

AFRICAN WOMEN IN RELIGION AND CULTURE

Chewa Women in the Nkhoma Synod of the Church of Central Africa, Presbyterian: A critical study from women's perspective.

by

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ABSTRACT

This thesis is an inter-disciplinary approach to the study of Chewa women in the Nkhoma synod of the Church of Central Africa Presbyterian. It is an interpretation, from a women's perspective within the Reformed tradition of their status, roles, and experiences. The introduction provides a detailed explanation of the area of study, African women's perspective of religion and culture, and methodology.

Chapter one aims at examining the context of women in Malawi. This includes the current demography, politics, economy and education as they affect women. The chapter also includes a background history of Chewa people and the church of Central Africa, Presbyterian which provide a base for the understanding of Chewa women in the Nkhoma synod.

Chapter two considers the position of Chewa women further by providing a detailed analysis of their position in traditional society. The period under study in this chapter is 1400-1870s. Through the study of the Makewana cult, the chapter aims at showing that Chewa women traditionally had religious leadership roles. This led to a discussion on the concept of God among the Chewa. In studying these traditional roles, the chapter shows both the positive and negative elements in Chewa culture. Chapters

one and two then provide a framework for chapters three, four, and five.

Chapter three analyzes in detail the issues of Chewa women in religious leadership and culture under the Dutch Reformed Church Mission and the Nkhoma synod from 1889 to present. It examines church policies on women's participation in church leadership positions and theological education. It also examines how the church has handled cultural issues, especially the women's initiation ceremony, bride wealth, child marriages, polygamy, and widowhood. The concern of this chapter is to show that while Christianity liberated Chewa women from some degrading cultural practices, it also denied women leadership positions.

Chapter four takes the issue of women's participation in the church further by examining the Chigwirizano-Women's organization. The aim of this chapter is to explore what the organization means to women, how it runs, and most of all, its relationship with the synod. The chapter establishes that Nkhoma synod women do not only suffer from patriarchy but also from clericalism.

Chapter five moves from the historical approach to a sociological one. It is primarily a survey of attitudes of men and women in the synod on the issues raised in chapters

three and four. It also aims at finding out if the presence of women in the general synod would make a difference.

Chapter six considers the effect on Nkhoma synod women who have participated in continental church women's organizations, especially their aims at raising the consciousness of women and the church with regard to women's issues.

Chapter seven provides a summary of the findings. It also raises theological issues on interpreting the Bible from a women's perspective and a new understanding of authority in the church. The chapter concludes by posing a challenge to the synod to develop a theology that takes into account the experiences of women in the church, and enables them to fulfill a creative role within it.

PREFACE

This study originates in a search for personal identity. What does it mean to be an African Chewa Christian woman coming from a Presbyterian religious tradition with a conservative evangelical character? It thus stems from a personal struggle to discover one's place, and at the same time understand African culture and Christian faith as they find expression in a Malawian community of men and women. It is an attempt to grapple with a growing conflict which has resulted from a failure to see the liberating message of Christ in the practice of the church as far as the position and roles of women are concerned.

Researching and writing from inside makes it difficult to be objective in one's analysis. Nevertheless, the fact that one is an integral part of an area of study means being equipped with knowledge which an outsider cannot have. Thus I am writing as a Chewa woman in the Presbyterian church of the Nkhoma synod seeking not only personal identity but serving the liberating quest of my sisters.

The desire to articulate my search for identity goes back to exposure that I received on women's issues at the consultations and meetings of the Programme on Theological Education of the World Council of Churches from 1984 to 1989. However, it was through my participation in the

inauguration of a Biennial Institute of African Women in Religion and Culture by the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians in 1989 that I got the inspiration for the topic of this study.

I would like to thank the University of Malawi for granting me a study leave to pursue my research. I acknowledge the financial assistance I received from the Programme on Theological Education of the World Council of Churches, and the University of Cape Town Scholarship towards the cost of the research for this study while in Cape Town. The grant I received from the Research and Publication Council of the University of Malawi for my field research is also gratefully acknowledged.

Few works of scholarly nature are a result of the efforts of an individual. Looking back on the road travelled, many names of people who helped me in various ways comes to mind. It is not possible to acknowledge all of them. Nevertheless, there are a few who deserve mention.

In the planning stage of my study I profited from discussions with Dr Joseph C. Chakanza, and Dr Kenneth Ross from the Religious Studies Department, Chancellor College, University of Malawi, Zomba; Dr Charles Wanamaker and Dr David Childester from the Religious Studies Department, University of Cape Town.

During my fieldwork, I was greatly encouraged by the help I received from women and men in the Nkhoma synod. I am grateful for all those people who agreed to be interviewed. The General Secretary of Nkhoma synod Rev Y. Chienda was particularly helpful in helping me to get permission to conduct my research in the synod and provide me with accommodation. I am grateful for giving me permission to speak to members of Nkhoma synod, have access to the church's documents at Nkhoma and Zomba archives. I am grateful to the Rev and Mrs Masina of Nkhoma congregation for providing me with the initial accommodation when I arrived at Nkhoma, and to Mrs Masina, Mrs Van Venter and Mrs Chikoti for making my stay at Nkhoma comfortable. I appreciated the constant companionship of Angelina Kazuwa during my field research.

I acknowledge the people who made available to me their personal files, articles and books and relevant information for my research. In particular, I am grateful for the help received from Miss Annamarie De Klerk of Nkhoma, Dr Christoff Martin Pauw of the University of Stellenbosch, Prof. John S. Pobee and Dr Mercy Amba Oduyoye of World Council of Churches, Geneva, and Dr Musimbi Kanyoro of World Lutheran Federation, Geneva.

I am grateful for the comments of interested readers of my drafts. In this connection I want to mention particularly my husband Maxwell, Dr Denise Ackermann, from the University of the Western Cape, Prof. N.K Gottwald and Mrs Laura Gottwald, who were visiting the Department of Religious Studies, University of Cape Town from New York, United States of America. Their critical comments helped to sharpen my presentation. I am also grateful to my mother who showed great interest in my research by sharing with me her own experiences related to my field of research which I did not know before.

My sincere gratitude is due to my supervisor, Prof. John W. De Gruchy for his untiring guidance and patience throughout the period of my research. I am particularly grateful for his quick reading of the many drafts that I presented to him. His comments were very challenging and encouraged me to work hard and present my ideas clearly.

Maxwell, Chisomo our son, and Chikumbutso my brother with whom I was staying during most of my research period created space for me to work. They endured with me during those long nights when I had to work in order to meet deadlines. Their moral encouragement sustained me during the most difficult moments of my research. I am also grateful for the encouragement I received from members of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians, especially the Cape

Town Chapter. Sr Irene Matsoso stands out most for me. It is my deepest desire that my research will benefit all those who are interested in creating a balanced community of men and women in the church.

I dedicate this thesis to Maxwell, Chisomo and my mother. I have learnt a lot about life through them.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AACC	All Africa Council of Churches
CCAM	Chitukuko Cha Amai M'Malawi (Women in Development in Malawi)
CCAP	Church of Central Africa, Presbyterian
DRCM	Dutch Reformed Church Mission
PACWA	Pan African Christian Women Alliance
WCC	World Council of Churches

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INTRODUCTION

This thesis is an interpretation, from an African woman's perspective, of the status, roles, and experiences of Chewa women from Central Malawi who belong to the Nkhoma synod of the Church of Central Africa, Presbyterian which has a conservative evangelical character.

While Chewa traditional culture included elements in which the dignity of women was affirmed, other elements have been oppressive. The coming of Christianity promised liberation from the latter, but the promise was not fulfilled to the extent that it should have been. Indeed, the missionaries introduced additional teaching and practices which placed women in subordinate positions in the society, and reinforced some of the negative cultural elements. All this was legitimated by reference to biblical texts. The result has been that Chewa women in the Nkhoma synod have experienced oppression at various levels and in various ways rather than the full liberation which the gospel of Jesus Christ offers. Rather than being faithful to the gospel, the synod has been dominated and guided by sexist African and Christian attitudes. This has been reinforced by clericalism in the church which, together with patriarchy, has excluded women from meaningful participation.

Despite this domination of Chewa women, some have begun to discover the liberating and empowering potential of the gospel with regard to their situation as women, and have begun to re-read the Bible from their perspective. This has been achieved mainly through interaction with other women in continental Christian women's organizations. They have begun to recognize the need for appropriate theological education which will enable them to retrieve the positive elements in their culture and the liberating elements within the Christian tradition. At the same time, they have begun to recognize that their liberation will also lead to the liberation of men in the Nkhoma synod, and create a new sense of partnership in the service of Christ, the church and the world. While this thesis out of necessity must be critical of all that oppresses women, its intention, *inter alia*, is to enable this partnership to develop.

The thesis has, however, other goals. Studies on religion in Malawi have predominantly centered on the role of men, both expatriate and local, and have been silent on women's involvement. Yet it has long been recognized that the majority of church attendants are women. We suggest two reasons for this. Firstly, there have tended to be more male scholars and theologians than female. In fact there is no female theologian who has done research in Malawi on women in religion. Secondly, scholars have usually been concerned with issues in which men play a more active part than women.

One actually gets the impression that women in Malawi have not contributed anything to the church worth researching. The end result is a dearth of theological literature on Malawian women by Malawian women. This has lead in turn to seeing what men do as being of higher value than what women do, thus perpetuating the subordination of women.

This research is important because it will show that although we live in the same country, the experiences of women in religion and culture in Malawi are different from the experiences of men. Further it will show that Malawian women are affirming with all the women of the world that there is sexual oppression in their lives, and they desire liberation. Thus Malawian women have started naming and describing their experiences in the church.

In sum, we shall attempt two major tasks. First, we shall examine the position in pre-colonial Chewa society, and especially their position in religious roles. We shall then examine Chewa oral traditions from a Christian women's perspective. The aim is not to glorify the past but to show a rich heritage that Chewa Christian women have in their culture. This forms part of the identity of all Chewa Christian women. In the process of revisiting this rich heritage for Chewa women, it is hoped that the African theologians of Malawi will incorporate this past in the new community of men and women in the church. In the words of

Mercy Amba Oduyoye, the research is about 'recreating and retrieving women's stories so that they can become an integral part of the story of the church and of Africa as a whole'.¹ On the other hand, oppressive elements to women in the traditional culture are identified and rejected.

Secondly, this research tells the story of Chewa women as they experience God in the Nkhoma synod. It records how the synod has handled women's issues from a cultural and biblical viewpoint. It exposes the biblical teachings that the church has used to oppress women. It also offers a new understanding of a relationship between men and women in the church based on the Bible. In so doing, the research approaches the Bible from two angles. It recognizes that the Bible was written by men within a patriarchal culture. Through the years the Bible has been interpreted by male theologians who made women invisible and presented them negatively. At the same time, the researcher also recognizes that the majority of church women in Africa find consolation and meaning in life through a relationship with Jesus whose message is in the Bible. Therefore, the same Bible read from a women's perspective has been used in this research to argue for the liberation of both men and women in the church. This has been done by separating biblical culture

¹ Mercy Amba Oduyoye, 'The Search for a Two winged Theology: Women's Participation in the Development of Theology in Africa' in ed. Mercy Amba Oduyoye and Musimbi Kanyoro, Talitha Qumi! Ibadan: Daystar Press, 1990, 22.

which is historically conditioned and therefore limited in application to a particular period in history, from the gospel which is universally true though always related to particular cultures.

These research findings will be incorporated in the course 'Modern Trends in Third World Theology' offered by the Religious Studies and Theology department, University of Malawi. It will stimulate interest and enthusiasm to carry out research projects of similar nature in other churches in Malawi. Thus the findings can also provide useful information to churches and theological institutions for both men and women as we build a new community of men and women as God intended. It will be an addition to literature on women in religion to be shared with the scholarly community worldwide.

African Women's perspective

A women's perspective is the underlying viewpoint of this thesis, and leads to a critique of culture and Christianity in Africa for denying the experiences of women. By women's experience we refer to the interaction of experiences of God, oneself, community and the world.

Research into African women's experiences in Africa was established as an area of academic study by The Institute of

African Women in Religion and Culture inaugurated by the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians (hereafter the Circle) in Accra, Ghana in 1989. The Institute was formed out of a realization that there is very little literature written by African women about themselves. This was particularly true for African women doing theology. In a bibliography of eighty-eight books on Feminist Theologies from a Third World Perspective, only nine books had articles written by African women. Mercy Amba Oduyoye's Hearing and Knowing has only one chapter that specifically deals with women in culture and church. Furthermore, the Lutheran World Federation's Department of Studies on Women in Church and Society produced a twenty-two paged bibliography on Feminist Theology for the period 1980-1986. The bibliography was divided into fourteen sections dealing with all the issues in feminist theology. Among all the books included, only one had articles written by African women. The World Council of Churches also produced a bibliography for the Ecumenical Decade of the Churches in Solidarity with Women (1988-1998). In a bibliography of ninety-three books, only four had articles written by African women. A book has yet to be written by an African woman that deals with experiences of African women in religion and culture. At the moment there are only chapters and articles in books or journals.

There is, then, an absence of African women's theology in Western Feminist Theology and Women's Studies. Often

studies in Feminist Theology have combined African-American womanist theology with African women theology as if their context is the same. In the case of African women's studies in departments of Sociology, issues of African women in religion are left out. As observed by Mercy Amba Oduyoye, 'policy-related and other research projects concerned with "women in development" often uncover cultural factors without associating them with religious beliefs and myths that rule women's lives and hamper women's development'².

There is also a realization that studies of religion in Africa have marginalized women or women's issues. For example, according to Gabriel M. Setiloane, 'the liberation, African Theology strives for, is that of the very "soul of Africa" from the imprisonment in the vaults of Western conceptualism and discourse, from celebration and pseudo scientific-ness, Botho, Ubuntu, authenticity born out of a living practical experience of MODIMO, Qamata, Lesa, uMvelinqangi is the totality of life.'³ The assumption here is that men's experiences of God are the same as women's experiences in Africa. Therefore, through the Circle, in the words of Mercy Amba Oduyoye, African women theologians are saying: 'We live on the same continent and belong to the

² Mercy Amba Oduyoye, 'The Circle' in Talitha, Qumi! ed. Mercy Amba Oduyoye, and Musimbi Kanyoro, Ibadan: Daystar Press, 1990, 1.

³ Gabriel M. Setiloane, African Theology: An Introduction. Johannesburg: Skotaville, 1986, 45.

same Church but the reality is that there are many Africas - the Africa of the rich and the Africa of the poor, the Africa of men who command and that of women who obey is experienced differently.⁴

Another example of how women's issues have been marginalized in the studies of religion in Africa is demonstrated in a study on African church history. According to Gerdien Verstraelen-Gilhuis, 'both in West and East Africa, under the auspices of the Universities of Nsukka (Nigeria) and the Makerere (Uganda) projects were launched in the mid 1960s to collect local church records and oral evidence from older Christians with, among others, the help of the Theological Education Fund of the World Council of Churches.'⁵ The project bore fruit in that a number of older Christians in Africa recorded their experiences in the church. This project spread to most of English-speaking Africa so that some older Malawian Christians participated.⁶

⁴ Mercy Amba Oduyoye, 'The Search for a Two Winged Theology: Women's Participation in the Development of Theology in Africa' in ed. Mercy Amba Oduyoye and Musimbi Kanyoro, Talitha Qumi! Ibadan: Daystar Press, 1990, 27.

⁵ Gerdien Verstraelen-Gilhuis, From Dutch Mission Church to Reformed Church in Zambia: The Scope for African Leadership and Initiative in the history of a Zambian Mission Church. Ph.D Thesis presented to the University of Amsterdam, 1982, 17.

⁶ Examples of books on Malawian Church leaders included Memoirs of a Malawian. The life and Reminiscences of Lewis Mataka Bandawe by L. M. Bandawe and Namon Katengeza by S. J Nthara.

A look at the bibliography that resulted shows that none of the experiences of local ministers wives and local leaders of church women's groups were recorded.

The establishment of the Institute of African Women in Religion and Culture is an attempt to address the above mentioned gaps. The Circle has embarked on a project of compiling all the books, articles in journals, as well as unpublished research that have been written by African women theologians. The ultimate goal is to gather all the written resources and place them in specific centres in Africa. The second project that the Circle has embarked on is advocacy for the inclusion of studies on women in religion and culture in departments of African Studies, Religious Studies, theology, and sociology at universities, theological institutions and colleges for higher learning. In this way the Circle aims to ensure that African Women in Religion and Culture becomes an academic area of study.

The major project of the Circle is to contribute literature to the theological world. The Circle has started working towards achieving this by publishing two books, entitled Talitha Qumi!, and The Will to Arise. The Circle also has a biennial Newsletter entitled AMKA which is a Swahili word meaning Arise. Other writing projects are being conducted at regional, national and city levels. Besides the group projects, other members of the Circle have embarked on

individual writing projects. This thesis is a contribution to this project. The Circle is also introducing a journal from 1993 which will contain researched papers from different parts of Africa written by African women theologians on women's issues.

The Circle has defined African women as all daughters of Africa who have been born on the continent of Africa. This includes African women who come from all the major religions of Africa as well as all women regardless of colour. These women belong to different classes. They are both urban and rural, rich and poor, educated and uneducated. Despite their differences in class, they share a common oppression from patriarchal practices in the church and in society.

Through their writings, African women theologians reveal the different approaches that exist among them. Women from different denominations and religions bring to the Circle their different experiences of God. Their writings reflect the existence in Africa of three main religions: indigenous African religions, Christianity, and Islam. Within Christianity, all the denominations of Africa are represented. Women also bring to the Circle experiences of women in the academy and the church. The racial tensions of South Africa and the poverty of African women as a result of political and economical turmoil in Africa are also

reflected. Indeed the writings of women in the Circle demonstrate the complexity of Africa, and of women's situation in particular.

The issues of African women theologians are the same as those of feminist theologians globally. The Circle aims at ensuring 'our Africanness as well as our contribution to the global sisterhood.'⁷ The sources of African women theologians are the experiences of African women which have their roots in the traditional religions and cultures of Africa. Mercy Amba Oduyoye has pointed out that 'we African women have to know our culture, our own rituals, challenge and change and appropriate what is of value and upholds our humanity.'⁸ The implication of this is that the sources for African women theologians who are also drawing from African theology are what upholds women and men's humanity in the Bible, in the African traditional religion and cultures. She goes on to argue that in Africa we need what she calls 'a two winged theology' of men and women 'balancing each other as they work in the church and society'.⁹ Thus working

⁷ Mercy Amba Oduyoye, 'The Search for a Two Winged Theology', 39.

⁸ Mercy Amba Oduyoye, 'When to Say No: The concern of African women theologians for a critical review of African religious traditions' in Our Advent, African women's experiences in the Lutheran tradition. ed. Musimbi Kanyoro, Proceedings of the African Lutheran Women Theologians' meeting, Addis Ababa, December 2-7, 1990, 18.

⁹ Mercy Amba Oduyoye, 'The Search for a Two Winged Theology', 29.

towards creating a community of men and women living together in mutuality as was intended by Christ.

African women theologians who are members of the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians are concerned with women's issues in the Christian faith and the traditional religions of Africa. For Teresa Okule, 'the women question is a Christological one'. She expresses 'the contradiction that is there in the way that the church in Africa has preached about the equality of all humanity and yet in practice has excluded women from the Eucharistic ministry'.¹⁰ Rosemary Edet has echoed the arguments of other women theologians but has gone a step further to say that the church has ignored the religious roles that women played in traditional society. She writes

The leadership of the ordained in our African Mainline Churches is constructed in a hierarchical order as a lid (barrier) to the membership of the Church, of which the majority are women. This structure supports and reinforces the traditional gender based society roles, ignoring the religious leadership of African women in the same traditional culture. Thus the church selects from African culture those elements that confirms its exclusion of women from authority where men are present. Here women demand that the church return to a Christlike understanding of authority and ministry, so that women and men may become partners in authority. Women demand for inclusiveness in ecclesial ministry and authority is a search for human development, a search for wholeness.¹¹

¹⁰ Teresa Okure's, letter to Mercy Oduyoye as quoted in Mercy's article on 'Women and the Church in Africa,' 1.

¹¹ Rosemary Edet, 'Women and Ministry in Africa' in Voices from the Third World. Vol XII, No. 1 1989, 96.

Marie-Bernadette Mbuy Beya is of the opinion that 'it is necessary for African theology to study the question of women's ordination to priesthood based on the history of the church and African tradition'.¹² This approach is to be made with the awareness that both in Christianity and traditional religion, African women have been oppressed. Rosemary Nthamburi of Kenya has echoed this by demanding that women themselves should seek for liberation. She has said that

The rise of nationalism and the fight for independence in Africa should have served as a lesson for African women. The African nations came to a new awareness and rejected the role of submission to their colonial masters and affirmed their humanity, and with courage and pride, they demanded freedom from their colonial masters, just like Moses went to the Pharaoh and demanded from him freedom for the Israelites.¹³

She is also of the opinion that African women understand that their fight for liberation goes with the fight for the liberation of all those who are oppressed among the their people. This is the view of most African Women Theologians.

African women theologians have seen the need for creating awareness of women's issues for all women. They

¹² Bernadette Marie- Mbuy Beya, 'Doing theology in the perspective of African women' in Our Advent. African women's experiences in the Lutheran tradition. ed. Musimbi Kanyoro, Proceedings of the African Lutheran Women Theologians' meeting, Addis Ababa, December 2-7, 1990, 72.

¹³ Rosemary Ntamburi, 'A New Image for African Women' in Fabella M.M. Virginia and Dolorita Martinez o.o., The Oaxtepec Encounter Third World Women Doing Theology (EATWOT Women's Commission), 106.

have therefore chosen to work within church women's' groups and ecumenical women's organizations. They have also sought to highlight the importance of theological education for women in Africa since there are very few women who are theologically educated. This is reflected in Mercy Oduyoye's research on African Women and Theological Education.¹⁴

Not all African Women Theologians are concerned with women issues. Women in the Circle are called 'Concerned African Women Theologians' because they want to get rid of the African assumption that 'issues of sexism are supposed to belong to a minority of disgruntled, leisure-saturated, middle-class women of the capitalist West'.¹⁵ To this Mercy Amba Oduyoye has responded by saying that 'the fact is that sexism is part of the intricate web of oppression in which most of us live, and that having attuned ourselves to it does not make it any less a factor of oppression'.¹⁶ Suggestions have been made to drop the word 'Concerned' and

¹⁴ Mercy Amba Oduyoye, 'Women and the Church in Africa: Perspective from the Present' in Voices from The Third World. Vol. III, No.2. 1980.

¹⁵ Mercy Amba Oduyoye was citing what has been said by men from the so called Third World at International meetings in 'Reflections From a Third World Women's Perspective: Women's Experience and Liberation Theologies.' in ed. Virginia Fabella and Torres Sergio, Irruption of the Third World: Challenge to Theology. Maryknoll: Orbis 1983, 249.

¹⁶ Mercy Amba Oduyoye, 'Reflections From a Third World Women's Perspective: Women's Experience and Liberation Theologies.' 1983, 249.

remain with African women theologians.¹⁷ This brings a problem because it may imply that all African women theologians are against sexism as it exists on the African continent. Perhaps those who made the suggestion are saying that all those women who think about God in the African context cannot avoid condemning sexism. It is not something that one can choose to live with or pretend that it does not exist in Africa. Now that sexism is known by its name, all African women theologians should exorcize it.

At the same time, there is an awareness in the Circle that in Africa, women's concerns are human concerns. Therefore any attempts to create a whole community of God in Africa cannot afford to marginalise women's concerns. This may also contribute to the desire of some members of the Circle wanting all African women theologians to be concerned with women's issues. The debate on this issue goes on.

Methodology

The collection of research materials was done in five major areas. Firstly a collection of conference papers at

¹⁷ This suggestion was raised at the meeting of Convenors on 4th January, 1992, held in Nairobi Kenya. Minute 60, was as follows; Title of the Circle: It was agreed that since the Circle has identified its concern and those "Concerned", the word "concerned" can be dropped from The Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians.' We should now call ourselves "The Circle of African Women Theologians". This will be put before the whole Circle.

the University of Malawi on the status of women in modern Malawi was made between 1988 and 1990. This location was the base of the researcher during that period, and the place where many discussions on the status of women are held. In particular, the researcher participated in workshops on research methods for female researchers and women in development in Malawi held at Chancellor College in Zomba. The materials collected at these workshops provides the basis on which the analysis in chapter one was done.

The collection of library and archival materials was done at several places. The University of Malawi library and Zomba National archives were used to collect information on the religious and social aspects of early Chewa history. Emphasis was put on unpublished research papers, Masters dissertations and Doctoral theses. This information was used in Chapter two. The University of Stellenbosch library, Cape Town State archives, Dutch Reformed Church archives in Cape Town, and Nkhoma synod of Church of Central Africa Presbyterian archives were consulted for all available minutes, reports, memoranda, magazines and newsletters of the Nkhoma synod on the policies of the church towards women in culture and religion from 1898 to the present. Personal materials of missionaries of the Dutch Reformed Church who worked at Nkhoma at one time or another living in Cape Town and Malawi were also consulted. Some materials were collected from the University of Cape Town library. All this material was used in chapters three and four.

Personal interviews with a purposely chosen sample of forty women and men was conducted to collect information for chapter five. The women included ministers' wives, leaders of Chigwirizano and lay members of Nkhoma synod. The men included church ministers and elders. The sample areas were Nkhoma, Lilongwe City, Mitundu, and Zomba in Malawi. Detailed information on how the personal interviews were conducted and the results of the interviews are found in Chapter five.

Further library research on what African men and women theologians as well as feminist theologians from the west have written was done at the World Council of Churches library in Geneva and at the Institute of Bossey in Switzerland in 1991 and 1992. Visits were made to women's desks of the Lutheran World Federation and World Council of Churches at the Ecumenical Center in Geneva to collect more material. This material has been used in the introduction, Chapters six and seven. More materials were collected during trips made in 1989, 1991, and 1992 to meetings of the Circle.

Two major problems that were encountered in the collection of materials were language and financial limitations. Most of the early records of the Dutch Reformed Church Mission kept in the Cape Town and Zomba archives were

written in Dutch or Afrikaans. Fortunately, through the help of the librarians at the Cape Town state archives, the researcher was able to get some materials which were also translated into Chichewa-the mother tongue of the researcher and the majority of Nkhoma synod members. The Cape Town State archives staff were also helpful in giving the researcher a general view of the contents of the Dutch and Afrikaans files. Limitation of funds made it impossible for the researcher to interview a larger number of people in the survey that appears in chapter five but the sample was adequate for the purpose.

CHAPTER 1

THE MALAWIAN CONTEXT

1.1 Introduction

This chapter describes the context which contributes to the shaping of the experiences of Malawian women. The context comprises the geography, demography, politics, economy, and education of modern Malawi. The chapter also includes a brief history of the Chewa peoples of Malawi, and of the Church of Central Africa, Presbyterian. As the chapter analyzes the situation of women in Malawi, the descriptions are not value free. Emphasis is on how the context affects women. In conclusion, critical issues facing women in Malawi are raised.

1.2 Geography

Malawi (formerly known as British Central Africa, then Nyasaland when it was a British Protectorate from 1891 to 1964) is in East Central Africa. It is a land-locked country bounded by Tanzania (formerly Tanganyika), Mozambique (formerly Portuguese East Africa), and Zambia (formerly Northern Rhodesia). The country is divided into three regions: North, Central and Southern, which are further divided into twenty four districts. Blantyre, Lilongwe and Mzuzu have the status of cities. Mzuzu, the Regional Capital

of the Northern Region was granted city status in 1986. Lilongwe is the Capital City of the country with 240,000 inhabitants. Blantyre-Limbe has 400,000 inhabitants. Eighty-nine percent of the population of Malawi live in the countryside. This thesis is interested in the Central region which comprises the following districts: Ntcheu, Dedza, Lilongwe, Mchinji, Dowa, Ntchisi, Kasungu, Salima and Nkhota-kota.

1.3 Demography

The 1986 population census of Malawi revealed that Malawi has a population of 7.9 million with an estimated growth rate of 3.7 % per annum. This means that Malawi has one of the highest growing rates in the world. Women comprise 52% of the total population. The average Malawian woman spends about thirty years of her life being pregnant, lactating and looking after children, both as mother and grandmother.¹ Between the ages of fifteen and forty-five a rural woman will have an average of at least eight pregnancies.² Women themselves have seen that frequent

¹ Naomi Ngwira, 'Women and Development in Malawi: issues problems and priorities for research', a paper presented at a training workshop on Research Methods and Techniques for Female Researchers at Chancellor College, Zomba, 1 -12th August, 1988, 4.

² Linley Stella Chirwa, 'Income Generating Opportunities and the Constraints for Women', a paper presented at the planning workshop on Sociology of Women in Development Graduate Programme, Chancellor College, Zomba, 9th to 10th February, 1990, 8.

pregnancies are a hazard to their lives and hamper their self development in all fields. Fortunately the Malawi government is aware of the problem and a nation wide campaign of child spacing was launched seven years ago. In a country that regards having children as a symbol of success in life, the implementation of the programme has not been easy. Research is being conducted by women in the Ministry of Health and the University of Malawi to find out how successful the programme has been.³

The 1986 census also showed that 89% of the population live in rural or semi rural areas. It is interesting and important to note that 92.2% of Malawian women live in rural areas.⁴ The implications of this on the lives of women will be mentioned later when we consider the input of women to the development of the Malawian economy.

³ One of the research proposals developed by some participants during the training workshop on Research Methods and Techniques for Female Researchers at Chancellor College, Zomba 1st-12th August, 1988, was 'Child Spacing or Reduced Fertility? An Investigation to Determine the Level of Acceptability of Fertility Reduction Family Planning Program'.

⁴ Maxwell Mkhwezalamba, 'Opportunities and Constraints on Women's Employment in Malawi', a paper presented at a planning workshop on Sociology of Women in Development Graduate Program, Chancellor Collage, Zomba, 16-17 February 1990, 1.

1.4 Politics

The country achieved independence as a member of a Commonwealth of Nations on 6th July, 1964, and it became a republic on 6th July 1966. Since then His Excellency the Life President Ngwazi Dr. H. Kamuzu Banda has been ruling the country as head of state and government. The political organization in Malawi operates on a six tier system. It is a one party state. Every Malawian is a member of the Malawi Congress Party. The party hierarchy and structure includes the President, the National Executive Committee, the Regional Committee, the District Committee, the Area Committee and the Local Committee. The President is elected by the people of the country. The National Executive and the Regional Committees are elected by the President, the District and Local Committees are elected by the people. The Malawi Congress Party holds a national convention which is the major political meeting of the country once every year in different venues. During the 1970 convention, which was held in the Northern region, His excellency, President Kamuzu Banda was declared the Life President of the Country and the Party. He was sworn in as Life President on the 6th July 1971.⁵ The nation had its last general election in 1976. There is currently much debate and insecurity as to the future of the country after the death of the president.

⁵ B Pachai, Malawi: The History of the Nation. London: Longman, 1978, 244-245.

It is important to note the existence of a strong League of Malawi Women in the Malawi Congress party. All Malawian women are members of this league. The league was created by the president with the aim of enhancing the status of women, and the League is a force to reckon with in Malawian politics. The women's songs carry messages for the president to which he responds in protection of women. The president acts as Nkhoswe number 1 to all women from any form of abuse.⁶ The president has also encouraged women to be Members of Parliament and Cabinet Ministers, although there have only been three women cabinet ministers since independence. Currently there are three women deputy ministers in the cabinet. The creation of the Ministry of Women and Children Affairs in the government in 1991, is yet another indication of how the president wants to uplift the status of women in Malawi. A book is yet to be written by women on the contribution of women to the politics of Malawi.

⁶ As it will be discussed in chapter 2 Nkhoswe is a male member of Chewa family who protects women of his lineage. All the women under Nkhoswe are his Mbumba. In the Malawian political system, this means that if a woman is harassed by her husband, she is free to seek protection from Malawi Congress Party officials who can have the husband detained in prison. The officials act on behalf of the president.

2.5 Economy

Malawi is one of the developing countries in Africa. In 1987 per capita GNP was estimated at around US \$160.00 by the World Bank.⁷ Agriculture, including livestock, fishing and forestry is one of the most important sectors of the economy and engages more than 95% of the population. Most of the time, more than sufficient food is produced for the country's needs leaving a surplus for export. The most important agricultural crops are tea, tobacco, groundnuts, cotton, sugarcane and coffee. Among grain crops maize(corn) sorghum, millet, rice and wheat are mainly grown for local consumption, although some maize and rice are exported. Malawi has a few minerals such as coal, bauxite and iron ore but they are not mined because of the very high cost compared to the income that would accrue.

Women constitute a higher proportion of the labour force in almost all sectors of the economy. Between 1979 and 1984 on average 57.4% of the work force in agriculture, forestry and fishing was comprised of women, and 22.2% was in community, social and personal services. Thus, the two industrial groups, agriculture, forestry and community, social and personal services employed about 80% of the female work force.⁸

⁷ Maxwell Mkhwezalamba, 1990, 1.

⁸ Maxwell Mkhwezalamba, 1990, 3.

In agriculture women are largely employed as estate labourers. Outside agriculture women are employed largely in the following professions: nursing and dental (46.1%), teaching (29.1%); stenography (70.1%), and sales (19.2%); administrative and managerial (4.9%) professional and technical (25.6%).⁹ The percentages are calculated in relation to men in the same employment. The figures show that besides agriculture, the majority of women are in stenography, teaching and nursing which are low paying jobs in Malawi. They also show that women are still mainly in what has been classified as traditional women's work.

The Malawi government and other organizations have introduced various programmes to improve the economic status of women. For example, the president has formed Chitukuko Cha Amai M'Malawi (Women in Development) which started within the Malawi League of Women of the Malawi Congress Party to focus on the social and economic uplifting of women. The organization was started in 1987 and already it has conducted a number of studies to identify problems of Malawi women and suggest solutions to the government. The organization has now been placed under the Ministry of Women

⁹ David Hirshman, Women, Planning and Policy in Malawi UNECA/ATRCW, Research Series, st/eca/atrcw/82/27, 4.

and Children Affairs so that it can have a secure source of operating funds.

1.6 Education

Malawi has not involved itself in universal education because its economy cannot sustain it. Only those who can afford to pay for their education go to school. The 1987 census showed that only 10% of the population were literate. 75% of the illiterate people are women. Thus the majority of illiterate people in Malawi are women.

In the Malawian system of education, the recommended age for starting the primary school eight years programme is six. At the end of eight years the children write the Primary School Leaving Certificate Examinations. The very successful ones are selected to go on to a secondary school of the government's choice to follow a two year course programme at the end of which they write Junior Certificate Examinations. In the whole country there are seventy secondary schools. Those who are successful go further and take another two year course programme at the end of which they write the Malawi School Certificate of Examinations. Entry to the University of Malawi, which is the only one in the country, is at ordinary level. A selection system is also used to enter the university. Since 1983, the best students at standard eight, Junior Certificate level and

Malawi School Certificate level are selected to go to the Kamuzu Academy where they study for O and A levels before going to the university or abroad for professional studies. Since 1985, entry to the Kamuzu Academy is at form one. For political purposes, selection to the University of Malawi since 1985 and to Kamuzu Academy is based on a district quota system.

Both girls and boys have equal educational opportunities. However the current Educational Statistics Booklet has revealed alarming results as far as the education of girls is concerned. The report shows that in standard one and two the number of girls who enroll is close to 50% of the total but only 30% of the original group of girls reach standard eight. It also shows that only 32% of secondary school places and only 20% of university places are taken by girls.¹⁰

Research has been and is still being conducted to find out why there is a serious gap in education between men and women in Malawi since this relates directly to most inequalities. Some of the factors contributing to the retardation of female education in Malawi include: a) traditional values and customs, e.g. Polygamy, early marriages and pregnancy and culturally held views about the

¹⁰ MOEC, Planning Unit 1988 Education Statistics, Malawi, Lilongwe, 1988, 7.

value of a woman; b) the colonial legacy, e.g. sexism in the curriculum, influence of economic incentives, influence of religious persuasions and inadequate job incentives for girls.¹¹

The Government is already taking measures to redress the plight of girls' education. The measures have been outlined in the following documents: Education development Plan:1985-1995, and the Statement of Development Policies: 1987-1996, with its Action Plan. Some of the strategies that have already been implemented include: offering bursaries to needy but deserving primary school girls, revising the curriculum, expanding the number of girls' secondary schools, and the introduction of a scholarship programme for girls who choose non-traditional areas of study at the University of Malawi. Adult women whose education has been cut short are being encouraged to attend literacy programmes. Those girls who dropped out of school are encouraged to make use of the night and correspondence colleges found in all parts of the country.

Thus some progress is being made in the process of increasing the number of women at all levels and all fields

¹¹ A.C. Lamba, and V. M. Gondwe, 'Gender and Formal Education in Malawi: The Plight of Women and What Cannot be left to Chance', a paper presented at a planning workshop on Sociology of Women in Development Graduate Program, Chancellor College, Zomba, 16-17 February, 1990, 6-7.

of study. However, it will take a long time before the situation is completely reversed because the gap of education between men and women in Malawi is still very large.

1.7 A brief history of the Chewa of Malawi¹²

1.7.1 The traditional society

Before British colonization there was no country called Malawi. Instead there were several Kingdoms of which the Malabvi and Tumbuka Kingdoms were the oldest and the largest. Between the seventeenth and nineteenth century some more tribes came in from the east, south, west and north. These were the Yao, Sena, Ngoni, Lomwe, Nkonde, and the Tongas. All these tribes had different languages and political, social, economic and religious systems.

Historical studies have shown that the remains of the earliest people of Malawi date from as far back as 800 C.E. Skeletons have shown that the earliest people were hunters and gatherers. Their body structures show that they were of pygmoid origin but larger than the San. In the Malawi oral tradition, they are known by names such as Abatwa, Akafula

¹² The whole of this section is mainly based on B. Pachai, Malawi: The History of the Nation and The Early History of Malawi.

and Mwandionelapati. All these names refer to their small physical structures. These people are also referred to as the pre-Bantu inhabitants of Malawi. Oral tradition has it that this group of people were either killed, displaced or absorbed by the first Bantu inhabitants of Malawi about 900 C.E. The first group of Bantu inhabitants is referred to as the proto Bantu. This group led a more settled life and were known for cattle farming and some forms of agriculture. They entered into what is Malawi through lake Tanganyika and are known as the Banda clan of the present Chewa people.

A second group of Bantu speaking people entered Malawi between 1300 and 1500 C.E. It is this group that is referred to as the Malabvi people who formed the great Malabvi empires which today stretch into three countries, Zambia, Malawi and Mozambique, under the leadership of Kalonga, Undi and Lundu. These groups migrated from Congo Country and entered Malawi from the north west to settle in central Malawi. The dominant ruling clan was known as the Phiri. It is important to mention that the Malabvi people consisted of several clans and were known by the following names: the Chewa, Mang'anja, Nyanja, Chipeta, Nsenga, Chikunda, Mbo, Ntumba and the Zimba. The Chewa in the central and south comprise about fifty percent of the present country's

population. The language of the Chewa has since independence become the national language alongside English.¹³

1.8 Religions in Malawi

The Malawi government encourages freedom of worship. The only religious group that has been banned is the Jehovah's Witnesses because of the anti-political nature of their religious beliefs. The major religions found in the country are Christianity, African Traditional Religion and Islam. According to information collected by B. Kandoole and K Phiri, by 1987 the proportions were as follows: Christianity 50% of the population, Islam 12% and an assortment of traditional and other faiths 38%. There are also 143 African Independent churches. ¹⁴

1.9 The Christian Missions in Malawi

Christianity was brought to Malawi by various missionary societies who arrived from the last quarter of the nineteenth century onwards. This thesis will limit itself to a brief history of the CCAP with emphasis on the Nkhoma synod.

¹³ B. F. Kandoole, and K. M. Phiri, Twenty Five Years of Independence in Malawi 1964-1989: Silver Jubilee Commemoration book. Blantyre: Dzuka, 1989, 18.

¹⁴ B.F. Kandoole, and K.M. Phiri, 1989, 44.

1.9.1 The Livingstonia Mission¹⁵

The Livingstonia Mission was established by the Free Church of Scotland in 1875 in memory of Dr Livingstone who had brought to their attention the evils that dominated Central Africa as a result of the slave trade. The first group of missionaries was led by E.D. Young and it included Dr James Stewart from Lovedale and Dr Robert Laws. The missionaries brought with them a steamer which they called Ilala. Their first station was established at Cape Maclear along the western coast of Lake Malawi. This group of missionaries believed that if their mission was to be successful they should evangelize and teach through the Africans themselves with the aim of building an African Church. Thus by 1876 they brought William Ntusane Koyi, Mapas Ntintili, Shadrack Ngunana and Isaac Wauchope to Malawi from Lovedale in the Cape Province. All of these evangelists played an important part in the development of mission work.¹⁶

By the end of the century Livingstonia had moved its headquarters from Cape Maclear to Khondowe and had opened stations at Bandawe, Ekwendeni, Kasungu, Loudon, and

¹⁵ For a detailed study see J. Johnson, Robert Laws of Livingstonia. London: Edinburgh house press, 1925.

¹⁶ B. Pachai, 1973, 88.

Kalonga. They had also established the Overtoun Institute for higher education which some regard as the best to be founded by modern missions.¹⁷ However the courses offered at Overtoun Institute were for men only. Thus women could not receive what was then considered higher education in the Livingstonia Mission.

Apart from education, Livingstonia mission is known for having pioneered negotiations with the Blantyre mission and Dutch Reformed Mission to form the CCAP under the leadership of Dr Laws. The negotiations started as early as 1900. The Blantyre mission agreed to join in 1924, and Nkhoma Synod in 1926.

1.9.2 Blantyre Mission

The Blantyre mission was established by the Established Church of Scotland in 1876 in chief Kapeni's land. They named it Blantyre after Dr Livingstone's birth place in Scotland. The first group of missionaries to Blantyre came together with the missionaries of the Livingstonia Mission. The Blantyre group of missionaries was headed by Dr Macklin and later joined by the Rev Duff Macdonald who took over the headship. Their first attempt to establish a Scottish colony at the mission ended badly during the first five years

¹⁷ J. McCracken, Politics and Christianity in Malawi 1875-1940. London: Longman, 132-156.

because the missionaries assumed civil jurisdiction over the Africans. Therefore all the missionaries were called back to Scotland in 1880.¹⁸

The coming of Dr David Clement Scott in 1881 to take charge of the mission saw a new beginning. Dr Scott was soon joined by Dr Alexander Heatherwick. Within a short time Scott built up a team of seven African deacons with whom he closely worked to the dislike of the other Europeans. Some of the Africans were sent to Lovedale and Scotland for further studies.

During Scott's leadership, more stations were opened in Domasi, Zomba, and Mulanje. A magnificent church building was completed at Kapeni in 1891, the first permanent church building in central Africa. Dr Scott resigned from his post for health reasons in 1898. Dr Heatherwick took over leadership of the Blantyre mission and headed it from 1899 to 1928. During Heatherwick's time, more stations were opened at Ncheu, Chiladzulu and Lunzu. He also saw the establishment of the Hendry Henderson Institute (hereafter H.H.I.) where a lot of Malawians in the southern region received their education and training in different vocations. It should be mentioned that the training offered at the Institute was also only for men.

¹⁸ B. Pachai, 1972, 80.

The Blantyre mission became fully autonomous in 1959 when the mission Council was dissolved and the Scottish missionaries became full members of the African church.

1.9.3. The Nkhoma Mission

The Nkhoma synod of the Church of Central Africa Presbyterian, which is the subject of this thesis, was founded by the Dutch Reformed Church Mission (hereafter DRCM). Therefore a more detailed historical background will be given.¹⁹

Andrew C. Murray was sent to open a mission in Nyasaland by the Ministers' Missionary Society of the Dutch Reformed Church in 1888. This society got to know about the need for mission work through the Rev James Stewart of Lovedale who had worked with the Livingstonia Mission. In fact A.C. Murray stayed with Dr and Mrs Laws of Livingstonia Mission whilst looking for a suitable site for a mission. Although he initially wanted to work in the Nkhonde area which was close to the Livingstonia mission field in the north, slave raiding by the Swahili Arabs made it impossible. Under the advice of Dr Laws he therefore moved

¹⁹ See also Christoff Martin Pauw, Mission and Church in Malawi: The history of the Nkhoma synod of the Church of Central Africa Presbyterian 1889-1962. D.Th. thesis, University of Stellenbosch, 1980.

to the central region which was then under Chewa chief Mwase of Kasungu and two Ngoni chiefs, Chiwere and Chikusi. Of the three it was chief Chiwere who welcomed Murray, not because he was interested in Christianity but because he wanted protection from other chiefs and the advancement of the Colonial government. It was at this stage that Murray was joined by the Rev T. C. B. Vlok.²⁰

The first mission station was established on 28th November, 1889 by A.C. Murray and T.C.B. Vlok very close to Chikuse's headquarters in what is today Dowa district. They called the place Mvera, which means obedience. By 1890 their first school was started at Mvera and the best four male students were sent to Livingstonia Mission for further education.

During the first five years, the mission opened five more schools and received four more staff, including the Rev Robert Blake (1892) who started Kongwe station in present day Dowa district, the Rev William H. Murray (1894) who took over Livlezi station from Livingstonia in 1895 and became head of the DRCM until 1936, Mr A.V.D. Westhuizen, who laid the foundation of the mission's agricultural teaching, and

²⁰ J. L. Pretorius, 'An Introduction to the History of the Dutch Reformed Church Mission in Malawi: 1889-1914' in ed. B. Pachai, The Early History Of Malawi. London: Longman, 1972, 366.

Miss Martha Murray who started the first boarding school for girls in 1895.²¹

Nkhoma station was opened in 1896 as a result of a request from the Chewa chief Mazengera who wanted to protect himself from the Ngoni raids with the presence of the missionaries. Later the headquarters of the mission was moved from Mvera to Nkhoma because of fear of attacks on the mission from the Ngoni and also fear of the outbreak of sleeping sickness at Mvera.

The first group of Malawians to be baptized in the mission consisted of fourteen men and five women on 10th December 1897. It was this first group that produced some of the Malawians who proved to be very helpful in the development of the African Church of the Mission. Of particular interest to this thesis is the contribution of Mai Sara Lingozi Nabanda who became the first woman in the Nkhoma synod to work at the Nkhoma hospital. In fact as a sign that the mission appreciated her special contribution, a girls' nurses home at Nkhoma mission was named after her. Mai Nabanda officially opened the girls' nurses home on 8th December, 1961.²²

²¹ J.L. Pretorius, 1972, 368.

²² Mthenga ndi Muuni (mission news letter) July 1960, 13.

By 1903 there were twenty eight missionaries, and between 1903 and 1914, fifty three more missionaries, the majority of whom were women, were at the mission. The women missionaries concentrated their work among women and girls in evangelism and primary education, general mission programmes of primary education, and hospital work. For example, Mrs Elizabeth Murray, wife of the Rev A.C. Murray started a mother's prayer meeting as early as 1903.²³ This was a group of Christian women from Mvera mission meeting on a regular basis to pray together and strengthen each other in their Christian walk. Besides the meetings, Mrs Murray used to visit the mothers in their own homes to teach them about health and hygiene especially in looking after children.

Due to the increase in mission staff, more stations were opened as follows: Mlanda (1902) and Mphunzi (1903) which are in present day Dedza district; Malingunde (1907) which is in present day Lilongwe; Malembo, (1907); Chinthembwe (1910); and Nchinji (1914).

The years of expansion included establishing mission stations in the neighbouring countries as well. For example, a station was opened at Magwero in Zambia, which in 1908 was handed over to the Dutch Reformed Church in the Orange Free

²³ M.W. Retief, William Murray of Nyasaland. Lovendale: Lovendale Press, 1958, 77.

State. By 1914 they also had stations at Fort Jameson, Madzimoyo, Nsanje, Nsadzi and Hofmeyr.²⁴ The DRCM also opened stations at Salisbury in Rhodesia among the Malawian migrant workers who formerly belonged to the mission, as well as to other Presbyterian missions in Malawi. The first congregation was established in 1944. It became a Presbytery in 1956 and the Harare synod became the fourth synod to join the CCAP in 1965.²⁵ All the ministers came from Malawi.

Stations were also opened in Portuguese East Africa at Mphatso (1909), Njanje, Nsadzu, Mwenzi, and Chiputu (1914) and Matenje in 1915. The Roman Catholic colonial government in Mozambique made conditions so difficult for the missionaries working there that the DRCM had to close all of its stations by 1922. The Mozambique Protestants living close to the border with Malawi joined the Mphunzi, Dedza and Mlanda mission stations. Several attempts were made to restart work in Mozambique but the conditions continued to be difficult. Still the Nkhoma synod continued to keep in touch with their Christians in Mozambique so that in 1973 three congregations were opened. Three years later, however,

²⁴ A detailed study of these stations has been done by Gerdien Verstraelen-Gihuis, From Dutch Mission to Reformed Church in Zambia: The Scope for African Leadership and Initiative in History of a Zambian Mission Church, Ph.D., University of Amsterdam, 1982.

²⁵ A detailed study of the Synod of Salisbury has been done by W.J. Van der Merwe, From Mission Field to Autonomous Church in Zimbabwe. Pretoria: NG Kerk Boekhandel, 1981.

the Nkhoma synod felt compelled by circumstances to break off all ties with the church in Mozambique leaving it entirely to itself.²⁶

During 1903 to 1914 when the mission was expanding, it was experiencing problems in its relationships with the British Protectorate government in Nyasaland. The problems started with the Anglo-Boer war of 1899-1902. Since the government was British and the Mission was made up of Afrikaners, there was tension between them. The Nyasaland government started viewing the DRCM missionaries with suspicion. The tension between the two sides increased when the Nyasaland government introduced a hut tax in 1892 and the missionaries opposed it. The missionaries' reasons for opposing were that the hut tax forced the local men to migrate to the neighbouring countries to look for jobs. The migration of labour in turn caused the breaking up of many Christian families and reduced the number of church membership. Furthermore, those locals who could not migrate were taken by force to work for the government for three months, in order to raise money for their hut tax, under very hard conditions so that many of them died of starvation. The Nyasaland government interpreted the DRCM's stand as inciting the locals to riot against the government. It took years of negotiation between the Nyasaland

²⁶ C.M. Pauw, 1980, 322.

government and the DRCM mission before relationships were normalized again.

The DRCM thought of combating the problems of the Africans, brought about by the hut tax, by introducing a three- fold programme in their mission of education, agriculture, industries and the formation of Christian families. Between 1904 and 1914, an average of one hundred and eleven village schools a year were opened by the mission. This expansion in education helped the mission to increase the number of Christians. The primary aim of the schools was to teach the Africans to read the Bible in Chichewa. According to the mission's policy, no one except in exceptional cases, was allowed to become a church member unless he or she could read.²⁷ All the teachers in the schools were Africans and were supervised by the missionaries. The educational expansion led to the opening of a teacher's training school at Nkhoma in 1904. However, Retief has observed that the main disadvantage with the mission's educational policy was that the education was only up to primary level. He goes on to say

This is reflected in 1904 when he (Mr William Murray) attended a mission conference at Blantyre. Some of the other missionaries talked of colleges and a University for natives but Mr Murray could not agree with them at this point. He felt that as yet the mission had to stick to primary education.²⁸

²⁷ J.L. Pretorius, 1973, 372.

²⁸ M.W. Retief, 1958, 88.

The Africans in the DRCM began to notice that their standard of education was poor in comparison to that of Africans educated by the other missions. Disatisfaction spread among the teachers as is reflected in a letter from the Executive Committee of the Nkhoma Synod Teachers' Association to all European and African ministers of the Nkhoma Synod. The letter said that

The aged Christians were taught to read and write Nyanja so that they could read the Bible only in Nyanja. They were taught against English and to hate a person who knows or speaks English. The motive is self evident- to narrow the outlook of the African and keep him in darkness.²⁹

The education of women in the DRCM was worse than that of boys in that apart from learning how to read the Bible, only a few lucky girls went to the missions' girls hostels. In order for one to qualify to be admitted at the hostels one had to be at least twelve years old and should have the permission of one's parents. This meant that girls who wanted an education, but had parents against it, had no chance of going to school. It is interesting to note that boys were not expected to get permission from their parents or guardians.

According to the constitution of the hostels, the aim of the hostels was to 'lead the girls to Jesus as Saviour;

²⁹ File S5/15/6/1/4 letter from Mr H.A. Kachaje and the Executive Committee of Nkhoma Synod Teachers' association, 1960.

to build up a good Christian character by inspiring them with the principles of obedience, order and helpfulness and by education in all kinds of domestic and manual work (washing, ironing, sewing, pottery, soap making etc)'.³⁰ Basically this shows that the type of education given to girls was to prepare them for home management.

The introduction of training in agriculture and local industry at all the mission's stations was a feature which the Phelps-Stokes Commission of 1924 said had no equal.³¹ The merits of the programme were the fact that the levels of agriculture and industries introduced made it possible for the Africans to implement them in their villages and earn a living to improve themselves. However as will be shown in chapter three, the major victims of migrant labour were women. Yet it was mostly men, (who migrated to the southern region and neighboring countries) who were exposed to the industrial and agricultural programmes. As a result labour migration remained a major problem.

The DRCM also believed that the formation of an indigenous church depended on the establishment of Christian families. According to Retief, the establishment of

³⁰ Mission Council, 1908, minute 1910:99-101.

³¹ M.W. Retief, 1958, 78.

Christian families depended on mission work with women and young girls. He went on to say that

they (women) have the shaping and training of the next generation to a great degree in their hands, and they have great influence over their husbands, either for good or for evil. If a Christian native should marry a pagan woman, then it is practically certain that he will revert to paganism. On the other hand, Christian wives, generally speaking, are a very great help and encouragement to their husbands in their Christian lives. It is particularly necessary that teachers, evangelists, native preachers and members of the Church Council and Presbytery should have wives who are Christians.³²

Perhaps this explains why the mission provided women and girls with just enough education to be good wives and not to be economically independent. This was not only true for the mission field but it also reflected what was happening to women in the homeland of the Dutch Reformed Church, South Africa. The mission also introduced mothers' literacy classes for the same reason. The fact that the traditional initiation of girls called chinamwali was Christianized and become chilangizo (more of this in chapter three) should be understood as a continuation of the same policy of establishing Christian families.

The mission's other major contribution to Malawi was the translation of the Bible into Chichewa which was started by the mission and later joined by the other Presbyterian missions. The mission opened its own printing press in 1907

³² M.W. Retief, 1958, 78.

and started publishing its own magazine called Mthenga, which is still being printed under the name of Kuunika.

The mission also had a medical section which was regarded as another way of evangelizing the people. The hospital which was opened at Nkhoma in 1915 grew to become the mission's main hospital. The other stations had small clinics. The contribution of women to this work cannot be measured. The most outstanding contribution was that of Dr Pauline Murray, daughter of the Rev A.C. Murray and Mrs Elizabeth Murray. Retief has this to say about her

She laboured for years and so excellent was her work amongst the women and children that she received a medal from the government of Nyasaland for her work.³³

At this point it is important to mention briefly the administrative structure of the mission. Between 1889 and 1898 the mission operated as part of the Livingstonia Mission. The DRCM formed its own Mission Council on 24-25 October 1898. This consisted of only the ordained ministers of the mission. Later it included the other male missionaries. It had an Executive Council which dealt with all the different departments of the mission. In 1903 a Council of Congregations was formed which was responsible for the ecclesiastical development of the church. With the growth of the Church this was later dominated by Africans,

³³ M.W. Retief, 1958, 77.

whose theology reflected that of the missionaries. It was the Council of Congregations that joined the other Presbyterian Mission to form CCAP in 1926 and took over Nkhoma synod from the DRCM in 1962.

The Mission Council become dissolved in 1962 under considerable pressure from the locals. Among other things the mission was accused of practicing apartheid, and not educating Africans high enough to continue from the missionaries.³⁴ This was a period of intense nationalism evident all over Africa.

All the missionaries were transferred to the Nkhoma synod of the CCAP to become full members. A link of moral and financial support still exists between the Dutch Reformed Church of the Western Cape in South Africa and Nkhoma synod. The post of Superintendent of the Mission was dissolve and replaced by the post of the General Secretary of the synod- a full time position with offices at Nkhoma and salaried by the synod.³⁵

³⁴ File S5/15/6/1/4/ letter from Mr H. A. Kachaje.

³⁵ C.M. Pauw, 1980.392. Pauw has argued that the creation of the post of General Secretary was from a Reformed as well as Presbyterian point of view, something alien. He goes on to argue that this development came about because of the precedent already set by the other two synods in the CCAP and partly because the erroneous notion existed that this General Secretary was to replace the former Superintendent of the Mission which had been a permanent and full-time appointment.

1.10 Issues for Women in Malawi.

In modern Malawi, women have not attained the highest levels of leadership either in society or in the Church. The majority of women do not have enough education to get themselves good paying jobs. Culturally they are required to have a lot of children which puts their health in danger and makes it impossible for them to work outside the home. Poverty has led women to get involved in dehumanizing conditions such as working for very long hours at home and out of home.

The Chewa, Yao and Lomwe ethnic groups comprise the matrilineal societies of Malawi. They represent more than fifty percent of the population of Malawi. Yet as far as the position of women in the society is concerned, Malawi is a patriarchal society.

The historians of Malawi have silenced women. Women do not appear in history texts with regard to what they contributed in the missionary era, colonial era, or in independent Malawi. It is only in the late nineteen eighties that one begins to read unpublished articles written by Malawian women on the situation of Malawian women. As a result, the government and people are now being made aware about the plight of Malawian women in all fields except,

however, in religion. Measures are beginning to be taken by the government to correct this unbalance. What has not been taken note of yet is the impact of the teachings of religion on the women's contribution to national development, and what the churches are doing to uplift Christian women who have been down-trodden for too long. This thesis will make a contribution to this as we examine Christian women in the Nkhoma synod of the Church of Central African Presbyterian.

CHAPTER 2

WOMEN IN TRADITIONAL CHEWA SOCIETY: 1400 TO 1889 C.E.

2.1 Introduction

In the previous chapter it was established that the Nkhoma synod of the Church of Central Africa, Presbyterian (CCAP) which is the subject of this thesis is located in the central region which is predominantly occupied by the Chewa matrilineal society. The process for a meaningful search for identity involves digging into the past. Knowledge of the past is only useful if it shed light on the present. The aim of this chapter is to reconstruct and highlight the positions and roles of women in traditional Chewa society. This information will be useful in understanding the present positions and roles that women have been taking in the church. It is also a way of allowing women in the church to understand themselves by learning from the past. As the past is examined, women may reclaim what is positive in traditional religion and culture, and question all that is negative. This chapter sets out to achieve this task in three steps.

First, it is argued that during the period of the Chewa of the Banda clan, 900-1600 C.E., women had total control of the rain shrines as prophetesses. With the coming of the Chewa of the Phiri clan from 1600 C.E. we see that two great

territorial rain shrines developed. In the southern region of Malawi the rain shrine was headed by a man called M'Bona, and in the central region it was headed by a succession of women known as Mangadzi or Makewana. The Makewana shrine is mentioned to show the amount of power that was vested in female religious leaders. The shrine came to an end when the Chewa area fell into the hands of a patriarchal Ngoni group. The coming of the missionaries and the colonial government did not create a favorable environment for the revival of a female led cult. Furthermore the missionaries refused to recognize that in an African context, it was often the women who played headship roles in religious matters.

Second, the paradox in the position and role of women in a matrilineal society is highlighted. On one hand a Chewa woman had the privilege of remaining in her village with her kins-people whilst married. She had the right to the ownership of the offspring of her marriage and the right to remarry after a divorce or the death of a husband. She inherited land from her mother which she used with her husband. On the other hand, Chewa woman, like many of African women, was subjected to the evils of early marriages, ritual intercourse, and fear of menstrual blood, polygamy, not being allowed to remain single, and being demeaned or degraded when barren. Thus although a matrilineal society promised some form of freedom and status for women it was still men who had power over them in that a

woman remained under the strong power of her uncle and brother.

Third, from the middle of the nineteenth century external influences contributed to changes in the Chewa matrilineal system. The effect of the changes on the Chewa woman have been mixed. In so far as her religious powers have been denied, the power of the husband over her has been strengthened. Polygamy increased with the coming of slave women, her image as a full human being was tarnished. On the other hand the coming of Christianity promised a certain amount of freedom but not quite enough.

2.2 Chewa rain shrines and the role of women

It is important from the outset to mention that Chewa religion was monotheistic although the existence of ancestress/ancestral spirits were acknowledged. Some scholars have observed that the God of the Chewa was known by many names that describe the elements of the wet weather.¹ Territorial rain shrines were therefore a communal way of worshipping God. The religious roles of women were very clear and accepted at the territorial rain shrines. For

¹ W.H.J. Rangeley, in his article on 'Makewana- the Mother of all people' in Nyasaland Journal. 1952; T. Price, in his article on 'Malawi Rain Cults' in Religion in Africa. 1964; J.C. Chakanza, in his article on 'Some Chewa Concepts of God' in Religion in Malawi. 1987.

example, there was the M'Bona shrine in the southern region and the Makewana shrine in the central region.

2.2.1 Women as prophetesses at rain shrines 1400-1600

C.E.

In the southern region the Chewa are mainly known as the Mang'anja. This Clan was noted for its well organized rain cults from 1400 to 1600 C.E. Very little is known about the organization of the cults. However, Schoffeleers, who did his research on the M'Bona cult in the south, has stated that

In this early period it was believed that the spirit of the High God visited these shrines in the wind and manifested itself there in the form of a great snake; a human wife was provided for the spirit. This wife was known as a M'Bona and she acted as an intermediary for God, articulating His commands.²

W.H.J. Rangeley who researched in the same area as well as in central region also mentions in passing about 'the noted "priestess" Cauwa Banda of Cirenje of the Banda clan'.³ Kings Phiri, who is an expert in the history of the Chewa, was informed by the Bandas that their ancestors were ruled by a female ritual leader called Mwali. Therefore, Kings Phiri is of the opinion that there was 'a pre-

² M. Schoffeleers, 'The Interaction of the M'Bona Cult and Christianity, 1849-1963' in ed. T.O. Ranger, and J. Weller, Themes in the Christian History of Central Africa. London: Heinmann, 1975, 14.

³ W.H.J. Rangeley, 1952, 31.

Malawian system of political organization based on the concept of ritualistic female leadership'.⁴

Nevertheless, the role of spirit medium passed over from women to men due to changes in traditional religion brought about by certain external factors such as conquest and the predominance of a new cult ideology. For example Schoffeleers points out that

At the rise of the Phiri chieftaincies and especially at the time of the rise of the Lundu dynasty in the sixteenth century, a combined political and theological revolution took place in the Lower Shire Valley. The Lundus gained control of the shrines and in the process the myth and structure of the cult changed. A new myth was created, which is the dominant theology of the cult today. In this story - which may well have reflected a historical clash between Lundu and the guardians of the older cult - we are told of a great male prophet, directly inspired by God, who was slain on the orders of the Lundu Paramount. It is the prophet, rather than the spirit - wife, who is called M'Bona in this myth.⁵

What is not clear is why the myth of the cult changed from having prophetesses to a prophet, especially as both the Banda and the Phiri clans were matrilineal. It is clear though that after the death of the prophet M'Bona he was not replaced by another male prophet. Instead there is mention of Salima, a woman who stayed at the shrine as wife of the spirit of M'Bona. Tradition has many versions of what her role was at the shrine. Thomas Price has mentioned two. She

⁴ K.M. Phiri, Chewa History in Central Malawi and The Use of Oral Tradition 1600-1920. Ph. D thesis, University of Wisconsin, 1975, 47.

⁵ M. Schoffeleers, 1975, 14.

cooked food every day waiting for the human return of M'Bona. She also carried M'bona's messages to the people which she received through dreams. The second role was a shared one with a male attendant of the same shrine known by the official name of Kalowantsekela.⁶ It is important to mention that M'Bona was never conceived as God but is still respected as an ancestral spirit up to today.

The fact that during the early period of the history of the rain shrines there is mention of a wife of the High God has made Chakanza conclude that the Chewa understood God to be male. He has argued that

Although God is intensely spirit with human personality where personality does not involve the possession of form, he is thought of as being male. As creator and sustainer of the universe, he is the epitome of fatherhood. This is dramatically symbolized at the earlier Chewa rain-shrine where God had a 'wife' with the title Makemvula (Mother of rain) and a male representative. The title of 'mother of rain' suggest that God is the 'Father of rain'.⁷

Chakanza's suggestion is supported by Marion Kilson who has written about the Bemba, Yoruba, Ganda, Mende, and San. She has stated that 'When the sex of the supreme being is mentioned (Mende, San), it is male. Both the supreme being and the male deities may be believed to have divine wives (Yoruba, Bemba, Ganda, Mende, San) and mothers (Bemba)'.⁸

⁶ T. Price, 1964, 119.

⁷ J.C. Chakanza, 1987, 5.

⁸ M. Kilson, 'Women in African Traditional Religions' in Journal of Religion. Vol. V111, 1976, 135.

Furthermore, Anne Nasimiyu, quoted Akinyele Omoyajowo as having said that 'at the annual Yam Festival, the priestess would bring messages from the divinity to the entire community or to individuals within the community. When possessed, the priestess would speak as if she is divinity himself and has to be addressed in masculine pronouns.'⁹ Mercy Oduyoye also has argued that, contrary to the opinion of other African women theologians who have argued that in Africa God is not male, despite non gender specific languages...,the predominant image of the source-Being (God) is male.¹⁰

In the case of the Chewa, we find the male concept of God difficult to accept because of our comparison of this rain cult with another one in the central region. If indeed God was thought of as being male how does one explain the fact that Makewana-mother of all people, (Prophetess of another regional cult in the central region of Malawi which will be discussed later) had attendants who were also called her 'wives'? The Chewa described God through activities manifested by the many phenomena of wet weather. The activities and phenomenon cannot be pinned down to a

⁹ A. Nasimuyu, 'Images of Women in African Religious Tradition' in Communicatio Socialis Yearbook. Vol. V111, 1989, 138.

¹⁰ Mercy Amba Oduyoye, 'The Search For a Two Winged Theology:....' 1990, 42.

particular gender. This therefore, means that among the Chewa God was without sex. The idea of a wife may well have meant something else rather than what we now think. It is therefore important for us to find out the exact meaning of having a wife at a shrine. Who instituted it and why? Moreover, just as God in the Bible is described as male by the Biblical patriarchal society, this may have been the case in the Chewa society.

2.2 Makewana Cult 1600-1870s

While the coming of the Lundu Phiri chieftaincies in the Lower Shire Valley gave rise to a new theology of a great male prophet called M'Bona, in the central region a change also occurred. A new regional cult emerged headed by a great female prophetess called Mangadzi. Tradition collected by Rangeley has it that Mangadzi was from the royal Phiri clan -a sister to prince Undi. She was in the company of her brother Undi, who was looking for a place to settle when she fell into a trance and started making strange prophecies on the southern bank of the Diampwe river, in what is now the Dedza District of Malawi.¹¹

A more plausible tradition collected by Kings Phiri has it that Mangadzi was a Banda shrine official at Msinja.

¹¹ W.H.J. Rangeley, 1952, 32.

She was possessed by God and began to prophesy and became the leading light among her people. Her position as prophetess and ritual leader was inherited by her daughters and other descendants. Hence the leading shrine organizers also came to be women or descendants of Mangadzi. They included Chauwa at Chilenje, Mwali at Mankhamba, Kafuluma at Mchinji and later Matsakamula at Nchisi.¹²

Kings Phiri suggests that Mangadzi and Makewana were not the same person. Mangadzi was from the Banda clan while Makewana was a Phiri priestess. Makewana built her own power at Msinja at the expense of Mangadzi. Kings Phiri goes on to suggest that

Makewana had the full support of many Phiri chiefs, including Undi, Kalolo and Masumba. This support plus control of the Msinja shrine boosted her authority: she became real maker of chiefs in the Bunda-Msinja area.¹³

The fact that the people who were with Mangadzi and Makewana, as in both traditions, immediately recognized their experiences as God -Mphambe or Chiuta- entering into her, brings out an important point. The point is that Mangadzi and Makewana might not have been the first women even among the Bandas and Phiris who were understood to be used by God in this way.

J.W. Gwengwe has stated that in the 1870s, the chief's sister performed special functions before and during an offering at a rain shrine which involved the whole village. She was responsible for the preparation of food to be

¹² K.M. Phiri, 1975, 50.

¹³ K.M. Phiri, 1975, 63.

offered at the shrine. During the rain calling ceremony, the chief and her sister led the prayers but she was responsible for the actual pouring of the libations whilst still praying.¹⁴

What was new to the people, however, was the religious observance that was built around Mangadzi and Makewana which Rangeley says was unparalleled in olden times in Malawi.¹⁵ Mangadzi became famous, to the extent that the Chewa's concept of God was changed. Rangeley states 'that she continued to be known as Mangadzi, so much so that Mangadzi became one of the names by which God is known. She was also known as Cauta, one of the recognized names for God, but it was by the name of Makewana that she was mostly widely known.'¹⁶

According to John Mbiti, the most common names for God in central Africa are: Leza, Mphambe, Chisumphi, Mulungu, and Chiuta or Chauta.¹⁷ Chakanza has argued that

The name Chiuta/Chauta is intimately connected with the Chewa national cult. Chauta is a Chewa version which has Chiuta as its equivalent in Tumbuka language. As Chauta is also the title of a female religious

¹⁴ J.W. Gwengwe, Kukula ndi Mwambo. Blantyre: Dzuka Publishing Company Limited, 1975, 21-24.

¹⁵ W.H.J. Rangeley, 1952, 32.

¹⁶ W.H.J. Rangeley, W.H.J., 32.

¹⁷ J.S. Mbiti, Concepts of God in Africa. London: SPCK, 1970, 329.

functionary at a Chewa rain shrine, the name Chiuta will henceforth be used to refer to God...Chiuta means literally a large bow. This is with special reference to the rainbow. the word also refers to the one who stretches the rainbow across the sky and to the one who lives in the sky. The rainbow is a symbol of God's activity in preserving creation. Hence the term Chiuta refers to God's primary role as the provider of rain.¹⁸

The questions that come to mind are 'Why was Mangadzi given the name for God in a society that believed in one High God?' Was she God, as Rangeley has implied in his research?¹⁹

Before dismissing the term Chauta as a name for God among the Chewa because it was used by the people to refer to a female religious functionary, one can argue that there must be some valid reason as to why Mangadzi acquired that name. To begin with Mangadzi or Makewana as she was commonly known, was a keeper of a rain shrine. As such it was believed that she controlled the rain. This meant that she was responsible for ceremonies to bring the rain as well as utter prophecies and make divinations. It is said that Makewana would disappear into the sacred pool of Malawi for three days at a time in order to call down the rain. When Makewana died, she was never referred to as having died. God cannot die. It was said that she had gone to visit God (Chauta).²⁰ It must have been these special gifts that she

¹⁸ J.C. Chakanza, 1987, 5.

¹⁹ W.H.J. Rangeley, 1952, 33.

²⁰ W.H.J. Rangeley, 1952 34.

had that earned her the name of Chauta. It seems to us that this is like calling His Excellency the life president Kamuzu Banda, Saviour, not because he is on the same level with Jesus Christ, but because the people of Malawi felt that he saved them from colonial rule.

At the same time, Rangeley's observation that the title Chauta was used for Makewana, brings some problems in understanding the Chewa concept of God. If Makewana was God, as Rangeley implies, how could she also go to visit God? According to the Chewa, who were an agricultural society, God was considered to be the author of rain. Chakanza maintains that

Rain is a central theme in Chewa worship as it is only God who can provide it. That is why God is associated with sky elements.²¹

We would therefore suggest that Makewana was given the title of God because she was God's representative to the people at that particular time. When possessed, she could speak as if it was God speaking to the people. The people recognized the voice of God when Makewana was giving the people the oracles of God. It was at such moments that the people did not hesitate to call Makewana by the name that was exclusive for God, or that the name of Mangadzi was used for God. This explanation helps avoid changing the actual term for God,

²¹ J.C. Chakanza, 1987, 7.

Chauta in favour of Chiuta among the Chewa, as Chakanza has done.

In fact even the term Makewana contains some aspects of the Chewa concept of God. P. Gundamwala, as quoted by Chakanza, made a collection of Chewa sacrifices and proverbs. He showed that one tribute of God among the Chewa is that God is Mleraana (One who brings up children).²² Leza, another term used to refer to God among the Chewa, has a similar meaning. Chakanza has stated that

Leza, from the verb kulela in Chewa and Tonga means one who rules or rears. Leza, then refers to God as the one who nurtures, rears or rules creation.²³

As stated earlier on, Makewana means mother of all children or mother of all peoples. A mother has the characteristics of nurturing and rearing children. Furthermore, in describing territorial cults of which the Makewana cult is one, Schoffeleers says:

territorial cults are concerned with the good of the total community, with prevention of floods, droughts, epidemics, wars. Organizationally they are characterized by a network of permanent shrines, by specialized priests, by a seasonal calendar of worship. Theologically they emphasize the creative and directive power of God...²⁴

²² P. Gundamwala, as quoted by J.C. Chakanza, 1987, 8.

²³ J.C. Chakanza, 1987, 4.

²⁴ M. Schoffeleers, 1975, 16.

In the case of the Makewana cult, we suggest that the Chewa recognized the feminine nature of God and also attributed it to Mangadzi and Makewana.

Makewana had a number of female attendants who lived around her at Msinja. Tradition collected by Rangeley has it that Msinja grew into a large village which resembled a town of her attendants and other functionaries and their families. Of importance to this thesis are her female attendants who were called Matsano. There is a controversy as to who the Matsano really were. One tradition says that the Matsano were young virgins between the ages of five and eight. The reason why they could be young girls is because of the strong taboos that exist about the mystery of menstruation in African traditional religions. As will be shown later, the menstrual blood is believed to have both positive and negative effects in a society. Positively it is a sign of life that perpetuates a society. Negatively, if not properly handled it can bring sickness to the whole community. At a shrine, it was believed, menstrual blood could chase away the presence of God. Therefore young girls who had not reached puberty would be preferred to work at the shrine because they could not 'harm' society.

Another tradition also collected by Rangeley which seems to be more plausible is that they were women of any age who felt the call to become Matsano for Makewana. This

would mean that the God who created the body of a woman did not choose whether the person to be called is menstruating or not. Tradition does not say whether Makewanas received oracles from God only when they were not menstruating. Tradition also does not tell us whether the Makewanas were sent by God to the shrine only after they had reached menopause or not, as is the case with other mediums in other countries.²⁵ The major role of the Matsano was to pound flour for offering. Some traditions say that they also joined Makewana in the rain dance.

Apart from the work mentioned above, Makewanas and Matsanos lived a life surrounded by rituals. For example, Makewanas slept in a special hut on a bed made with ivory tusks which were covered with black cloths. Matsanos also slept in special huts next to the Makewana. A Makewana and the Matsanos were not supposed to be married or become pregnant although Makewana was involved in ritual intercourse at the shrine with a special functionary, called

²⁵ B. Bam, 'Priorities for women in South Africa' in ed. D.L. Eck, and D. Jain, Speaking of Faith: Cross Cultural Perspectives on Women, Religion and Social Change. London, the Women's Press, 1986, 40. Brigalia Bam has said that in the Xhosa traditional religion, women can only participate in ceremonies which bring the ancestors back to earth after menopause, when they attain a certain amount of purity.

Elizabeth Amoah, 'Femaleness: Akan Concepts and Practices' in ed. J. Becher, *Women, Religion and Sexuality*. Geneva: WCC Publications, 1990, 139. Elizabeth Amoah has said that among the Akan of Ghana women who hold religious functions such as traditional priests are forbidden to enter religious shrines when they are menstruating.

Kamundi, as a way of marking the end of the initiation ceremony for girls. If Makewana became pregnant she was thrown into the sacred pool secretly. If a Mtsano was found to be involved in a sexual relationship with one of the functionaries, she was stopped from being a Mtsano and the man was put to death.

Both a Makewana and the Matsanos never cut their hair or nails, as cutting would mean chasing away rain. Rengeley collected contradicting traditions with regard to the Makewanas and Matsanos life style. One tradition²⁶ says that they only wore black cloth for the same reason. However another tradition says that a Makewana dressed like all the women of her time. Yet another tradition says that she never bathed except when she went to the sacred pool called Malawi whose water was not drunk or used in any way by anyone. Still yet another tradition says that she occasionally bathed in very hot water to show that she had strange powers over water. If any of them died they were buried at a special graveyard and large quantities of water were poured in the grave before burial. Other traditions say that this did not apply to the Makewanas but only to the Matsanos. It is said that when a Makewana died she was covered in a black cloth tied with stones and thrown into the sacred pool by

²⁶ According to the research done by Rengeley, there are a number of traditions that developed to explain what was happening around the Makewanas and Matsanos, some of which are quoted here.

the Matsanos. No one referred to the death of a Makewana for she was not supposed to die. Her absence was explained in terms of having gone to visit Chauta. In her place came a new Makewana who also had to start by falling into a trance and making prophesies. Before being accepted as a Makewana the women underwent tests. Only those who passed the tests were accepted. Once accepted it would be announced that she had been sent by God and then she could be taken to her hut to begin her duties.

A Makewana was also vested with political powers. According to Rangeley

By some accounts, Makewana also allotted country, and that, when requests for chiefdom were made to her, she sent Malemia, (a functionary at the shrine. He was responsible for receiving messages and oracles from Makewana to the people), first to inspect the country. It is very doubtful that she did appoint chiefs. On the other hand it is freely admitted that Chadza Phiri and Chadza Mkwenda were never confirmed in their chiefdoms until confirmed by Makewana, and it is stated that it was Makewana who gave them their tails and bangles of chiefdom.²⁷

Since a Makewana had such powers, any time she travelled any distance, which was very rare, she was carried on the shoulders of a man as were the other chiefs. She also had the rights of Mzinda- a sphere of influence over which she was responsible for the initiation of girls which is called chinamwali. This is normally the responsibility of a chief and it was very important in the Chewa society.

²⁷ W.H.J. Rangeley, 1952, 39.

A Makewana was not the only woman who could exercise political power among the Chewa. Kings Phiri has established that in pre-Malawi chieftainship, as described by the Banda traditions, was based on the idea that the female chief or her male substitute possessed mystical powers.²⁸

Among the Chewa, chieftainship passed on from the chief to the children of his sisters. In most cases it went to the male children. However, whenever they identified a daughter with leadership qualities or if there was no male child among the chiefs' sisters children, they could choose a woman.²⁹

The Msinja town was completely destroyed in the 1870s by the raid of the Chidyaonga Maseko Ngoni from Domwe. All the people of Msinja fled in different directions. After a while some of the functionaries come back to Msinja and attempted to rebuild it. However it did not work for a number of reasons. Langeley offers four. Firstly, the then Makewana completely disappeared. Another one came claiming to have been sent by God but she did not pass the necessary

²⁸ K. Phiri, 1975, 51. Other informants of Kings Phiri say that because Mangadzi was only a woman and therefore powerless, she delegated much of her divinely acquired authority to a brother, Chembe. This arrangement gave men whatever claim they have to political authority.

²⁹ In 1959, Mthenga ndi Muuni of July reported that there were three women chiefs. These were chief Kalolo and Khongoni in Lilongwe and chief Bibi Kulunda from Salima. The present Chief Kachala at Nkhoma is a woman.

tests. Secondly, the Makumbi village, which was responsible for providing food to the Msinja town so that the functionaries could concentrate on their religious roles, was no longer there. Therefore it was not easy for the Msinja functionaries to perform their religious roles as well as produce their own food. Thirdly, the coming of Christianity from 1875 onwards to different parts of the country which preached a message against the traditional religions made it difficult for an already weakened cult to function with full support from its people. Lastly, when the country was declared a British Protectorate in 1890, the power of the chiefs was reduced drastically. Since a Makewana ruled a village that resembled a town, it was no longer possible for the remaining functionaries to operate without the original power of a chief. The rain shrine itself still exists up to this day but at a different location and without a Makewana and some of the functionaries.

The story of the Makewanas brings out a very crucial point for the concerned Malawian women theologians to share with the Church in Malawi. The story shows that culturally there is evidence that among the Chewa of central region, for a long time the highest religious position in society was held by women. As the story has shown, the principal intercessors with God on behalf of human beings were women. Through the Makewanas Chauta's wishes were made known to

human beings. This was the highest status in the society. At the time it never occurred to the men to question the possibility of women holding such a powerful position. By retelling the story of Makewana's rain shrine the aim is not to Christianize it but to show that the Chewa have a rich culture of women serving God in positions of leadership. Furthermore, it shows that as the churches in central region grapple with the issue of the role of women in the church, they cannot exclude women from positions of leadership by basing their arguments on culture for there is evidence to prove that women had such authority in the traditional culture. It is important, then, to turn to the Chewa traditional society and examine the position of women in order to understand why the Mangadzis and Makewanas were accepted by society for such a long time, from the fourteenth to the nineteenth century.

2.3 The Chewa Traditional Woman

Images of Chewa women in matrilineal society can be understood by examining the family system from two perspectives. The Chewa woman was looked upon as the root of the lineage (tsinde) as well as a dependent (mbumba). These two perspectives show that although a matrilineal society gave a woman high status and a certain amount of freedom which was not there in a patrilineal society, she was also heavily dependent upon, as well as controlled by her uncle

and brother who had total power over her whether single or married. Her family power did not mean matriarchy. The Chewa woman was not spared from the evils of ritual intercourse during initiation, early marriages, mental torture to barren and single women, polygamy, levirate marriages and abusive widowhood rites.

2.3.1 A root of a lineage

Among the Chewa, matrilineage was viewed as consisting of all those who could trace their descent from a common ancestress. In the tradition of such a group, this founding ancestress was called *tsinde* (the root).³⁰ In a Chewa family the mother had the privilege even in marriage of remaining united with her own kinsfolk, and to control, with their help, the offspring of her marriage. This was unlike a patrilineal society where the children and the property of the family belonged to the husband's side. The mother was supposed to remain united with her brothers and sisters, and together with them to retain rights of possession over children.³¹ Thus the woman had the privilege of being the base or root of a lineage.

³⁰ K.M. Phiri, 'Some changes in the Matrilineal family system among the Chewa of Malawi since the nineteenth century' in Journal of African History. 24, 1983, 259.

³¹ K.M. Phiri, 1983, 258.

2.3.2 A sacred vessel of life

As the root of a lineage, the woman was seen as a sacred vessel of life. She was responsible for the continuation of the community. Thus the community's future and destiny was decisively dependent on her. In her fertile womb she carried both male and female. As Benezet Bujo has said, 'when she successfully gave birth, she defeated death'.³² The terms used to describe a pregnant woman among the Chewa, pakati, show the idea of being between life and death. The woman was not seen to do this alone. God and the ancestors were involved in the process of dispensing life. A lot of taboos were observed in order to protect life. If a woman died in the process of giving birth the blame was put on her husband and the consequences were severe. If she managed to deliver properly she was treated as a victor with much ululation from the other women. Offerings of thanksgiving to God and the ancestors were made by the husband.

Besides giving life to the community the mother was also responsible for the nourishing and shaping of that life. This work was shared with the other women of the same clan. As she worked around the home she socialized her

³² B, Bujo, 'Feminist Theology in Africa' in Theology Digest. volume 36, no. 12, 1989, 27.

children in the norms of her society and taught them about the existence of God and the ancestors through stories.

Being barren was considered to be the greatest misfortune that could happen to a woman. What John Mbiti has said about a barren woman is true for the Chewa.

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, not only for the genealogical line but also for herself. When she dies, there will be nobody of her own immediate blood to remember her, to keep her in the state of personal immortality. She will simply be forgotten...She will suffer for this, her own relatives will suffer for this, and it will be irreparable humiliation for which there is no source of comfort in traditional life.³³

This shows that even in a matrilineal society, a woman's value was associated with having children. Thus the personhood of a woman was not in her own right but in relation to what she could offer the community in terms of children. Being barren was a divine curse. Rituals were performed to ward off evil, and medicine was used to cure the situation, sometimes with success at other times not. Thus a marriage without children was considered incomplete. Ironically if there were no children in a marriage the blame was mostly put on the woman.

³³ J.S., Mbiti, 'Flowers in the Garden-The role of women in African Religion' in The Place of African Traditional Religion in Contemporary Africa. Nairobi: Council for World Religion, 1987, 7.

Unlike a patrilineal society, traditionally among the Chewa having more girls than boys was preferred because it meant expansion of the village. Girls grew up knowing that their husbands would build houses for them near their parents' house. Kings Phiri has pointed out that at the same time male children were appreciated as guardians or trustees (Ankhoswe) of their sisters' marriages. He has observed that a woman without a guardian was like a slave because it meant there would be nobody to handle her marriage affairs. On the other hand, Emily Maliwa, writing about a special class of women in traditional Malawi, has argued that, in a matrilineal society, female Ankhoswe are usually preferred. The reason for preferring women is that 'in matrilineal societies very important matters affecting marriage or the settlement of disputes are engaged in by women as men are usually away from home'.³⁴ We assume that Maliwa was referring to the time when Malawian men were involved in migrant labour. We are not sure as to whether her statement can also be applied to the time when men worked within their wives' homes. Whatever the case, one can argue that the Chewa had some women as Ankhoswe which is a special role that was shared with men.

Being single was unheard of in Chewa society. Girls were prepared while very young for life with a man. Men too

³⁴ E.N. Maliwa, Legal Status of Women in Malawi. Ph.D. thesis, University of London, 1978, 109.

were not allowed to be single. A person was not complete alone but with a partner of the opposite sex. This is connected to people's beliefs about creation. In the Kaphirintiwa creation myth of the Chewa, it is believed that the sky opened and in a great shower of rain, down came Chiuta, the first man and woman, and all the animals'.³⁵ Gabriel M. Setiloane has said that the Soto/Tswana believe that their 'first parents came out of a hole in the ground (...) together, men with their wives, children and their animals, sheep, goats and dogs.'³⁶ Thus emphasis was on family rather than singlehood.

2.3.3 Initiation ceremonies

Female initiation ceremonies were considered very important among the Chewa because that is where sex education was taught. The girls were also prepared to take up their future roles as mothers. Kings Phiri has argued that the other reason why the initiation ceremonies for girls were considered important is because 'they accord greater social or symbolic respect to women than to men, as reproducers of the lineage'.³⁷

³⁵ J.M. Scoffeleers and A.A. Roscoe, Land of Fire: Oral literature from Malawi. Limbe: Popular publications, 1985, 19.

³⁶ G.M. Setiloane, 1986, 5.

³⁷ K.M. Phiri, 1983, 259.

The seriousness of initiation ceremonies can also be measured in terms of the fact that the Chewa had four stages of initiation ceremonies for women, and the teaching of important things in a woman's life was entrusted to special female teachers called Anankungwi. The first initiation ceremony marked the end of childhood and the beginning of womanhood. It was called chinamwali among the Chewa and was conducted as soon as a girl reached puberty. This was a very important occasion in a woman's life, for at this ceremony she was advised by the Nankungwi to accept the status of womanhood and leave childhood behind. Usually a specific time was set aside when all the girls who had reached puberty were separated from their society and went through a period of seclusion for instruction.

The Nankungwi (who was a highly respected, elderly and experienced member of the society), sought permission from the chief to conduct the initiation ceremony which lasted as long as a month in seclusion. Since these ceremonies were regarded as a form of moral and religious education, the Nankungwi was required to have 'a detailed knowledge of the norms, morals, beliefs and customs of the society which were passed on to the girls'.³⁸ Perhaps it was for these reasons

³⁸ R. Nowa, 'Puberty rites for Girls of Malata Village, T.A. Makwira Chikwawa District', a seminar paper presented to the Department of Religious Studies, Chancellor College, Zomba, 1986, 1.

that J.W. Gwengwe has stated that the Nankungwis were usually sisters of chiefs.

Among Africans, the blood of a menstruating woman is a paradox. The first time that a girl starts menstruating, the news is received by the community with jubilation because that is a sign of life and hope for the continuation of the society. Yet at the same time it has always been feared as having certain mysterious powers which can harm life. Thus, at a communal level, when the initiation of a large number of girls was taking place, taboos regarding refraining from sexual intercourse were observed by the parents of the girls, as well as the chief. In the case of every day life a couple refrained from sexual intercourse when they felt that their daughter was approaching puberty, when the wife was menstruating, and when the wife had given birth until the time when the baby was admitted to the community with necessary rituals.

However sexual rites were performed between the initiates and unknown men (fisi) to mark the end of the puberty initiation. If the girl was married before the initiation ceremony, her husband would come to perform the duties of fisi. At the heart of the rituals was the desire to preserve life, which could easily be taken away if there was carelessness during the time of a woman's menstruation. An elaborate feast marked the end of the ceremony where the

whole community welcomed the initiates to the world of adults.

This ceremony was regarded very highly among the Chewa so that, as it will be shown later, any girl who became pregnant before the ceremony was severely punished. Yet no one questioned the idea of involving the initiates in ritual intercourse as violating their sexuality. Furthermore, as will be shown in chapter five, the fear of the menstruation blood was systematically used to deny women their full humanity in the society. Even at this early period, fear of the menstrual blood and the rituals that surrounded it, led to men taking a second wife.

Another type of initiation ceremony was performed when the matured 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 seriously. The girl was told never to argue with her husband and to treat her husband like a king. Although the man went through nyau-initiation ceremony for men, he was not told how to please his wife sexually.

After the marriage ceremony there was another rite where the newly weds together received instruction on how they were to conduct themselves as married people. At all

these ceremonies it was the female Nankhugwi who played the major role in giving instructions.

The first pregnancy was also followed by another initiation ceremony for the mother. Among the Chewa the ceremony was called Chisamba. This ceremony dealt mainly with how a husband and wife were to relate to each other during pregnancy and how they were to look after their children. She was also instructed into the taboo they had to observe during this period. Maliwa has stated that

In the olden days (especially among the Yao, the Chewa (the Nyanja) and the Lomwe) this ceremony (known as "litiwo" in Yao or "Chisamba" in Nyanja) was so important and valued that if a mother did not send her daughter there, she was punished. Informants mentioned that in the olden days a child born of a mother who had not undergone "Chisamba" or "litiwo" was buried alive. The punishment was so grave, it is therefore proper to assume that no woman could allow herself not to undergo Chisamba ceremony if only to save her child and also to avoid embarrassment on her part.³⁹

This provides us with an example of women oppressing other women since it was a female Nankungwi and the old women of the lineage who were responsible for such oppressive customs. Cultural practices such as this should have been rejected by women even before the influence of Christianity or westernization.

³⁹ E.N. Maliwa, 1978, 118-9.

2.3.4. Marriage

By the time the missionaries came to Chewa country they found that Chewa women were getting married at a very early age, between twelve and fourteen. Some of the girls even reached puberty after they were already married. The reasons for this are not known. However we can assume that the parents feared pregnancy outside marriage as this brought embarrassment to the whole lineage. This can be supported by the fact that if a girl became pregnant before marriage she underwent a humiliating initiation ceremony which involved verbal abuse and the wearing of a necklace made of dog's intestines. She could then be paraded around the village so that everyone would know that she had done something unacceptable in the lineage. This was also a way of warning the younger girls to avoid such activities or else they too would undergo the same punishment. The man responsible went through the humiliating experience with her. This punishment was also used on girls who got married and became pregnant before the initiation ceremony.⁴⁰

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 survive. Where the mother survives she has a

⁴⁰ J.W. Gwengwe, 1975, 74.

very high chance of developing 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.⁴¹

Traditionally men married at an older age. The main reason for this was that the men had to wait until they had built a hut for the prospective wife, worked in their parents-in-law's gardens, and made enough domestic equipment to be used by themselves as well as the wives. The matrilineal system looked at the men who came to marry as work horses. Nkamwini was the word used to describe a husband by the uncles and the brothers of the wife. Such a system is clearly dehumanizing the husband.

Apart from this dehumanizing side of the matrilineal system the male had the right to choose whom he wanted to marry and could ask his uncle to approach the woman's parents. The qualities and skills that he would be looking for in a wife would include obedience, skill at cooking, and a good reputation, because he wanted to emphasize his male superiority. The girl was also consulted by her uncle if she was interested in the man or not. Even in a matrilineal society women did not approach men for marriage. The most

⁴¹ A.J. Makumbi, Maliro ndi Miyambo ya Achewa. Blantyre: Longman (Malawi) Ltd, 1975, 17-19.

important quality that women looked for in men who were proposing marriage to them was faithfulness. To some extent the decision to marry or not rested on the two. Nevertheless, since marriages between cousins were encouraged and preferred, (between sons of a sister and daughters of a brother or between daughters of a sister and sons of a brother), individual freedom in choosing a marriage partner was restricted. Furthermore, the marriage bond was extended to the families of the couple.

No bride wealth was paid by the man to the woman's family but only small gifts of appreciation to the parents as well as to the prospective wife. Some missionaries, when they came to Chewa country, argued that the fact that there was no bride wealth involved made Chewa marriages weak. The woman was not strongly bound to her husband. She could therefore divorce her husband easily. However, as will be shown in chapter five, where bride wealth has been used some women suffered greatly because they were treated as the property of the man and his extended family. Thus one would expect the missionaries to appreciate the freedom that a Chewa woman enjoyed without bride wealth.

The wedding took place at the woman's home where the man had already built a house during the days of courtship. The wedding preparations were done mainly on the woman's side although the man's side brought some food when coming

to deliver the prospective husband. The new couple were given land by the wife's mother or uncle. In some cases, after the man stayed at his wife's village for some time he could ask for permission from the woman's uncle or brother to allow him to take his wife to his village to settle. Depending on the reasons given and the behavior of the man, permission was granted or refused. Where permission was granted the man had to pay a token, which was usually a white chicken, to the guardian of the wife. This arrangement was called chitengwa. In most cases the man stayed at his wife's village.

If for some reason the man wanted to take a second wife, which was rare because of the fact that the man stayed at the wife's home, it was discussed with all the Ankhoswe from both sides. The first wife was also consulted and depending on the reasons given sometimes permission was granted. In most cases it was the head of a lineage or those men who were allowed to take their wives to their villages who practiced polygamy. In the case of the men who were staying at the wife's home, it meant that the man had to build two houses at each woman's village and he would be rotating between the two villages. The effects of polygamy on women will be discussed in chapters three and five. It should be made clear here, however that although the man stayed at his wife's village, this did not mean that there was equality in the home between husband and wife. Even in a

matrilineal society a man was regarded as superior to his wife.

2.3.5. Divorce

Among the Chewa a woman could divorce her husband if he failed to have sexual relations with her because of other women; if he did not provide clothing for her; if he was beating her often for no adequate reasons; if he could not have children by her; if he went on a trip and did not come back; if he showed that he did not like the wife's relatives; if he did not perform his share of duties like building a house for her and working in her parents' garden; if he was a wizard; and if he did not respect the head of the lineage. The man could divorce his wife if she was lazy; could not cook well; was unfaithful; nagging for no adequate reasons; unfriendly to her husband's relations; her babies died; and if she was a witch.⁴² Of particular interest is the fact that unfaithfulness on the part of the wife led to divorce but not on the part of the husband. One can only explain this in terms of the fact that the Chewa were also a male dominated society. However custody of the children was always given to the mother of the children or the brothers of the mother.

⁴² J.W. Gwengwe, 1975, 79-80.

2.3.6. Widowhood

In the event of the death of a husband, the wife, who in the first place gave life, stayed in the house with the dead body up to the time of burial. The mother and the widow sat on the mat next to the head of the corpse. All 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, which usually took place a day or two after death. Burial was followed by rituals of drinking medicine, cutting hair and burning the house which belonged to the deceased as a way of getting rid of all evil spirits that were associated with the graveyard. The widow also underwent a period of seclusion before a ritual was performed to set her free.

While in some African cultures the widow underwent many dehumanizing rituals, the Chewa woman was protected by the fact that she was surrounded by her kin who supported her emotionally and economically to bear the loss of her husband. The ritual of burning the house which she shared with her husband meant, however, that the wife no longer had accommodation of her own but had to go back to her parent's home. Since she also had children to care for, she was then a burden on her parents.

The Chewa widow had a number of options, like the Kwaya people of East Africa where Michael C. Kirwen did his

research. If she was still staying in her parents' home, she had the freedom to choose to remarry and take her children with her. If the man died while the arrangement had been made to take the woman to live in his village, a widow could return to her parental home with her children and be remarried. If she chose to remain in her deceased husband's homestead, which was rare, she could take on the status of a single woman or become the leviratic wife of a brother-in-law. It should be made clear that there was no pressure on the part of her brother-in-law to be a surrogate or substitute for her deceased husband.⁴³

2.3.7 The paradox of the status of Chewa women

The Chewa matrilineal system accorded women some value. She gained status through initiation ceremonies, and to a certain degree she had a say regarding whom she wanted to marry. Since there was no bride wealth she was entitled to have the husband stay with her in her village. This stabilized her psychologically as she was spared mistreatment from in-laws. In the case of mistreatment from her husband she had the right to take her husband to Ankhoswe and seek their protection. Wife battering was sufficient ground for divorce. Where divorce was granted she kept the offspring of her marriage and the house which was

⁴³ C.M. Kirwen, African Widows. Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1979, 83-112.

built for her by her husband. The woman was free to remarry after divorce or in the event of the death of her husband. Thus the matrilineal system gave greater freedom and dignity to women, essential elements of personhood. In such a society the problems of having a woman as a religious leader are significantly reduced.

Nevertheless, it should be noted that Chewa women were also dependant on their brothers or uncles. Although a woman remained with her relatives, she was controlled to a large extent by her brother or her uncle from her maternal side. It was the wife's brother who became guardian (nkhoswe) to his sister and her offspring, and the sustainer of their social, economic and legal interests. In her married state she continued to be known by her maiden name which was from her maternal uncle.

There was, however, social segregation between men and women in the Chewa society. Women worked and ate in a group with their children away from the men. The best food went to 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.

Although elaborate initiation ceremonies indicated that women were highly respected, an analysis of what was going

on at the initiation ceremonies also show that at the end of the day they really benefited the men. Throughout, the girls were being drilled to recognize that life means making men happy. They were told how to make themselves desirable to their husband, how to respect men privately as well as publicly. The men were not told to make their wives happy at Nyau secret or closed societies.⁴⁴

Thus one can argue that Chewa women had a certain amount of power in their families but family power did not signify matriarchy. The women had no power to make decisions to remain single if they wanted to. Their areas of functioning and their power within those areas were determined by Chewa men. The effect of this on women was that they explained their importance in terms of their relationship to men. To this extent, therefore, the Chewa women suffered from male domination just like all their African sisters. It was during group pounding of maize that the women sang songs that expressed their feelings about life. Women used pounding sessions -pantondo- to discuss issues that pertain to women in life. This provided an outlet of negative emotions that women may have had.

⁴⁴ Kings Phiri has evaluated the Chewa secret societies as conservors of the Chewa traditional values and would seem to be as old as Chewa society itself. The popular or general view is that they performed social, educational and religious functions within local Chewa society. Of late, it has been shown that for Chewa married men they serve as men's clubs or pressure groups. They enabled the men to band together, to share their experiences, and to reinforce one another psychologically. K.M. Phiri, 1983, 261.

2.4 Changes in the image of the Chewa women

Three features contributed to the destruction of the limited dignity of Chewa women. These were the introduction of slavery from 1810; the coming of patrilineal societies into Malawi from early 1870s, and, more ambiguously, the introduction of Christianity and colonization.

As early as 1810 Chewa chiefs were involved in the slave trade. This meant that Chewa chiefs started owning slaves. The status of a chief depended on the size of his village. In order to expand their villages, the head of a lineage gave female slaves to their kinsfolk. At this time 'it was the females who were a target of slavery because women were prospective wives, childbearers and agriculturists'.⁴⁵ Due to this new set up of marriages,

the Chewa men felt that women who had been captured in war or purchased from caravans made better wives than those married under regular matrilineal custom. They were the property of the husband, tended to abide with him permanently, and did their utmost to secure his favour. For this reason, a man who had both free and slave wives often gave greater attention to the latter than to the former. The children of the slave wife had the same status as the children of the free wife.⁴⁶

A slave woman lost control of her sexuality. She was a victim of abuse and was valued not in herself as a person

⁴⁵ K.M. Phiri, 1983, 263

⁴⁶ K.M. Phiri, 1983, 265.

but because of what she could bear for her masters. There was moreover, competition between a slave woman who wanted to gain favour from her shared husband by being obedient in every way possible, and a Chewa woman who was not as subordinate to her husband but wanted to maintain her marriage. This, we would argue, was the beginning of a change in Chewa women, making them submissive to their husbands. Indeed, the quotation above from Kings Phiri indicates that the free Chewa woman lost her dignity, as it was the obedient slave wife who was preferred. It was being made clear to the free women that given a chance the Chewa men wanted all women to be their slaves if they wanted to remain married.

The second change in the matrilineal system that destroyed the limited dignity of the Chewa woman was the result of foreign influence coming from the patriarchal societies that settled with the Chewa. The first group were the Chikunda from Mozambique who come as traders in ivory, elephant hunters and refugees in the 1870s. Although the Chikunda were a patriarchal society, their influence on the Chewa was very small because they came in small groups. In fact the majority of them were absorbed into the matrilineal system of the Chewa. The second group was that of the Swahili people who came with the slave trade from the East Coast. They were a patriarchal society and created a big town of slaves in Nkhota-kota among the Chewa from 1840s. In

this town everybody followed the Swahili system of taking a wife to live with the husband and not the husband following the wife. The third group was the Ngoni who arrived in Chewa territory in the 1870s. The Ngoni defeated the Chewa of Dedza and Dowa area and settled with or near them. Being a subject people for a while the Chewa started practicing a patriarchal type of marriage. However there is evidence to show that when the Ngoni political and military power declined, the Ngoni started mixing their culture with the Chewa one and that the matrilineal system survived. At the same time some Chewa people continued to adopt the Ngoni system of marriage by paying bride wealth and therefore taking full responsibility for the wife and the children. It was this group that also destroyed the religious power of women among the Chewa.

The third and most decisive change in the matrilineal system of the Chewa came as a result of the arrival of the missionaries during the last quarter of the nineteenth century. This is the subject of chapter three and will be discussed there in detail.

2.5 Conclusion

In traditional Chewa society it was an established fact that women religious leaders had authority over all their subjects. In some cases the leaders combined religious and

political leadership. The case of the Makewanas serves as an example. In this society the names of God had male and female attributes. The fact that lineages were traced through women may explain the ease with which the traditional Chewa society accepted women religious leaders.

While the effects of change from a matrilineal to a patrilineal were many in the nineteenth century, the changes discussed above did not affect Chewa country as a whole at once. Each factor mentioned affected some areas more than others. The Chewa matrilineal system is still being practiced in Malawi today. Where the system is being practiced, the greatest change has been control of the family by the father. It is a focus of this research to find out what this has meant to Chewa Christian women in terms of initiation ceremonies, bride wealth, the right to divorce a husband, remarriage, access to children and property after divorce or in the event of the death of the husband, and women leading a single life. Since the church contributed to the introduction of the changes, we will also assess the extent to which the church has helped to solve the problems it helped to create for Chewa Christian women.

It remains to be seen in the following chapters whether the missionaries had the interests of women in mind when they dealt with such issues. Emphasis will be on the changes that have occurred in a Chewa woman's life as a result of

contact with Christian teaching. Furthermore, it remains to be seen as to whether the problems that have been highlighted still exist for the modern day Chewa Christian woman.

CHAPTER 3

WOMEN IN THE NKHOMA SYNOD OF THE CHURCH OF CENTRAL AFRICAN PRESBYTERIAN 1889-1989.

3.1 Introduction

The Nkhoma synod of the Church of Central Africa, Presbyterian (CCAP) celebrated its centenary on 26th November, 1989. The aim of this chapter is to show that during those hundred years the church has rejected some cultural practices of the Chewa people and freed women from oppression, but imposed its own oppression on women by maintaining a sexist theology which has pushed women to the periphery of church administration and meaningful participation. Emphasis will be on reasons the church gave for rejecting or adopting Chewa cultural practices in relation to women.

When Christianity came to Africa it came as a male dominated religion. Anything that was incompatible with this perspective was crushed. Adrian Hastings has rightly argued that women were not a special case in the impact which the Christian missionary made upon nineteenth-century Africa.¹ This means that freedom from cultural oppression for African women as a result of the coming of Christianity came as a coincidence rather than a formulated understanding of their

¹ A. Hastings, African Catholicism: Essays in Discovery. London: SCM, 1989, 36.

salvation. The missionaries' policies in dealing with local people's culture depended on what the home mission had to say. Policies on initiation ceremonies and marriages were handled in Western ways, which was considered to be in agreement with the Word of God.

In the DRC at this early stage, there was little differences between the ministry of women in the home churches and mission fields. For example when the Dutch Reformed Church Mission came to central Malawi, women were excluded from being evangelists, deacons, and elders. In their home country the DRC women were only admitted as deacons in 1982 and as elders/ministers in 1990. Nevertheless, women in the DRC would study theology. Within the Reformed tradition, missionary policies on women differed. For example, the Reformed missionaries in Taiwan promoted women, whereas in Malawi they stressed on the subordination of women.²

² L.K. Wang, 'Ecclesiology and Women: A view from Taiwan' in We Dare to Dream: Doing Theology as Asian Women. ed. V.M.M. Fabella, and S.A.L. Park, Hong Kong: AWCCT, 1989, 24-25. Among other things, Wang has stated that traditionally, in Taiwan society, women had no status. When Christianity came to her country through the Presbyterian Missionaries, they emphasized the need for women education, and several schools were established especially for girls and women. One of these specialized in teaching 'Bible Women' who served as evangelists and lay pastors...About 1950 women were accepted for the ordination to the gospel ministry, as well as to serve as elders and deacons.

3.2 The church's position on women's participation in leadership roles

When the DCRM came to central Malawi and worked among the Chewa, they made it clear that the practice of rainmaking, which was at the heart of Chewa religion, was evil. This meant a complete rejection of the Chewa religion. It also implied that the God of the Chewa who worked through female mediums like the Makewanas was different from the Christian God. Moreover the missionaries' image and understanding of the place of women in the church in the nineteenth century was based on a literal interpretation of Genesis and the letters of St Paul.

Subordination of women was thought to be divinely sanctioned. The creation myth in Genesis was the biblical foundation for the subordination of women. The Genesis myth was interpreted as saying that woman was created from man, after man and for man's advantage. Genesis 3: 16 was taken to be the divine law that man should be head of the woman. These arguments were further strengthened by Paul's teachings in the New Testament, especially his words addressed to the church in Corinth;

Women should remain silent in the churches. They are not allowed to speak, but must be in submission, as the Law says. If they want to inquire about something, they should ask their husbands at home; for it is disgraceful for a woman to speak in the church.' (1 Corinthians 14: 34-35).

In chapter 11:7-10 of the same letter Paul says

A man ought not to cover his head since he is the image and glory of God; but the woman is the glory of man. For man did not come from woman, but woman from man; neither was man created for woman but woman for man. For this reason and because of the angles, the woman ought to have a sign of authority on her head.

An additional resource for the subordination of women was 1 Timothy 2:11-14:

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.

Such texts, read literally and uncritically, provided the guidelines for handling women's issues in Malawi.

Despite the missionaries failure to appreciate Chewa culture, they introduced a potentially liberating message for women. For example, at the first conference of the women members of the various mission societies of the Consultative Board of Federated Missions, a Miss Walker of Livingstonia Mission presented a paper in which she quoted a Malawian woman speaking to her friends and saying

My friends, do you see it? Do you realize what is happening? We are people. In our own village, where are we women, when plans are being made or discussed for the good of our people? It is men who are inside the kraal, we women are cut out. Now here in the church we are brought inside. we have been given a place and work to do in the Kingdom of God. Here in the church we are people.³

³ E.J. Walker, 'African Women Against Their Background' in The Life and Place of Women in the Church and Community,

In this statement one hears a deep cry coming from a Malawian woman for recognition as a full human being created in the image of God. A recognition which women did not find in their patriarchal Ngoni culture and which Christianity seemed to promise. It is a statement about how a woman defines her personhood. To be a person means that you have a say in what is happening around you. You are involved in the discussions that involve you and the community. Your capabilities are recognized and utilized for the good of the community. You are made to feel wanted and you are given a place to which to belong. For the Livingstonia synod this statement was true because by 1951 there were already 270 women elders and 316 women deacons. From this angle one can argue that women had indeed found their place and true freedom in the church, even though they were not yet ordained as ministers. For the Nkhoma synod, this much longed for recognition of women's humanity as created in the image of God has yet to be realized.

The debate concerning African women in church leadership roles in the Nkhoma synod could be dated from September, 1966, when a question was raised at a Synodical meeting on whether women should be allowed to go to theological College. At the same meeting another question

papers presented at the first meeting of women missionaries, 1949.2.

was raised as to whether women could be ordained. The responses that came from the Committee were that only the Committee of the Joint Theological College could discuss the practicability of allowing women into the theological college. As to the ordination of women, the synod decided that the question must be investigated by the committee which was also studying the possibility of having women as elders.⁴ Since the establishment of the first station of the DRCM in 1889 no woman had received theological education or acquired any leadership position in the church.

A year later, the synod's representative on the Theological College Board gave a report to synod that 'the Board agreed that female students may be admitted but only where the sending synod has some special work for them (e.g. women's work) but not with the view for ordination'.⁵ This became clear when the Nkhoma synod enrolled its first and

⁴ Cf S5/15/6/1/9: Minutes of the 9th meeting of Nkhoma Synod held at Nkhoma from 26th August to 2nd September, 1966, minute S.238.

⁵ Cf S5/15/6/1/9: Minutes of Synodical meeting of 6/6/67, minute KS.828. When a union was formed by the four Presbyteries of Livingstonia, Blantyre and Nkhoma in the 1920s to form The Church of Central African Presbyterian, they agreed that each presbytery, later synod, would be responsible for the training of its own ministers. However, in 1963, they established a joint theological college based at Nkhoma. In 1974 Blantyre and Livingstonia synods moved their students to Kapeni in Blantyre. The colleges transferred to Zomba in 1978 to become the United Theological College with the Anglicans joining in. Since 1991, the best students proceed to do two more years at the University of Malawi and graduate with a degree in Theology.

still only female theological candidate, Mary Chinkhwita, in 1968.

3.2.1. Mary Chinkhwita, a case study

As soon as Mary Chinkhwita enrolled at Nkhoma Theological College the synod magazine Kuunika picked up the story and presented her as the possible first woman minister in the synod. It did not take long before the synod corrected the mistake in the following strong words

Synod emphasizes that there is no lady minister in our synod but the one who is at the theological college is being trained to help her fellow women. The mistake was even put in Kuunika but it is not so. After the course, she will not be ordained as a minister, not at all.⁶

As a result of what had happened, the synod did not feel comfortable with Mary Chinkhwita continuing her studies at Nkhoma Theological College. Therefore attempts were made to find her another place to study in South Africa.⁷ While negotiations were going on for her further studies, the synod decided that she should not attend the College for the fourth year (last) year, but start work in schools and colleges among girls and women in Lilongwe.⁸

⁶ Cf S5/15/6/1/9: Synodical meeting of 16-23 August 1968, minute S.407. See also minute S414.

⁷ Minutes of Moderamen of 3/10/1969 minute KS.1665.

⁸ Minutes of Moderamen of 6/8/70 minute KS.2093.

Soon after she started her new job, she began having problems. Her major complaint was that she was doing work for which she was not trained. She therefore submitted her resignation letter. The synod was shocked by her reaction. They therefore negotiated with her to withdraw her letter and promised her better working conditions and a new job which involved giving Bible Instruction at Lilongwe Girls Secondary School, as well as person to person evangelism among the girls. She was also to conduct person to person evangelism among the housewives in her vicinity.⁹

By 1971 Mary was informed that the South African University they chose for her could not take her because she had not finished her studies at Nkhoma, therefore she was not qualified to enter the university. It was not until seven years later that she got a British award to study for one year in England.¹⁰ When Mary went to England she had problems finding a course in social work as was demanded by the synod. She could not study Religious Studies at a degree level because her academic background was insufficient. She does not seem to have sought the advise of a Career Advisor for she decided to do some courses in Administration which would help her qualify for entry to a degree programme. In

⁹ Minutes of Moderamen of 22/6/71 minute KS.3220 and of 24/12/71 minute KS.3367.

¹⁰ Minutes of Moderamen of 8/3/1977 minute KS.6149; KS.7081; 8/9/1978 minute KS.7204; 24-26/10/1978, KS.7429.

the process she became interested in what she was doing and ended with a Masters degree in Public Administration.¹¹ By then seven years had passed. This is an instance where personal interests and those of the church clashed seriously with disastrous results on both sides. The Nkhoma synod was becoming anxious and was naturally disappointed that she had not done a degree in Religious Studies. Despite her type of qualifications, the synod was determined to send her to teach at Mlanda Girls Secondary School- the synod's first and only girls Secondary school.¹² Mary did not want to teach. She finally told the synod that she was not coming back to them.¹³

The case of Mary Chinkhwita has been cited by the church to show how its first attempt to educate and involve a woman in leadership positions failed.¹⁴ And therefore, it

¹¹ When I was studying for my Masters Degree at the University of Lancaster, My supervisor, Dr Peter Gedge, happen to have taught Mary Chinkhwita at St Martin's Teacher's College in Lancaster, England. He told me just how frustrated Mary was with her poor educational background and the demands of her synod on her. She struggled academically, financially and socially.

¹² Minutes of Moderamen of May, 1985, J.596; December, 1985 minute M.1418; April, 1986, J.622.

¹³ Minutes of the Moderamen of 1989 minute M.2905.

¹⁴ In November, 1990 I had a discussion with Dr H. Kamnkhwani of Nkhoma Synod who was then defending his D. Th thesis at the University of Stellenbosch. We talked about the involvement of women in the synod. He was of the opinion that the case of Mary Chinkhwita is a stumbling block to the advancement of women in the synod. His opinion was echoed by most Nkhoma synod ministers during my field research in 1991.

has been argued, women should not be trained theologically. It is interesting to note, however, that when Mr Kapuchi and Mr Chakwera, who were sent by the synod to study at the University of the North in South Africa, came back with different doctrines and were expelled from the synod, that did not mean the end of sending ministers to South Africa for further studies. So why should the mistakes of the synod's dealings with one woman mean the end of theological education for all women in the synod?

It is important to bear in mind that when Mary Chinkhwita was studying at Nkhoma Theological College, the General Synod of the CCAP was also just beginning to grapple with the issue of the responsibilities of women in the church.¹⁵ A Commission was set up in 1967 by the Nkhoma synod to investigate the issue. The first report of the Commission was out within a year but was rejected because the synod was not satisfied with some parts of it. The result was the setting up of another Committee to continue the investigation. They also wanted to consult a report from Reformed Ecumenical Synod on this subject.¹⁶ The fact that the new committee was given two years to complete work

¹⁵ Synod meeting minutes of 16-23/8/68, S.6; KS.409; and S.414.

¹⁶ Synodical meeting minutes of 16-23 August, 1968, S.414.

already started shows that as far as the synod was concerned this was not an urgent matter.

After two years the synod discussed the findings of the Committee and accepted the following recommendations

- a) According to the Bible, women cannot be allowed to the office of elder (overseer) because they do not have ruling power. This also applies to the ministry.
- b) It appears that the Bible is not against women becoming deacons, as deacon is not a ruling office.
- c) Although women cannot hold offices in the church, they must be urged to serve the Lord in the church through the office of all believers.¹⁷

For Mary Chinkhwita, who felt called to serving God full time in the ministry of the church, it was clear that as far as the church was concerned, the door was closed. She was to serve God just like any other woman. That was the beginning of her frustration. She was denied the opportunity to fulfil her calling just because she was a woman. According to the recommendations quoted above, the church based its decision on the nineteenth century missionary interpretation of Genesis 3:16; Numbers 30:3-12; 1 Corinthians 14:34; Ephesians 5:22; Colossians 2:18; Titus 2:5 1 Tim 2. On this basis the church prevented her and other women from fulfilling significant roles.¹⁸ According

¹⁷ Synodical meeting minutes of 28th August -4th September, 1970.7, minute S.565.

¹⁸ Mthenga ndi Muuni, July 1960, 13.

to the Nkhoma synod's theology, God gave ruling power to men, it would therefore be theologically wrong for the synod to share power with women in church leadership.

The stand of the synod was strengthened by the Christian Council's report to the synod of the Reformed Ecumenical Synod (RES) held in Australia in August 1972. Of particular interest is item twelve which reads as follows:

Concern over the Dutch Reformed Church in the Netherlands: The Orthodox Presbyterian Church in America and the Reformed churches in New Zealand state that as the Dutch Reformed Church in the Netherlands is deviating from Reformed doctrines, they should be removed (or resign themselves) from membership of the RES. (They mention the following main points):...b) They have allowed women to the ministry.¹⁹

The Nkhoma synod must have found comfort in the fact that there were others in the Reformed church who shared their conservative theology as far as the role of women in the church was concerned.

The Nkhoma synod's stand was also reflected in 1975 when questions were raised concerning women preaching at a women's revival meeting', or a women's guild, or a member of women's guild preaching at a funeral of another member of women's guild. The synod responded by stating that only ministers can preach at a revival meeting, the women's guild, and at any funeral. The issue was brought up again

¹⁹ Minutes of Synodical Committee, 5-7/4/1972 minute KS.4066.

when members of the synod started asking for female evangelists. The synod stated that while there is a need for female evangelists, the regulation against having female ministers covers female evangelists as well.²⁰

Ten years later members raised the same issues again but this time included the issue of having women elders.²¹ Again the synod turned the requests down. On the issue of women as elders, the synod's comment was that it is a good thing but the time was not yet ripe. No elaboration was made as to why it was not the right time and what would indicate that the right time had come. Since no theological reason was given, it can only be concluded that the synod was still holding on to their theological stand as stated in 1970. One also notices that there was a shift in reasons for refusing women to take leadership positions in the church. The synod started with biblical reasons but later on changed this to timing. It is also interesting to note the official response of the General Synod in 1990 to a questionnaire sent by the Coordinator of Women's Ordination Project of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches. The reason given against the

²⁰ Minutes of 14th Synodical meeting of 10-18/4/1975 minutes S.1035; S.1041; S.1042; Zolamulira Z.208.

²¹ Synod minutes of 11-13/12/1984, minutes SC.411 and 424; April 1985, S.1865 and S.1867.

ordination of women in the CCAP, was that of timing and not theology.²²

Pressure from outside continued steadily so that in 1987, the synod decided to play safe by making the following statement

Synod does not agree that women should be elected deacons. But because this matter continues to arise, the tutors at the theological college with others who may be interested, should thoroughly investigate this matter again.²³

Since this statement was made, a group of four ministers started working on the issue. By 1991 they had produced a six paged document analyzing the position of women in the Bible. This document followed the arguments that the Dutch Reformed Church of South Africa used to change their theology to allow ordaining women. However the commission did not go as far as recommending the ordination of women in the Nkhoma synod. They proposed that women be accepted as deacons. A thorough discussion of this document will be found below in chapter five.

²² The questionnaire was sent by Rev A Mbezuma Mfune dated 3rd July 1990. His full response was 'While I do not have reasons to deny women's ordination, there is no one who has so far felt the call to the Holy Ministry. In the fulness of time women will be ordained'. This response presupposes that the church advertised and no woman responded. Yet the constitution of the church makes it clear that women can not be ordained. Furthermore, the response does not state what the fulness of time imply. This thesis will therefore treat it as representing the views of the writer and not the General Synod of CCAP.

²³ Synodical meeting, April 1987, S.2060.

The fact that the synod has failed to silence requests for women's active involvement in the church for the last three decades is, however a sign of hope for women. The synod cannot say no forever when there is a wind of change in most Reformed churches outside the country in the interpretation of the Bible on women's issues. A case in point is the current change of position in the Dutch Reformed Church in South Africa. Furthermore, at the 22nd General Council of World Alliance of Reformed Churches (of which CCAP is a member) held in Seoul in 1989, it was agreed that a booklet be produced to assist all WARC member churches who do not (or maybe are considering) ordain women seriously reconsider their positions in the light of the scriptural declaration of the oneness of women and men in Christ. The booklet will be circulated to all member churches at the end of 1992. It is hoped to be used in Bible studies so that all church members and decision makers should be well informed on the issue of ordination of women to ministry.

3.3. Women in the church and culture

While the Nkhoma synod totally rejected the Chewa religious practice of having women in leadership positions on theological grounds, it took a double stand in other cultural practices that affect women. In some cases the

synod adapted some cultural practices while in others it rejected them. The product of their unintentional action was the up grading of women from inhumanising cultural practices. Thus despite the missionary failure to appreciate the Chewa culture, they introduced a liberating potential often despite themselves. The aim of this section is to examine how this was done and the motive behind each adaptation and rejection. This will be done through an examination of initiation ceremonies, bride wealth or chiongo, child marriages. polygamy, divorce and remarriage only in as far as they affected church women.

3.3.1. Initiation ceremonies

In 1903 the DRCM told its members that those wishing to join the baptismal class should not attend the initiation ceremony - chinamwali.²⁴ As noted in the previous chapter, chinamwali was regarded highly among the Chewa. The reasons for forbidding chinamwali are not stated in any minutes. However in a paper presented by Mrs Stegmann of the DRCM to a conference in 1949, she stated that there were many things in the ceremonies which were in conflict with the demands of Christianity. Emphasis was put on the fact that the initiation of a pagan girl was accompanied by much cruelty

²⁴ CC S5 15/6/11/8: Nkhoma Presbytery minutes 15-16th December, 1903.

and degradation. Therefore, in order to rescue Christian girls, the church thought of banning chinamwali.²⁵

The questions that comes to mind are: What kind of cruelty and degradation? Were cruelty and degradation the main reasons why chinamwali was banned? We shall deal with the issue of cruelty and degradation later in this chapter. For the moment we suggest that there were other factors that contributed to the banning of chinamwali. They include the association of chinamwali with Nyau;²⁶ the association of chinamwali and low attendance of girls at school;²⁷ and the belief that chinamwali was sinful because the missionaries felt that all African practices were sinful. Thus, the missionaries sought to liberate women from oppressive chinamwali practices.

Whatever the case, the banning of chinamwali made it difficult for Chewa women to join the DRCM. Without passing through chinamwali it was not possible to be accepted as a fully adult woman in Chewa society. Especially for the older women, who acted as Nankungwi or Phungu, it must have been

²⁵ Stegmann, 1949, 8.

²⁶ For a full account of the conflict between the missionaries and Nyau in Chewa country see I. and J. Linden, 1974. and M. Scoffeleers, Symbolic and Social Aspects of the Spirit Worship Among the Mang'anja Ph.D Thesis, Oxford University, 1968.

²⁷ CCA P3 3/2: Copy A. C. Murray to J. Stewart (Lovedale), 9/11/1891.

extremely difficult to give up their positions of leadership for which there was no equivalent within the Christian church.²⁸ Indeed there is evidence that chinamwali continued secretly among the Chewa women even after they joined the church.²⁹

In the 1920s it was beginning to be felt in the DRCM that merely condemning the Chewa rites and putting nothing in their place did more harm than good. This was first suggested by one of the missionaries, J.A. Retief, in his article which appeared in 1928 in Mission Periodicals. In this article Retief suggested that the church should consider starting a Christian initiation ceremony.³⁰ This was at a time when another suggestion had been made to the church along the same lines by the colonial government.³¹ At an international level, things were also changing. For example, at the International Missionary Council meeting held in Belgium in 1926, it was felt that there was a need to study the cultures of people converted to Christianity in order to differentiate between what was evil, what was not compatible with Christianity, and what could be of value in

²⁸ G. Verstraelen-Gilhuis, 1982, 85.

²⁹ Conversation I had with Mai Mwale at her house at Nkhoma on 14th August, 1991.

³⁰ BSK 1928/3:10.

³¹ Letter of Provincial Commissioner for Central Province to chief Secretary of 8/9/1928 in Vinyao file 1922-39 No. 2/23/22. National Archives, Zomba.

such cultures. Among other things, it was felt that initiation ceremonies could be changed in some places and be Christianized, although no commitment was made.³²

Retief's views on Christianizing the initiation ceremony started a debate among the missionaries of the DRCM on whether this could be acceptable or not. Some missionaries saw chiefly the negative elements in chinamwali, so that Christianizing it was out of question. They strongly felt that they did not want to compromise with sin.³³ Nevertheless the Christianization of initiation ceremonies was already in progress by some African Christian women and it had the support of both African Christian men and women. This forced the church to officially accept it in the 1930s. It then became a ruling that all the children of church members in the DRCM should attend Christian initiation rites which were called chilangizo.³⁴ What happened here confirms the Comaroff's point that when the missionaries brought Christianity to Africa there was conversion and conversation. They argue that

(the Christian religion) was seized by the Africans and sometimes refashioned, put to symbolic and practical ends previously unforeseen, and certainly unintended. Conversely, some of the ways of the Africans

³² G. Verstraelen-Gilhuis, 1982, 181.

³³ Letter of Provincial Commissioner of 8/9/1928.

³⁴ CCA S5 15/6/11/8: Annual general report, 1928; Nkhoma Presbytery minutes 1929, 4-6; 1931, 4; cf. 1936, 5; 1942, 7; 1943, 16-18.

interpolated themselves, again detached and transformed, into the habitus of the missionaries.³⁵

The importance of chinamwali in Chewa women's lives was also experienced by the Roman Catholic church in central Malawi. Linden has shown this in connection with the education of girls in Chewa areas. He says that

the ratio of boys to girls at school at Likuni, a Chipeta (Chewa) area, between 1919 and 1928 was 2:1. In areas where Ngoni influence was strong, for example Kachebere, the number of boys and girls attending school was nearly equal. This reluctance of women to enter the mission orbit of the mission stations in the principal Chewa/Man'ganja districts seems to have been correlated with the prevalence of chinamwali...Catholic missionaries in both vicariates, finding it impossible to eradicate the rites, attempted to modify them.³⁶

Linden's statement is reflected in the ruling that was passed by one of the bishops in the area who stated that

chinamwali will have to be tolerated as it is impossible to suppress it. However missionaries should recommend to their Christians that they suppress anything immodest in this ceremony.³⁷

As a result of this ruling, research began on what would be an acceptable form of a Christian chinamwali in the Catholic church. By 1939, the Catholics started such ceremonies in central Malawi.³⁸ The fact that the Livingstonia Mission was

³⁵ Jean Comaroff and John Comaroff, Of Revelation and Revolution: Christianity, Colonialism, and Consciousness in South Africa. Vol 1, Chicago: The University of Chicago, 1991, 16.

³⁶ I. and J. Linden, 1974, 168-169.

³⁷ I. and J. Linden, 1974, 169.

³⁸ For information on how the Anglicans dealt with chinamwali in their churches in central Malawi see R.G.

not confronted with a similar problem confirms that this was a purely Chewa problem.

If we compare chilangizo in the DRCM to the traditional chinamwali we find that there were both similarities and differences. The most obvious similarities were the stages of the rite: puberty, marriage and pregnancy. The major change was the replacement of the traditional instructresses-Nankungwi- with Alangizi. In the Christian circles, Alangizi were village Christian women nominated by the Christian women from each area, in conjunction with the minister and elders of that particular area and appointed by the kirk session. Since all church leaders were men, the role of choosing Alangizi was being shared with men while in the traditional set up it was done by women only. The qualities which were sought in choosing Alangizi included the following: they were to be women of authority, respected by their associates; they were supposed to have been married in church; and their home life had to be an example to those around them. Wherever possible these instructresses were chosen from the wives of African ministers and elders of the church.³⁹ They were also supposed to have been women who had given birth to children.⁴⁰

Stuart, 'Christianity and the Chewa: The Anglican Case 1885-1950'. Ph.D. thesis, University of London, 1974.

³⁹ Stegmann, 1949, 7.

⁴⁰ Nkhoma Synodical meeting of 28th-4th September, 1970, S. 566 (b). The synod recommended that it would be good

At the end of the day, when chilangizo had been introduced, Alangizi were operating under the supervision and training of the women missionaries of a particular station. The reasons for this arrangement was to make sure that elements which were incompatible with Christianity were not taught to the girls. Secondly it was because the missionaries included some new elements which were not there in the traditional initiation ceremonies which made it necessary for Alangizi to receive instructions from the women missionaries. Conversion to Christ became a point of emphasis at all initiation ceremonies. In fact the church calender included training programmes for all Alangizi in the Nkhoma synod at the church's lay training center. In this way a lasting break was made with the traditional ceremony and a Christian alternative was introduced in its place.⁴¹

As mentioned above, chilangizo had three stages which were puberty, marriage and pregnancy. The following section will examine each stage to show its distinct features in comparison to chinamwali which was described in chapter two.

and advisable when electing Instructors to find a person who himself or herself has children, in the event of the people having objections against a childless person.

⁴¹ CCA S5 15/6/11/8/: Annual General Report, 1928; Mkhoma Presbytery minutes 1929, 4-6; 1931, 4; cf. 1936, 5; 1942, 7; 1943, 16-18.

3.3.1.1 Puberty

When a child of Christian parents started menstruating the mother or Phungu (guardian) went to see the Alangizi. Two Alangizi would go to the home of the girl to give her instructions on the sanctity of the body, and the respect due to it, physical implications of puberty, behavior towards men and her elders. This was the initial instruction.

A public ceremony was organized twice or more in a year when all the girls who had received private instruction got together away from their village to be received in the circle of initiated women. This was attended by the mothers of the initiates, leading Christian women, girls who had already been initiated, and missionary women in charge of the area. This always took place during the long vacation so that school attendance was not affected.

The ceremony was mostly held in the evening in a well lit and decorated hall. All the initiates were dressed in white and seated on the mat. The ceremony was opened with a prayer and singing of hymns. This was followed by a sharing from the Bible by a woman missionary. Two Alangizi would then give the girls instructions on traditional ways of showing respect towards parents and older people, how to

treat children, how to conduct oneself towards men and general cleanliness of body, and behavior. The initiates were then welcomed and given their place in the group of women by shaking hands with all the women present in the hall. The ceremony was concluded by singing a hymn and offering a prayer.

The elements which were removed from the traditional chinamwali included reporting to the chief about initial menstruation which was accompanied by gift giving, sexual intercourse with fisi, beliefs in all taboos, brewing and drinking beer on the last day of the initiation ceremony, and Nyau dances.⁴² It was sexual intercourse with fisi, and beliefs in all taboos which the missionaries found to be cruel and degrading to the girls.

In the late 1940s the DRCM introduced another element to the girls' initiation ceremonies. Once a year they organized camps for the initiated girls. The camps were introduced to keep the girls busy between the time they were initiated and the time they got married. Most of the girls were not attending school and were waiting to get married. These camps were held outside the villages. Parents of the girls took it upon themselves to put up temporary buildings

⁴² P. Pretorius, 'An attempt at Christian Initiation in Nyasaland' in The International Review of Missions. 1950, 289.

where such camps were held, and provided food. The programme was conducted by Alangizi and the women missionaries. The programme of the camp included learning games and songs, knitting, sewing, cooking, taking care of babies, and Bible study. Lectures were also given by the missionaries and Alangizi, and nurses or doctors were invited to come and explain to the girls the functions of women's bodies.⁴³ Stegmann reports that at first women were horrified at the thought that their young girls were taught about the functioning of the body and the sex organs. However with the passing of time, this became the most popular lecture, and attracted the girls to go to the camps.⁴⁴

The reaction of the mothers should be understood in terms of differences in teaching methods in sex education between the traditional teachers and the missionary women. In the traditional initiation ceremonies the girls were instructed in tribal beliefs norms and morals. This was mainly done through songs that had associated moral referents and secret meanings, and some secret terms. Some of the meanings were explained others were not and the initiates had to find the meanings for themselves later in life. In the case of the missionary teaching everything was made very explicit to the discomfort of the mothers.

⁴³ P. Pretorius, 1950, 290.

⁴⁴ Stegmann, 1949, 10.

The Nkhoma synod's stand on initiation ceremonies received support from the Malawi Congress Party at its 1972 annual convention when 'the delegates passed a resolution inter alia calling for the revival of some positive aspects of traditional institutions and initiation rites through which young people were taught good behavior and prepared for adult life.'⁴⁵ The church and party differed on what were positive aspects of the traditional initiation ceremony. For example, the nyau dance at the initiation ceremony was upheld by the party while the church banned it.

Chilangizo still goes on and has the full backing of the church. In an independent Malawi which has been urbanized and detribalized, it is no longer easy to organize chilangizo. This is particularly true for the urban area. However, some Chewa parents of the Nkhoma synod, like in the case of the researcher, still send their children to their villages for chilangizo. Instead of spending time outside the village, the teaching is now done in a secluded house within the village. The girls go in on Thursdays during the school holidays and come out on Sundays. The teachings are now carried out in the church building. It is no longer a requirement that a woman missionary be present as there are

⁴⁵ Malawi Congress Party Annual Convention Resolutions 1965-1983: 1972- Zomba paragraph (b) p. 15. A Malawi Congress Party Publication.

very few of them now. On a Sunday all the initiated girls take a special place in the church and are welcomed by the whole congregation by shaking of hands after the service. There is no special colour of clothing for the closing session.

3.2.1.2 Marriage

When the banns were called, it was the duty of the Mlangizi to visit the girl at her parent's home and prepare her for marriage. The only people who were allowed to be present were the initiate's mother and the Nkhoswe. During this ceremony, teaching was given on the purpose of marriage as the procreation of children, the care of husband and home, and the recognition of pregnancy.

In the 1970s the CCAP, Blantyre synod saw the rise of a new form of chilangizo for prospective brides which was called the Kitchen Party. Within a short period this spread to all churches in the urban areas, other denominations, as well as non Christians. In the Nkhoma synod, it was unofficially adapted as a town version of chilangizo for prospective brides rather than the puberty initiation ceremony as suggested by Kamlongera in one of his papers.⁴⁶

⁴⁶ C.F. Kamlongera, 'Denigration of a culture or cultural change in Malawi: The Kitchen Party'. Arts Seminar 1986/87 paper No. 2, Department of Fine and Performing Arts, Chancellor Collage, Zomba, University of Malawi.

Within a decade its popularity among town people made the churches treat it with suspicion as it had a mixture of western influence, traditional culture and Christian teachings. Kamlongera reported that 'the Roman Catholic Secretariat in Malawi asked its members not to hold Kitchen Parties until their role in society and their relationship to Christian belief had been sorted out.'⁴⁷

The major difference between the Kitchen Party and chilangizo for prospective brides was in organization. Kitchen Party had an organizing committee that dealt with the logistics of venue, collecting donations, sending out invitations and selecting a mistress of the ceremony. The ceremony was held on a Sunday afternoon a week before the wedding. Within the Kitchen Party there were two ceremonies. The first was attended by a large group and the second one was held later in the evening attended by a few people and it centered around sex education. We shall come back to the Kitchen Party in chapter five as we examine its problems for Christian women in the Nkhoma synod.

When the initiate fell pregnant, she informed her mother who in turn informed Mlangizi. At this stage the instruction included teaching on the implications of pregnancy such as self control and attendance of the Ante-

⁴⁷ C. F. Kamlongera, 1986/87, 8.

Natal Clinic. This has basically remained unchanged in the Nkhoma synod.

3.3.2 Evaluation

Chilangizo has become an integral part of the life of the church to the present day. Each annual general report of the synod includes a report on chilangizo. All reports show that chilangizo has been successful in the Nkhoma synod. Its major contribution has been getting rid of cultural taboos associated with menstrual blood and sex that enslave its observers. The question is 'Why has chilangizo been so successful in the Nkhoma synod?' It can be suggested that the seriousness with which the church has taken chilangizo has contributed to its success. According to Zolamulira Za Sinodi Wa Nkhoma, (Rules and Regulations of Nkhoma Synod) published in 1970, one notices that the whole structure of chilangizo has been systematically laid down. The church also came up with a book which was published to be used by Alangizi. Secondly, according to the aims stipulated, by introducing chilangizo, the church hopes to develop self awareness and moral independence in girls and women. They also hope to win girls and women to Christ since it is open to non-members of the church as well. The fact that this is a new form of women's initiation, which Pretorius has described as a combination of the traditional and modern elements, makes chilangizo very attractive even to non-

Christian parents so that the church had to open it up to include non Christian girls.⁴⁸ Thus besides fulfilling a moral obligation, it is also used as an evangelism programme with considerable success.

Church authority has also been used to make chilangizo work. For example, if a Christian child attends chinamwali, there is a penalty of eighteen months suspension from the sacraments for the parents.⁴⁹ Secondly, when a couple wants to get married in church, the church asks for a chilangizo certificate from the girl before agreeing to announce the banns. Under such circumstances, it becomes imperative for girls in the Nkhoma synod to attend chilangizo.

Most importantly, chilangizo has succeeded because women themselves wanted it. From the very beginning women started practicing it without the knowledge of the church. To them it was an important aspect of culture which they felt could not be left out of being a Chewa Christian woman. Among other factors, it was the African women's insistence that made the missionaries change their stand on women's initiation ceremony. The end result was compromise.

⁴⁸ J.L. Pretorius, 1973, 374.

⁴⁹ Zolamulira Za Presbyterio wa Nkhoma DRCM Press, Nkhoma, 1932, 23.

Yet, there are some important issues that were not taken into account when deciding on chilangizo teaching. 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 self control during pregnancy, were not necessarily liberating for a woman.

Besides chinamwali, the DRCM forbade bride wealth, child marriages, polygamy, beer making and drinking, and divorce (except in the case of unchastity). All these issues had positive and negative implications for African women.

3.3.3 Bride wealth

The issue of bride wealth was discussed in the DRCM because of the presence of the patrilineal Ngoni among the Chewa of central Malawi. The Ngoni were found among the Chewa in increasing numbers because the establishment of mission stations and the colonial government saw the beginning of detribalization of Malawi. The church's stand against bride wealth was declared at a meeting of the Mission Council in 1925.⁵⁰ There was much opposition to this

⁵⁰ CCA S5/15/6//1/4/: Annual general report, 1925, 18.

ruling from the Ngoni church members because payment of bride wealth assured the Ngoni men that children born in marriage belong to their father's lineage. Furthermore, the payment of bride wealth for the Ngoni was one way of sealing a marriage - a form of marriage certificate. Shorter has explained the value of bride wealth in Africa, in the following way

(Bride wealth's) original character was as a process of real or symbolic gift exchange, legalizing a marriage, legitimating the children of a union, indemnifying the bride's family, stabilizing the marriage to a limited extent, and propitiating the spirits. Above all, it had the function of giving cohesion to the extended family.⁵¹

The Chewa had chiongo which was also banned by the church. As stated in chapter two, chiongo are small gifts of appreciation given to the family of the prospective wife by the prospective husband. Throughout the missionary period members continued to query the action taken by the church. An example is one of the questions to the editor of Mthenqa in which a church member asked what is wrong with chiongo. The response given could be taken as an explanation of the stand taken by the church on both chiongo and bride wealth.

Originally no amount of money was mentioned. The man paid according to what he had and it was received with thanksgiving. However now the parents of the girl are asking for a specific sum of money. This is like selling. Therefore, since this has been abused, the church has said no.⁵²

⁵¹ A. Shorter, African Culture and the Christian Church. London: Chapman, 1973, 71.

⁵² Mtenga Vol. 39, December, No. 12, 1957, 12.

The fact that between 1889 and 1927 bride wealth does not appear as an issue of discussion in the DRCM might be because the missionaries acknowledged the positive side of bride wealth as outlined by Shorter. Therefore the church was willing to accept it as part of the traditional Ngoni marriage. It could also be because lack of bride wealth threatened the position of the man in a family which the missionary favoured unlike the Chewa system which they opposed. It was a church ruling that in a Christian family, it is a man who has complete control of the home as well as children. Also stipulated was that the uncles of the children should not have a say in the upbringing of the children.⁵³ In this way the missionaries showed that the matrilineal system of marriage was against the will of God as found in the Bible.

Bride wealth was abused by the parents of prospective brides when the colonial government introduced hut tax. Previously bride wealth was paid in a form of cattle. The introduction of a money economy brought an increase in the amount of bride wealth. The higher the education of the girl the more the money demanded by her parents. This led to delays in marriages because most men could not afford the prohibitive bride wealth. For those who managed to raise the

53 Nkhoma Presbytery minutes 1928, 18.

money with the help of their relatives, it led to the husband and the relative treating the wife as chattel. Thus the church opposed the degradation of women that was accompanied by bride wealth.

In 1962 the church changed its stand about chiongo and bride wealth, permitting members to practise both. This still applies up to the present.⁵⁴ No reason was given as to why the church changed its stand. It can only be assumed that the male members of the church, who also happened to be in control of church administration and who benefitted from the existence of bride wealth and chiongo, exerted enough pressure to make the church change. If the church stopped bride wealth because it was degrading women, the question to be asked is whether bride wealth stopped degrading women. Only women have an answer to that question as they are on the receiving end. If the answer is no, then one can conclude that the church did not have women in mind when they first banned bride wealth or when they decided to reintroduce it.

3.3.4 Child marriages

From the very beginning the DRCM opposed child marriages. The position of the church was that the minimum

⁵⁴ Zolamulira, 1970, 120, minute Z.468.

age limit for the marriage of boys and girls be puberty or about fifteen years.⁵⁵ No reason was given as to why such a ruling was necessary. This thesis suggests that the missionaries did not approve Chewa child marriages as the children involved were too young to understand the implications of their decision. Another reason was that child marriage prevented girls attaining education. A third possible reason could be that the missionaries wanted to be in line with age requirements for marriage in their home countries.

The repeated appearance of this issue in the minutes of the Mission Council meetings shows its seriousness. By 1903 the church decided that any man who married a girl who had not reached puberty should not be allowed to join the baptismal classes.⁵⁶ There was a further extension of this ruling in 1907 which stated that Christians should not give their sisters and children in marriage before they reached puberty.⁵⁷ The following year saw yet another addition which stated that Christians should not allow their children to be betrothed before puberty.⁵⁸ In 1930 the church revised its

⁵⁵ DRCM Executive of 24-25 October, 1898.

⁵⁶ Zolamulira, 1970, 124, minute Z.497 and minutes of Council of Congregations 15-16 December, 1903.

⁵⁷ Zolamulira, 1970, 124, minute Z.476 and minutes of the Council of Congregations of 30th April, 1907.

⁵⁸ S5/15/6/1/4: minutes of the Council of Congregation 1908, 17. This minute does not appear in Zolamulira of 1970.

ruling on a suitable age for marriage by making it twenty one for men and eighteen for women. This met strong resistance from church members so that at the 1931 meeting the ruling had to be revised to state that the age of the man be nineteen and the woman be seventeen.⁵⁹ A penalty of eighteen months suspension from taking sacraments was imposed on any Christian who allowed his or her child to marry before the stated age. The Mission Council meetings that followed after this decision considered a string of letters protesting against the ruling.

When the missionaries from different denominations met the Registrar General to frame a law related to African marriages on 6th November 1945, it had the support of all the missionary bodies in the then Nyasaland, except the Roman Catholic. Clause 9 stated that 'no marriage shall be celebrated under the ordinance where the woman to be married has not passed the age of puberty.' The object of this clause was to prevent child marriages.⁶⁰

3.3.4.1 Evaluation

⁵⁹ S5/15/6/1/4: Church minutes of Nkhoma 1931, 18

⁶⁰ S5/15/6/1/4: Minutes of the meeting of the Committee appointed to consider all questions affecting native marriages and to make recommendations concerning legislation on the subject, held in Council Chamber on 6th November, 1945.

Throughout the colonial era, the DRCM maintained their rigid stand on child marriages. However the increasing number of disciplinary cases on this issue forced the Executive Committee to change the age limits for marriage to nineteen for men and sixteen for women.⁶¹ To this extent one can say that the church has constantly protected women. But one can also look at it as a struggle between Western culture and the traditional Malawian culture rather than Christianity against traditional culture. The protest of church members can be understood if one bears in mind the fact that not many girls were going to school despite the introduction of a Christian initiation ceremony. Therefore, there was a parental fear that if daughters waited too long to get married after reaching puberty, the chances were very high that the girls would get pregnant. Further, by not getting married early, the girls were a burden on their parents. This was especially so because there was another ruling in the church which said that if a girl becomes pregnant or aborts, both the girl and her parents would be suspended from the sacraments for a period of eighteen months.⁶² This ruling still stands to the present.

3.3.5 Polygamy

⁶¹ Zolamulira, 1970, 123, minute Z.496.

⁶² S5/15/6/1/4: Church minutes of Nkhoma 1920, 18.

The issue of whether polygamists should be admitted to the baptismal class in the DRCM was discussed in the early days of the mission but no resolution was reached.⁶³ This meant, however that as long as there was no decision, polygamists could not become baptized members of the church. An exception was made for the first wife of a polygamist. The Mission Council had no problem in accepting her into the baptismal class.⁶⁴ It was only after consultations with the Livingstonia Mission in northern Malawi that the Council made a ruling in 1903 that a polygamous man should not be part of the baptismal class.⁶⁵ He was to be accepted on condition that he had divorced all his other wives except the first one. The other divorced women would also be accepted in the church as single parents. Consultation with Livingstonia was due to the fact that for a while the two missions held mission council meetings together. Moreover Livingstonia had more experience in dealing with polygamy issues because they were based in an area that practiced polygamy more than amongst the Chewa. Furthermore, Livingstonia had also been in the mission field much longer than the DRCM.

⁶³ This was one of the issues discussed at the first meeting of the Executive Council of the DRCM held on 24-25 October, 1898.

⁶⁴ S5/15/6/1/1: 1st meeting of the Executive Council.

⁶⁵ S5/15/6/1/1: meeting of the Executive Council...15-16 December, 1903.

Within a period of two years, the DRCM saw the need to extend the ruling to the effect that Christians should not give their daughters and sisters in marriage to a polygamous man.⁶⁶ After this date, the Executive Council dealt with an increase in cases of polygamy, adultery, and divorce at its meetings. There were a number of reasons for this. Firstly, the patriarchal Ngoni who came to live among the Chewa in the 1870s practiced polygamy as part of their traditional marriage pattern. As has been mentioned already in chapter one, intermarriages took place between some Chewa women and Ngoni men, between slave women and Chewa men. Secondly, some Chewa also practiced polygamy especially if the first wife could not have children. The observance of many taboos among couples also encouraged polygamy. Thirdly, and perhaps the strongest contributor, was the introduction of hut tax by the colonial government, for many women were deserted by their husbands who went to look for jobs at the mines in neighboring countries in order to raise money. Some of the men never came back home. They either died or got married to other women from the countries to which they went. Deserted women suffered economically. Linden, writing about the Roman Catholic in central Malawi, stated that

At Kasina mission in 1930, it was calculated that forty-six out of 170 heads of Catholic families were absent from their villages, working; five had been away for several years and showed no signs of life. In the eighteen villages around Likuni mission, forty-eight

⁶⁶ Zolamulira, 1932.17; Zolamulira, 1970.121, minutes Z.475.

heads of families were away, and thirty-six of these dissolved their marriage and remarried. From a total of sixty-six men away from these eighteen villages, only forty-six pounds was sent back each year.⁶⁷

Thus deserted women had to bear a heavy economic burden. They became responsible on their own for the house and children, the growing of crops using primitive methods, and the paying of tax. A shortage of male and economic hardships on deserted women resulted in the increase of polygamy even among Chewas. Many women became second or third wives because of need and poverty. Other women resorted to brewing beer and distilling spirits so that they could sell and raise money for themselves and their children. In some cases the beer was given to people who were invited to come and help prepare gardens. It was a payment for services rendered. Brewing of beer as well as drinking was forbidden by the church.⁶⁸ By brewing beer, women risked being suspended from the church for eighteen months.

In 1912 the colonial government passed a law forbidding polygamy within Christian marriages between Africans.⁶⁹ Due to the seriousness of the problem of deserted women, the

⁶⁷ I. and J. Linden, 1974, 172.

⁶⁸ M.W. Retief, William Murray of Nyasaland. The Lovendale Press, 1959, 159.

⁶⁹ For more information on the types of marriages which were accepted in the colonial era in Nyasaland, see I. and J. Linden, 171.

DRCM were forced to declare its stand on the issue. By 1914 the DRCM stated that if a Christian went away from home for a period of three years without contacting his wife, and if the wife went to court to obtain divorce, the church would accept this.⁷⁰ This is still the stand of the church to the present. The colonial government reduced the years of desertion to two.⁷¹ The Catholic church refused to grant its members divorce under any circumstances. There were two responses to this from their members. The first group was that of women who remained in the church and accepted the hardships. The second was that of women who left the church and attached themselves to polygamous marriages. The choice was a hard one for the women involved as both cases involved suffering.

As for the DRCM, Retief tells a story which shows how women in a polygamous marriage suffered as a result of being divorced by a man who had become a Christian. He tells about a man called Tsilizani whose name was changed to David when he became a Christian. When he was converted to Christianity, he had to divorce and send away his second wife and her children whom he loved very much. After he was baptized, a year later there was famine. Fortunately he had a good harvest but he knew that his former second wife and

⁷⁰ Zolamulira, 1939, 18 and minutes of the Executive Council, 1914.

⁷¹ I. and J. Linden, 1974, 170

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 should bring food to him regularly and he would deliver it to her. The plan worked very well.⁷²

3.3.5.1 Evaluation

The story cited is about a woman who was fortunate enough to be supported economically for one season although she was divorced according to the demands made by the church. Yet there were many women who were not as fortunate as she was. Seeing that the plan devised by Murray worked well for this particular woman, one would assume that the church was to take it upon itself to help deserted women in order to avert the suffering of the Christian women concerned. As observed from the on going discussion, deserted women had to strip themselves of their dignity for the sake of getting something to eat for themselves as well as their children.

In this regard, Holmes of the Zambezi Mission suggested four ways of combating the problem of polygamy: setting up Christian homes, stopping migratory labour, providing employment for women, and a Government law forbidding

⁷² M.W. Retief, 1959, 49.

polygamy to all African.⁷³ Holmes' ideas sound very good but they did not take into account other factors which were prevalent at that time. For instance, setting up a Christian home without proper employment which provided adequate money for themselves and for the payment of hut tax was not a practical solution. Secondly, stopping migratory labour could have worked only if the country had set up industries in order to employ Africans in great numbers and help them earn honest money. Thirdly, the employment of women could have worked only if the women had some form of education and training in useful skills that would make them marketable in a country which had no industries. Lastly, the government could not impose a Christian law forbidding polygamy as if the whole country was Christian. That is why the traditional marriage ordinance still allows polygamy.

A more plausible plan is the one proposed by the Blantyre women missionaries in 1951. They proposed establishing a joint center for deserted women to which all missionaries could send deserted wives to acquire six months training in Bible study, Christian home making, training of children, hygiene, sewing, knitting, and other crafts by which a living might be earned, as well as cooking, and gardening for provision of food. The idea being that, as

⁷³ L.M. Holmes, 'How to Combat Temptation to Gross Sins' a paper presented at the first Women Missionary Conference, 1949, 11.

well as giving the women training in order to learn some crafts which would make them economically independent, they might also learn what a good home should be like. It was hoped that after training some women would return to their villages to earn a living by some craft which they had learnt. Other women might go forward for midwifery training, yet others as nurses, house servants, or cooks in European homes.⁷⁴

Although the training plan was for basic skills, it can be commended as a good plan in that it aimed at making deserted women independent. However the plan did not materialize because other missionaries to whom the plan was presented rejected it. Fear of the oppressing husband took the upper hand at the expense of liberating the deserted woman. In the end it was resolved that each mission should have its own programme to cater for deserted women. It can be suggested that one of the reasons why the proposal was rejected was because the victims were not consulted. African women would not choose to reject freedom and maintain a marriage which did not exist in practice.

⁷⁴ The proposal was submitted by women missionaries from Blantyre Synod at the first General Mission Women's Conference which was held at the same time with the 6th General Mission Conference. The proposal is on page 26 of the women's report.

The problem of deserted women still exists in Malawi. According to official reports 28.8% of all families are one-parent in Malawi. However according to research conducted by Naomi Ngwira, the ratio is as high as 60% in some areas.⁷⁵ Although the area of research is different, it still raises issues for the Nkhoma synod. The figures show that the church still has a problem on their hands concerning what to do about deserted women.

3.3.5.2. Widowhood and remarriage

In the event of the death of a husband, the Nkhoma synod ruled that the widow should not be in isolation for a long period as was the normal traditional practice. This ruling seems to be to the advantage of women. However the synod made the ruling not because it had women as a special category in mind but because as Christians they missed group worship, and the chances were high that they would backslide. The church feared losing members.⁷⁶

⁷⁵ Ngwira's research was done in Zomba at Jali. She argues that the official rate is low because of the way the government has defined female headed households and also because some women claim dependence on men even though they are single mothers. The results are found in Ngwira, N., 'Women and Development in Malawi: Issues, Problems and Priorities for Research' A paper in a report of the training workshop on Research methods and Techniques for female researchers at Chancellor College, Zomba, 1988.

⁵⁶ Zolamulira. 1970, 140 and Executive Council minutes of 1934.

Nevertheless, there were other rulings in this connection that were made with the protection of women in mind. The first example was the ruling that Christians should not demean or degrade widows and children because of property. In the same ruling, all Christians were asked to write wills.⁷⁷ There are difficulties in the implementation of this ruling because of the high illiteracy rate in Malawi. The second example of protection for women was the ruling that forbade a forced marriage of a widow to a relation of the deceased. At the same time, the synod also accepted marriage between a widow and a relation of the deceased if he was single and if the widow had agreed to marry him.⁷⁸ Both rulings were favourable to women because they gave them freedom of choice.

3.4 Conclusion

This chapter has shown that Christianity came to central Malawi as a mixed blessing for African women. The Bible was used to deny women their full humanity which they hoped to realize in the church. Passages from the Bible were used to silence women from protesting against sexism in the church. When the synod denied leadership roles in the church

⁷⁷ Zolamulira. 1970, 140, and minutes of the Executive Council of 1928 and 1941.

⁷⁸ S5/15/6/1/13: (a) Synodical Committee, August, 1976 minute K.S. 6043; 15-22nd April, 1977, minute S.1298.

to women, what they were saying to them is that they were not of the right gender to be used by God in that capacity. However, the fact that the issue of women's involvement in the church was now and again brought up is an indication that church members were aware that things were not right, that the church was blocking the feminine voice of God reaching them. Unfortunately the records do not indicate as to whether the requests came from men or women.

It is evident that the synod needs to change its theology of women's involvement in the church in order to avoid further disasters like the case of Mary Chinkhwita. Her case should be viewed as an example of a clash between a biblically conservative sexist fundamentalism and a cry for the recognition of women's humanity in church leadership. Furthermore it is not fair that the problems that the synod faced with one woman should be used to prevent all women from having theological training. It is also unfortunate that no one can attend theological training unless sent by the church. As long as the synod maintains a negative attitude towards women, no other women from Nkhoma synod will receive theological training.

Christianity promised an elevation of personal dignity by eliminating oppressive elements in the traditional initiation ceremonies, bride wealth, child marriages and widowhood rites. Yet it never brought about the fullest

enjoyment of this promise. The Nkhoma synod has elevated the Christian female initiation ceremony to a level that makes one who has gone through it feel a complete Chewa Christian woman. However the biblical passages used makes one who is analytical feel oppressed in that they emphasize that a woman was created for the enjoyment of man. A much more critical reading of these Scriptures is now required.

The fact that the synod has reintroduced bride wealth and chiongo makes one question whether the plight of women was considered when making these decisions. It is a good thing that the church has persistently banned polygamy. However nothing has been done to elevate the suffering of those women who have been deserted. It is important to know the reasons which the church has used against child marriages before we assume that it was for the protection of women. It is also important to know whether Western Christianity and culture is responsible for the positive elements that the church has adopted against African culture to the advantage of women.

One feature that has been found lacking in the Nkhoma synod are the viewpoints of women themselves. All the decisions are made for them even in issues that affect their relationship with God. Does this reflect the Nkhoma synod's theology of women's participation in the church? One wonders whether women actually think about their fate in the synod.

It remains to be seen in the next chapter how women in the Nkhoma synod have tried to make meaning out of their situation within the strict rules of the synod.

CHAPTER 4

'A CHURCH IN A CHURCH'? CHIGWIRIZANO CHA AMAI ACHIKRISTU

4.1 Introduction

In the previous chapter we have shown that women have been barred from taking positions of leadership in the Nkhoma synod by the policies of the synod, even though some members of the church have persistently queried this. The aim of this chapter is to show that 'to many a faithful church woman Chigwirizano is a form of self-expression, an opportunity to do something, but even more to be somebody. Chigwirizano gives to women a feeling of belonging within a male dominated church'... In many ways it also provides scope for leadership talent to develop among women...¹ At the same time Chigwirizano is regarded with suspicion by the synod which feels that it should be rigidly controlled for fear that it might turn out to be 'a church within a church'. This is reflected in the introduction of Mkhlapakati a male representative at all Chigwirizano meetings. Chigwirizano has grown from strength to strength in its membership and activity in the church. The synod has also curbed its power at all levels in different ways. Chigwirizano suffers from clericalism which has prevented from being a mouth-piece for women in the church. All these

¹ G. Verstraelen-Gilhuis, 1982, 253, and C.M Pauw, 1980, 296.

factors will be reflected as we examine the origins of Chigwirizano, organizational developments, and the relationship between Chigwirizano and the synod.

4.2 Origins of Chigwirizano

Chigwirizano cha Amai a Chikristu is an organization of Christian Women who are united in their service for the Lord.² Unity is emphasized as expressed in a proverb which says it is easy to break one stick but not a bundle of sticks. Chigwirizano strongly believes that there is power in united efforts. The idea of women uniting in the service of the Lord is based on Exodus 35:25-26. When the children of Israel were making a Tent for the Lord, the women got together and used their skills to serve the Lord. It should be borne in mind here that in the quoted verses, the women mentioned were a special group with God-given artistic abilities.³ Membership in Chigwirizano is open to all Christian women in the synod who take part in Holy Communion and want to serve God. Secondly, the activities of Chigwirizano are not limited to artistic ones as stated in the quoted verses. Chigwirizano recognizes that all women who are in Christ form one body. Each member has a different

² Malongosoledwe ndi Zopangana Za Chigwirizano Cha Amayi Achikristu. Nkhoma: Nkhoma Synod of the church of Central Africa, Presbyterian, 1989, 1.

³ D. Guthrie et al, ed. New Bible Commentary. Liecester: Inter-Vasity Press, 1970, 139.

gift (Romans 12 4-8) and is commended to use whatever gift she has received to serve others, faithfully administering God's grace in its various forms. (1 Peter 4:10). Therefore in Chigwirizano we find committed Christian women who want to identify their gifts and use them to the full as they work with other women to the glory of God.

Chigwirizano was began in the DRCM towards the end of 1939 when the mission was celebrating its fiftieth anniversary. The missionary women decided that 'it would be a fitting gesture to commemorate this great and happy event by starting an organization for women by women in order to link together all earnest Christian women in greater Christian effort.'⁴ The activities of the women included: spreading the Gospel, practicing hospitality, and visiting the sick, the bereaved, the elderly, backsliders and weak Christians. The proposal requesting synod to approve officially the formation of Chigwirizano was submitted by Mrs B. B. Eybers and Mrs J. A. Retief. Synod accepted the proposal in 1939. However it was not until 1940 that the organization actually started.⁵

⁴ Minutes of the 1st Conference of women members of the various Missions of the Consultative Board of Federated Missions held at Nkhoma 1949, 29.

⁵ Mthenqa, January-February, 1940.

In 1940 Chigwirizano was established with five branches. Mchinji had 28 members; Dzenza, 21 members; Malingunde, 14 members; Kongwe, 9 members; and Nkhoma, 31 members. The groups were organized by the wives of the European missionaries who headed the stations mentioned. It should be noted that it was possible for the European women to find a group of matured African women to start the Union in 1940 because the work of the earlier missionary women had borne fruit. As early as 1890 Mrs Elizabeth Murray was visiting African women in their homes and witnessing to them about the love of Jesus. Mrs Murray taught mothers how to take good care of their children and how to prepare healthy food. She treated the sick. Most of all she started weekly prayer meetings for those who became Christians. At these meetings she taught African mothers how to lead a Christian life and free themselves from traditional practices that are against the Word of God. Retief comments that 'judging by results, it must be admitted that this work amongst women was an outstanding success, and Mrs Murray was its heart and soul.'⁶

The work of Mrs Murray was further strengthened by the coming of Martha Murray in 1893 who started work among young girls and helped them to become Christians. Her first hostel for young girls was established at Mvera. When her work

⁶ M. W. Retief, 1959, 80.

became successful, girls' hostels were opened at the majority of the missions. By the time the mission was celebrating its jubilee, the young girls from the hostels had grown into mothers and grandmothers and responsible Christians. This is confirmed by Erida Naphiri's letter in 1937 in which she said that Christian women from Nkhoma went to villages teaching other women Mlozo (Bible study) and home care as well as teaching Sunday School. She was commending the idea of Christian women working together because therein lay their strength.⁷

Rute Nabanda was another African woman who had a vision of women ministering among women for Christ. She saw that in Christ there is a certain type of freedom which the women themselves were not utilizing. Her prayer was that

God should open the mouths of women who can stand among other women without feeling shy just like what the Samaritan woman did. She called men, women and children to Christ as stated in John 4:39-42. These are happy times. Previously our mouths were shut, but the grace of Jesus Christ is upon us.⁸

Such enthusiasm among women to work for Christ was further encouraged by the establishment of the Women's Day of Prayer. It is not clear as to when this was established in Malawi. However it might have started as early as 1932 at Nkhoma, and was introduced by Mrs W.H. Murray. She had

⁷ Mthenga, May-June, 1937, 25.

⁸ Mthenga, July-August, 1937, 20.

received an English programme from the Dutch Reformed Church in South Africa which she translated into Chichewa and distributed to all congregations in the Nkhoma synod.⁹ Besides meeting together once every year for prayers, in between some women were sent out to witness for Christ and teach others in adult literacy classes.¹⁰ Such meetings were held, however, at a few stations and on a very small scale before Chigwirizano was officially launched in 1940. Nevertheless, it was through them that African women got the idea of the importance of women coming together to serve God and other people.

⁹ Tsiku Lopemphera M'dziko Lonse Lapansi, A pamphlet printed by Nkhoma Press. Women's day of prayer was started in the United States in 1887 by Presbyterian women. Their aim was that on this day women should examine themselves in the light of Christ and confess their sins. Within a short time the idea was spread to other denominations and other countries. An International Committee was formed in 1967 and the aims too became global. The day of meetings is the first Friday in the month of March. Through this day women confirm their faith in Jesus Christ, they share their hopes and fears, joys and sadness, blessings and lacking; They are encouraged to realize that they are part of a large world and therefore should share in the burdens of other people through prayer, to know their talents and use them to help others.

In the Nkhoma Synod, after Mrs W.H.Murray left, the work of organizing the Women's day of prayer continued through Mrs Stegmann. Nkhoma Synod women were later joined by women from other denominations such as Zambezi Mission, South African General Mission, C.C.A.P.Blantyre, Evangelical Churches and Church of Christ. Today, the meetings are under the Christian Council of Malawi.

¹⁰ Mthenga, March-April, 1939, 19.

Although the women missionaries suggested the formation of Chigwirizano, the African women also felt that they were ready for such a Union. This is reflected in the letter that was written by mission educated African women to the Union of Christian women of Dutch Reformed Church (VSB) in Wellington in South Africa to thank the women missionaries for starting women's work in Nkhoma synod. They regarded themselves as the fruit of South African Christian women. They declared that the time was ripe for them too to start bearing fruit. Thus the birth of Chigwirizano in the Nkhoma synod was looked upon by African women as a sign that the women had reached a stage of maturity in their Christian faith to work in a more organized manner and on a larger scale. The new baby, Chigwirizano, was to be brought up well to the advantage of the church, serving it in love.¹¹

The joy that filled African women at the birth of Chigwirizano is reflected in the following letters that appeared in Mthenga magazines of 1940

Thank you Presbytery for allowing Chigwirizano to start. We already see the advantages of having Chigwirizano such as revival meetings among women, knowing one another as we discuss the Word of God and have fellowship, raising transport money for the women who are going to introduce Chigwirizano in other villages. What I like most is that women too have got a chance to help others even though we ourselves are not well off. I am strengthened by John 9:4 where Jesus said that we must do God's work while it is still day for night is coming when no one can work. Now that we

¹¹ Mthenga, November -December, 1939, 20-21.

have been sent to do God's work, even though we are women, we can do it.¹²

We have realized in a new way that women are not useless. We are friends of the Lord of Lords, we have found special respect in Christianity...We rejoice on hearing that Presbytery has accepted women to start Chigwirizano. Thank you. Acts 2:17 says In the last days, God says I will pour out my Spirit on all the people. Your sons and Daughters will prophesy...'Who are Daughters? Are we not the ones?'¹³

It becomes clear then that to African women, the introduction of Chigwirizano gave them a status in the church which they did not have before. The women saw themselves as co-workers with the Lord Jesus. That knowledge gave them the realization that Christianity was offering them a special kind of respect. Secondly, Chigwirizano strengthened their image as persons in the eyes of God. The idea of being a daughter of God brought with it a special claim that they too had received the Spirit of God which was poured on everyone. It brought them the confidence that as women they could do God's work. This implies that before then there was a feeling that God's work could only be done by men. It also made women start looking at Scripture in a new way and see themselves among those who are sent by God. They started using verses from the Bible to understand themselves in a new way, thereby empowering themselves with the Word of God.

¹² Letter from Lida Naphiri from Mchinji, Mthenga, March-April 1940, 14.

¹³ Letter from M. B. Lebetina Chimsale, Kampango Nsadzu, Mthenga, July-August, 1940, 14.

4.3 Organizational development of Chigwirizano

4.3.1 Leadership

Chigwirizano started with the establishment of branches in congregations and outstations. Each group had to form a Committee consisting of a Mtsogoleri (leader), secretary and treasurer. The selection of leaders was based on whether persons had the talent of leadership and whether they could read and write in Chichewa. There was also a committee of Chigwirizano at Presbytery level which consisted of all the wives of ministers and Atsogoleri of that Presbytery. Their role was to organize revival meetings of Chigwirizano once a year. At synodical level, a Central Executive Committee was formed, with members elected to serve for a period of three years. The first Executive committee was elected in 1941 and consisted of the following office bearers: Leader, Mrs J. Eybers; Vice leader, Sara Nabanda from Nkhoma; Secretary, Mrs A. Rens; Vice secretary, Lida Naphiri from Mchinji; Treasurer, Mrs E. Van Der Colff; Vice Treasurer, Enesi Mateyu, Member, Erida Nakhoma from Malembo. In 1943 Mrs J Steenkamp was co-opted into the Executive committee to fill the vacancy created by the absence of Mrs J. Eybers.

The fact that all leading positions were taken by missionaries, and that African women took secondary positions was not strange at the time, for it reflected the

fact that missionaries were in control of everything. Secondly, there is a difference in the way the women are designated. Unlike the Europeans, African names do not include their marriage status because that is part of Chewa culture where a woman is always known by her maiden clan name. An exception was Enesi Mateyu because she was married to a minister and therefore, according to the Nkhoma synod, had to be known by her husband's name.

The second general assembly of Chigwirizano was held from 14th-17th July, 1944. It was attended by 130 members. A new Executive Committee was elected. Mrs A. Rens became Leader, Enesi Naphungwako from Chikoma was the vice-leader. Mrs E. V. D. Colff was the Secretary and Birisika Nabanda from Malingunde was the vice-secretary. Mrs L. Hugo was the treasurer and Mtendere Nangodo from Nkhoma was the vice-treasurer. Erida Nankhoma from Malembo served a second term as member. In 1946 two new members joined the Executive Committee. These were Mrs L. Benadi and Mrs D. Labuschagne.

The women missionary leadership of the Executive changed in 1959 when Aniya Nabanda was elected as the first Malawian leader.¹⁴ She was a matron at Mlanda girls hostel. Her committee included Mrs L. Hugo, Mrs L. Minnaar, Mrs R.

¹⁴ Mthenqa ndi Muuni, February, 1960. In this magazine she is called Mai Aniya Naphiri but in the minutes of Chigwirizano she is persistently called Mai Aniya Nabanda.

Steytler, Meri Naphiri, Zeresi Natembo, Flori Najere and Enara Naphiri. The second Malawian leader was Evenesi Makewana who was elected at the 1962 general assembly meeting of Chigwirizano. Her committee consisted of Mrs L. Blok as vice-leader, Mrs H. Van Wyk as secretary, Jani Naphiri as vice-secretary, Litina Tsitsi as treasurer, and Mrs R. Stelytler as vice-treasurer and Fanesi Namaseko Konzakapasi as Member. This change in leadership from missionaries to Malawians can be explained in terms of changes that were taking place in the whole synod. From April 1962 Nkhoma synod achieved independence from the DRCM. The relationship between the two was no longer that of daughter and mother, but two autonomous synods. However it should be noted that changes in the leadership of Chigwirizano happened before the synod became independent. This may be explained in terms of the missionaries preparing Malawians for leadership from the beginning of Chigwirizano. There was sisterhood between the two groups.

Nevertheless the Central Committee of Chigwirizano has continued to have missionary women serving in different capacities. In fact Miss Annamarie De Klerk was leader of Chigwirizano from the end of the seventies up to 1989 when synod decided that only wives of serving ministers could be leaders in the Executive Committee. A new position of

advisor was created and it is currently being served by Annamarie De Klerk.¹⁵

The decision that the leader of Chigwirizano should be the wife of a minister is not approved by many women.¹⁶ Although it was put into practice during the elections of 1989, as early as 1966, when Mrs Konzakapasi was elected leader of the Central Executive Committee of Chigwirizano some ministers expressed an unwillingness to accept leadership from a woman who was not a minister's wife. Mrs Konzakapasi, wife of a teacher and church elder, and Miss Annamarie De Klerk, a single missionary, were the ones who experienced rejection most from some ministers because they served as leaders of Chigwirizano Executive Committee for more than two terms yet they were not minister's wives. It is clear, however that leadership ability exists amongst women who are not wives of ministers, and that, not all minister's wives have such ability. This matter has raised the whole issue of ministers and their wives controlling both the synod and Chigwirizano. For example, the current leader of Chigwirizano is wife of the current moderator of synod. This means that the power to run the synod and

¹⁵ The present Central committee of Chigwirizano is now led by Mrs Chalera the wife of Rev S. P. Chalera, the current Moderator of the synod. Her committee consist of Mrs Kaligande, Mrs Chipshiko, Mrs Masina, Mrs Van Der Venter, and Mrs Kasalika. All of them wives of ministers.

¹⁶ This was a view expressed by the ex leaders of Chigwirizano during my interviews with them in August 1991 in their homes.

Chigwirizano becomes vested in one family. It also means that the clergy control Chigwirizano through their wives. In that case, the problem for Nkhoma synod women is not simply patriarchy but also clericalism.

Queries on restrictions put down by synod on the selection of leaders at the Central Executive Committee of Chigwirizano were sent to synod. Synod is, however, in favour of maintaining the present status quo.¹⁷ The new restrictions apply also at Presbytery level, though at branch level anyone can be elected leader. The minister's wife has the position of advisor. The whole leadership structure of Chigwirizano confirms the existence of the problem of clericalism.

4.3.2 Membership

When Chigwirizano was introduced, it was made clear that only those women who take part in Holy Communion could become members.¹⁸ This was because they only wanted women who were mature in their faith and serious about serving Jesus Christ. Furthermore, since Chigwirizano involves sharing one's faith with others and encouraging weak

¹⁷ Synodical minutes of 9-16 April 1991.

¹⁸ Mthenga, January-February 1940, 8.

Christians, it became important that members should understand their own commitment to God.

The Central Executive Committee of 1942 decided on the guide lines for membership. If someone wanted to become a member, she was asked to make her intentions known to the leader of her branch. The leader invited her to attend Chigwirizano meetings for one month as an observer during which time her behavior and attendance was also monitored. After that period she could be admitted if she brought a 3 pence contribution which was called Mafuta (oil money to help in the running of Chigwirizano) and a duku (white head scarf which was used as an identification of Chigwirizano members).¹⁹

The contribution of mafuta has always been taken seriously in Chigwirizano to the extent that if a member was not contributing, her membership was cancelled. By 1978, it became necessary to require that anyone who wanted to become a member of Chigwirizano had to get a letter from her church elder to confirm her Christian stand and her monthly church pledge. The period of observation was further extended to three months which, thus, meant six meetings. She was further required to memorize the rules and regulations of

¹⁹ Minutes of the Central Executive Committee of Chigwirizano of 13th April 1942.

Chigwirizano which appear on the membership card.²⁰ In the seventh week she was asked to recite what was on the card during a meeting. For those who could not read, Chigwirizano women were assigned to help them memorize. This is done up to the present.

A member promises to give church pledges, to take care of her family by cleaning her house, and the clothes of all her family members, to make sure that there is family worship, to teach her children how to pray, to send them to Sunday School, and teach them the Word of God, to go to church worship every Sunday, to attend all church meetings that require her presence, and to avoid traditional practices that are against the Word of God. If she performs well and has brought her money and head scarf, she is received into Chigwirizano. In 1989 another condition was added to membership. On the day that a woman is received into Chigwirizano, she is asked to buy the Chigwirizano handbook which contains its rules and regulations.²¹ It was further added by the Central Executive of Chigwirizano that only ministers' wives can dress a new member of Chigwirizano and that celebrations should not accompany the admission of

²⁰ Malongosoledwe ndi Zopangana za Chigwirizano cha Amayi Achikstu Nkhoma Synod, 1978, 4.

²¹ Malongosoledwe ndi Zopangana za Chigwirizano cha Amayi Achikristu Nkhoma Synod, 1989, 4.

new members.²² This implies that before 1990 any Chigwirizano leader could admit a new member. Reasons for refusing a celebration after admission are not known.

Although no written permission is required from a husband of a woman who wants to become a member of Chigwirizano, if the man voice his opposition, he is respected and the wife is denied membership.²³ This is based on Ephesians 5 which commands wives to submit to their husbands. This was particularly true in the early days when Chigwirizano was introduced. Many husbands who were not Christians did not understand what Chigwirizano was all about. They particularly viewed house to house evangelism programmes of Chigwirizano women with suspicion.²⁴

Misunderstanding of Chigwirizano was not only limited to non-Christians. Even some Christian men, church elders and ministers did not allow their wives to become members.²⁵ The persistence of the problem has now led to a ruling which says that all the wives of deacons, church elders and

²² Minutes of Central Executive Committee of Chigwirizano held at Nkhoma, on 16-20th August 1990 minute 90.4 number 7.

²³ Minutes of the Central Executive Committee of Chigwirizano of 17th April 1947.

²⁴ Interview with Mrs Falesi Nangondo Gwengwe at Nkhoma Church on 10th August 1991.

²⁵ Report of Chigwirizano to Synod of April 1952.

ministers should become members of Chigwirizano.²⁶ The reasoning behind this was that people look up to wives of church leaders as examples in Chigwirizano. They therefore feel discouraged when wives of church leaders do not become members. In some cases the wives of leaders themselves did not want to become members. This was particularly true of young women who felt that Chigwirizano was for elderly women.²⁷ Yet from the very beginning the Central Executive saw the need for making a special effort to include girls and young mothers in Chigwirizano. A special request was made asking the women missionaries to start Chigwirizano among girls.²⁸ Young mothers now join Chigwirizano especially in the urban areas. This is because most of them have been exposed to the Student Christian Organization when they were in secondary schools. Therefore by the time they join Chigwirizano they are already mature in their Christian life. Up to this day there are very few girls who have joined Chigwirizano. Perhaps this should be understood in terms of African culture where mothers and their daughters do not socialize on the same level.

²⁶ Interview with Mrs Ndeya who became a member of Chigwirizano in 1974 because her husband had been appointed to be a church elder.

²⁷ Report of Chigwirizano to Synod of April 1951.

²⁸ Minutes of the Central Committee of Chigwirizano of 15-17th April 1941.

There were misunderstandings of Chigwirizano membership even among the Christian women themselves. For example Alangizi of Chilangizo did not want to become members of Chigwirizano because they felt that would mean doing two jobs for the church. The Central Committee had to explain to all Christian women that Chigwirizano was not a job but a way of uniting all Christian women who want to serve Jesus.²⁹ The problem persisted ³⁰ until synod had to intervene in 1958 and 1960.³¹ Now all Alangizi are members of Chigwirizano.

Another problem came from Chigwirizano women themselves who separated from other Christian women. Most of the early members felt that being in Chigwirizano gave them a special status. They, therefore, wanted to sit on their own during Sunday service. Even in service projects, some Chigwirizano women did not want to work with others.³²

Despite the misunderstandings, Chigwirizano has continued to grow from year to year. For example in 1940 there were 103 members in five branches. In 1949 there were 1,848 members in 62 branches. In 1954 Chigwirizano had 3,163

²⁹ Report of Chigwirizano to Synod of April 1942.

³⁰ Report of Chigwirizano to Synod of April 1954.

³¹ Zolamulira, Z.346, 1986, 86

³² Report of Chigwirizano to Synod of April 1943 and 1946.

members in 101 branches. In 1960 there were 5,000 members in 108 branches. In 1978 there were 13,600 members in 160 branches. In 1989 there were 30,000 members in 227 branches.

Although there are only 94 congregations in the whole synod, Chigwirizano branches have reached 227 because some of them are in out-stations. Secondly, a branch can be formed if there are ten members. The number of members has also continued to increase because of the nature of activities. In the early days members used to meet on Wednesday mornings once a month to teach each other the Word of God and other important issues for Christian women such as proper dressing, child care, how to help each other during sickness and funerals, witnessing, cooking, and identification of traditional practices which are against the Word of God.³³ Later on the day of meeting was changed to Friday morning because Wednesday morning was also for midweek church prayers. The number of meetings per month has been increased to two which take place on the first and third Fridays of the month. In the urban areas, Saturday afternoon twice a month is Chigwirizano day. The change was made to accommodate working women who want to become members of Chigwirizano. This proved to be effective for Lingadzi congregation which is in the Capital city of Lilongwe. For example when the Rev M. Matanda and his wife moved to

³³ Report of Chigwirizano to Synod of April 1941.

Lingadzi congregation in 1979, Chigwirizano members were not more than 30. Then the women were meeting on Fridays. Since most of Lingadzi members are working class, it was not possible for the women to become members. Mrs Matanda's committee decided to change the day of meetings to Saturday afternoon. By 1990 Chigwirizano members had increased to more than 300. ³⁴

The format of Friday/Saturday meetings has also changed. The synod now produces a yearly guide to Chigwirizano meetings called Mawu a Mwezi ndi mwezi which is used by all the branches during the meetings. The Central Committee of Chigwirizano chooses a minister who is to prepare the yearly guide. The minister is paid by Chigwirizano for the work done. At all Chigwirizano branch meetings, three books are used to make sure there is order. They have a register buku la maina in which they mark all present and their monthly contribution to Chigwirizano. While it was easy in the past to record names by first name and chiongo which is the clan name, this becomes a problem in towns and among wives of church leaders who are known by their husbands' names as a result of missionary and colonial influence. The second book is for accounts, buku la ndalama. The third one is the minute book, Buku la msonkhano.

³⁴ Interview with Mrs Matanda at Nkhoma on 19th August 1991. Her husband was minister at Lingadzi CCAP in Lilongwe from 1979-1990.

Chigwirizano organizes leadership courses every time new persons are elected to office to ensure that they learn how to use Chigwirizano books and how to conduct meetings.

The twice monthly meetings have helped to increase membership in that women find a chance to preach, share testimonies of the things that God is doing for the them, pray and sing freely. Most of all there is solidarity of purpose which helps the women renew their commitment to each other and to God.

Chigwirizano has also grown because of their door to door witnessing programme. In the 1940s members used to go on such programmes in villages. Each group went out with their woman missionary who carried small packets of salt to give to the women to whom they witnessed. The verse which they shared wherever they went was John 3:16. A person was visited several times.³⁵ By 1942, there was a book on sale on how to witness and each member of Chigwirizano was encouraged to buy a copy. As many people came to Christ, Chigwirizano included a programme called Mlozo. This is a Bible study for new members to help them to know the Bible. The new members were also encouraged to join catechumen classes so that they could become full members of the nearest congregation. Since most people did not know how to

³⁵ Interview with Mrs Falesi Nangondo Gwengwe at Nkhoma on 10th August 1991.

read, Chigwirizano arranged a programme of adult literacy for their members. Both witnessing and Mlozo programmes have continued up to this day.

A further development in Chigwirizano that is aimed at increasing its membership has been the organization of revival meetings called chitsitsimutso. Originally they were organized by Chigwirizano women at Presbytery level who invited a number of ministers to preach. It is only in the late eighties that synod gave permission to women to organize revival meetings and choose speakers among themselves. The Executive Committee selects women speakers who they believe have the gift of preaching. The women go out to invite their friends who have not received Jesus Christ as their Lord and Saviour to come to the meetings. The meetings go on for three days. In many cases membership to Chigwirizano goes up after such meetings. ³⁶

Chigwirizano's charity activities have also been another element that has contributed to the increase in its membership. Chigwirizano women visit the sick in hospitals and homes, comfort the bereaved materially as well as spiritually, and they help the weak and elderly, and the

³⁶ Interview with Mrs Masina at Nkhoma on 21st August 1991. She is a wife of a minister. She and her husband ministered at Lobi in Dedza and Nambuma in Lilongwe congregations from 1978 to 1989 when they were transferred to Nkhoma congregation where they are serving now.

poor. This programme has been very effective because they do not discriminate against anyone when it comes to helping. They reach out to CCAP members, both those who are weak and strong Christians, and to Christians from other denominations who are in need. They also reach out to people from other religions or those who may not show allegiance to any religion at all. As they reach out to all people in need, they bring the warmth of the love of Christ to all human beings. In so doing many people who have been touched in this way respond by either encouraging their wives to become members or if its a woman, they themselves become members of Chigwirizano.

When Chigwirizano started expanding, it became necessary to have a full time worker. The first full time Chigwirizano worker was Jani Mkhoma in 1956. She was based in Lilongwe. The second worker was Mrs E. Chamanza who retired in 1989. Mrs Kagundu is the current Chigwirizano worker. Since Chigwirizano work has expanded greatly, the Central Committee has felt that there is now need for each Presbytery to have its own worker who would be accommodated, paid and chosen by each presbytery. Such plans are in the making.

4.3.2 Uniform

From the very beginning, the Uniform has been considered important among the members of Chigwirizano. When

the Chigwirizano proposal was submitted to synod in 1939, it included the uniform. The uniform was to be a white head scarf bearing a torch on the forehead.³⁷ Since it was difficult to get the required head scarf, it became mandatory that as one was admitted to Chigwirizano, one had to pay an extra 6 pence and then receive duku from the women missionary.³⁸ When the group of Chigwirizano members was small, each person was given embroidery thread and was asked to sew on the emblem of a hand bearing a torch. However, when the Chigwirizano expanded to 78 groups in 1951, the Central Committee of Chigwirizano selected a special group to do embroidery of the Chigwirizano emblem on head scarfs.³⁹ This measure was taken to ensure uniformity in the embroidered emblem.

The emblem had a special meaning to Chigwirizano members. It was a reminder that they were carrying the light of Jesus Christ that brings salvation to others. By 1943 it was observed that when a member dies, her uniform was taken and used by her relations who were not members. The Central Executive Committee resolved the issue by saying that if a member dies and the other members want to dress her with

³⁷ Mthenga January-February 1940, 18.

³⁸ Presbytery report from Mrs Retief who was acting as Secretary of Chigwirizano Central Committee, Nkhoma, 9th July 1940.

³⁹ Minutes of the Executive Committee of Chigwirizano of May 1956, Mlanda.

Chigwirizano head scarf, they can do so. However, if the relatives want the cloth, then Chigwirizano emblem should be removed. This was also done to uniforms of people who have stopped being members and those who are under church discipline.⁴⁰

In 1955, women from Blantyre and Livingstonia synods agreed to have one badge as a symbol for women in CCAP. For Nkhoma synod this meant a replacement of the emblem of a hand carrying a torch. The synod supported the suggestion and asked that it should be given a chance to approve the final symbol on the badge before they were ordered. The new symbol designed was of a calabash with a cross on top, an open Bible in the middle and half the rising sun at the bottom. This is inside a ring which has CCAP at the base. The outer-most base has Chigwirizano written on it. For the Blantyre synod the outer base has Mvano written on it while for Livingstonia synod it is Umanyano. In the absence of an official explanation of the symbols, one can only assume that the calabash symbolizes women because in the cultures of Malawi a calabash is used by women to carry and keep water. The rising sun is a command to the women to rise up. The open Bible, the women are to preach the Gospel. The cross, the Gospel of Jesus. As they preach, they should remember that they are part of CCAP. The Nkhoma synod

⁴⁰ Chigwirizano Executive Committee minutes of 18th April, 1943 and 13th April 1944.

approved the badges in 1959.⁴¹ The Central Executive Committee of Chigwirizano authorized the use of the badges in 1960. The new emblem now appears on all Chigwirizano books and letter heads. Thus by 1961 the Chigwirizano uniform included a white head scarf and a badge.

Visitors from Chigwirizano of the Salisbury Presbytery attended the 1963 Central Executive Committee meeting held at Mlanda. The visitors were dressed in white head scarfs, white blouses with a white belt, black skirts and black shoes. The women from Nkhoma were impressed with the beautiful uniform. It was therefore agreed at the 1964 general Assembly of Chigwirizano held at Dzenza that the uniform be introduced in the Nkhoma synod too. In 1965 the Chigwirizano leader Mrs Falesi Konzakapasi and her secretary Mrs Chienda went to Zimbabwe to learn more about Chigwirizano uniform. From 1966 the proper uniform of Chigwirizano was introduced as white head scarf, white long sleeved blouse, black long skirt and black shoes.

The uniform has its own rules and regulations. For example, In the forties up to the sixties, the uniform was worn only at Chigwirizano meetings and activities.⁴² Now it is worn during Chigwirizano meetings, the funeral of

⁴¹ Zolamulira ...1886, 86.

⁴² Minutes of Chigwirizano Central Executive Committee of 31 July 1953.

Chigwirizano members, ministers, church elders and deacons because these are people who have positions in the church.⁴³ This should be understood in terms of the respect that is accorded to a funeral where Chigwirizano women are present in their uniforms. At such funerals Chigwirizano women lead the funeral processions singing beautifully.

In a synod where three quarters of its members are in the rural area and they are subsistence farmers, the basic uniform is still a white head scarf. This is also used when admitting a new member. However for those who have leadership positions and those who can afford it, a full uniform is required. Having a full uniform is considered important by the members so that most women involve themselves in piece work, for example, preparing some one else's garden in order to raise funds to buy the uniform. If they have joined Chigwirizano as elderly women who do not have money even to buy the head scarf, the branch which they have joined buys it for them.

If someone has a full uniform, she is required to wear it at all the necessary places and functions. Wearing part of the uniform or adding a jersey on top or Chitenje (a piece of cloth usually worn by Malawian women from the waist downwards), is tantamount to punishment of 20t for an

⁴³ Synodical minutes of 9-16 April 1991, minute S.2545

ordinary member and K1.00 for the leaders.⁴⁴ This is taken seriously in that during Chigwirizano meetings, there is time set aside to inspect uniforms.

Chigwirizano uniform has proved to be important to the women in many ways. The women do not look at the colours as having any significant meanings but the wearing of the uniform gives the members authority over other women when they go out witnessing.⁴⁵ Although the synod is against the idea of Chigwirizano women separating themselves from other Christian women, Chigwirizano women with uniforms still get special recognition in the church.

4.3.4 Mafuta

The first proposal of Chigwirizano to synod included the giving of a financial contribution of 3 pence from every member to her branch.⁴⁶ This contribution is called Mafuta (money for oil which keeps a lamp burning. This symbolism should be understood in terms of the original emblem of a hand carrying a torch. A torch needs oil to keep it burning). At the first meeting of the Central Executive Committee of Chigwirizano in 1941, it was decided that there

⁴⁴ Interview with Mrs Masina at Nkhoma in August 1991.

⁴⁵ Chigwirizano Central Committee's report to Synod of 15 September, 1941 submitted by Mrs A.H. Rens.

⁴⁶ Mthenga, January to February 1940, 18.

should be a central fund. 1 pence from the 3 pence contribution of each member was to be sent to the central fund by August each year. Today the members contribute K1.00 a month for the central fund. The members make their contribution at the beginning of each month. If a member does not contribute regularly, her name is cancelled from the register.

During the first twenty-five years each branch was given the freedom to decide how it was going to use the remaining money. However guidance was given on the type of projects to be considered. The projects included helping to pay fees for women who wanted to become teachers and nurses, but who could not afford the fees; paying for the studies of Chigwirizano women who went for training in order to teach other women about Chigwirizano. Central fund money was to be used for buying Chigwirizano books such as registers, minutes and treasurer's books. It was also to be used for transport for the Executive Committee.⁴⁷ Since then the projects have also included contributing towards the synod's school for the blind in Kasungu, the school for wives of theological students, paying the salary of Chigwirizano workers, synod's hospitals, and work among the youth, refugees, and Muslims.

⁴⁷ First meeting of the Executive of Chigwirizano was held on 15-17th April, 1941 at Nkhoma. This is found in Chigwirizano in DRCM Executive minute book 1940-1962.

Since 1978 it was decided that compassionate service money should be contributed separately from Mafuta. The second fund was called Chifundo (compassion). This is the money which is used to help the sick and the poor. A third fund was also introduced in 1988. This was Chitukuko (development fund) Every member contributes 20 tambala per month extra to go towards Chitukuko. It is from this fund that each branch sends K10.00 every August to the Central Committee of Chigwirizano.

Chigwirizano has involved itself in projects that are specifically aimed at lifting the status of women. Education of women has been a priority. For example, when synod started negotiating with the government for permission to build its first girls' secondary school in 1983, Chigwirizano women started raising funds so that a large amount of the money used was contributed by the women. The second major project for which the women have undertaken to raise funds is the building of the Malingunde Women's Training centre which was opened in January 1992.

Chigwirizano also raised funds for the Nkhoma synod centenary celebrations in 1989. Besides that Chigwirizano helps to raise funds for congregations whenever there is a need.

4.3 5 Chigwirizano and synod

The relationship between the church and Chigwirizano is that of a father and daughter. This is reflected in many ways. In the original proposal of Chigwirizano to synod it was made clear that every year Chigwirizano should send a report to synod explaining their activities as well as providing a financial statement. Writing the reports starts at branch level which they send to the Executive Committee of Chigwirizano at congregational level. The Presbytery Executive Committee of Chigwirizano combine all the branch reports and write one report for Presbytery. Each Presbytery also combines all its congregational reports and sends them to the Central Committee of Chigwirizano. The ten Presbytery reports are also combined to make one report which goes to synod.

At every Chigwirizano meeting the women are reminded that they are a branch of the church and are not a church in themselves. They should therefore uphold the unity which is there between the church and Chigwirizano and accord church leaders due respect. It was felt that this should be the case because of constant misunderstandings among the women as to the exact status of Chigwirizano. As early as 1944 questions started coming to the Central Executive Committee of Chigwirizano asking whether Chigwirizano is independent

from the church.⁴⁸ The response was that it is a branch of the church. It was as a result of such questions that the committee suggested that once in a while church elders should be asked to attend Chigwirizano meetings. Some church leaders also complained that they were not being respected by Chigwirizano women who did not want church elders to have a say in any of their programme. The constant response from Chigwirizano was that Chigwirizano women should show respect and submission to church elders.⁴⁹

The problem of the relationship between church and Chigwirizano was not found in all congregations for in some congregations church elders, who are all men, attended Chigwirizano meetings and planned Chigwirizano projects together with the women. Church elders also invited Chigwirizano leaders to attend session meetings so that they could help in sorting out cases that affected women. This explains why it was then recommended by the Executive Committee of Chigwirizano that church elders should be involving Chigwirizano leaders when trying cases that affect women.⁵⁰ It therefore worked well for the church elders who implemented the suggestion.

⁴⁸ Minutes of the Executive Committee of Chigwirizano of 13th April 1944.

⁴⁹ Minutes of the Executive Committee of Chigwirizano of April 1948.

⁵⁰ Minutes of the Executive Committee of Chigwirizano of 1941.

In the seventies the synod made a ruling that there should be a church elder in the Executive Committee of Chigwirizano at branch and Presbytery level, and a minister and a church elder in the Central Executive of Chigwirizano. These representatives are called Mkhalapakati. Their role is often a source of misunderstanding between Chigwirizano and the church because some Mkhalapakati tend to dominate at Chigwirizano meetings instead of being observers.

Through the years, synod has tightened its grip on Chigwirizano. For example, from the beginning Chigwirizano was asked to give an annual report of all its activities to synod.⁵¹ This meant that Chigwirizano representatives had a chance to attend synodical meetings. However, things changed from 1966 when the Chigwirizano representatives were told that they should only come to give a report and answer questions arising from the report and not attend the whole meeting. Furthermore, a minister, his wife and a church elder were to be present when writing Chigwirizano reports from congregational level. After writing the report it has to go to Chigwirizano Presbytery through the church and not directly.⁵² These measures were adopted to ensure that Chigwirizano is not independent but is under the synod.

⁵¹ Zolamulira. Z.349, 1986, 87.

⁵² Zolamulira. Z.355, 1986, 88.

From 1966 onwards synod decided that the Central Executive Committee of Chigwirizano should refer to synod any major decision before implementation for fear of confusion in the church.⁵³ The synod also decided that three men should be part of the Central Committee of Chigwirizano. They should include a minister, a church elder, and Mkhalapakati. The minister was made the overall leader of the Central Executive Committee of Chigwirizano.⁵⁴ In practice this means that Chigwirizano's leadership is in the hands of men, in particular, ministers. This is another example of clericalism and patriarchy in Chigwirizano.

The responses of Chigwirizano to synod's demands have varied. In some cases they have accepted synod's decisions without question. For example, the Chigwirizano Executive Committee felt that since the numbers of Chigwirizano members are growing to such an extent, there is need to have a Chigwirizano worker in each presbytery. Their reasoning was that this move would help in educating Chigwirizano members on how to witness and improve the quality of Bible Studies among Chigwirizano members. In this way Chigwirizano could have quality Christians and not only quantity. The proposal included that the workers would be trained at Yoswa

⁵³ Zolamulira. Z.353, 1986, 88.

⁵⁴ Zolamulira. Z.345 b., 1986, 86.

school for one year before going to work in the Presbyteries. Chigwirizano members from each Presbytery would be responsible for the workers' accommodation and salary.⁵⁵ The synod agreed that the idea was a good one but felt that the time was not ripe for such programmes.⁵⁶ On enquiry it was found out that the synod felt that there was not enough money to embark on such a project despite the fact that Chigwirizano was willing to raise money for itself. The other reason was that the job that the Presbytery Chigwirizano workers would do is currently done by ministers' wives who are appointed at each general assembly of Chigwirizano. Thus the introduction of Presbytery Chigwirizano workers was going to deny ministers' wives this role. What is interesting, however, is the fact that the wives themselves who are represented in the leadership of Chigwirizano admitted that their effectiveness was limited in this area because they already feel overworked.

Another example is on the expenditure of Chigwirizano money raised through the Chigwirizano golden Jubilee celebrations. Chigwirizano wanted to use the money for buying furniture and equipment for students and teachers'

⁵⁵ Minutes of the Central Executive Committee of Chigwirizano of 15th June 1989 minute CK.477.

⁵⁶ Minutes of the Central Executive Committee of Chigwirizano of 10th June, 1989 minute KC 497.

houses, and also set up a memorial school of Chigwirizano at Malingunde Women Training Centre.⁵⁷ Synod responded by saying that it would decide on what the money should be used for. It suggested that Chigwirizano should build a house in Lilongwe which will be rented and raise money for the synod.

In some cases Chigwirizano women have asked synod to rethink its decision when it responded negatively to the women's suggestion. A case in point is the proposal to have jubilee celebrations for Chigwirizano in August 1990. Synod suggested that the celebrations be postponed until the following year for lack of funds. This was because the previous year the synod had centenary celebrations at which Chigwirizano did a great deal to raise funds. However, the women wrote back to synod requesting that they go ahead with their plans as they had already done fund raising.⁵⁸ They also felt that Jubilee celebrations would only make sense in the year that Chigwirizano turned fifty rather than celebrating in another year. Thus the Jubilee celebrations for Chigwirizano went ahead successfully in 1990 as requested by Chigwirizano.

⁵⁷ Letters from Secretary of the Central Executive Committee of Chigwirizano to the General Secretary of Nkhoma Synod dated 6th March 1990 and minutes of the Committee of Chigwirizano Golden Jubilee.

⁵⁸ Minutes of Central Executive Committee of Chigwirizano of 10th June, 1990 minute KC.492-3.

Chigwirizano also speaks out when synod rules in Chigwirizano are being abused. For example, it was observed that the role of Mkhlapakati (church representative) at Chigwirizano meetings varied from one branch to another and from one Presbytery to another. There were complaints among the women that in some places Mkhlapakati were taking over Chigwirizano meetings. The Executive of the Central Committee of Chigwirizano reminded all Mkhlapakati that they should only be observers and give advice where things were going wrong.⁵⁹

On matters of financial claims, Chigwirizano leaders requested from synod that transport claims be the same as with synod. This request went to synod several times before it was approved. Thus while Chigwirizano has accepted negative responses from synod on some of their proposed programmes, in other cases they have persisted with their request until synod has given a positive response.

At congregational level, in most cases there is a good relationship between Chigwirizano and the church. Chigwirizano women help by teaching Sunday School and catechumen classes. They also help in bringing more members to church through their outreach meetings and person to

⁵⁹ Minutes of Central Executive Committee of Chigwirizano of 15th June, 1989 minute KC.448.

person evangelism. They work in consultation with the church to raise money for church projects.

4.4 Conclusion

In the story of the woman of Samaria and Jesus at the well in John's Gospel chapter 4, we find that the woman was a nobody until Jesus changed her self image. She was filled with life and wanted to share it with others. In this story Chigwirizano women recognize themselves. When Chigwirizano was born in 1940, women were given a new status and sense of self-worth, as well as an outlet to publicly share their faith with others. To African women, Chigwirizano presented an opportunity for them to change and to obey the command of Jesus to go and make disciples of all people. The women recognized themselves as a community of God called to be witnesses of Jesus Christ. This explains why Chigwirizano is only for women who have a testimony to share with others.

The women recognized that the authority to spread the Gospel comes from God. They were to spread the Gospel that is in the Bible to their families, communities and societies and bring them a message of salvation. Throughout the years of Chigwirizano's existence the women have not been discouraged by the restrictions on their preaching in the church on Sunday. Instead, they have gone out to do house to house evangelism and open air preaching. Wherever they have

gone, they have given other people the consciousness of Jesus so that they should follow him. They have preached through touching others with acts of kindness. They have also preached through their behavior both inside and outside the home. By memorizing Chigwirizano rules and regulations they have come to terms with the fact that they too were created in God's image therefore they have to spread the Gospel. They have touched the lives of many children through teaching Sunday School and catechumen classes, and the lives of other Chigwirizano women through Mlozo and adult literacy classes.

Chigwirizano promises have also shown women that their faith and Christian living in the home does not depend on their husbands. It is the woman who has the responsibility of teaching her children the Word of God. She has been given authority to initiate family worship and encourage her family to go to Sunday services of worship. Simple as this may seem, to a woman who is committed to serving God, this responsibility has given her self esteem.

Through meetings at different levels, Chigwirizano has shown women that they can use their talents to build each other up, and thus to build the church of God. Women have gone to Chigwirizano meetings with heavy hearts but through singing, sharing and praying together, they have gone home uplifted, and energized to meet the challenges that life

brings. Chigwirizano meetings help the women to be filled with the Spirit of God.

Chigwirizano has also given women a chance to join the ladder of church leadership, though with a lot of restrictions. A Chigwirizano member's funeral is respected by the wearing of Chigwirizano uniform just as it would be if it were a church deacon, elder and minister. In fact when church leaders are mentioned in sermons, Chigwirizano members are also included.

Like any organization, Chigwirizano has its problems. The writing of the monthly guide for Chigwirizano by ministers who have theological training is appreciated. Nevertheless, it would be more meaningful to women if the guides were written by a woman who understands and identifies with the fears and hopes of women. The fact that during the missionary days women missionaries were responsible for the writing of Chigwirizano Bible study and preaching during Chigwirizano conferences is important. What is at stake is not whether it is theologically correct for women to write their own Bible study materials or preach at their meetings. The women missionary had theological training from their homes which African women in the Nkhoma synod do not have. This situation has created a system whereby the African women have been made to perpetually

depend on the ministers who alone have the privilege of theological training.

Now that Chigwirizano has grown a great deal, there is also need to change ways of doing certain things to ensure growth in the spirituality of the members. For example there is need for a change in the way Bible studies are conducted during the Chigwirizano conferences. The size of Bible study groups is an area of concern if they are to be effective. Groups of forty can not achieve much in that people do not open up and they go home without being helped.⁶⁰ Women look forward to the Bible studies. If the groups were cut down to a maximum of ten in each group, the discussions would be more fruitful.

While Chigwirizano has involved itself with programmes that deal with the plight of women, it has failed to be a mouth-piece to the synod on issues that oppress women in the church and in society. Women are aware that the synod has dragged its feet in advancing the education of women and girls. The organization has supported financially and morally Mlanda Girls Secondary school and Maligunde Women's Centre. However the women have not gone beyond that to ask for post secondary education for women in the synod, and all the advanced scholarships have gone to men. Instead of

⁶⁰ This was my observation during the Presbytery meeting of Chigwirizano at Nkhoma in August 1991.

asking to send Chigwirizano workers to Yoswa school for their theological education, why not ask for Zomba theological Collage? The women have not dealt with women's issues such as wife abuse even when they are aware of their existence in the church.

Through the years women have wondered who they are despite being reminded at every meeting that they are part of the church. Perhaps the question that should be asked of synod is what are the women saying when they continue to misunderstand their identity and their relationship with synod? In our opinion all these misunderstandings arise from a desire to be recognized and acknowledged. It is a cry to be trusted and to be elevated from the status of a daughter to that of a partner in building the church of God in the Nkhoma synod.

The shifting of emphasis in choosing leaders in Chigwirizano from the hands of people with talents to ministers' wives has been a major source of dissatisfaction. This shift has made even some wives of ministers uncomfortable because they know that they do not have leadership talent. For those who know that God has given them leadership talent but are not wives of ministers, they feel restricted and frustrated.

The decision to make a minister the overall leader of Chigwirizano is a clear sign of mistrust that exists between Chigwirizano and synod and a sure way to kill the enthusiasm that women had when Chigwirizano was born. The way the church leaders have handled Chigwirizano says a lot about the silent theology of the church towards women. Do church leaders feel that Chigwirizano is a church in a church? The policies of the church toward Chigwirizano make one respond in the affirmative. As long as the women operate under Mkhlapakati, one will always get the feeling that the church does not trust Chigwirizano. Yet from the beginning Chigwirizano promised women a chance to put into practice their leadership qualities. It remains to be seen in the next chapter how both men and women feel about the position of women in the Nkhoma synod.

CHAPTER 5

A SURVEY OF PRESENT ATTITUDES TOWARDS WOMEN IN THE NKHOMA SYNOD

5.1 Introduction: Field work methodology

The last two chapters have dealt with how the Nkhoma synod has handled issues that affect women. The issues have been divided into two categories, namely, the participation of women in the church, and women and cultural practices. The participation of women in the church included leadership roles, theological education and women's organization in the church-Chigwirizano. Women and cultural practices included chilangizo, bride wealth, child marriages, widowhood and property, and remarriage. This chapter examines the attitudes of church members towards these issues. We agree with M. W. Retief that

The issue of attitudes is very important in our lives. All our deeds and words and behaviour are influenced by our attitudes...If there is something wrong in our attitude towards our fellowman, then this must necessarily have an obstructing influence on all we do or leave undone. To know a person, one must know what his/her attitude is towards others.¹

Since women are excluded from decision-making structures in the synod, the central question for this chapter is: what are the experiences, feelings and thoughts of women on all the decisions of the church which affect them? At the same time there is an accompanying question

¹ M. W. Retief, 1959, 82.

addressed to men: How do men feel about the church's decisions on women? The second question is important because a goal of the thesis is not simply the liberation of women in the church but a new community of men and women working together in harmony.

The answers to these questions have been sought by conducting informal interviews with men and women from the Nkhoma synod. Twenty women were interviewed. They included ministers wives, Chigwirizano leaders, chilangizo leaders, widows, divorced and deserted women, women from polygamous families and single girls. This broad category of women was purposely chosen because of the issues being examined. Twenty men were also interviewed. Among them, ten were ministers and the other ten were elders. Deacons, and other male members of the church were excluded because they do not attend the general synodical meetings.² In total forty men and women were interviewed.

The church members were a mixture of urban and rural. Since three quarters of the members of Nkhoma synod are in rural areas, only ten of the sample, five women and five

² In the constitution of the Nkhoma synod of 9th November 1970, article IX, it is stated that the synod is constituted by all the serving ordained ministers of the congregations which belong to the Nkhoma Synod in terms of Article 1I; all ordained ministers who are in charge of congregations but who serve the church within the bounds of the Nkhoma synod; and one representative Elder from every established congregation.

men, were from urban areas. The age range for both sexes was 22-82 years old. The educational range for men was from a Masters degree graduate in Divinity to people with no education at all. Among women only two had first degrees, four had senior secondary education from Catholic schools of which two had certificates and one had a Diploma in teaching. Two had junior secondary education from distant education, and six women had some form of primary education. Six had no education at all. Half of the interviewees were working at Nkhoma synod's institutions, the synod's office, secondary school, primary school, hospital, and printing press. One quarter of the interviewees were from the working class in para-state organizations and private businesses. The other quarter were subsistence farmers.

The interviews were conducted at four places which were also purposely chosen. These were Nkhoma synod headquarters, Lilongwe City, Mitundu and Zomba. The first three places are in Lilongwe district in central Malawi. Nkhoma synod headquarters in rural Lilongwe was chosen as the main centre because it has a large community belonging to Nkhoma synod due to the presence of the synod's main hospital, synod offices, nursing school, William Murray secondary school, Nkhoma primary boarding school, Nkhoma Malawi Distant College of Education, Nkhoma Printing Press, Yoswa women's school and the congregation of Nkhoma, within a radius of fifty kilometers. In this community one finds retired

ministers and their wives, those waiting for posting to congregations, wives of ministers whose husbands are studying outside the country, and widows of ministers. One also finds ministers and their wives who have served in different Presbyteries of the synod in Dedza, Lilongwe, Nchinji, Dowa, Nchisi Nkhota-kota Kasungu and Salima. Some of them have served in both urban and rural areas and therefore have years of experiences behind them. They were able to compare what happens among women and to women from one congregation to another. In the villages around the synod's headquarters one is also assured of finding Chewa people who have not intermarried with other tribes belonging to the Nkhoma synod.

Lilongwe City was chosen in order to get an urban and broader in-put since the Nkhoma synod congregations here include members from Livingstonia and Blantyre synods. The interviewees were able to compare what happens in Nkhoma synod with other synods. Despite the cosmopolitan nature of the population of the city, the interviewees were selected on the basis of being Chewa and from the Nkhoma synod. Mitundu, which is in Lilongwe was visited because one of the long serving leaders of Chigwirizano lives there. Zomba was included because Nkhoma synod women were participants at the Pan African Christian Women Alliance's (PACWA) first general Assembly for Southern Africa for one week. Thus, Nkhoma and Lilongwe City were part of the original research areas while

Mitundu and Zomba were included while the researcher was in the field. All the interviews were held between July and August 1991.

The writer was the only researcher and conducted all the interviews personally. Informal in-depth interviews and observation were the main tools used for research. The questions asked were in three categories. The first category was personal identification. This included age, marital status, educational attainment, occupation, name of congregation and presbytery, and position held in the church. This was because in some responses a correlation was made between the educational attainment of the interviewee and the responses given. The second category was on the position of women in leadership roles. This included Chigwirizano and theological education for women. The third category was on Chewa Christian women and culture. This included chilangizo, chiongo or bride wealth, child marriages, polygamy, widowhood and property, and remarriage. The questions were mainly based on personal experiences or personal opinions of the interviewees. The attached appendix 1 is an indication of what was asked. The time spent talking to a person also varied. The original plan was to spend thirty minutes to one hour with each person. In practise more time was spent, partly because the interviewees also asked a lot of questions as they found the subject interesting.

The first place to be visited was Nkhoma. Months before the place was visited, letters were written to the General Secretary of Nkhoma synod asking for permission to conduct research. The letter was discussed at a synodical meeting and permission was granted. (See appendix 2). Once permission was granted a detailed letter was written to the National Executive Committee of Chigwirizano informing them of the research, the personal background of the researcher and asking for their help in booking appointments with persons to be interviewed and finding accommodation at Nkhoma. This letter was also discussed at the 1991 yearly meeting and was approved. A similar letter was written again to the General Secretary.

A house was provided at Nkhoma among the missionaries and the Malawian ministers. This indicated that the researcher was accepted. The fact that the house was previously occupied by a woman missionary who was working with wives of theological students identified the researcher with women. At Chigwirizano meetings the researcher was introduced as a grand-daughter of a retired minister of Nkhoma synod from Kasungu and a grand-daughter of a late evangelist from Chawa congregation in Dedza Presbytery, in order to gain acceptability. Thus her identity was established in a typical patriarchal manner. Nevertheless relations with women improved when she was introduced as a

woman student who is writing on what it is like to be a woman in the Nkhoma synod. The information that their experiences would form the subject of the research made them even more eager to make sure that their opinions were heard. Being next door to a Malawian minister and his family who were very willing to help made it easier for the researcher to know what was happening in the community which was of interest to her.

The first week at Nkhoma coincided with Chigwirizano Nkhoma Presbytery meeting. The meeting was attended by five congregations from Nkhoma, Mthandiza, Chowo, Chitundu and Mtenthera. Chigwirizano branches from out-stations of the mentioned congregations also came to participate in this annual meeting. Each branch came with their Mkhlapakati. The researcher participated in this meeting which lasted for four days. From the beginning of the meeting the researcher was introduced and participants were notified that some would be approached to share their knowledge with her. Out of one thousand participants, Six Mkhlapakati and eight chigwirizano women were interviewed. The choice of interviewees was random, but based on those who were free and willing to be taken aside for discussions.

At the beginning of each interview there was another self-introduction, and what was expected from respondents was outlined. All the interviews were tape recorded. Except

for two people the rest requested that they would like to remain anonymous. All of them were willing to talk about personal and private issues. The women confessed that they found it easy to talk to the researcher because she was a woman and they assumed that her education and interest in God put her on the same level with ministers. All the men asked about their performance during the interviews. Towards the end of the meeting the men interviewed came together as a group, and asked for a replay of their interviews. This was followed by a group discussion of all the issues raised during the individual interviews. Perhaps this was one way of seeking clarification after having thought about the issues individually. They all indicated that they had enjoyed the experience and wished there was more time for further discussion because it was the first time they felt challenged to talk seriously about issues that affect women. They also confessed that at first it felt strange for them to discuss such issues with a woman. The group discussions were not recorded but detailed accounts were written down soon after the session was over.

Appointments which were booked before and during the meeting were followed up afterwards. For Nkhoma, Lilongwe City and Mitundu, both men and women were interviewed at their homes. Since the researcher was living within the same communities appointments were booked in the mornings, afternoons as well as late evenings, sometimes over meals.

This group resisted the use of tape recorder. Some did not mind the researcher taking notes, others just wanted a free discussion with no note books. Therefore after each session, the researcher had to write down in the field notebook all that was discussed before going for another appointment. For all the female interviewees further discussions took place when the researcher was going out the door or at bus stops and road junctions. This is a cultural way of chatting between friends. Without cassette recorders, pen and pencil, most of the people were open to talk on any subject which was brought up. In such cases, for the people who can read and write, a copy of written discussions was sent to them so that they could confirm whether what was written was what they had said. The subject under discussion raised a lot of interest in that some people asked for a second discussion by coming to where the researcher was staying or inviting her to their homes again. The second discussions were done individually, as couples, and also with a group of eight women who came to the researcher's home over traditionally baked potatoes, roasted ground nuts and sugar cane. Others expressed their disappointment when the researcher failed to book appointments to hear their stories. Financial constraints limited the number of people.

Informal in-depth interviews were chosen rather than structured questionnaires following Jannet Finch's proposal on interviewing women. Finch was influenced by Ann Oakley

who takes the view that formal, survey-type interviewing is unsuited to the production of good sociological work on women. She prefers, 'less-structured research strategies which avoid creating a hierarchical relationship between interviewer and interviewee'. That sort of relationship, she argues 'is inappropriate for feminists doing research on women, because it means that we objectify our sisters.'³

At all places people received the researcher with respect firstly, because she had the permission of the synod; secondly, people knew at least one of her relations which made her one of them; thirdly, the researcher knew some of the children of the interviewees through university education; fourthly, the researcher was known to some of the ministers through her position in the department of Religious Studies at University of Malawi which acts as external examiner to the Zomba Theological Collage and through her involvement with the Theological Society of Malawi. Lastly, she was the first Malawian woman researcher on this particular subject. All the discussions were conducted in Chichewa.

While at Nkhoma the researcher had another opportunity to attend Nkhoma congregation Chigwirizano meetings and

³ J. Finch, '"Its great to have someone to talk to": the ethics and politics of interviewing women' in C. Bell, and H. Roberts, ed. Social Researching Politics, Problems, Practice. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1984, 72.

chilangizo. The chilangizo session lasted for four days. She was allowed to attend as an observer only because she too had already gone through the sessions as a young girl.

In Zomba, it was not easy to interview more than four people for the one week of the Pan African Christian Women Alliance (PACWA) general assembly. There are four reasons for that. Firstly, the programme was very full. Secondly, it was not easy to identify Nkhoma synod women among delegates from many denominations within the country as well as from Zambia, Tanzania, Zimbabwe, Botswana, Lesotho, Swaziland and South Africa. Thirdly, some of the Nkhoma synod women that were approached viewed the researcher with suspicion as it was not within Nkhoma synod's jurisdiction. Nevertheless, observations of what kind of influence Nkhoma synod women get from other women within the country as well as outside the country played a major role. This forms the subject of chapter six. The researcher registered at the conference as a participant.

Being a woman researcher was vitally important in this research. It affected relationships with both women and men. As someone who herself had gone through chilangizo, got married in church, with a widowed mother, and being a 'grand child of Nkhoma synod' it was easy to establish relationships with women. For some interviewees, it was important to know who the researcher was before they

volunteered any information. Others said they felt free to talk because the researcher was a woman who understood how they felt and who identified with them. They felt that for a long time they had just bottled up their frustrations due to the patriarchal nature of the society and the church. Although the researcher was different from most women because of what is considered higher education in Malawi, the fact that she came with the attitude of wanting to learn from the women contributed to the establishment of good relationships. It was made clear to all those interviewed that there were no right and wrong answers. What was being asked for was how they felt and why they felt that way. The men mostly took a defensive stand about their views. They preferred to say what other men say on those issues rather than what they themselves think. In some cases a view was presented as someone else's and later on in the process of discussions was owned.

5.2 Analytical procedure

The responses of the interviewees have been divided into categories. The first category deals with the attitudes of men and woman toward women in church leadership positions. This is further divided into four sections. The first section is of negative attitudes coming from men, and the second of negative attitudes coming from women. The third is of positive attitudes coming from the men, and the

fourth is of positive attitudes coming from women. Here emphasis is on comparing the attitudes of men and women. The second category deals with attitudes of men and women towards women in theological education and the case of Mary Chinkhwita. The third category deals with attitudes of men and women to Chigwirizano. A comparison of the attitudes of men and women will also be made for the second and third categories. The fourth category deals with attitudes of men and women to women in the church and culture (chilangizo, child marriages, polygamy, and widowhood). The emphasis here is on analyzing the experiences of women.

5.3 Women's participation in church leadership

There was a variety of reasons from both men and women as to why women should not be included in church leadership positions. Among the men, the responses included church tradition, personal prejudice, Biblical and cultural basis. Among the women the reasons given included the gender division of roles and poor self image as a result of cultural teachings.

5.3.1 Negative responses from men

5.3.1.1 Church tradition

Four out of the twenty men interviewed gave reasons based on church tradition and conservative theology for not wanting women in church leadership. Examples of common responses were:

The church does not allow it. In fact when the missionaries came they showed it very clearly to us that women should not hold positions of leadership. Therefore, the synod is only following that example. The example is a good one because it is supported by scripture.

In the CCAP, Nkhoma synod has always followed a conservative theology in everything. In this way we protect the church's reputation. Examples from other synods that have taken a liberal stand by sending women for theological training and having women working in the church have not been encouraging either. There is the example of a woman from one synod who after finishing her studies started working at the synod's office and twice got involved in relationships with married ministers working with her. These stories have brought constant fear in the Nkhoma synod that the presence of women in leadership positions will be a constant temptation to men. Many will lose their faith.

In such arguments, we notice that there is resistance to change. The male interviewees feel secure in preserving what they already know even if it does not represent the gender of the majority of members in the church. One also notices that pride is taken in the fact that they are conservative and therefore not open to any new interpretation of theology especially where women's' issues are concerned. There is also the patriarchal tradition that

women are morally weak. Men are normally strong but women cause them to sin. Women are viewed as a source of sexual danger to men.

5.3.1.2 Prejudice

Three out of the twenty men interviewed did not want to see women in church leadership positions because of a division of labour between men and women, the emotional nature of women and their physiological functions, and because they think women have a poor self image. They all started with "yes God can call a woman to church leadership position, but

Women lose their tempers quickly. Church leadership positions require patience. Women do not have patience.

How is she going to minister when she is pregnant?

Our women cannot accept the responsibility of leadership. Since 1987 women have been given an opportunity to preach at women's' revival meetings but they do not seem to do it.

The fact that God created women with the ability to bear children is looked at as a curse which can prevent the Spirit of God being present in the church if women were to be ordained ministers. It is as if there is some unholiness that is connected with being pregnant. This type of thinking may be connected with the Chewa traditional belief that Makewana and Matsano were not to bear children as long as they held their holy positions. It could also be connected

to the influence of Old Testament practices where women who have just borne children were treated as unclean (Leviticus 12).

Prejudice against women is clearly reflected in the association of patience with men and temper with women. What is being said here is that biologically there is a connection between being a woman and irrational thinking, and being a man and rational thinking.

5.3.1.3 Biblical basis

The responses were in three categories. Two out of twenty men felt that women should not take any leadership positions for biblical reasons. They argued that

The Bible does not allow women to stand before men and give instructions.

There were two more responses that argued that women can take some positions but not others. For example, it was argued that

although 1 Corinthians 14:34-35 and 1 Timothy 2:11-12 do not allow women to become ministers and church elders, the Bible is not against women becoming deaconesses. Nevertheless, if women are deaconesses this should be in accordance with what culture has defined as women's' behavior. For example women deaconesses should not have authority over men, for men are the heads of women.

A third category had the subjection of married women to their husbands in mind.

A woman cannot be a church leader because if she is married she is under the responsibility of her husband. The Bible says she belongs to him and therefore cannot make an independent decision. It would therefore be difficult for congregations to call her. It could also be unfair to ordain only single mothers and girls because it could look like the synod is saying that women who want to be leaders should not get married.

The total responses which were based on the Bible were five and they reflect two positions. The first group is fundamentalist, taking every word from the Bible as coming directly from God. There is no differentiation between culture and the Word of God in the Bible. They therefore take the stand that the Bible is against women taking positions of leadership. The second group has examined all the leadership roles in the Bible and put them in two categories of roles for men only and roles that can be shared with women. Among the leadership roles that are practiced in the Nkhoma synod, the second group feels that the Bible has allowed the diaconate to be shared with women. Nevertheless, there is a qualification. Christianity has given power to men over women which under no circumstance should be compromised. The other two positions of elder and minister are considered exclusive male positions because they involve authority as far as their understanding of Scriptures are concerned. The argument that a woman cannot be called to a church because she is under the authority of her husband assumes that all Christian husbands do not give

their wives' professions a priority as a way of showing respect, and consideration to one another in their marriage.

5.3.1.4 Cultural bias

Six out of twenty rejected the inclusion of women in leadership positions on a cultural basis. They argued that

it would be difficult for men and women to work together in leadership positions. For example it would not be culturally accepted for a married woman church elder to accompany a male minister or a female minister to be accompanied by a male church elder in one vehicle when going on visitations or to meetings.

If women are brought into church leadership, there will be more cases of church discipline among the leaders as women would be a constant temptation.

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 in the rural area is shown even in agriculture. It is the women who work 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 men who sit and women stand. The men enjoy dominating women. Once there is change in the position of a woman in the rural areas, the church will also change.

The responsibility of church leadership is too heavy for a woman. If a woman becomes a minister, she has two jobs. One of taking care of her home and the second one of taking care of one or two congregations with several out stations. That would be too much work for her.

Who is going to look after the home and the children for her if she becomes a minister?

Asked how come women manage to work in the home and outside in secular employment, the response was that

Church ministry cannot be compared with secular employment because sources of authority are different. God's work cannot be mixed with house work.

These male stereotypes about women are present in all cultures of the world. What is being said here is that culture decides what is women's work and what is men's work. As girls grow up they are taught at home and through chilangizo what is women's work. Cultural demands are interpreted as God's will for women. The place of a woman is in the home, giving birth and rearing children. It is as if God willed it that way. Although God can call a woman to leadership positions in the church, house work is more important. If she is faced with two jobs, she should always stick to the home.

The issue of travel to meetings if women are in leadership positions is the one which was used at the April 1991 general synodical meeting to reject women taking positions of leadership in the Nkhoma synod. Patriarchal culture which is concerned with preserving ruling power in the hands of men at all cost is called upon here against women sharing leadership roles in the church. There is also the assumption that in the Malawian culture, in particular the Chewa culture, that under no circumstance do women have power over men. Another assumption which is being made here is that in Chewa culture, like in most cultures, women are responsible for tempting men and not the other way round.

There is also the assumption that Malawian cultural attitudes towards women are not changing.

5.3.2 Negative responses from women

Only two women out of twenty interviewed had reservations about women having leadership roles in the church. Their responses were not very different from the ones voiced by men. One argument was based on the gender differences between men and women and the other was on women's low self image and prejudice.

It was argued that

men and women are different. Women have their areas and men have also their own areas of work. Therefore women in the Nkhoma synod should be content with serving God through Chigwirizano and managing their homes while men concentrate on leadership roles.

Women cannot take leadership positions even if offered them because women are not aggressive by nature. For a long time women have been silenced by their culture so that even now women do not speak out whenever men are around.

The two responses reflect the impact of patriarchal teachings on women. The responses show what women have been taught over the ages and they have come to believe that what is said about them is true. They have internalized the prejudices against women and have learnt to conform with what is expected of them to the extent that they do not seek change.

5.3.3 Positive responses from men

The positive responses from men were based on what they have seen women doing and what they feel the voice of God is saying now. Only two men out of the twenty interviewed supported the idea of having women in leadership positions. Asked what they thought about women in leadership positions and why, the responses were as follows:

Women are capable of handling leadership roles in the church if only they were given a chance. I have seen women who have gifts of preaching during Chigwirizano meetings. Once ordained, the church will benefit from their gifts. Women are good counsellors. They can handle people's problems very well if they are given leadership positions in the church.

I cannot answer that question because I have also wondered why in our synod women are not given leadership positions. To me there is no difference in having a male or a female as a church leader as long as God is in it. Our emphasis should be to do the will of God and not to please a person.

These men were looking at women as people just as capable as men. Women have the same gifts as men. They mentioned qualities of leadership and counselling that they have seen in women which can be used to the glory of God. For them the will of God does not exclude women from church leadership positions. The will of God, to them, includes what is in the Bible as well as what God is saying now.

5.3.4 Positive responses from Women

Eighteen women out of twenty interviewed felt that women should be included in church leadership roles. Their reasons were based mainly on their experiences with God in their personal faith. The central issue to most of them was being called by God. The following statements illustrate this

In Chigwirizano we are involved in preaching and evangelization. What is the difference between what we are doing and preaching at a Sunday service? I do not understand the sacredness of a Sunday service when the same God uses us during the week to preach and win people, and strengthen those who are weak spiritually.

I refuse to accept that cultural reasons should be used to bar women from taking leadership positions in the church. Church leaders are aiming at pleasing people and not listening to the voice of God. As long as the church leaders fix their eyes on people, women will never have a chance in the Nkhoma synod. The church will never experience the blessings that women can bring.

A woman can be a church leader as long as she has been called by God and she has received the right training for it.

Some of them were elderly women who gave examples from their previous experiences with the church.

I was a deaconess in the Nkhoma synod in the sixties. My work involved collecting Sunday offerings and helping serve the Holy Communion. But a time came when all the deacons and deaconesses were stopped with no explanation. After a while deacons were reinstated. We are still left out. We would like to know why?

Others did not hide their frustrations at the way they feel used by the church leaders who refuse to acknowledge

what God is doing in the synod through women. What they are asking for is recognition by sharing in leadership roles.

I do not understand why the synod is still taking a conservative stand on the role of women in leadership positions. Already we are doing all the work but we do not get credit for it. Nkhoma synod is the largest in CCAP because of Chigwirizano.

In some cases exposure to ordained women from other Reformed churches brought an awareness that made them realize that God can call women to leadership positions. But it is the church leaders who have the power to decide as to whether women should be included or not.

At first I was happy with the present set up of the role of women in the Nkhoma synod. But when I went to a meeting organized by Livingstonia synod and met a woman minister from Zambia, I came to realize that God can use women in leadership positions just as men.

If one looks at women in church leadership as doing God's work and concentrate in fixing one's eyes on God, there should be no problem.

Asked as to whether women have made their desires known to synod, the responses were that the Chigwirizano National Executive had not done so. However in congregations women speak through church elders because elders are representatives of the decision makers of the synod. This implied that the questions that are sent to synod on the inclusion of women in church leadership come from women through church elders who represent them. For some women, they said they do not ask why the church has not included them in leadership positions because the male defined

culture demands that women should show respect to men by keeping quiet.

5.3.5 Evaluation

The number of responses for the inclusion of women in church leadership roles was the same as the number of responses against it. This does not reflect what happens at synodical meetings because when the women's issue is discussed those who are against it have always been in the majority. In this sample the equal numbers have come about as a result of the presence of women. A closer examination of the figures shows that 90% of the responses against women in leadership positions came from men while 90% of the responses for women came from the women themselves. This means that if women were to be present in the synodical meetings and were given equal voting power, the discussions would take a different turn. The voice of women would in all probability, influence the decision in their favour. The 10% of men who were in favour of women in leadership positions indicate just how small the support for women issues is among the men who have the decision power.

An analysis of the negative responses from men shows that the main reason is cultural (33%), the second is Biblical (28%) and the third is church tradition (22%). This means that the majority of the men in the Nkhoma synod are

against women in church leadership positions purely for cultural reasons. This analysis is in line with the reasons given at the April 1991 synodical meeting where the issue of including women in the church leadership was discussed and rejected. A closer examination of the reasons given for church tradition show that they are similar to the Biblical ones. When the two are combined they take up 50% of the negative responses. This may imply the strength of the conservative theology especially on women's issues in the Nkhoma synod.

An analysis of the negative responses by both men and women are based on people's ideas of the image of women in Christianity and in culture, both of which have been shaped by patriarchal ideas. The main Biblical passages which guide responses are Genesis 1 and 3, 1 Corinthians 14:34-35 and I Timothy 2:11-12. The approach taken when interpreting these verses is fundamentalist. It is assumed that a woman cannot do the same church work as men because women are inferior. This means women have no authority over men and therefore cannot take a position of leadership in the church as it would involve ruling men. This point is further strengthened by appealing to the position of a woman in the Chewa culture which they interpret as also rejecting women having power over men. The other issue which has been brought out is that a woman is rationally and morally weak. Her thinking capabilities are not on the same level with men. Therefore

she would not only be a constant temptation to men, she would also not manage to cope with the work. At most, a women's sphere of influence is homemaking. The fact that a woman becomes pregnant is associated with uncleanness, and therefore too unclean to minister. God, who is holy cannot use a pregnant woman because she is unholy.

5.4 Women in theological education

The issue of women sharing in church leadership positions was often linked with women in theological education during the interviews. Nine men out of the eighteen who were against women in leadership positions also mentioned that theological education was for those who would be ordained to the ministry. If women cannot be ordained, they should not receive theological education, they argued. The other nine men did not mention women in theological education at all. All the men who did not talk about women in theological education had little primary education. This may suggest that since they did not have formal education themselves, they did not see the need for theological education for women. In the Nkhoma synod, only ministers receive theological education.

Two women mentioned that they had wanted to go for theological education for personal reasons. They felt that God was calling them to go and learn more so that they could

be equipped for ministry among women. They started experiencing the call of God when they were secondary school students. One of them wanted to change denominations from Presbyterian to Roman Catholic simply because she felt that the door was completely closed for her in the Presbyterian church while in the Roman Catholic church she could at least become a nun. It was pressure from her father that prevented her from becoming a Roman Catholic nun. Both women got married to men who later became ministers. It was when the husbands were getting their theological education that the women had a chance to study since the theological schools have programmes for wives of theological students. When asked to evaluate the type of theological training they received, the following were the answers

My training gave me confidence to share the Word of God with others. However, I feel that our education was of an inferior quality in that I was not prepared to answer most of the theological questions that women ask me.

My training prepared me to motivate other women to witness for Christ but it did not prepare me to explain to women why our church believes in certain things.

The responses of these women show that there are some women in the Nkhoma synod who personally feel called by God to go for theological training. As young women they identified their gifts which they received from the Holy Spirit and they sought ways of being trained so that they could effectively put their gifts to use. Since the church has no opening for them, they have to get married to a man

who will go for theological training in order for them to get trained as well. Secondly, they had to settle for an inferior type of theological training because that was the best that they could have under the present circumstances.

When asked whether they would accept going for theological training in Zomba if the church were to allow them, eleven women responded in the affirmative. However, inadequate entry education was cited as the strongest factor that would inhibit them from going for such theological education. Most of these women only had primary education and the entry qualification for the CCAP theological college is the Malawi School Certificate of Education. The issue of education revealed many frustrations as women told their stories as to why they stopped at primary school level. One particular case deserves to be mentioned here because it portrays how women are still devalued in culture.

I was in standard eight when Alangizi 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 and the man himself. I was told that I was acting against God by refusing 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.

Such stories echo a deep cry coming from many Malawian women. They reflect a realization that women in the Nkhoma synod can make a meaningful contribution in the church if only more women had higher education. Secondly, if the church could provide evening classes for the majority of married women, it would go a long way to improve the status of so many women who have had to cut short their education in order to get married for one reason or another. Thirdly, the present structure of theological institutions prevent married women from study. Because of family commitments, they cannot register at institutions where they would be required to be boarders. The alternative is to study theology either by correspondence or through night schools. At present such options are not available.

Three women mentioned that as much as they would like to go for theological training, there are no career opportunities for them. This led to a discussion on what they thought they could do with theological education if they were not ordained. The jobs mentioned included teaching Religious Education in secondary schools, counselling in church schools, lecturing at the church theological college, work with Chigwirizano women. The women also felt that theological training could still help if they were to be engaged in part-time church related jobs.

In other words the women were saying that even if they were not ordained, they would like to have theological education. At the same time they realized that the church would be required to open up some of its current jobs to women. Except for nursing and primary school teaching, Nkhoma synod has only three women working full time at its other five institutions. This situation is not by accident but by design for the synod made clear that it has no work for young girls in any of its departments, the only exception being the hospital.⁴

All the issues raised by the women demand that the church change its attitude towards the role of women in the church. This is important because in order for one to go for theological education at the Zomba Theological College, besides qualifications, one has to be sent by one's church. This means that as long as the church takes a negative attitude towards the inclusion of its women in theological education on the same level with men, Nkhoma synod women will continue to lag behind the other synods. Fortunately, now that the University of Malawi has introduced a degree in Theology, Nkhoma synod girls who are in school and are interested in theology, have a chance. What remains is to encourage them to move in that direction. Eventually this could work to the advantage of the synod in that when the

⁴ Synod meeting of April 1985, minute S.1898.

synod does decide to ordain women, there will already be some women with theological education. Those who feel that God is calling them to full time service in the church will come forward for ordination.

In the case of eight men and five women, just the mention of women and theological education raised the case of Mary Chinkhwita, to whom we have referred earlier in chapter three. Some men felt that Mary had the right to feel disappointed when after her studies her male classmates had better houses, salaries, and other benefits than her just because they were ordained and she was not. However, she made her working conditions worse when she appealed to a politician to intervene on her behalf for since then her relationship with the church deteriorated. Nevertheless, these interviewees felt that it is wrong to use the case of Mary to bar all women from being sent for theological training.

Others felt that Mary was not a balanced person. Although she competed well with other students in her class, it is unfortunate that the synod started with her in sending women for theological training. The fact that she got married to a politician and that her marriage ended in divorce made her relationship with the women she was working with difficult.

Yet some men shifted the blame from Mary to the educational level of Nkhoma synod ministers at the time she graduated. They argued that the level of understanding of ministers to issues of women and education was limited as they themselves were victims of a low missionary education in theology. They felt that had it been now, after some ministers in the Nkhoma synod have received graduate and post graduate degrees from outside the country, perhaps her case could have been handled differently.

Two elderly women who worked with Mary when she was in training were in favour of sending girls for theological education because they appreciated her level of understanding of the Word of God. They argued that theological education freed Mary to interact with men at the same level. Yet two wives of ministers viewed Mary's freedom as disrespect to their husbands.

The reactions of this sample to Mary's case says a lot about experiences of women in what the church and society has termed men's jobs. Her intellectual capabilities were considered to be at the same level with her classmates. However, because she was not ordained, her conditions of service were lower than those of her classmates. Her outcry against such injustices was not heard. Instead emphasis was put on her methods to get attention which were deemed as overstepping the church. While her educational level was

appreciated by some, to other women she was a threat simply because she was, at a later stage, single. Being divorced was a stigma which she had to endure. Some women feared that their husbands would be dating her. To many men she is a symbol of how the church tried to include women, but women failed. Mary may have reacted wrongly in some cases but it cannot be denied that she was a victim of circumstances not favourable to the presence of women working full time in the church.

5.5 Chigwirizano

All the people interviewed had something positive to say about Chigwirizano. However, there were differences between men and women as to what those positive issues are. Men concentrated on what Chigwirizano is doing for the church, while the women looked at what Chigwirizano is doing for themselves personally, as well as for the church.

Eight men rated Chigwirizano as number one among all the church's sections that are involved in increasing church membership and building the quality of church members. Twelve men saw Chigwirizano's main purpose as meeting the financial needs of congregations. They appreciated all the development projects in which the women are involved. All the twenty women interviewed mentioned Chigwirizano's primary role as evangelism. Fund raising was secondary. The

women went on to mention the things that Chigwirizano is doing for them. Most of them mentioned being a member of Chigwirizano as helping them to stand firm in their Christian faith. This, they felt, is particularly true in the running of their homes, and personal relationships with people.

On the issue of Mkhlapakati, (male representative of the congregation) at Chigwirizano meetings, all the men agreed that the position was necessary. Among women, it was the wives of ministers who appreciated and understood the role of Mkhlapakati. However, there were a variety of reasons given as to why there should be Mkhlapakati at Chigwirizano. The reasons included the following:

Women quarrel a lot, the presence of a man helps to keep order.

Mkhlapakati are like men in families who help in the control of the home.

They help to sort out problems among women.

The seven women who were against the idea felt that Mkhlapakati were like policemen. Their presence at Chigwirizano made the women feel that the synod does not trust them. They also felt that they would like to participate in synodical meetings so that they can contribute to making decisions that affect them just as it was the case in the sixties.

The choice of Chigwirizano leadership was another issue that divided both men and women. Eleven men and seven women did not see anything wrong with the policy that ministers wives only should be leaders of Chigwirizano Executive Committee while nine men and thirteen women opposed this.

5.5.1 Evaluation

The differences in opinion between men and women on what they think is the greatest contribution of Chigwirizano might be due to the fact that some men would not want to give women the credit for the spiritual growth of the church because that would weaken their argument of not including women in leadership positions. Secondly, the women were talking about first hand experiences while the men were commenting on what they saw. The fact that there were only positive responses from women for Chigwirizano may indicate the emphasis of Chigwirizano's teaching to all its members.

Responses on Mkhlapakati show that there is a shift in what the synod says is the role of Mkhlapakati and what actually happens. While church policy says that Mkhlapakati are representatives of the church to Chigwirizano, in practice they get involved in the actual running of Chigwirizano. Secondly, there was no difference between the reasons given by men and women as to why there should be Mkhlapakati. The assumption underlying the reasons was that women cannot manage to run Chigwirizano on

their own. They need men to help them. In this way one sees the perpetuation of patriarchal structures even in what is supposed to be a women's only alliance. The women who supported the presence of Mkhlapakati may represent how male domination has succeeded in brain washing women that on their own they can do nothing. These women seem to be saying that men are the only ones who have the ability to control women's affairs. Those who oppose are rightly saying that since they are members of the church, they do not need representatives. If there is a need for synodical representation from Chigwirizano, then it should be a woman.

The divisions on the issue of who should be a leader in the Chigwirizano National Executive indicate that if women were present where the decisions were being made, the results would be difficult to predict as the women do not seem to be speaking with the same voice. However the fact that combined responses against the decision amount to 45% while those who were in favour came to 55% could imply a rejection of the decision. Again this may be taken as an indication that the presence of women among the decision makers in the synod would bring balance and a women's perspective to issues.

5.6 Women in the church and culture

5.6.1 Chilangizo

All the twenty women interviewed had gone through chilangizo. All of them appreciated the things they learnt through chilangizo. They all wanted chilangizo in the Nkhoma synod to continue. The strongest reason for wanting to see it continue was that it helps women avoid traditional practices which are regarded as evil and sets the Christian free to depend on God for protection. It was argued that it is wrong to mix chinamwali's teaching with Christian teachings for the two cannot go together. They mentioned that the major negative thing about traditional practices was that they are based on fear. Both men and women felt that traditional practices are still being practiced by some Christians, especially weak ones. It was reported that some people still do not know that some traditional practices are not accepted in the Nkhoma synod. This is because some people get converted while they are already adults. The only initiation ceremony that they know is the traditional one, therefore they continue to instruct their children in the traditional initiation ceremony before going to the Christian one.

In the Nkhoma synod, therefore, chilangizo was perceived as helping the majority of members to know God and

reject traditional practices that show dependance on mystical powers. At the same time there was a note of pride in their culture in that chilangizo's roots are still in the Chewa culture. Nevertheless there seems to be a need for another form of chilangizo for parents who became Christians after they were already married.

The second popular reason for wanting chilangizo to continue was because those girls who followed chilangizo teachings, get married in church, and set up good Christian homes. This was attributed to the fact that chilangizo instills in the girls fear of pregnancies outside marriage. Instilling of obedience to parents and elderly people was also viewed positively as one way of helping the girls to avoid destructive activities in life. For that reason some women were in favour of the old traditional practice of girls going to their Mlangizi every month to show her that they were menstruating. For those who rejected this, they felt that it was sufficient for Alangizi to check brides for pregnancy a week before their wedding day. While it is good to uphold high moral standards, the women did not see these procedures as subjecting each other to oppression. At another level, one cannot fail to see patriarchal influence in the checking of the virginity of a bride-to-be while the groom is trusted to have maintained Christian moral standards. Furthermore scrapping of the requirement for

compulsory checking of pregnancy before wedding, would avoid cheating as is sometimes the case.

Only one woman viewed the instilling of obedience to the girls negatively. She associated this teaching at chilangizo with women's passiveness in not speaking out against the patriarchal structures that bar women from taking meaningful leadership roles in the church. Although she was a product of Nkhoma synod, exposure to higher education enabled her to look at the oppressiveness of some of the elements of chilangizo towards women. In opposition to obedience, she favoured respect of one another as the basis for a healthy relationship between Christian men and women. This indicates that exposure to critical thinking and analysis of one's situation is of great importance in the liberation of women from oppressive elements in their culture. Her analysis also led her to interpret anew the biblical passages that ask a woman to obey their husbands. Thus an analysis of culture affected the interpretation of the Bible in a liberating direction.

The third element that was mentioned in favour of the continuation of chilangizo was that it helps women to understand the functions of their bodies. This has proved to be very important since most of the traditional practices reveal a misunderstanding of women's bodies. This point should be understood in the light of the fact that the

majority of women do not have a chance to go for secondary education where such things are taught in Malawi. Therefore chilangizo equips such women with knowledge about themselves which they could not acquire from anywhere else.

On the negative side, it was the Alangizi that came under attack. It was felt that sometimes the choice of Alangizi is not done with great care. There have been many cases where Alangizi introduce traditional teachings in chilangizo, thereby confusing the girls. There have also been cases of Alangizi being cruel to the initiates. In the case of preparing women for marriage, two of the interviewees complained that some Alangizi just give the girl the Chilangizo handbook to read for herself if she knows how to read without explanations. In such cases the girls do not feel that they have been helped adequately. Thus while the training of Alangizi in the Nkhoma synod is appreciated, there is still a need to have closer supervision of how Alangizi are doing their job.

On the issue of Kitchen Party and chilangizo, only four of the women interviewed had knowledge of Kitchen Party. The fact that they were all urban dwellers was an indication that Kitchen Party was indeed an urban phenomenon. It never penetrated the rural areas of the Nkhoma synod. All four had participated in both Kitchen Party and chilangizo but favoured chilangizo. Their arguments against Kitchen Party

were that some of the women who came to Kitchen Party were not Christians. As a result, their advice to the prospective bride was not always helpful and some of them were coming to the party drunk. They mentioned that advantages of chilangizo against Kitchen Party were: Alangizi are professionals while at a Kitchen Party anyone can give advice; chilangizo is restricted to Nkhoma synod Alangizi while Kitchen Party is open to women from all churches; and Alangizi for the prospective bride are few while the number of people giving instructions are many at a Kitchen Party. Nevertheless, all the four women felt that chilangizo could learn from Kitchen Party the idea of giving the prospective bride gifts for her kitchen.

5.3.2 Evaluation

Although the sample was only of twenty women, it is clear from the responses that women still support the introduction of chilangizo in the Nkhoma synod and they would like to see it continue. Many understand its contents and cherish it. What the women have not done is to analyze chilangizo critically and see whether it has some elements that are oppressive or not. It was only one person, with higher education who was critical about its content. This supports the idea that if more women in the Nkhoma synod were educated and made aware of patriarchal oppression, they would be in a better position to analyze chilangizo and

reform it in a way more helpful to women. While chilangizo's handbooks have been edited three times since chilangizo was introduced in the Nkhoma synod, the changes made were not done in the light of the liberation of women from cultural and biblical oppression. There is therefore a need for a revising of their content from a women's perspective.

The women interviewed did not mind who was involved in deciding what should be the content of chilangizo or who chose Alangizi. This may imply that they agreed with the synod's way of making decisions for them, or that they have never been provoked to think for themselves on such issues. However, they showed concern on how Alangizi do their work, which is an indication that they are concerned about the quality of chilangizo.

5.6.3 Bride wealth or chiongo

In a sample of eighteen married women, five had chiongo paid for them. At the time of research one was staying at her husband's village and had no problems with that. She was of the opinion that she felt secure having moved to her husband's village, because her husband had no excuse for not helping her financially as some men do when they are at their wives villages. The second one had moved back to her village because her husband had married a second wife. The other three were staying in town where their husbands were

working and had not experienced staying at the husband's villages. Nevertheless, they all said that even though chiongo was paid, they did not feel forced to remain married if things did not work out.

Fifteen of the women interviewed were against chiongo. They had no objections in moving from their villages to follow their husbands at their working place, but they expressed a desire to settle eventually in their own villages. An example of the major reason given against chiongo and chitengwa (settling at the husband's village) was that marriage is viewed as entered into freely. A woman marries out of choice and there should be nothing to tie you down if you want a divorce. This is the type of thinking that the early missionaries were against in matrilineal cultures. They held strongly to the Biblical teaching that divorce is only permissible in the case of unchastity.

These women also mentioned that the major problem with moving to town or to the husband's village soon after marriage was that husbands no longer feel obliged to build houses at their wives' villages, as is the Chewa custom. Women are then at a disadvantage if the marriage does not work out as they have to take their children with them and there is no home to go to.

Both men and women viewed the synod's unbanning of chiongo with relief because it helped Christians to stop cheating and be honest. They were all aware that chiongo continued although the synod had banned it. They also felt that parents and uncles are now more moderate in their demands for the cost of chiongo than before it was unbanned.

Among the men, they felt that cases of chiongo and chitengwa have increased more than before because of the economic development of the country. With an increase in the country's population, family land is becoming smaller so that families have no land to share with men who marry and want to move to their wives' villages as required by tradition. The educated men and women stated that they would like to buy land and settle at a neutral place.

5.6.4 Evaluation

The responses indicate that the sample did not include women who have been abused by the practice of chiongo. This may be due to the fact that the sample was small. It might also be due to the fact that the practice of chiongo among the Chewa is still low. In the sample, chiongo cases were only 25%. The responses also suggest that the negative effects of chiongo on women have been minimized by the fact that more couples were living on their own in work places. What came out clearly was the fact that for a Chewa woman

chiongo does not take away her cultural freedom to escape from abuse in marriage. It also became clear that the synod's banning and unbanning of chiongo was not because they had women in mind, but in order to prevent financial exploitation among Christians. It is on this basis that all the interviewees supported the synod's decision to reinstate chiongo.

5.6.5 Child marriages

In a sample of forty, thirty-eight were married. Of these twelve could not remember how old they were when they married. Eight of the twelve were women and four were men. The fact that they could not remember might be due to illiteracy as their educational levels were also below standard three or no education at all. There is also a possibility that some of them married at a very young age but did not want to talk about it as it is against the synod's regulations. The other twenty-six interviewees married between the ages of seventeen and twenty-nine. The age range for men was nineteen to twenty-nine while for women it was seventeen to twenty-nine. This implies that those who knew their age when they got married were within the required age of the synod. Education and not the synod's regulation was cited as the major reason for late marriages. For women with low or no formal western education, late menstruation was given as the reason for not getting married before the age of seventeen. These women stated that due to

poor diet they menstruated between the ages of sixteen and seventeen. Such girls got married at the age of nineteen and therefore gave birth to their first child at the age of twenty or later. They said that with improved diets things have changed. Four of the women interviewed had daughters who started menstruation at the age of twelve. Three of the girls became pregnant between the ages of thirteen to fifteen. This information implies that teenage pregnancies should be a major concern of the church now rather than early marriages.

All the interviewees mentioned that in the rural areas, some female church members are still getting married below the synod's age requirement of sixteen. The major reason given by six ministers for agreeing to marry under-age couples was that couples otherwise eloped and the church thus lost members. For the women, avoidance of pregnancy before marriage was the only reason given for allowing girls to marry before the age of sixteen. Teenage pregnancies and abortions were major concerns for mothers as expressed during a Presbytery Chigwirizano Bible study that the researcher attended. This emphasizes the gravity of the problem of teenage pregnancy.

During the survey, it was also discovered that all women interviewed rejected child marriages. They argued that it is not safe for the teenage girls to become pregnant for

they have problems when delivering babies. A second reason was that when girls get married while very young they are not ready to handle the problems of marriage. There was an assumption that most of such marriages end up in divorce. It was argued that even if the girls gave birth safely, they are not old enough to look after husbands and children as the girls themselves are too immature.

Chilangizo was seen by the interviewees as the only solution to child marriages and teenage pregnancies outside marriage. Both men and women argued that those girls who follow the instructions given at chilangizo have a deeper knowledge of their bodies as the temple of the Holy Spirit, and therefore avoid situations that would force them to become sexually active at an early stage. This response strengthens the importance of chilangizo for Nkhoma synod's women. The fact that none of the interviewees mentioned sending girls to school as a way of solving the problem of child marriages indicates that Nkhoma synod women do not consider the length of time spent at school as a solution. Perhaps the increase in girls dropping out of primary school as shown in the research conducted by Kadzombe might be the reason here.

⁵ E.D. Kadzombe, 'Causes of Primary School Drop-Outs' A paper presented at the National Seminar on Problems of Primary School Drop-outs, 8th-10th August, 1988, Parliament Buildings, Zomba.

5.6.6 Evaluation

From the responses, it is clear that child marriages still occur in the Nkhoma synod. However the interviewees showed that the issue of child marriages should be weighed together with the problem of teenage pregnancies which they feel is on the increase. While mothers are concerned about the problems of child marriages and appreciate the synod's regulations, they seem to indicate that the major problem in the synod is teenage pregnancies. This shows that the presence of women among the decision makers in the synod would represent the problems of women more accurately.

5.6.7 Polygamy

All the interviewees spoke negatively about polygamy. They acknowledged that although the church is against polygamy many Christians are leaving the church because of polygamy. The reasons for the increase in cases of polygamy that they know were the same for both men and women. The chief reason given by men was the fact that the president of the country gave it his blessing, and had encouraged men to take more than one wife. A second reason was that of change in the status of people which has resulted from the economic development of the country.

The woman chief interviewed observed that Christians are introducing a new type of polygamy. She noted that in her village young girls are being made pregnant by some church leaders who pay the girls not to mention them as responsible. She felt that this was child abuse and prostitution which devalued the dignity of women and needed to be condemned strongly. The children are being taken advantage of because of poverty.

Sixteen women spoke negatively about polygamy for two reasons, one spiritual, the other economic. Spiritually, it was felt that the mental torture that women in polygamous marriages experience make it impossible for them to have a clear mind and develop a meaningful relationship with God. Economically, women in a polygamous relationship who have no other source of income find themselves in a situation of shortages of essentials for themselves and their children. Their husbands do not support them adequately as there are too many children to look after. This information contradicts the commonly held belief that sometimes women are forced to seek a polygamous relationship for financial reasons.

A story from the experiences of one Christian woman in the sample will help to substantiate the points raised above. Joana Yohane Naphiri was born in 1966. She got married in 1983 at the age of seventeen. Her husband was

then a church elder. Chiongo was involved in their marriage arrangement so she moved to her husband's village. In 1989 her husband took a second wife. Since the church is against polygamy, her husband surrendered his position and membership of the church. Since he decided to take the second wife, she was asked to move to her village where he still comes once in a while. She is bitter towards polygamy in that it is affecting her Christian life and it makes her feel rejected. She cannot feed and take care of the children alone. She only has primary education, and her only source of income is farming. Although she is twenty five, she does not want to divorce her husband and get married again because she has four children. She feels that it would be unfair to her children if she were to get married again. Her church minister advised her to maintain her marriage, ignore her husband and concentrate on her Christian life. She is finding it hard to concentrate on her Christian life as she has too many problems. She is still praying and hoping that her husband will one day divorce the other woman and come back to her to stay.

5.6.8 Evaluation

The responses show that polygamy is not only a phenomenon of the past, but is still present even among some members of the Nkhoma synod. Women and their children are suffering as a result. What seems to be worse is the

unfaithfulness of Christian men which leads to the destruction of young girls' future. The plight of used and deserted girls is the concern of mothers, just as the teenage pregnancies mentioned before.

The low education of the majority of women in Malawi makes them vulnerable to polygamy and child abuse. At the same time some women who are in polygamous relations still suffer economically. Perhaps economic independence which could come with higher education would go a long way to help women in a polygamous marriage to obtain self-worth and avoid being taken advantage of.

The fact that there was no deserted married woman in the sample might be due to the size of the sample and not the disappearance of the problem. What is evident from the sample is the appearance of the abuse of young girls.

The reopening of Malingunde Women Centre by the synod in January 1992 is appreciated because it is aimed at enabling women with primary education to learn skills for a balanced living. However, the major disadvantage is that although the women will pay fees for the six months training, they will not get certificates which they can use to get a job and earn some money and thereby acquire some form of economic independence to protect themselves from abuse.

5.6.9 Widowhood property and remarriage.

Four of the women interviewed became widows between 1974-1988. Four reasons were identified for the suffering of widows in the synod. These were having large families, low levels of education, the inability to get a job, and the deposal of family property by relations of the deceased husband.

Of the four widows interviewed, the number of children that they were left with were between six and eight. In all four cases the children were of school going ages. Of the four women, only one had a good paying job by Malawian standards by the time of the death of her husband. She had junior secondary school education. The other three women had primary school education, two of whom had done some courses where they got certification. Two were married to Nkhoma synod ministers. Therefore, they were both getting half of their deceased husbands pensions. Both of them were given jobs within the synod's institutions after the death of their husbands. The fourth one was also given a job by the synod after the death of her husband because for a long time her husband had worked in one of the synod's institutions although he was working elsewhere at the time of his death.

All four women were grateful to the Nkhoma synod for the support they received after being bereaved. All of them mentioned Chigwirizano women as their greatest helpers in time of need. In fact one of them joined Chigwirizano as a result of the support she got from Chigwirizano women. For the three who are working within the synod, their greatest complaint was the very low salaries that they get from the synod. For the two who receive their husband's pension from the synod, they complained of late payment of pensions sometimes waiting as long as four months. All four women complained about the heavy burden of educating their children. Although there is a minute which says that the synod would help in the education of the children of the deceased ministers, none of the women benefited from that minute.

Of the four widows, two lost their property completely to the relations of their deceased husbands. In both cases the families were living in a house that belonged to the husband's employer. All the interviewees understood the loss of property by a widow to the relations of the husband as part of the Chewa culture which says that the children do not belong to the husband's family. Therefore when his relations take the property they do not care what will happen to the children as they are not their responsibility. The widows involved found the whole experience humiliating because they felt stripped of all the possessions acquired

while the couple was together. They felt that such behaviour destroys the relationship that was there between the women's family and that of their husbands. Women do not feel seeking help from the church on the property issue could help because the church is led by men who are sometimes involved in the taking away of property from the wives of their relations. In all four cases none of the husbands had written a will to protect their wives. In fact all the forty people interviewed were not aware of the churches regulation that men should write wills.

Although all four women are free to remarry, they have decided not to because of the large number of children under their care. All four women feel that it is difficult to find a man who would accept them and their children.

5.6.10 Evaluation

In the four cases studied, where there was economic independence as a result of education and the ability to get a decent job, the suffering as a result of loss of a husband was minimized. Large families contributed to the widows suffering. This implies that economic independence among women and having smaller number of children could make the lives of widows more bearable.

The church is to be commended for employing the widows of their deceased ministers wives. However, although it is appreciated that the church is not a profit making organization and in general church workers are poorly paid, delaying payment of pension to widows cannot be excused. This is especially true when there is a pension fund that comes from foreign sources but the money is used for what the church considers to be more urgent. The decision on what is urgent to the administration of the church is made by men who do not take into account the suffering of the widows. The widows are voiceless in the church. Those who have complained through writing are labeled ungrateful and trouble makers. This is another example of the lack of representation of women among the decision makers in the synod. If the church does not provide an example of taking care of the widows of its ministers, what is the fate of the widow of an ordinary church member?

The interviewees have shown that the problem of degrading widows through depossessing them of the property jointly owned with their deceased husbands is a reality in the Nkhoma synod. The fact that all the people interviewed were not aware of the synod's regulation about writing wills to protect widows is an indication that no one takes the problems of the widows seriously. The Christian men, especially church leaders, seem to be sending a silent message that they do not care what would happen to their

wives and children if they were to die first. It seems that if there is to be any change in this area, the voiceless need to get up and gather courage to speak for themselves as God is already on their side. Taking away of property from widows should be condemned even though it is part of culture for it leads to the suffering of Children of God. Taking away of property from widows should be viewed as stealing.

5.7 Conclusion

By way of summary, we have observed that women's attitudes towards the policies of the synod on matters that affect them sometimes coincide and at other times differ. On cultural practices women agree with the synod on the introduction of chilangizo and the banning of Kitchen Party in the urban areas of the synod. The majority of the women agree with the content of chilangizo. Yet we have also observed that the majority of women do not have the skills for analyzing the content of chilangizo from a women's perspective which would enrich self worth among the women in the Nkhoma synod.

We have also observed that women in the Nkhoma synod are not threatened by the reintroduction of chiongo because the majority of the women had not experienced the negative effects that chiongo could bring to women. At the same time we have also noted that the banning and later unbanning of chiongo in the synod had nothing to do with protection of

women by the synod from possible abusive cultural practices to women.

The survey has shown that women agree with the synod's banning of child marriages. Nevertheless, for the majority of the women it is teenage pregnancy that worries them most. This may mean that projects that would be specifically designed by the synod to address this problem could get women's total support.

It has also been indicated that while women agree with the synod's banning of polygamy, experience shows that some Christians are still leaving the church because of polygamy. The survey has also shown that there are Christian women in the synod who are still suffering from the evils of polygamy. At the same time women observed that some Christian men are involved in the sexual abuse of girls that result in teenage pregnancies and the birth of unwanted children. The low education of women in the synod has contributed to male exploitation.

We have observed that the experiences of four women indicate that the suffering of widows in the Nkhoma synod is a serious reality. The contribution of the synod to the widows of its deceased ministers has been noted and the cries due to the major financial shortfalls voiced. While respecting the financial difficulties of the church, we

require a special consideration of the widows. The fact that all the interviewees had not heard about the synod's ruling on writing a will suggest lack of concern among the all male decision makers for the property of widows. A suggested solution might be to include the drafting of the will at the time of marriage.

A more serious problem which comes out clearly here is the fact that the problem of Chewa women is not simply living in a patriarchal system, despite their matrilineal origins, but rather as caught between a combination of both patriarchy and matriliney in which, in various contexts, they receive the short end of both systems. For example, in the case of the widows, both systems were operating to women's disadvantage. On the one hand the accumulated property of the marriage was assumed to belong to the husband's relatives, and neither the wife nor children received property, as in a matrilineal system in which not only the wife but his children do not belong to the husband's lineage.

The biggest differences between the policies of the synod and the attitudes of the majority of women were on the issues of the participation of women in church leadership positions, theological education, the presence of Mkhalapakati in Chigwirizano, and the choice of leaders in the Executive Committee of Chigwirizano. All the issues of serious contention have something to do with the sharing of power between men and women in the church.

With the results of the survey in mind, we can argue that the inclusion of women in the synod's decision-making mechanism on the same level with men could make a major difference to the quality of decisions made, especially but not only, on issues that affect women. A systematic conscientization of both men and women to women's issues is necessary in the synod in order to bring out a spirit of tolerance and understanding. Conscientization could start at different levels. Theological institutions would be one important place. Conscientized ministers would also do the same for their congregations. Most of all, an alliance of women in the synod would present an excellent opportunity for women to be made more critically aware of issues and speak out for themselves. The mobilization of women for this specific purpose and an examination of their theology will form the basis of the next chapter.

CHAPTER 6

NKHOMA SYNOD WOMEN AND ECUMENICAL AWARENESS OF WOMEN'S ISSUES

6.1 Introduction

A wind of self awareness is blowing among Christian women in Africa. African women are becoming conscious that they have been on the periphery of the church and society for too long. They have accepted their sufferings in the church and society as from God. They have come to the realization that sexism in the church and society is sin. This has made them break their silence and speak out in protest. They have also realized that their strength is in the mobilization of ecumenical sisterhood organizations. This has meant going beyond church women's groups. Through these organizations they are beginning to re-read the Bible and discover that what society and the church is today is not what is intended by the gospel.

The aim of this chapter is to show that Nkhoma synod women have had limited exposure to the ecumenical mobilization of African Christian women. This may explain why they have not initiated change in their own position in the church. Moreover few women from Nkhoma synod who have been exposed to the mobilization of African church women, have not passed on information learnt to the grassroots. Thus the majority of Nkhoma synod women are isolated from

the changes that are beginning to happen among church women elsewhere. An examination of Nkhoma synod's women involvement with groups such as Malawian Women in Theology, Pan African Christian Women Alliance and the Decade of Churches in Solidarity with Women will illustrate this.

6.2 Ecumenical mobilization of African women

6.2.1 Nkhoma synod women and Malawian Women in Theology

The first group of Malawian Women in Theology was organized by the Church of Central Africa Presbyterian, Blantyre synod, Chigodi Women's Center in September, 1990. The consultation was sponsored by the Blantyre synod with the intention of getting together all Malawian women in theology to know each other and identify their concerns so that they could make their voices heard in the church and society. The invitations were sent to all members of Christian Council of Malawi. This could have meant an ecumenical group. However, the women who responded to the invitation were sixteen, mainly Presbyterians from Blantyre synod. Out of the total, Livingstonia synod sent three participants, Mrs E.C, Munthali, Mrs M. Mwale -products of Zomba theological College and Mrs C. Phiri-a product of Livingstonia theological school. Nkhoma synod sent only one participant, Mrs E. Kagundu,- a product of Yoswa school for

wives of theological students. The fact that all participants were Presbyterian may imply that the other denominations were not ready to get involved. On the other hand, the small number of attendants may reflect just how few women theologians there are in Malawi because chances of women getting theological education are so limited. Thus the number of participants at the meeting was itself making a statement to the churches that women in Malawi have an enormous struggle just to get an opportunity to study theology.

The Malawian women theologians met under the theme of 'Called to be the women of God.' At this meeting they shared experiences and named the various forms of oppression, prejudice and injustice against women in the church and society in Malawi. In particular, their concerns included issues of women's identity before God, their call in the family and church as children of God, and their economic predicaments. All the issues were examined from their faith perspective and cultural context. As a result of the discussions, these women theologians felt the need to produce Bible study materials based on issues affecting women so that all church women should have a new understanding of who they are before God. In order to continue the process of consciousness raising they planned to have similar meetings at a presbytery and local congregation level. As a way of emphasizing their desire to

built a community of men and women in the church and society, they decided to adopt an inclusive approach by attempting fifty-fifty participation between men and women at their future meetings.

The Malawian women theologians saw the need for consciousness raising of other church women to support other women as they propose to start negotiating for increased participation of women in the church leadership and decision making positions in the church. This was crucial because women are in the majority in the church and yet for a long time they have been conditioned to look up to men only for leadership. In some cases women have opposed the inclusion of women in leadership positions in the church. This comes from women who have internalized their own oppression in the domestic sphere and in the church.

The women theologians asked the churches to reconsider their stand on the ordination of women to eucharistic ministry. They asked that women who are called by God to ministry to be given space to respond to God's call. They also demanded that the role of single women in the church be accepted and defined even though Malawian culture does not recognize them. They demanded that the church should take a

stand as regards the legal rights of women in relation to ownership of property and land.¹

6.2.2 Evaluation

The idea of Malawian women theologians coming together to identify their concerns was in response to the inauguration of the Institute of African Women in Religion and Culture which is being run by the Circle of African Women theologians. It is not clear to us as to why they did not call themselves the Malawian Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians. For Blantyre synod, it was possible for women to organize such meetings and think along those lines because the leadership of the synod is sympathetic to the plight of women in the church and is making efforts to contribute to their uplifting.

The Rev S.S. Ncozana, who is the current General Secretary of the synod is of the opinion 'that male dominance in the church is traditional, but has no place in the kingdom of God. It is not part of God's plan, but of human making.'² This is supported by the fact that in the CCAP it is Blantyre synod only that has established a center

¹ Report of the Malawian Women in Theology Event, Grace Bandawe, Blantyre, 1990.

² This was said in the Rev S.S. Ncozana's opening remarks when he was officially opening the Women in theology event on Tuesday September 25 1990 at Grace Bandawe Conference Center.

for women with full time theologically trained female staff. They are also the only ones who have sent more women for theological training at Zomba theological college (although they do not count more than five). Furthermore, since 1987 Blantyre synod invited a Canadian woman minister, the Rev. Peggy Reid, to come and help with consciousness raising of men and women, laity and clergy, about women working in full time church leadership roles. Besides the Rev Peggy Reid, Blantyre synod has, on several occasions, invited women ministers from Reformed traditions in Africa to come and talk to the synod's women so that they can see for themselves that God also uses women in leadership positions. For example, Rev Jane Kamau from the Presbyterian church of East Africa was present at the Women in Theology Event in 1990. Her attendance was intended to encourage women in the church as she shared her experiences.

Unfortunately the Rev Ncozana's liberal ideas on the full participation of women in church leadership positions are not supported by the majority of the church leaders of Blantyre synod. This was reflected when he failed to get the two thirds majority needed for a positive decision on the ordination of women in the Blantyre synod at the 1991 Synodical General Assembly.

By participating in the Women in Theology Event, the Nkhoma synod delegate became aware that there are more women

theologians from other synods than in her own. She learnt that it is important for women to get together and talk about their experiences -naming their oppression and finding ways to get rid of it in order to create a whole community of men and women working together in the church and society. She saw the importance of having supportive leadership in the synod that creates space for women to theologize. She also received encouragement when she saw role models of women ministers in other Reformed churches from outside as well as within the continent.

Empowered with such knowledge she went back to her base with a strong desire to raise the consciousness of women in her synod. But she felt overwhelmed by the attitudes of both men and women from her synod. This was mainly because she was then being trained to become a Chigwirizano worker. In her class, they started off with three students. One of them was withdrawn because of differences in theology. This raised the fear that any challenge of the synod's theology could mean losing her chance. To make it worse, she had just lost a husband and was struggling to fend for her seven children.³ Besides, she was aware of the fact that Nkhoma synod has always disapproved of the other synod's liberal theology.⁴

³ The information in this paragraph is based on the interviews I had with Mrs E. Kagundu during the time I was conducting field research at Nkhoma in August, 1991.

⁴ C. M. Pauw, 1980, 398.

It seems, therefore, that the need for more women theologians in the Nkhoma synod is an acute and urgent one. This would go a long way in theologically trained women encouraging each other to speak on women issues to other women within the synod and also to involve the male leadership who may be sympathetic with the plight of women in the synod.

6.2.3 Nkhoma synod women and Pan African Christian Women's Alliance (PACWA)

A group of Nkhoma synod women participated in the launching of the continental Pan African Christian Women Alliance⁵ (here-after it will be referred to as PACWA) at the Kenyatta International Conference Center, in Nairobi Kenya in August 5-12, 1989. They met under the theme of 'Our time has come' based on the biblical story of queen Esther. PACWA is the product of women delegates to the Association of Evangelicals of Africa and Madagascar General Assembly which was held in Lusaka Zambia in September, 1987. After the General Assembly, a desk was established to follow up

⁵ At the conference held in Nairobi in 1989, the Christian women called themselves the Pan African Christian Women Assembly. At the regional conference which was held in Zomba, Malawi, they agreed to drop Assembly and replaced it with Alliance because they are still part of the total assembly of Association of Evangelicals of Africa and Madagascar.

the resolutions agreed upon during the pre-PACWA consultations and in all future meetings. Mrs Judy Mbugua, from Kenya became the first chair-person of PACWA Executive Committee.

By joining PACWA, this group of Nkhoma synod women aligned themselves to its objectives which are

To stop the tide of ungodly liberalism and secularism with its resultant materialism. To assert the true dignity of women as found in Jesus Christ and contained in the Bible. To inject into African society Biblical morals and values through women, who are the mothers of any society. To deliver Africa from decadence and ultimate collapse. To make disciples of African Nations for Christ in the continent of Africa.⁶

The Nkhoma synod women also joined in the covenant of PACWA. Malawi PACWA was launched in February, 1990 at Kwacha International Conference Center, in Blantyre. A group of Nkhoma synod women were present there too. They pledged with the other Malawian Christian women to witness for Christ in Malawi by involving themselves in providing moral and spiritual support to AIDS patients, raising money to build an orphanage and a hostel to re-educate girls who drop out from school due to pregnancy. It was not surprising therefore to see Nkhoma synod women among the delegates to the Regional Conference of PACWA which was held in the Great Hall at Chancellor College, Zomba in August, 1991. As each country present gave reports of what they had done since the

⁶ PACWA covenant, A Commission of Association of Evangelicals Africa and Madagascar on Women Affairs, 1990, 2.

Nairobi conference, the women were empowered by the experiences of what is happening in the other countries in southern Africa.

6.2.4 Evaluation

Through PACWA, more Nkhoma synod women have learnt to be part of African Christian women from different denominations. They have learnt that the time has come for African church women to 'emerge from the shadows to speak up for themselves and define in their own way the woman-man relationship in the heart of the church and society.'⁷ This call has made women go beyond the activities of church women organizations and became more involved with women's issues at an ecumenical level.

The conference theme of PACWA, 'our time has come' presupposed that since Christianity was introduced in Africa, African women were not actively involved in improving their social status in the church and society. In the words of Dr Tokunboh Adeyemo, the General Secretary of the Association of Evangelicals of Africa and Madagascar,

Christianity has been in Africa for more than a hundred years. Some of the early African leaders had vision of Africa as a Christian continent but they lost their visions through putting emphasis on authority and

⁷ Marie-Bernadette Mbuy Beya, 1990, 1.

church administration. Now that women have woken up, they should keep the fire of the gospel burning.⁸

In our opinion, however, we suggest that African women were involved in the evangelization of Africa and in improving women's social status once Christianity was established. We do not hear about what the women have done because the scholars who have been writing church history in Africa have excluded the contributions of African Christian women to the development of the church in Africa. Furthermore, their voices were not heard because they were speaking in isolation in different corners of the continent. Therefore, through PACWA women have gained a voice to make known what our fore-mothers were doing. In PACWA we see African Christian women mobilizing themselves to seek recognition from African Christian men who have ignored the contribution of women in the church for a long time.

Without losing their evangelical commitment to the authority of the Holy Scriptures, through PACWA, Nkhoma synod women have learnt to reject any teaching that makes women inferior to men. As stated in the PACWA covenant, the women have done this by affirming that God created men and women as equal bearers of God's image (Genesis 1:26-27.) They have also claimed equality in Jesus Christ (Gal 3:28)

⁸ Dr Adeyemo's sermon on 25th August, 1991 during the PACWA Regional conference at Chancellor Collage, Zomba, Malawi.

who poured out the Holy Spirit upon all flesh, sons and daughters without discrimination (Acts 2:17-18).

In this respect, the Nkhoma synod women have joined PACWA in being appalled at the discrimination against women in matters of social justice; being barred from the highest levels of leadership both in church and society; and often denied access to economic sources of production. They therefore advocate equal treatment of men and women in all aspects of life. If there is a need to show partiality then it should be to women who have been down trodden for a long time. Their argument is that God is just and fair. Where there was a need for God to take sides, then it has been with the poor and oppressed who have mostly been women and children.

On the other hand, PACWA, has not encouraged Nkhoma synod women to pursue issues of women in church leadership positions. Under women's ministries in their covenant they acknowledge that the Holy Spirit distributes gifts to women and men as stated in 1 Cor. 12:11. Yet during the Zomba conference the Convenor of Malawi PACWA made it clear that PACWA women are not interested in church leadership positions. This is confirmed by the fact that none of the leaders on the international and national committees is ordained or a trained theologian. Deducing from their statement in the covenant that 'their way of operation is

not in competition with men but co operation,' when dealing with women ministries, seeking leadership positions in the church would be considered competition.

Furthermore, PACWA women do not seem to realize the contradictory stand they have taken when it comes to the Christian home and family. In the family they have upheld the message of women submitting to their husbands as stated in Ephesians. Yet equality as stated in Genesis 1 and the submission of women to men are incompatible. In the case of submission, it implies that the partner to be submitted to is superior to the one submitting. It also implies that the person who is submitting is under the control of the other. As stated in chapter seven, this is a condition that came about as the result of the fall of the human race and was not in the original plan of creation by God. We therefore suggest that the emphasis should be on the message of Ephesians 5:21 which calls both husband and wife to submit to one another out of reverence for Christ. This recognizes the fact that man and woman are of equal value before God and toward each other.

PACWA has emphasized the importance of a Christian home consisting of one man and one woman. In this respect they have condemned polygamy and the abuse of childless marriages prevalent in Africa. Where a family has been blessed with children, they have put the responsibility of their nurture

on both parents. For Nkhoma synod women, this emphasis is in agreement with the teaching of their church. What may be new to them is the message that single women should be recognized and accepted by the church and the condemnation of wife-beating in Christian homes. This point is very important in the Nkhoma synod because as observed Chigwirizano is dominated by married women. Secondly in the research of Gerdien Verstraelen- Gilhuis, she found out that the Dutch missionaries and African church leaders did not protest to Christian husbands beating their wives in the Reformed church in Zambia.⁹ In the case of the Nkhoma synod, there is silence on this issue. It is not condemned nor is it encouraged. In a culture where wife-beating is taken as part of normal way of life, one knows that many Christian wives in the Nkhoma synod are beaten by their husbands. Therefore, a message which brings this issue to the fore is welcomed by the Nkhoma synod women.

Participation in PACWA meetings is beneficial as it brings to consciousness different aspects of the plight of women in the church and society. However, our major concern is that the numbers of women from Nkhoma synod attending PACWA meeting are very small. Secondly, the women that go to PACWA meetings are not sent by the church. On one hand this is good because Nkhoma synod's women who are single or not

⁹ Gerdien Verstraelen- Gilhuis, 'From Dutch Mission Church to Reformed Church in Zambia'...1982.250.

members of Chigwirizano feel free to attend PACWA meetings. On the other hand, there is the problem that no official forum for the discussion of women's concerns learnt from PACWA exists.

Thirdly, most of the Nkhoma synod women who went to Nairobi in 1989 and who attended the regional conference in Zomba in 1991 have a desire for ecumenical gatherings but do not understand English because of low educational standards. In Nairobi there were no translations into any of the local languages spoken in Malawi. In Zomba, there were no professional translators so that one could not fully understand what was being said if one did not understand English. It is no wonder then that the women who could not follow what was being said spent most of their time outside the conference hall. This situation highlights the fact that women's problems are also the problems of Africa as a whole. The existence of too many languages in Africa hampers the development of the continent. The illiteracy rate is far too high among women. This makes it difficult for mass participation at continental conferences.

Fourthly, there were some Nkhoma synod women who were aware of PACWA meetings but did not attend because they did not feel comfortable with the involvement of Malawian women politicians in the administration of the Zomba PACWA conference. They cited an example of fund raising for the

conference as having been done through Chitukuko Cha Amai M'Malawi (CCAM meaning women in development in Malawi). To this end some Christian women feared that PACWA would be hindered from carrying a prophetic voice to the society if it operated under the control of the politicians. An examination of the projects that PACWA Malawi has chosen has made others argue that there is no difference between a Christian Women's movement and what the politicians are already doing. PACWA Malawi would seem to be the Christian wing of CCAM.¹⁰ The political connotation of PACWA is emphasized by the fact that in some countries where PACWA has been launched at a national level, they have tried to involve the wives of the presidents, or the government hostess as in the case of Malawi.

In response to these accusations, the Malawi PACWA organizers have argued that since they had just launched the Malawi PACWA it was not possible to organize a regional conference without the help of those who are well established fund raisers. In the Malawi case, the established women's organization happen to be CCAM. They give glory to God for the fact that by the end of the conference some of the women politicians who were involved in the organization of the conference accepted Jesus as

¹⁰ Conversation I had with Mrs A. Khonga and Mrs G. Kapuma, before the Zomba PACWA conference.

their Lord and Savior, something maybe they could not have done if it was not for their involvement in PACWA.¹¹

The Zomba conference was attended by hundreds of Christian women. The mood of worship appealed to the masses of African evangelical women. Through the prayers of the women, one could see and feel the desire of women to be free from family and social oppressions and worship God as they wished. We are of the opinion that what attracts women most to PACWA meetings is Christian character formation and the desire to do something for God in the midst of the people of Africa. When an altar call was made, a large number of women responded showing that there were some women who came to the conference who had not yet made a commitment to the Lord Jesus Christ.

Therefore, while PACWA has its faults, it also has a definite purpose of mobilizing African Christian women to stand up, challenge some of the African oppressive systems and do something to alleviate the suffering of the disadvantaged masses.

¹¹ Conversation I had with Mrs Sulamoyo, one of the Malawi organizers, during the Zomba PACWA conference.

6.2.5. Nkhoma synod women and the Ecumenical Decade of Churches in Solidarity with women.

Nkhoma synod men and women joined other churches in Malawi on 8th December, 1991 when launching the Ecumenical Decade of Churches in Solidarity with Women. The conference was organized through the women's desk of the Christian Council of Malawi. The idea of forming an Ecumenical Decade of the Churches in Solidarity with Women originated from the World Council of Churches in 1987. This was in response to the United Nation's decade for women. The WCC did not only outline the need for the decade for their church members and other interested churches. The women's desk of WCC gave an example by launching the decade in April 1988 at the Ecumenical Centre in Geneva, Switzerland. Thus 1988-1998 was declared to be the decade in question. The WCC has defined the purpose of the decade as

Empowering women to challenge oppressive structures in the global community, their country and their church.

Affirming-through shared leadership and decision-making, theology and spirituality-the decisive contributions of women in churches and communities.

Giving visibility to women's perspectives and actions in the work and struggle for justice, peace and integrity of creation.

Enabling the churches to free themselves from racism, sexism and classism; from teachings and practices that discriminate against women.

Encouraging the churches to take actions in solidarity with women.¹²

In Africa, the decade coincided with the establishment of two major continental groups of African women who have embraced its ideas. Since 1983, African women theologians had been planning to get together. With the encouragement of the decade, the Circle of African Women Theologians was inaugurated in September, 1989 under the theme 'Daughters of Africa arise.' This theme was based on Jesus' encounter with two women as recorded in Luke 8:40-56. More about the activities of the Circle of African Women theologians has been said in the introduction of this thesis.

The second group is the women's desk of the All Africa Conference of Churches(AACC). The decision to establish a women's desk was made at the AACC's 5th Assembly in Lome in August 1987. Women delegates to this Assembly requested a women's conference that would critically analyze the ministry of women in the church and society. In 1988 Miss Omega Bula, from Zambia was employed as the first Secretary of the women's desk of AACC. In October 1989, the first AACC Women's Continental Conference was held in Lome Togo from 16th-21 October 1989 under the theme 'Arise and shine for Your Light has Come' based on Isaiah 60:1.

¹² Brochure of the Ecumenical Decade of the Churches in Solidarity with Women 1988-1998, World Council of churches, Geneva page 1.

The women's desk of AACC was established just when the Ecumenical Decade of Churches in Solidarity with Women was launched. In the words of Omega Bula

the conference offered African church women the opportunity to examine, analyze and assess the struggle for justice, peace and integrity of creation from women's perspective. It was called to serve as a challenge and source of encouragement for the churches in Africa to work in solidarity with women.¹³

Although the conference embraced the ideas of the decade, it had its own objectives which were

To critically analyze the ministry of women in the church and society and come up with strategies of action for the effective witness;

To provide a forum for sharing on the justice, peace and integrity of creation issues from the national and regional levels and to identify continental emphasis for action during the Decade;

To affirm the importance of women's participation in the ministry of the church and society;

To strengthen women's fellowship and sisterhood in Africa.

The objectives were further translated into Conference sub-themes which were:-

Justice, Peace and Integrity of Creation, which included the debt crisis, militarism, human rights, apartheid and environmental issues.

Community Life Issues, which included marriage, family life, traditions, child survival, single parenthood, and adolescent fertility issues.

People's participation in the church, which included the mission of the church today, lay leadership, ordination and youth issues.

¹³ All Africa Conference Of Churches, Report on Women's Continental Conference Lome Togo October 16-21 1989, 1.

Education and training, which included illiteracy among women, vocational training, theological education, community based health education, and life skills issues.

In continuation of the spirit of the 1989 Lome conference, the launching of the decade in Malawi in 1991, aimed at translating the sub-themes into Malawian issues. For the decade in Malawi, they have decided to examine community life issues, people's participation in the church, and education and training.

6.2.6 Evaluation

The launching of the decade in Malawi could not have come at a better time for both church women and men of Nkhoma synod. The synod is not a member of the World Council of churches but it is a member of the Christian Council of Malawi. Therefore through the Christian Council of Malawi the synod has pledged itself to be advocates of the decade agenda. Perhaps this is the time for Nkhoma synod to ask itself what it means to be in solidarity with women. It could be suggested that by accepting the call of the decade, Nkhoma synod is being asked to identify itself with the hopes and fears of women's experiences in the church and society. In the words of Mercy Oduyoye, the church is being encouraged to

listen more carefully to women, and to review attitudes that prevent women from feeling at home in the church.

Solidarity with women means examining why women sometimes want to establish parallel structures.¹⁴

It will mean identifying practices and teachings in the church that are obstacles to women's creative theological, spiritual and decision making contribution in the church and society.¹⁵ ...The decade in solidarity with women calls upon the churches to listen to women and to take their concerns seriously as being integral to the human search for life in all its fullness.¹⁶

In the case of the Nkhoma synod, this is their chance to have their consciousness raised to women's issues on a large scale. This is because the decade is a church affair. It involves men and women working together to liberate the church from the sin of sexism.

Among the five church women who participated in the Lome 1989 Conference, none of them was from Nkhoma synod. One delegate was from Blantyre synod, one from the Livingstonia Synod and the other two were from the Anglican church in Malawi and one from the Christian Council of Malawi, Women's desk. Since the decade also involves church women's organizations, a Chigwirizano worker was involved in the planning of the launching of the decade in Malawi. The fact that the decade has the support of the church has freed

14 Mercy Amba Oduyoye, Who will Roll The Stone Away?: The Ecumenical Decade of the Churches in Solidarity with Women Geneva: WCC Publications, 1990, 45.

15 Mercy Amba Oduyoye, Who will Roll The Stone Away? 1990, 13.

16 Mercy Amba Oduyoye, Who will Roll The Stone Away? 1990, 64.

a lot of Nkhoma synod women to remain faithful to their church but at the same time feel liberated to participate in the projects of the decade.

6.3 Conclusion

Our discussion has shown that 1989 was a year in which African women in the church decided to break their silence. It is a year in which African women decided to reject the teaching that women are to be quiet in church because they are inferior to men. Through PACWA in Nairobi, The Circle of African Women Theologians in Accra, and AACC Women's desk in Lome, African church women have declared that sexism in the church is a sin. Through reading the Bible with new eyes they have affirmed that they are of equal value with African men in the church and society. Through examination of their roles in the African Church, they have observed that there is more they can do than keeping the church buildings clean, make and clean altar cloths, take up evangelistic work among women that has helped to fill the churches with new converts, visit the needy, sick and poor, fund raise for the church, and teach at Sunday School. They are now asking the church in Africa to acknowledge that women have more potentials than what they have hitherto displayed.

African church women are also speaking with one voice in different organizations asking the church to re-examine

its teachings on the family which has left a lot of wives and children abused by husbands and fathers without feeling remorse. They are asking the church to be a prophetic voice in condemning cultures that have mistreated women. In Malawi, church women have started echoing the voices of protest at the way they are treated in the church in 1990 through first, PACWA, followed by Women in Theology and then the decade in 1991. Throughout, the Nkhoma synod has been present in a limited way.

The beginnings of the mobilization of African church women have not been all smooth among themselves. They have been suspicious of one another. The Circle of African Women Theologians has been accused of being elitist in composition. The Circle has defended itself by saying that the theology they are writing is the theology of all African women. Women theologians are part and parcel of the church women who are protesting against oppression in the church and society. They are articulating the pains, fears and hopes of church women as they live among the masses of women. The AACC has been accused of taking the Circle's theme and changing it a bit. At the same time the AACC has claimed that their theme was chosen before they knew about the launching of the Circle. PACWA has been accused of undermining the efforts of other women by opposing the ordination of women. Questions have also been asked if one can be a member of all the three organizations.

There has also been opposition to church women joining ecumenical church women's organizations even in the Nkhoma synod. Some wives of ministers have refused to get involved because they feel that their special position among women is threatened. This is understandable because what the ecumenical organizations are asking for is new to the majority of African Christian women. Organized teachings of the masses to the issues raised could help remove hostility among women. One thing is for certain, the seed of change in the church has been planted. It will take a while to accomplish much. There will be a mixture of much pain and joy just as what women go through when watching a child grow. Still, the journey has begun.

The importance of women from the Nkhoma being part of a continental networking with other African Church women cannot be over emphasized. Women banding together, finding their common voice, and beginning to change their status quo is one of the major steps taken to establish themselves on the same level with men in the church and society. Out of the banding together comes the networking of church women. According to Joann Nash Eakin,

the fundamental idea of a network is that it is an exchange of ideas, resources, programs, work in progress, and people. It is also an identification of these ideas and resources. The chief function of network is to share information, to make connections; It is a communication system...It is also a source of

inspiration and motivation. It is an empowering force.¹⁷

Operating in isolation, sending a few women to participate in the national and continental groups of Church women, is one way of refusing change for women in the Nkhoma synod. The church creating space for the women to be involved with other women's organizations is a step forward. Church women in the Nkhoma synod creating space for themselves and implementing whatever applies to their situation would be a leap forward.

¹⁷ Joann Nash Eakin, 'From the Prairie to the World' in Russell, Letty M., et al Inheriting Our Mothers' Gardens: Feminist Theology in Third World Perspective. Louisville: The Westminster Press, 1988, 121.

CHAPTER 7

TOWARD A LIBERATED COMMUNITY OF MEN AND WOMEN

7.1 Introduction

In the introduction to this thesis, we observed that the study of Chewa women coming from a Presbyterian religious tradition with a conservative evangelical character requires critical examination of culture and faith in the light of women's experiences. A multiplicity of oppressions experienced by Nkhoma synod Chewa women is at the center of this study. We came to the recognition that this thesis falls under African Women in Religion and Culture as an area of study which was established by the Institute of African Women in Religion and Culture.

In chapter one we provided a descriptive analysis of the context of women in general in Malawi, aware that descriptions are not value free. This was because the experiences of women in the church are affected by how they are imaged in the society. In this chapter we outlined the demographic, political, economical, educational, and religious status of Malawi with particular reference to women. We argued that the general picture of women presented to us shows that they are lagging behind men in all fields. However, while the government and the people of Malawi are being made aware of the plight of women, this is not true in

religion. The government is taking measures to uplift women through various projects, the church, however, has not followed this. In this chapter we also outlined the early history of the Chewa of Malawi to show that although they are matrilineal and constitute half the population, Malawi is basically a patriarchal society.

In Chapter two we took the situational analysis a step further to set the scene for the remainder of the study. We examined the position of women in traditional Chewa society of Malawi between 900 to 1889 C.E. In our discussion of the religious position of women, we argued that although religious leadership was in the hands of women, contemporary Malawian theologians have underplayed the existence of Chewa female heads of rain shrines. We also argued that the Chewa culture had some social elements which gave dignity to women such as husbands settling in their wives' village, women owning the offspring of marriage, passing on of land from mother to daughter, and the right to remarry after divorce or the death of a husband. On the other hand we argued that there were other cultural practices which were degrading to women such as the coming of fisi during the girls' initiation ceremony, fear of menstrual blood, polygamy, among others. However, foreign influences speeded the process of change in the position of Chewa women. Among other factors the coming of the missionaries contributed to the changes that took place in the religious and social

position of Chewa women.

The analysis of the position of Chewa women in the Church of Central African Presbyterian of the Nkhoma synod from 1889 to the present in chapter three formed the pivot of this study. We examined the policies of the synod in detail to establish its stand on issues raised in the previous chapter. We argued that the coming of Christianity to Chewa society was a mixed blessing for women. It introduced liberty for women but did not bring it to the full. A literal interpretation of the Bible led to the church's refusal of women from holding leadership positions. We used the case of Mary Chinkhwita to illustrate our argument. The banning of women from getting an appropriate theological education was rejected and a call for a much more critical reading of scriptures was made.

Despite the missionaries' failure to appreciate the Chewa culture, they introduced liberating elements when the church Christianized initiation ceremonies, banned child marriages and polygamy. We supported the church's stand on these issues but we also highlighted the need for a critical examination of the biblical passages used at chilangizo. We also drew the attention of the church to the plight of deserted women. We questioned the church's motive for banning child marriages and the reintroduction of bride wealth or chiongo.

In chapter four we took the issue of women's participation further by analyzing the activities of women in the church through Chigwirizano. We argued that through the establishment of Chigwirizano, women acquired a new status and some self worth in the church. It provided an opportunity for women to share their faith with others, to practice leadership skills and also give them a chance to join the ladder of church leadership. We established that the synod's decision that Chigwirizano Bible studies be written by a male minister overlooks the fact that the context of women's experiences of God are different from men's. We raised the issue of the presence of Mkhlapakati at Chigwirizano meetings and the fact that Chigwirizano leadership at presbytery and synod level is restricted to the wives of ministers. Further we pointed out the existence of clericalism as another form of oppression for women. We concluded by arguing that the persistence of misunderstandings that exist within Chigwirizano as regards to women's identity and status in relation to synod arise from a desire to be recognized and acknowledged as partners instead of daughter. We also argued that the restrictions imposed on Chigwirizano by the synod has contributed to its failure to speak out on behalf of women on women issues.

Chapter five provided an opportunity to analyze the issues discussed in chapters three and four through a survey

based on field work. The survey examined church member's attitudes towards the participation of women in church leadership roles, theological education, Chigwirizano, chilangizo, bride wealth, child marriages, widowhood, property and remarriage. Our primary question was, what are the experiences, feelings and thoughts of women on all the decisions of the church which affect them? Our secondary question was how do men feel about the church's decisions on women? Our analysis of the results revealed that men's and women's views differed substantially on women's participation in the church. The majority of women were in favour of women participating in church leadership and theological education. They also favoured controlling decisions and leadership of Chigwirizano. Arguments for and against were mainly based on a literal interpretation of biblical passages. Others were based on a patriarchal cultural understanding of the position of women.

On cultural issues that affect women, we observed that both men and women agreed with synod on the introduction of chilangizo. While we agree with the results of the survey on this issue, we also argued that the majority of the interviewees do not have the skills for analyzing critically the contents of chilangizo from a women's perspective. We noted that chiongo or bride wealth was not an issue among the women interviewed. We also determined that the protection of women was not the cause for the banning and

later unbanning of chiongo. While women were against child marriages, it was teenage pregnancy that bothered them most. The interviewees attested to the evils of polygamy as it is being experienced now by some female members of the church. The suffering of widows with or without the financial support of the church was made known. A particular plea was made to the synod to pay special consideration to widows. Another plea was made to the synod to take the writing of wills seriously. In conclusion we argued that the survey demonstrated that the inclusion of women on an equal basis in decision making bodies would make a major difference to the quality of decisions made, especially and not only, on issues that affect women.

Chapter six placed the discussion of Nkhoma synod women on an ecumenical level as we examined the issues being raised by some African Christian women organizations and the participation of Nkhoma synod women. The women's organizations include the Malawian Women in Theology, the Pan African Christian Women Alliance and The Decade of The Churches in Solidarity with Women. We have observed that these groups have taken upon themselves to re-read the Bible from a women's perspective and to challenge the church for practicing sexism. We pointed out that Nkhoma synod women have been present in these organizations in a limited way. Yet, we argued, it is very important for Nkhoma synod women

to be in solidarity with other women if they are to initiate change in their own position.

In the above summary of our discussions and analysis, from chapter two to six two issues stand out. The first is the importance of the Bible in justifying decisions reached, and second the understanding of authority in the church by both the synod and women. We now focus our attention on these crucial issues from a women's perspective.

7.2 Interpretation of the Bible in the context of women's struggle for humanhood

Throughout this thesis we have been aware that the Nkhoma synod of the CCAP stands within the Reformed tradition, and therefore places a premium on the role and authority of the Bible in the life of the church. Located within this tradition, we accept the normative functioning of the Bible in the church, but critically question the fundamentalist use of the 'Scripture Principle' to reinforce patriarchy and clericalism. But we are convinced that the Bible is an indispensable resource for our task as women theologians in Africa, both because of its liberating trajectories and because of its wide acceptance by Chewa Presbyterian women and the church as having unique authority. Thus biblical hermeneutics finally becomes a critical focus for our task.

In chapters two and five, we noted that the synod has used the Bible to decide what the position of women in the church should be. To begin with, we saw in chapter three the passages that the church used to ban women from taking positions of leadership. In this case it was established that the Bible has total authority in deciding what the position of women should be. In doing that the church used a literal interpretation of the passages. This method of approaching the Bible was also evident in the responses of some male interviewees in chapter five. Nevertheless in the same chapter we noted that the church took a step further to do research on how to understand the passages that relate to women's involvement in church leadership. Thus they went beyond the biblical passages to examine the cultural historical background of the passages. This hermeneutical process led them to accept that in the early church women were holding positions of leadership. However in their recommendations the position was limited to deaconship. The recommendations went further to say that the position of deaconship should be exercised according to Malawian culture which does not allow women to have authority over men. This also implies that when examining the passages, the researchers were influenced by their Malawian cultural context. In fact, they approached the passages in terms of the patriarchal context of both Malawian and biblical societies.

Thus we see the appropriation of the Bible in two ways. Gerald West has called these the professional and ordinary ways of reading the Bible.¹ We argue that the professional way of reading the Bible as found in the synod's researchers was critical but biased against women. In the case of the ordinary readers of the same chapter the reading of the passages was not critical but literal. In both modes the contents of the Bible were the Word of God. That is why in some responses of the interviewees it was said that God does not allow women to hold positions of leadership. The further rejection of the findings of synod researches by the general synod of April 1992 may indicate a rejection of a critical way of reading the Bible and a desire to remain conservative and uncritical.

The appeal to a cultural stand on women not having authority over men raises questions of authority in making decisions. Does the general synod appeal to culture over against the Biblical authority when it suits them? At the same time we notice that the appropriation of culture by the synod does not take into account the traditional religious position of women in the Chewa society which allowed women to have religious authority over men.

¹ Gerald O. West, Biblical Hermeneutics of Liberation: Mode of Reading the Bible in the South African Context. Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications, 1991, 140.

In our discussions we observed in chapter four that when Chigwirizano was introduced Malawian women used the same Bible to justify their involvement in church leadership. Biblical stories like the woman at the well were read and interpreted in the light of their experiences. Here we are confronted with ordinary readers who, while aware of biblical passages which silence them, choose to ignore them in favour of the ones that strengthen and liberate them. We argue that even at a basic level these women approached the Bible critically. They examined their experiences and found hope and power as they read the Bible from their perspective. This way of reading the Bible was echoed in chapter five when the women argued that God calls women to ministry. At this level, the women understood the Word of God as becoming alive when the written word is related to their experiences. Thus the passages of 1 Tim. 2 did not tie with the women's experiences of God.

At the same time there were other examples of women who accepted the Bible's message against women in leadership positions. We have also observed in chapter five that although women in the Nkhoma synod are dissatisfied with denial of meaningful participation in church leadership positions, higher formal education, and theological education, and some cultural practices, they have not made their feelings known. This may be due to an internalizing of biblical passages about obedience and respect to those in

authority. On this issue, the Nkhoma synod women are like all African women, as Musimbi Kanyoro observed that

African women who have grown up in the church, were taught to accept everything in silence. Even though women had a lot of say in the matters of the home and the society in some African cultures, the church changed this. The church taught that women should be silent (Tim 2:12-15). The church taught that blind obedience was the only ticket to heaven and that any discontent was a sure sign of a free ride to hell. The Christian faith in Africa was built on the fear of hell and the love of heaven.²

A combination of cultural and biblical teachings on obedience to leaders may explain why none of the African Independent churches in Malawi have been founded by women. Further research would be required to find out how such churches in Malawi have used culture and biblical teachings with regard to women. As for the Nkhoma synod, the attitude that the majority of women have taken has helped church leaders to maintain this power. The question is 'For how long will women of Nkhoma synod remain quiet?'

We observed in Chapter six that Nkhoma synod women have begun to participate in conferences where other church women are beginning to be conscious that the Bible had been used against women and that there is a defference in interpretation and understanding if the Bible is read from a women's perspective. This was first made known by a group of

² Musimbi Kanyoro, 'The Ecumenical Decade of Churches in Solidarity with Women and the African Women' in Report on Women's Continental Conference Lome, Togo, October 1989, 72.

American women in the 1880s among whom was Elizabeth Cady Stanton. In the book, Women's Bible, Elizabeth Cady Stanton and her group provided an interpretation of the passages 'directly referring to women, and those also in which women are made prominent by exclusion.'³ This book provided a framework from which women ought to read the Bible. They studied scientifically all the Biblical passages that refer to women and argued that women should recognize that the Bible is patriarchal and androcentric. Furthermore, the Bible was written by men and reflects men's interpretation of God's activities with ancient Israel. Her statement should be understood in the context that the Bible is a record of the experiences of ancient Israel with God over a long period. They also argued that the passages which degrade women are a reflection of the ancient culture of Israel and not divine revelation. Commenting on the findings of Stanton and her group, Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza stated that

Cady Stanton and her coauthors thus confirm the general tenet of historical-critical scholarship that divine revelation is articulated in historically limited and culturally conditioned human language. But feminist interpretation particularizes and relativizes the Bible even more by specifying that biblical language is male language and that the conditions and perspectives of the Bible are that of patriarchy. In doing so it resorts to the third model of Biblical interpretation

³ Elizabeth Cady Stanton, The Woman's Bible. Seattle: Coalition Task Force on Women and Religion, 1774, 2nd edition, 5.

which stresses the interaction between the text and situation.⁴

Interpreted in terms of the authority of the scriptures, this means that for those who are reading the Bible from a women's perspective, not everything in the Bible has the same authority. A process of sifting the divine message from the historical-cultural background is a prerequisite. The framework provided by Elizabeth Cady Stanton is still accepted by contemporary women doing theology from a Christian women's perspective. There are, however, various approaches to the process of sifting by different women doing theology. It is not possible to cite all of them as this is a full subject on its own. Nevertheless we will give outlines of the position of Rosemary Radford Ruether, Elizabeth Schusslér Fiorenza, Phyllis Trible, Letty M. Russell, Dorothee Sollé because their approaches, while western in orientation, are influential among women in all contexts doing theology. They are also work within a Christian framework.

Rosemary Radford Ruether's approach is based on her quest for the promotion of the full humanity of women. In her book entitled Sexism and God Talk, she has argued that 'whatever denies the full humanity of women is (,therefore,) appraised as not redemptive, it does not reflect the divine

⁴ Elisabeth Schusslér Fiorenza, In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins London: SCM Press, 1983, 13.

nor is it the message of an authentic redeemer.⁵ This means that those biblical passages that deny the humanity of women are not divine. At the same time those passages that promote the humanity of women are from God and therefore authoritative. They are what counts as the word of God. She has identified the authoritative passages within the Bible in what she has called the prophetic-liberating tradition which sides with the oppressed and the marginalized. She has divided the prophetic-liberating tradition within the Bible into four central themes. These are

(1) God's defense and vindication for oppressed; (2) the critique of the dominant systems of power and their powerholders; (3) the vision of a new age to come in which the present system of injustice is overcome and God's intended reign of peace and justice is installed in history and (4) finally, the critique of ideology, or religion, since ideology in this context is primarily religious.⁶

As Ruether analyzes the prophetic-liberating traditions, she is aware that the writers did not necessarily have the liberation of women in mind. The important thing is that women doing theology can claim them for themselves to reject patriarchy and seek liberation. As Gerald West has observed, 'Ruether's appropriation of the past is based on the need to "situate oneself meaningfully in history."⁷ Thus while Elizabeth Cady Stanton saw the

⁵ Rosemary Radford Ruether, Sexism and God talk: Towards a Feminist Theology. London: SCM Press, 1983, 18-19.

⁶ Rosemary Radford Ruether, 1983, 24.

⁷ Gerald O. West, 1991, 87.

whole Bible as totally androcentric, Ruether argues that there are some traditions within the Bible which are liberating to women.

Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza who is interested in understanding the New Testament from a women's perspective by a reconstruction of the position of women around Jesus and in early Christianity is of the opinion that Ruether did not go far enough in her interpretation of the Bible from a women's perspectives. She argues that even the prophetic liberating traditions are not free from patriarchal culture.⁸ Further, she argues that

it must not be overlooked that the marginality and invisibility of women in the biblical history is produced by androcentric texts and linguistic reconstructions of history insofar as androcentric text tend to erase women as active participants in history. Regardless of how androcentric texts may erase women from historiography, they do not prove the actual absence of women from the center of patriarchal history and biblical revelation. Therefore, feminist cannot afford to deown androcentric biblical texts and patriarchal history as their own revelatory texts and history.⁹

In other words Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza, is arguing for the approach that requires the reader of the Bible to go behind the text to find out more about the social-historical position of women in ancient Israel. In this process

it not only has to claim the contemporary community of women struggling for liberation as its locus of revelation, it also must claim its fore Sisters as victims and subjects participating in patriarchal

⁸ Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza, 1983, 17.

⁹ Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza, 1983, 29.

culture. It must do so not by creating a gynocentric life-center on the fringes of androcentric human and biblical history, but by reclaiming such androcentric human and biblical history as women's own history.¹⁰

Although Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza puts emphasis on reading behind the text, she is also of the opinion that the heritage of women can also be recovered 'within the biblical text and traditions that articulate the liberating experiences and visions of the people of God.'¹¹ She agrees that

A feminist theological interpretation of the Bible that has as its canon the liberation of women from the oppressive sexist structures, institutions, and internalized values must, therefore, maintain that only the non-sexist and non-androcentric traditions of the Biblical interpretation have the theological authority of revelation if the Bible is not to continue as a tool for the oppression of women.¹²

Another western theologian who has made a significant contribution to the reading of the Bible from a women's perspective is Phyllis Trible. She has chosen an interpretation that is based on the text itself. By this approach she does not reject the method proposed by Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza which goes behind the text for it adds to one's interpretation of the text. Nevertheless

¹⁰ Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza, 1983, 29.

¹¹ Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza, 1983, 33.

¹² Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza, 'Toward a Feminist Biblical Hermeneutics: Biblical Interpretation and Liberation theology' in Ed Brian Mahan and L Dale Richesin, The Challenge of Liberation Theology: A First Word Response, Maryknoll: Orbis, 1984, 108.

her primary concern is with the text itself.¹³ The methodology of Phyllis Tribble has been well summarized by Gerald West in the following way;

First, she argues that the text yields multiple interpretations of itself. Her emphasis leads, second, to her argument that the interests and experiences of the interpreter guide and shape interpretation. Here she not only recognizes her own feminist interests and questions, she also embraces them. Third she argues that within the Bible there are countervoices, untold tales of terror, and neglected themes. And fourth, she argues that counterliterature can be recovered via a rhetorical methodology to inform a feminist perspective.¹⁴

Like Rosemary Radford Ruether, Phyllis Tribble has found a counter discourse within the scriptures. Although the counter discourse is patriarchal, it contains elements which are against the oppressive nature of the dominant patriarchy. Although the counter discourses are few and far between, they serve the purpose of neutralizing the strong accent of patriarchy in the scriptures. However her major contribution is in uncovering the forgotten texts that give a picture of women in situation of struggle within the text as documented in her book, Texts of Terror.¹⁵ For her the process of translating the text is on-going. She says

Since no exegesis is exempt from the experience of the exegete, no interpretation is fixed once and for all. Clearly the hermeneutical task requires understanding

¹³ Phyllis Tribble, God and Rhetoric of Sexuality. Philadelphia: Fortress 1978, 8-9.

¹⁴ Gerald O. West, 1991, 120.

¹⁵ Phyllis Tribble, Texts of Terror, Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984.

the Bible as dynamic literature engaged with continuing experience.¹⁶

Letty M. Russell is in agreement with those women theologians who claim that in spite of the fact that the Bible was written in a patriarchal culture and is androcentric, it has liberating authority for women. She is of the opinion that

the Bible has authority in my life because it makes sense of my experience and speaks to me about the meaning and purpose of my humanity in Jesus Christ.¹⁷

She goes on to say that for her 'the Bible is "scripture" or sacred writing, because it functions as "script", or promoting for life.'¹⁸ At the same time she notes that not everything in the Bible is liberating. Her methodology is explained in the following way

The particular interpretative key that assists me in continuing to give assent is the witness of scripture to God's promise (for the mending of creation) on its way to fulfillment. That which denies this intention of God for the liberation of groaning creation in all its parts does not compel or evoke my assent (i.e. it is not authoritative).¹⁹

Dorothee Solle from Germany adds by stating that

¹⁶ Phyllis Trible, 'Biblical Theology as Women's Work' in Religion in Life, Vol. XLIV, No.1, (Spring 1975), 7.

¹⁷ Letty M. Russell, 'Authority and the Challenge of Feminist Interpretation' in ed Letty M. Russell, Feminist Interpretation of the Bible. Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1985, 137.

¹⁸ Letty M. Russell, 1985, 138.

¹⁹ Letty M. Russell, 1985, 139.

We cannot be without the Bible, nor do we want to betray it is the book in which women are often humiliated and hurt. The Bible speaks of God -and at the same time it distorts God.²⁰

Her guiding criterion in reading the Bible is the search for the God of justice. She argued that 'We take up the Bible as partners in dialogue; in it speak people who have responded to the call of God but who- as males of their time- have missed, denied or perverted the call of God to justice.'²¹ Therefore whatever 'urges Christ' in the Bible is authentic and whatever urges patriarchy is from the biblical authors.²²

In summary we have noted how Western women reading the Bible from a women's perspective in the community of faith deal with the issue of the authority of the Bible. All the approaches have indicated that the starting point is a hermeneutics of suspicion. In reading the Bible, first of all, women ought to be aware of patriarchy and androcentrism. In the words of Katharine Doob Sakenfeld

Christian feminists approach the text with at least three different emphases:

1. Looking to texts about women to counteract famous texts used "against" women.
2. Looking to the Bible generally (not particularly to texts about women) for theological perspective

²⁰ Dorothee Solle, Thinking about God: An Introduction to theology. London: SCM Press, 1990, 75.

²¹ Dorothee Solle, 1990, 75.

²² Dorothee Solle, 1990, 76.

offering a critique of patriarchy (some may call this a "Liberation perspective").

3. Looking to texts about women to learn from the intersection of history and stories of ancient and modern women living in patriarchal cultures.²³

Although the approaches have been separated in three sections, there is free movement within the sections as women doing theology read the Bible from women's perspective.

Since this thesis is concerned with African women, we now turn to how African women doing theology read the Bible. As mentioned previously, African women theologians affirm that feminist concerns are not foreign to Africa for they cut across race and time.²⁴ Although African women theologians have not yet written books in which an African Christian women's way of reading and interpreting the Bible has been exposed adequately, we find sections in books and articles in which this has been done. For example, Mercy Amba Oduyoye has said that

As a woman who feels the weight of sexism I cannot but go again and again to the stories of the exodus, exile, and to other biblical motifs in which 'the least' are recognized and affirmed, are saved or held up as beloved by God or at least are empowered to grow at the fundaments of the structures of injustice until these fundaments cave in on themselves. these narratives have

²³ Katherine Doob Sakenfeld, 'Feminist Uses of Biblical Materials' in ed Letty M. Russell, Feminist Interpretation of the Bible. Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1985, 56.

²⁴ Mercy Amba Oduyoye, 'Naming the Woman: The Words of the Akan and the Words of the Bible' in Bulletin of African Theology Vol. 3(5) 1981, 82.

been for me the bearer of good news. therefore in spite of the entrenched patriarchal and ethnocentric prepositions of the Bible, it is a book I cannot dispense with and indeed may not since I remain in the Christian community and that community means more to me than my personal hurts.²⁵

Another example is from Musimbi Kanyoro who was summarizing the methodology of Bible studies for the Circle of African Women Theologians. She notes that

The Bible is a message of liberation for African women, much as it is also used to deny their freedom. During the Bible study sessions it became clear to us that for women to find justice and peace through the texts of the Bible, they have to try and recover the women participants as well as their possible participation in the life of the text. Secondly, women will need to read the scriptures side by side with the study of cultures and learn to recognize the boundaries between the two. Such recognition will help women to interpret Biblical passages within the proper hermeneutical understanding of ourselves and our contexts as Christian women. Women will need to sincerely claim Biblical Liberation without being apologetic to the culture set-up in which the message of the Biblical passage has found its audience today.²⁶

The mentioned Bible studies were done in the context of African marriage, single life, widowhood and rituals.

Thus African women's way of reading the Bible stems from their context. For Nkhoma synod women, as demonstrated in this thesis, this context includes frequent pregnancies, exclusion from highest political and religious leadership,

²⁵ Mercy Amba Oduyoye, Hearing and Knowing: Theological Reflections on the Christianity in Africa. Maryknoll: Orbis, 1986, 147.

²⁶ Musimbi Kanyoro, 'Bible studies at the Convocation' in Talitha, Qumi! ed. Mercy Amba Oduyoye, and Musimbi Kanyoro, Ibadan: Daystar, 1990, 52-53.

low education, poverty, chilangizo, child marriages, chiongo, teenage pregnancies, desertion, loss of property after the death of husbands, and a history of women in religious leadership. It also means a rejection of all that denies them their humanity in culture and the Bible. In the case of the Bible this will involve identifying what is part of the patriarchal culture and therefore meant for a particular group of people and what is divine and universal. Furthermore, it means claiming for themselves the power to write their own Bible studies. We agree with Renate Cochrane that 'it would be arrogant to suggest that grass-roots women could not learn to understand this.'²⁷

As demonstrated in chapter six, for African women who are re-reading the Bible within their context, the starting point has been the Genesis story. This is because the rejection of women in leadership positions has been associated with the inferiority of women. The verses quoted in chapter three confirm this point. The re-reading of the Genesis creation story has been done in the light of source and redaction criticism. This has necessitated going beyond the texts as well as a literal reading of the passages.

²⁷ Renate Cochrane, 'Equal Discipleship of Women and Men: Reading the New Testament from a Feminist Perspective' in ed. Denise Ackermann, Jonathan A Draper and Emma Mashinini Women Hold Half the Sky: Women in the Church in Southren Africa. Pietermaritzburg: 1991, 23.

Although western Old Testament feminist theologians²⁸ have examined the passages before, African women theologians have also found it necessary to reflect on the creation myths because as Mercy Amba Oduyoye points out, 'a biased application of myth and of tradition is very familiar to us in Africa.'²⁹ In this thesis a women's understanding of the creation stories is crucial in the light of the responses of the interviewees in Chapter five. At the same time we will also draw from the insights of Western women in theology.

In the process of re-reading the creation stories it becomes important to point out that source criticism has shown that there are two creation stories. Genesis 1:26-2:4a and 5:1-2 make one unit while Genesis 2:4b-4:2 is another unit.

What are the passages saying about the humanity of women? We will begin with Genesis 1:26-2:4a. Here we are told that the human species is composed of male and female. We are also told that human beings are a unit in nature and diverse in sex. As male and female, they were created in the

²⁸ Phyllis Trible, is a Western Old Testament scholar who has contributed greatly to the feminist interpretation of Genesis 2-3. God and Rhetoric of Sexuality, Philadelphia: Fortress 1978 and Texts of Terror, Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984.

²⁹ Mercy Amba Oduyoye, 'Women from the Perspective of the Bible' in Orita: Ibadan Journal of Religious Studies, Part Two, 1976, 146.

image and likeness of God. What does in the image of God mean? This image is not the physical appearance of any human beings, but rather the ability to reason, to create and to take care of creation. Human beings are created in the image of God in order to live in a relationship with God, to worship and to serve God. Adam or man in this passage is used as a generic term for humanity defined male and female. In this creation story, both male and female are of equal value in dignity before God.

The command to be fruitful, multiply and fill the earth is given to both male and female human beings contrary to what some male theologians have said in the past. Male and female humanity, in God's original plan, were to work in partnership, to complement each other. Therefore neither gender was superior or inferior to the other.

As mentioned already, the Biblical negative responses about the role of women in the church are also based on a number of passages from the New Testament. In this exegesis, our model passage is 1 Tim 2:11-15. In this passage the author is saying that male and female are different in nature. Man is superior to woman because Adam was formed first and Eve second. This order in creation has given man authority to rule woman. Therefore woman should submit to man. The author also argues that Eve was deceived and therefore became a sinner. What is implied here is that Adam

does not take the blame for the fall of humankind, but Eve. Furthermore, because women are inferior and the cause of sin, the author commands that women should learn in silence and are not allowed to teach or have authority over men.

Where do these ideas come from? It is possible to argue that the author is reflecting the position of women in Asia Minor. It is also possible that the author is reflecting the interpretation of Genesis 2:4b-4:2 of the time. What is clear to us is that the passage is not a divine revelation but a reflection of the patriarchal culture.

In Genesis 2:4b-4:2, the term Adam refers to male, unlike the first passage where it referred to humankind. Man was the first to be formed (2:8). Man only was given the responsibility to cultivate and keep the garden. He was also given power to give names to all of God's creation (2:15). Woman was created from man for the purpose of becoming man's helper. After woman was created, she was given to man. Man named the woman. As observed by Bette Ekeya, 'according to Semitic culture, to name someone gives you power to control that person'.³⁰ This is why 1 Tim. 2 says that it was God's original plan that man should dominate woman.

³⁰ Bette Ekeya, 'Women's Place in creation' in Talitha, Qumi! ed. Mercy Amba Oduyoye, and Musimbi Kanyoro, Ibadan: Daystar, 1990, 95.

Modern study of the Bible has revealed that the two creation stories were written at different times in the history of Israel by different authors who had different purposes. The creation stories reflect what was happening during the time they were written. The first creation story belongs to the Priestly tradition written during the time of the Exile when the people of Israel were reflecting on God's purpose for her existence. This passage also reflects on the place of men and women in the creation of God. The second creation story belong to the Yahwist tradition written during the time of King Solomon. Teresa Okure is of the opinion that the major purpose of this passage is 'to make a fundamental statement concerning the personal relationship between man and woman.'³¹ Bette Ekeya has gone further by saying that the passage aims at communicating the fact that from the beginning of creation, man and woman were destined to be husband and wife. Man was destined to belong to his wife rather than to his parents (2:24).³²

Bette Ekeya has also observed that in the second passage, when woman was being created from man, man did not take part. He was unconscious. Mercy Amba Oduyoye has also added by asking a question 'does the fact that Adam was

³¹ Teresa Okure, 'Women in the Bible' in With Passion and Compassion ed. Virginia Fabella, and Mercy Amba Oduyoye, Maryknoll: Orbis, 1988, 49.

³² Bette Ekeya, 1990, 97.

fashioned out of dust of the soil make him lower than the soil and subordinate to it?'³³ Therefore neither man nor woman can claim power or ownership of the other. What is important here is the fact that when woman was created, man felt complete. The fact that woman was created to be the helper of man does not make her inferior to man. According to Phyllis Tribble, 'the way the Hebrew word "ezer" (helper) has been used in Ps. 121:2; 142:8 146:5; Exod. 18:4; Deut 33:7, 26 and 29; Ps 20:2, connotes superiority'. In these passages God is described as the helper of Israel. However Phyllis accepts the fact that 'the accompanying phrase "fit for" tempers the connotation of superiority to specify the mutuality of women and men.'³⁴ Furthermore, woman being created after man does not make her inferior as implied in 1 Tim 2, rather that when she was created, the climax of creation was reached. It was necessary that she be created to make God's work complete. Teresa Okure has argued that 'the visual imagery of the creation of the woman from man's rib vividly illustrates both their identity in nature and their destined union as husband and wife in 'one flesh' (verse 24)'. She goes on to argue that 'it can even be said to symbolize their equality, since according to Augustine,

³³ Mercy Amba Oduyoye, 1976, 164.

³⁴ Phyllis Tribble, 'Feminist Hermeneutics and Biblical Studies' in Feminist Theology: A reader. ed. Ann Loades, London: SPCK, 1990, 26.

they were thus intended to "walk side by side" and "together look where it is they walk".³⁵

A closer look at the story of the fall (Gen. 3:1-4:2, 25) does not support the argument of 1 Tim 2:14 that it was the woman who was deceived and became a sinner. Gen. 2:16-17 shows that the command not to eat the fruit from the tree of knowledge of good and evil was given to Adam before Eve was created. Furthermore, Gen 3:6-7 shows that when Eve alone ate the fruit nothing happened. Further, Phyllis Tribble has demonstrated that Adam and Eve were together through-out the conversation with the serpent unlike what traditional interpretation has presented to us. The crucial phrase, she maintains, 'is, "who was with her" is omitted in many translations of Gen 3:6'.³⁶ This verse show that both Adam and Eve bear equal responsibility for sin. The disobedience to God became complete when Adam too ate the fruit. Verse 6 shows Adam was a willing participant to the act of disobedience which demonstrate that his will power to say no to sin was weak unlike Eve who first objected and argued with the serpent. It was also Adam who was first accused of disobeying God as indicated in Gen. 3:10-11. It should also be made clear that woman was told that her husband was going

³⁵ Teresa Okure, p. 49.

³⁶ Phyllis Tribble, p.27.

to rule over her as a punishment for sin and not the way God intended it to be from the beginning of creation.

Something else happened to the woman as a result of the fall of man and woman. She was made mother of the living-co-creator of human beings with God. This information then rejects the belief from some interviewees in chapter five that child bearing disqualifies woman from God's service for it is a blessing and not a curse.

If this interpretation of the passages of the creation stories is correct, it becomes possible to turn to the injunction in 1 Timothy 2: 11-15 and reject the underlying theology as coming from a misinterpretation of the Genesis myth. Women in the Nkhoma synod should now refuse to keep quiet in church for they have kept quiet long enough and have missed the freedom that is theirs through salvation in Jesus Christ. They should claim the promise of Galatians 3:28 which promises them that in 'Christ there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female for all are one in Christ Jesus.' This is the new life as God intended it to be, a life of partnership between men and women as they save God in the church. It is therefore wrong for the church to deny women their privileges because of literal and a misinterpretation of the Bible.

7.3 A new understanding of authority in the church

In our discussion in chapters three to five we observed that the relationship between women and the synod is of daughter who submits and a father who commands. We noted how the synod rejected women in leadership position in the church as well as in Chigwirizano. The idea of having minister's wives as leaders of Chigwirizano at a high level is another way of men controlling the leadership through their wives. The presence of Mkhalapakati can be interpreted in the same way. The denial to women of a theological education on the same level with men is another form of men dominating women. Understanding of authority as domination in the church has been rejected by women doing theology. They prefer sharing authority, since women's interpretation of the Bible rejects domination as culturally conditioned.

Otto Maduro has described the effects of such an awareness in the following way

The transformation of the subordinate classes' worldview into one that is autonomous and distinct from that of the dominant classes is the indispensable condition for creating the objective possibility of transforming the material conditions of their own existence, and thereby of ceasing to be subordinate classes.³⁷

³⁷ Otto Maduro, Religion and Social Conflict Maryknoll: Orbis, 1982, 137.

He goes on to say that under such circumstances two things can happen. The group that has become conscious about its difference from the dominating class can either accept the difference and keep quiet or can decide to oppose the dominating forces. This may lead to formation of organizations that aim at struggling against domination. This may be in the form of 'systematic and continuance actions of gradually accelerating offensive against domination'.³⁸

Examples from the West have shown that what Maduro has described has actually happened. Some women who felt oppressed by the authority of domination from men which is sanctioned by the Bible left the church. Others have remained in the church but in a transformed way while waiting for the time that the whole church will change and stop practicing sexism. This has led to the formation of what Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza and Rosemary Radford Ruether have called 'Women-Church'. The basis of the foundation of Women-Church is that women cannot wait for the patriarchal church to reform its sexism before they can worship meaningfully in an inclusive way. Under such circumstances, therefore, 'Women-Church' is an alternative community. For Fiorenza, Women-Church is modeled on the community of Jesus which was a community of equals who were called to faith in God. She is of the opinion that

³⁸ Otto Maduro, 1982, 138.

A true church is a community of self-identified women and women-identified-men who band together to struggle against oppression. 'Women church' strives for women's power and religious self affirmation, their liberation as well as the liberation of all alienation, marginalization, and oppression.³⁹

According to Ruether, the existence of 'Women-Church' is based on what a church should be. She is of the opinion that 'the church is where the good news of liberation from sexism is preached, where the Spirit is present to empower us to renounce patriarchy, where a community committed to the new life of community is spreading this vision and struggle to others.'⁴⁰

Letty Russell appreciates 'Women-Church' but prefers to work within the church, but in a critical way. She favours authority as partnership within the church. She says

In this view, reality is interpreted in the form of a circle of inter-dependence. Ordering is explored through the inclusion of diversity in a rainbow spectrum that does not require that persons submit to the "top" but rather, that they participate in the common task of creating an interdependent community and tends to reinforce ideas of cooperation, with contributions a wide diversity of persons enriching the whole.⁴¹

In this quotation Russell is saying that it is not enough for the church to create space for women in the

³⁹ Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza, 'The Will to Choose or to Reject: Continuing Our Critical Work' in ed. Letty Russell, Feminist Interpretation of the Bible. Philadelphia: Westminster, 1985, 126.

⁴⁰ Rosemary Radford Ruether, 1983, 213.

⁴¹ Letty Russell, 1985, 144.

current patriarchal church structures. The church is being called to go beyond that and create church structures that empower women. This is because the experience of most women who have been given positions of leadership in other churches with the present patriarchal structures have shown that it does not work. Rosemary Radford Ruether has argued that

Women in ministry, like all women trying to function in public roles under male rule, find themselves in a double bind. They are allowed success only by being better than men at the games of masculinity, while at the same time they are rebuked for having lost their femininity. In such a system it is not possible for women to be equal, but only to survive in a token and marginal way at tremendous physical and psychological cost.⁴²

Judging from the issues that have been identified in the mobilization of African church women in chapter six, they would like to remain in the church and seek reform through church women's organizations. They would like to work together with men in the churches to form a new community of men and women in Africa. PACWA is asking for equality in the church. The other ecumenical women's organizations are going a step further to ask for sharing of authority. This would involve both men and women taking part in the process of change. Mercy Amba Oduyoye has presented this in the following way

We are called to struggle for the transformation of relationships. We have to live the life of the future even as we seek to bring into existence by our

⁴² Rosemary Radford Ruether, 1983, 201.

insistence on personal accountability, participation, and on the importance of becoming authentic reflectors of the image of God. In this way we may hope to build a human community whose obligations arise from within ourselves rather than from outside pressure. This view challenges the traditional view of authority. It is part of the liberation process that will surely encompass all persons.⁴³

While Mercy Oduyoye does not explain which traditional authority is being challenged here, we would assume that it is both the African culture and the church's view of authority. Both authorities emphasize a pyramid structure of authority which has the privileged (male ministers) at the top and the oppressed at the bottom. This is not acceptable to women. African women are asking for partnership in the church.

8.4 A challenge to the Nkhoma synod

On the basis of our findings in this thesis we may conclude that the Nkhoma synod is yet to come up with a theology that would make its female members understand what it means to be a Chewa Christian woman in the church today. We therefore agree with Musopole who said that

What has been said about the church in Africa having no theology is particularly true of the churches in Malawi. It still lives on 'historically stale' confessions which were formulated, not only elsewhere, but alas! a long time ago, believing that the theological canon is fixed and new theological insights have now ceased. The churches have failed theologically to engage the problems facing them at present time in a creative way... This being the case, the churches

⁴³ Mercy Amba Oduyoye, 1986, 135.

portray a foreignness which still smacks of colonial and Christendom-missionary mentality and a conservatism more suited to museums than to an organization with a mission to declare the new life in Christ.⁴⁴

With this quotation in mind, it may be concluded that the selective appropriation of the Nkhoma synod of the traditional Chewa culture on women was based on the theology of early missionaries of the DRC with regard to women's issues. Although there has been a shift in the reasons for denying women participation from church leadership from biblical to cultural, our survey shows that traditional biblical and missionary reasons are still strong in the attitudes of the policy makers. This may be due to the fact that the church has not come up with a different position from the one introduced by the early missionaries. Now that the church is being made aware of the existence of a women's perspectives to church history and theology, it becomes necessary to change.

A starting point for changing the synod's attitude towards women is the realization that theology is not static. Meaningful reflection in our experience of God should always be based on our context. This may mean acceptance of the fact that there is nothing sinful about wanting to understand God in our modern Chewa context. It also means there is nothing spiritual or holy about being

⁴⁴ Augustine Musopole, 'Towards a theological method for Malawi' (part one) Unpublished paper, 1992, 1.

proud of the fact that the synod has always been conservative in all matters as expressed by some interviewees in chapter five. If the church is to be relevant to the needs of its people, its major concern should be to discern God's Word and purpose in relation to our times and context.

The synod needs to realize that its female members are struggling for full humanity in the church. When the synod sees a continuation of requests for women in church leadership positions, it should realize that women who have been made voiceless through a sexist interpretation of the Bible are speaking through their church elders (who attend general synod meetings).

Furthermore, the Nkhoma synod needs to accept the fact that the way the female members of the church experience God is different from the way the male members do. This means that the synod needs to accept that women's interpretation and experience of the Bible is different from that of men. Therefore, while the fears of the synod about Chigwirizano becoming 'a church in a church' are appreciated, women should be given higher formal and theological education so that they can be empowered to theologize in their context.

The question then is this: Can the Nkhoma synod go through a structural transformation without compromising its

Reformed theological tradition? It should be borne in mind that the whole process of Reformation started with the desire of wanting to do the will of God through the search of the scriptures. It is through the same process that women are bringing to the attention of the Reformed church that the Bible should be read with the understanding that it was written from a patriarchal point of view. Furthermore, as noted in chapter three, in 1989 the World Alliance of Reformed Churches made a call to all its members to be inclusive in church ministry at all levels. Since Nkhoma synod is a member, responding to that call in the affirmative would be accepting the humanity of women and being faithful to the Reformed tradition.

In the process of the transformation of the Nkhoma synod's theology toward women, there is also a need for it to implement a genuine programme of empowerment for women. This would involve the synod going beyond re-examination of its own structures. It would need to motivate women to accept their position as equals with men in the eyes of God. Since Christianity empowered men through introducing them to the Word of God and providing them with education as well as theological education, the synod is being asked to use the same instruments to empower women. In order to reach this position the synod needs to recognize that sexism is as evil as the racism of the missionaries which it rejected in 1962.

APPENDIX

GUIDING QUESTIONNAIRE

This questionnaire was used informally and with variation from person to person and the conversation was recorded on a tape. There was only one researcher.

Title

AFRICAN WOMEN IN RELIGION AND CULTURE.

Chewa Women in the Nkhoma Synod of the church of Central Africa, Presbyterian: A critical study from women's perspective.

SECTION 1

IDENTIFICATION

1. Name of the interviewee.....
2. Sex
3. Age.....
4. Marital Status

- Married monogamous
- Married polygamist
- Divorced
- Separated
- Single
- Widowed

Educational Attainment of the interviewee

- No education
- Primary
- Some secondary
- Completed J.C
- Completed M.S.C.E.
- University
- Theological certificate
- Theological diploma
- theological degree(s)
- Other (Explain)

- 6. Occupation.....
- 7. Name of church congregation.....
- 8. Position held in church.....

9 Name of Presbytery.....

SECTION 2 WOMEN IN CHURCH LEADERSHIP POSITIONS

10 What do you think about women participating in church leadership positions?

11 What are the reasons for your answer?

CHIGWIRIZANO

12 What is the major contribution of Chigwirizano the church?

13 How do you feel about:-

- a) Having a male church representative at chigwirizano meetings;
- b) Having only wives of ministers as leaders of Chigwirizano National Executive Committee?

SECTION 3 CHRISTIAN WOMEN AND CULTURE

CHILANGIZO

14 Did you attend Chilangizo?

- 15 Did you find it helpful?
- 16 Explain.
- 17 Do you know why Chilangizo was introduced in the Church?
- 18 If yes explain
- 19 Should chilangizo continue?
- 20 Give reasons
- 21 Do you have any suggestions for change if it has to continue?
- 22 If yes, explain.

CHIONGO OR BRIDE WEALTH

- 23 Was chiongo or bride wealth paid when you were getting married?
- 24 What effect does it have on your marriage now?

CHILD MARRIAGES

- 25 How old were you when you married?
- 26 Do you know why the church wants girls to be married at least when they are sixteen?
- 27 If yes, explain.
- 28 Do church members take the age restriction seriously?
- 29 Explain.

POLYGAMY

- 30 What do you think about Christian marriage being polygamous?
- 31 Do you think some church members secretly practice polygamy even though the church does not allow?
- 32 What are the effects of polygamy on women?

WIDOWHOOD AND PROPERTY

- 33 When did you became a widow

- 34 How many Children do you have?
- 35 How do you support yourself and the children?
- 36 How was the issue of property handled?
- 37 Do you intend to get married again?

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Mrs J. Chikakuda, Sellenbosch, Cape Town
 Mrs Chikoti, Nkhoma
 Mrs Chiyenda, Nkhoma
 Mrs Ezileti Chisale, Nkhoma
 Miss Annamarie de Klerk, Nkhoma
 Mrs Falesi Nangondo Gwengwe, Nkhoma
 Mrs Honde, Nkhoma
 Chief Kachala, Nkhoma
 Mrs Belia Nakhwenda Kachala, Nkhoma
 Mrs Kachingwe, Lilongwe City
 Mrs E. Kagundu, Nkhoma
 Mrs A. Khonga, Zomba
 Mrs Kozakapasi, Mitundu
 Miss V. Kumadzi, Nkhoma
 Mrs Hilda Kuthyola, Nkhoma
 Mrs Makina, Lilongwe City
 Mrs Magombo, Nkhoma
 Mrs Masina, Nkhoma
 Mrs Matanda, Nkhoma
 Mrs Migochi, Lilongwe City
 Mrs Rute Naphiri Mose, Nthandiza
 Mrs Mwale, Nkhoma
 Mrs Mwase, Lilongwe city
 Mrs Rosemary Nchini, Nkhoma
 Mrs Ndeya, Nkhoma
 Mrs Gezina Phiri, Nthandiza
 Mrs Mphanda, Nkhoma
 Mrs Sulamoyo, Lilongwe city
 Mrs I. Van Deventer, Nkhoma
 Mrs Joana Naphiri Yohane, Chitundu

Men

Mr E. Banda, Lilongwe City
 Mr M. Banda, Chitundu
 Mr Y. Banda, Mitundu
 Rev Chikoti, Nkhoma
 Mr B. Chikankheni, Lilongwe City
 Rev Y.A. Chiyenda, Nkhoma
 Mr Chimutu, Nkhoma

1 The information collected from the people listed here was given at various stages of research and has been used in chapters two to six.

Mr L Chisale, Chikoma
 Mr Chithambo, Lilongwe City
 Mr E. Kang'ombe, Chikoma
 Mr P. Kachala, Nkhoma
 Dr H. Kamnkhwani, Stellenbosch
 Rev W.R. Kawale, Nkhoma
 Mr Kwenda, Chowo
 Rev Masina, Nkhoma
 Mr Mwale, Mtenthela
 Mr C Mwale, Lilongwe City
 Mr L Mtemba, Mthandiza
 Mr L Phiri, Chitundu
 Mr M Phiri, Lilongwe City
 Mr P Phiri, Mthandiza
 Rev Van Deventer, Nkhoma

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