away, so I stayed at home with my mother while my father went to work. I have one older brother, Robert. I enjoyed playing with him when he got home from school. I loved to play outdoors as a little girl and I loved to play with dolls. I would dress a little doll like a real baby and feed it with a pretend bottle.

1. What was it like for you as a young girl in Malawi? Who were the primary people who participated in your raising? How is that changing today? Do you believe these changes are due to education? Religious beliefs? Western influence? Political changes?
2. What were some of the important sayings or proverbs your parents taught you?
3. Were there any special ceremonies for girls? Boys?
4. Respect seems to be a very important part of life in Malawi. I have observed it in children, women, and men. How were you taught to show respect to older adults? Were you taught different types of respect to men? To women? Are these customs changing?
5. What are the wedding customs here in Malawi? How does a young man find a girlfriend? Does a young man ask permission from the girl's parents for marriage? Has this changed for your children?
6. As a woman, are there certain things you do to respect your husband? Other men in the community?
7. What are the typical duties or responsibilities of a wife and mother?
8. What are the typical duties for a husband or father?
9. Are there specific social customs that pertain only to women? To men?
10. How has life changed for the young girls in Malawi today?

## Appendix B

Oklahoma State University  
Institutional Review Board

Protocol Expires: 4/29/02

Date : Monday, April 30, 2001

IRB Application No AS0160

Proposal Title: STRUCTURAL RITUALIZATION AND THE WOMEN OF CENTRAL MALAWI: A  
FEMINIST ETHNOGRAPHY

Principal  
Investigator(s) :

Carol Minton  
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Stillwater, OK 74078

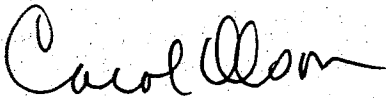
Dr. David Knottnerus  
006 CLB  
Stillwater, OK 74078

Reviewed and  
Processed as: Expedited

Approval Status Recommended by Reviewer(s) : Approved

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Signature :



Carol Olson, Director of University Research Compliance

Monday, April 30, 2001

Date

Approvals are valid for one calendar year, after which time a request for continuation must be submitted. Any modifications to the research project approved by the IRB must be submitted for approval with the advisor's signature. The IRB office MUST be notified in writing when a project is complete. Approved projects are subject to monitoring by the IRB. Expedited and exempt projects may be reviewed by the full Institutional Review Board.

VITA



Carol A. Minton

Candidate for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Thesis: The Theory of Structural Ritualization and the Social Construction of Gender Inequality in the Central Region of Malawi

Major Field: Sociology

Biographical:

Education: Graduated from Donald Gavit High School, Hammond, Indiana in June, 1969; received Bachelor of Science degree in General Studies and a Master of Education degree in Gerontology from the University of Central Oklahoma in May, 1996 and July, 1997, respectively; received a Master of Science degree with a major in Sociology from Oklahoma State University in December, 1999. Completed the requirements for the Doctor of Philosophy degree in Sociology in December, 2003.

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Publications: *Perceptions of Religious Integration for People with Developmental Disabilities* by Carol A. Minton and Richard A. Dodder. Published in Mental Retardation, December 2003; *The Wishes of People with Developmental Disabilities by Residential Placement and Age: A Panel Study* by Carol A. Minton, Richard A. Dodder, Amanda Fullerton and Barbara Murray. Published in The Journal of Disability Policy Studies, Winter 2002.

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