Role of Folktales in Shaping Namwanga Young Women's Personality Development

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Abstract

This article examines the significant role of folktales in shaping the personalities of young Namwanga women, with a particular focus on how they align with Namwanga cultural and traditional values. The study adopted a functionalist approach to analyse and interpret the findings, thereby highlighting the broader societal and individual impacts of oral narratives. The study collected data through participant observation to examine how folktales shape young women's moral consciousness. The findings demonstrate that Namwanga folktales primarily impart crucial life lessons to young women and the wider audience. Specifically, these narratives emphasise marital fidelity, illustrate the harmful effects of vices like jealousy and arrogance, and caution against favouritism among children in the family. Furthermore, selected folktales explicitly warn against adultery and theft, promoting obedience and diligent performance of domestic duties. Overall, this article shows that performing folktales helps foster the personality development of young Namwanga women.

Keywords:
Namwanga, Chinamwanga, folktales, personality, personality building.

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Introduction

The Namwanga are an ethnic community found in Tanzania, Zambia, and Malawi. In Zambia, they live in Muchinga Province, specifically in the Nakonde and Isoka districts. In Malawi, the community predominantly lives in the northwest (Sinkamba 1984). This study focuses on the Namwanga of Tanzania, who live in the northwestern part of the Songwe Region, in Momba District. The district borders Rukwa Region and

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Zambia to the west, Mbozi District to the east, Chunya District to the north, and Ileje District to the south. In many African societies, traditional culture remains a cherished part of people's lives, particularly in rural areas. It encompasses its own systems for socialisation, education, law, and science (Mulokozi 1999). Mulokozi (1999) adds that "the traditional cultural systems serve as a means of preserving, passing on, and even transforming the people's cultural values, knowledge, and heritage through traditional oral narratives such as sayings, folktales, poetry, dance, and societal rituals" (p. 5). Similarly, the Namwanga have norms, culture, and traditions, mainly practised by the older generation to impart norms, culture, and values to the young. This involves learning through observation, imitation, participation, and apprenticeship from what elders do, say, or how they behave.

Joshua Usman (2018) explains that "in Africa, where stories are narrated by our grandparents, one of the exciting memories is when we sit around, all ears in anticipation of their wonderful stories (p. 06). Similarly, Namwanga oral narratives, including folktales, are typically narrated by elders to guide the younger generation into becoming responsible adults. Mulokozi observes that folktale performers are mainly grandfathers and grandmothers; occasionally, elder sisters and brothers may also perform when available (Mulokozi 1999, p.13**).** In Namwanga, older people are the primary storytellers to the young generation. For young women, this practice teaches them how to become good wives and mothers.

As Finnegan (2012) further explains, a folktale is any oral prose narrative from any society **(**p. 310). Similarly, Okpewho defines folktales as "oral narratives" expressed through word of mouth. These stories have often been referred to as "prose narratives," but Okpewho prefers the term "oral narratives" as it is a more representative description of the art form (Okpewho 1992, p. 181). James (2012) adds that folktales are stories passed down from ancestors and drawn from the daily experiences of ordinary people. Finnegan and Okpewho's definitions seem broad, encompassing stories of historical truth, origins, and purpose, as well as narratives that describe a specific context or occasion. According to Fedeo (2021), Africans, including the Namwanga, do not officially classify their stories into rigid

categories. Based on Fedeo's contention, I applied Okpewho's definition in this study, which refers to all oral narratives as folktales, because the Namwanga do not officially classify their stories.

Notably, folktales fulfil many societal functions. They primarily serve to entertain and to express cultural values, traditions, and beliefs from generation to generation (Mdhluli 2025). Adeyemi (1997) observes that folktales can inculcate virtues such as humility, gratitude, and respect for elders, […] perseverance, cooperation, hospitality, truthfulness, honesty, willingness to take advice, patriotism, courage, and the fear of God (p. 115). Through folktales, the Namwanga society passes its values and norms to the young generation, including young women.

Folktales in Africa, as Mdhluli (2025) contends, serve as a social learning tool of African culture. Children learn cultural values and beliefs by witnessing and copying the behaviour of characters in folktales (p. 4). Furthermore, folktales have been found to be essential to African children's socialisation; they are taught about their cultural background, history, morals, beliefs and customs through the use of folktales (p. 5). Similarly, Kashaka (2025) argues that folktales preserve traditional culture and identity. They also serve a social function, connecting community members through shared rituals and societal norms, and they record human behaviours (Kashaka, 2025, p. 33). Similarly, among the Namwanga, folktales, like other literary works, play a highly important role in shaping the personality of society-based o Namwanga cultural values and beliefs.

Personality refers to a person's entire mental organisation at any stage of their development, encompassing their character, intellect, temperament, morality, and all the attitudes they develop throughout life (Magnavita, 2002, pp.15-17). Magnavita clarifies that personality is closely related to temperament, an individual's basic biological disposition, and character, a person's core qualities like integrity, honesty, and stability that remain intact throughout life. To Mdhluli (2025), personality is an individual's distinctive behaviour, emotions, and thoughts in response to their environment. It is how people think, feel about themselves, and how they relate to others (p. 7). Among the Namwanga, a good personality includes an individual's general behaviour, personal actions, and relationships with society.

In any society, several external factors, such as culture and the family system, influence personality (Zucker 1984). Zucker notes that personality

is shaped by both "biological factors concerning the variants of genetics that each person carries, and the other half of individual personality comes from the external environment" (p. 297). Building a strong personality expands one's capacity, nurtures talent, and builds new skills, generally addressing weaknesses and turning them into strengths (Shyam 2018). This article argues that folktales are one of the external environmental factors that contribute to the personality development of young Namwanga women.

The Namwanga understanding of personality is similar to that of other Tanzanians and Africans. Blazio (2018) asserts that "African people have a unified vision of reality and understanding. A person's personality is shaped by their parents or immediate family members" (p. 213). In Namwanga, it is believed that parents who lack the right personality cannot develop their children's personalities properly because parents show their children the right way. Mphasha (2015) supports this view, arguing that the child's future lies in the hands of parents, who are expected to teach their children to be wise. This is because parents have the knowledge to sustain life and play an important role in guiding the young. In addition, Nwankwo (2021) contends that parents are responsible for teaching and monitoring their children to avoid immoral conduct. In Namwanga, the family is an important institution that fundamentally shapes an individual's behaviour. Parents in Namwanga diligently shape their children's moral conduct because any misconduct by their children reflects on them, and people laugh at them for their children's poor behaviour.

According to Hikmati and Bhata (2021), "folktales carry an untold moral message; the indigenous stories are developed with social context and laden with moral lessons. They show what is right and wrong to the young stars" (p. 33). Hikmati and Bhata explain that folktales "tell us our history; they describe where we live, and ultimately who we are" (p. 38). They educate both young and old by sharpening their wit and orienting them to past generations' wisdom. Furthermore, folktales help to safeguard and maintain identities, cultural values, traditions, and societal practices (Hikmati & Bhata 2021). From this, it can be argued that folktales play significant roles in the community's philosophical, sociological, and cultural life.

Among the Namwanga, folktales are crucial in shaping personalities and societal roles, including those of young women. Many folklorists acknowledge the significant role of these narratives in shaping young women's social conduct and behaviour (Seboni 2010), giving women a key influence on moral upbringing. Seboni notes that "when a woman is brought up correctly, her family is at an advantage because she will get married, which is a bonus" (Seboni 2010, p. 2). This concept highlights women's influence in imparting morals to children of both genders. Suda comments that "African women have a unique position not only to produce and sustain life but also to instil [...] moral standards of behaviour during socialisation" (Suda 1996, p. 73). Furthermore, Oteje et al. (2020) argue that "women had nice responsibilities within the upbringing of youngsters, particularly in moulding them to become girls" (p. 02). Similarly, Maduegbunam (2015) emphasises that "society requires values reorientation and the people to influence this in children are mothers. This is because women and mothers are good character moulders within the home" (p. 01). Although all parents have a duty to teach their children morals, society often condemns the mother when things go astray. This parallels Fedeo's (2021) argument that the mother is responsible for teaching her daughter acceptable behaviour that will lead her to be a faithful wife to her husband. Any misconduct is seen as a result of the mother's failure to teach her daughter proper manners (p. 42). Thus, traditionally, the mother is primarily responsible for moral teaching. In Namwanga, when the daughter behaves badly, the mother is the first to be condemned, saying (*Nyina atawasunda ichete*), "the daughter is not well taught by her mother". Because of this practice, Namwanga mothers are always very careful in shaping their daughters' behaviour.

Megbowon and Poswa (2025) contend that present-day African societies face numerous social challenges that threaten the social order, including changes in institutions and behaviour. This underlines the need to reinforce African moral values in every possible way, including folktales (p. 2). The Namwanga, too, could not escape from this phenomenon. This article thus focuses on the personalities of young women in Namwanga society because they are believed to have the first responsibility for moulding their children's personalities. The high rate of harmful social vices today is often attributed to women's negligence in their responsibility to teach ethics (Kehinde 2020). Therefore, this article examines how Namwanga society uses folktales to shape the personalities of young women as future mothers

and family members. The study will serve as a guideline for shaping society and show how mothers are important members in moulding children in the Namwanga and society in general.

Theoretical Orientation

Milton Damian (2007) observes that functionalism views society as an intricate system with interdependent parts that must work effectively for society to remain stable (p. 02). This perspective holds that societal cohesion is maintained through a shared consensus on norms and values, with all members working collectively for society's greater good (Damian 2007, p. 4). This study employs functionalist theory to explore the profound impact of Namwanga folktales as a shared value that shapes the personalities of young Namwanga women and helps keep society stable.

A core tenet of functionalism is its recognition of the vital role of oral literature. As Miruka (2001) states, "functionalists believe that any cultural activity performed in the community must have a practical value or function for its people" (p. 136). This framework sees society as a stable entity, sustained by cultural activities like narratives that embody and preserve beliefs, customs, rituals, and social structures (Miruka 2001, p. 138). Similarly, local narratives are understood to possess a clear social function (Finnegan 1970). African folktales, in particular, serve direct or indirect functions such as educating, upholding morals, stabilising society, and transmitting cultural knowledge among ethnic groups (Finnegan 1970). Likewise, narrating folktales is considered purposeful (Okpewho 1992, p. 173). Among the Namwanga, folktales have a practical value as they serve a socio-cultural function. The Namwanga use tales to maintain shared values and correct misconduct in their society, helping the community remain stable.

The functionalist approach emerged as a critical method for studying a society's life and culture. Malinowski (1948) observes that culture, expressed through tales, operates in connection with […] moral influence and sociological principles. Tales govern our faith and control our conduct (p. 78). Similarly, this approach examines the functions or roles any societal practice performs, including the tales its members tell, and how these

functions contribute to the society's survival (Okpewho 1992). Okpewho (1992) further emphasises, "Whatever is done by members of a society, it has a utilitarian or practical function" (p. 174), highlighting that many traditional cultural performances, including folktales, serve specific functions within the societies where they are performed.

Kudakwashe Tuwe (2016) states that storytelling mediates and transmits knowledge […] to younger generations about culture, morals, expectations, norms, and values (p. 02). Using functionalism, this study examines how folktales educate, transmit traditional beliefs and values, and shape the behaviour of young women in Namwanga society. The study uses this theory to trace and analyse events in the selected tales, specifically how these events and the characters' actions shape the personalities of young Namwanga women. Drawing on Malinowski and Brown, who argue that "stories fulfil in primitive culture an indispensable function […] it safeguards and enforces morality, is a vital ingredient of human civilisation" (Malinowski, 1948, p. 78), this study analyses the chosen Namwanga folktales. The central tenet of this discussion is the conviction that tale narration in society must serve a purpose, be it social, cultural, political, or economic, and that functionalism has become a crucial method for studying societal life and culture.

Data Collection

The Namwanga folktales examined in this article were collected through participant observation. Uwamusi, C and Ajisebiyawo, A. (2023) explain participant observation as entering a group of people with a shared identity to understand their community. This process includes participating in performances to gain knowledge and a deeper understanding of the actors and their context (p. 20). In this study, I applied participatory observation by participating as an active audience member: clapping my hands, asking for clarification, responding to the narrators, and observing their behaviour and actions during the narration. The method helped the researcher gain a deeper understanding of Namwanga values, beliefs, norms, and culture, particularly young women's moral teachings in the narrations. With participants' consent, the researcher recorded all narratives using an audio recorder. Following the collection, the folktales were sorted, translated, and analysed. As a native Namwanga speaker, the researcher initially translated the collected folktales into English. To ensure accurate and reliable translations, the researcher consulted other expert Namwanga translators.

This article focuses on the analysis of six specific narratives which were found relevant to the objective of this study: *Umwanachi Ing'umba* (The Barren Woman), *Wakapanya wa Mino* (The Carving Teeth), *Imfumu na Wamangwe* (The Chief and His Wives), *Umwanachi Umung'o* (A Thief Girl), *Enyina wa Pambali* (The Stepmother) and *Umuntu ni Ng'wina* (The Man and the Crocodile).

Findings and Discussion

Hofmeyr (1992) asserts that stories cannot be separated from men and women; what matters is simply who sat where. The skill of telling stories to socialise young girls is seen as essential to the female craft, where the content of those stories is more gender-specific and also linked more closely to forms of women's work (p. 43). In Namwanga culture, elder women, such as aunts and grandmothers, along with other family and clan members, primarily train young females in essential duties, knowledge, and skills (Simaluwani, 1994). Elder women, especially aunts, effectively foster social cohesion and transmit social norms and cultural values to younger girls. They are also responsible for instructing girls during secluded initiation ceremonies.

Mature young Namwanga women are educated for social maturation in a special house called *Imbusa.* This serves as an initiation into adulthood. Simaluwani (1994) notes, "Aunts appoint instructresses and decide in whose house a particular young woman will be kept while under instruction" (p. 123). During this traditional education, folktales, songs, and proverbs are key tools for instilling self-discipline and fostering responsible membership in society. This aligns with Tuwe (2016), who argues that the main lesson of oral African stories is to teach and reinforce moral principles and provide youngsters […] with a sense of identity and valuable lessons about life. African storytellers, particularly the Namwanga, typically conclude their narratives by explicitly stating the moral lesson. This aligns with the philosophy of education in traditional societies, which aims to character-build and instil moral qualities in girls to prepare them to become good women (Simaluwani, 1994). Thus, as mentioned previously, folktales serve

as a vital and traditional means by which the Namwanga impart moral lessons to their young women.

Tales for Personalities to Young Women Abandon

This section examines moral development by exploring how young women are prepared to uphold ethical standards and avoid vices such as jealousy, deceit, theft, and disobedience. The section examines three tales: *Umwanachi Umung'o* (A Thief Girl), *Wakapanya wa Mino* (The Carving Teeth), and *Umulumendo ni Ng'wina* (The Boy and the Crocodile). The tale *Wakapanya wa Mino* (The Carving Teeth) is about six girls who decide to visit the 'teeth smith' to have their teeth carved so they can be more beautiful. The girls had to prepare porridge for the teeth carver as payment. Almost all the girls could not prepare good porridge except one: Rose. The teeth carver said the lady prepared delicious porridge. Accordingly, the teeth carver carved their teeth according to the quality of each girl's porridge. Rose's teeth were thus carved more nicely than her friends'. On the way home, her friends felt jealous and threw Rose into the river because her carved teeth looked lovely.

In Namwanga, young women are taught seriously to prepare food as they prepare to be good wives. Girls' tales are told in the kitchen, where women tell their daughters about desirable behaviour and how to cook to mould them for womanhood. Many taboos are told to let them think about acceptable rules of society, enabling them to have a good personality" (Kabaji 2005, p. 167). For the Namwanga, the kitchen is a significant place for young women to learn how to cook and other cultural values of Namwanga society. On the other hand, "Stories [...] as per tradition are still common ways of learning to cook. Elders will tell stories about how they will cook *Nshima* (posho) from millet or how they will cook chicken without spices or cooking oil" (Turmo 2011, p. 18). Such stories would motivate young Namwanga women to try out these recipes. Cooking for the Namwanga can also be symbolic. For instance, a young woman who knows how to cook is believed to be well prepared to be a good wife because of being good in the kitchen, *ukupya amawele* (to burn breasts). This means that a woman is good and sharp at cooking. Sometimes, after marriage in Namwanga, a woman is given a cooking test (*ichipenvya*), and the aunts and the daughter's grandmother can assist and approve her cooking ability, which adds love and value to them.

In Namwanga, women who are not good at cooking (*watalalila piziko*) are seen as lazy and bad wives. In Namwanga, a lazy woman shames her mother, as she is insulted for her irresponsibility (*Nyina atamsunda*). In the story, Rose knows how to cook. Rose symbolises a good mother and wife-to-be because she managed to cook a nice porridge. The narrator says, *efumpi wino wanonile ukulusye efumpi wensi, awino Rose wakulunzile* (the porridge that was found to be nice was that which Rose prepared). Because of that well-cooked porridge, *Rose wapanyilwe ichete ukuchila wawo wasano* (Rose fixed her teeth well compared to other young women). From the story, the Namwanga young women learn the importance of hard work and reasonable behaviour in society.

In *Wakapanya wa Mino*, the story highlights the significance of carving teeth and the Namwanga young women's understanding of beauty. The concept of beauty in Africa is broad and varies across cultural communities. According to Kabaji (2005), "Beauty has a lot to do with adherence to the values of the society and conforming to the dominant ideological framework [...]. In Maragoli society, a beautiful girl is like rotten fish" (p. 87). For the Yoruba, "beautiful women are often observed to be arrogant [... and self-opinionated]. Whatever goes wrong in society is associated with them" (Kabaji, 2005, p. 88). According to Fedeo (2016), Banyakyusa perceive that beautiful women are associated with promiscuity, "which makes them acquire sexually transmitted diseases" (p. 58). Comparing the beauty of a woman with those harmful vices, like a rotten fish and being attractive for multiple sexual relationships, symbolises how beauty is negatively perceived in some societies.

In contrast, the Namwanga view beauty positively, treating it as wealth, especially when it refers to good manners and morals. According to Kaziga et al. (2021), "beauty and ethics coincide; one cannot be beautiful and yet misbehave" (p. 7). As a result, young Namwanga women work hard to be beautiful by decorating themselves and adding to their natural beauty. In Namwanga, carving teeth, charms on the face and chin, and a nose piercing are symbols that make a young woman beautiful (*Uuyembo wa wakazyana*). Similarly, Kaziga et al. (2021) add that "in ethnic groups, the standard of beauty is characterised by a slender nose, thin lips, finely shaped heads, dark-

skinned, short black hairs, slender fingers and white teeth" (p. 12). In Namwanga, a beautiful young woman with good moral standards is likely to marry early, while an ugly woman is not. In the story, because Rose's well-carved teeth symbolise beauty, she is also seen as morally upright, making her friends jealous enough to plan to kill her. Her friends know she will marry before them because of her beauty and good manners.

The story *Wakapanya wa Mino* also proposes the effects of jealousy. Among the Namwanga, jealousy is intolerable. Having jealousy for the Namwanga is compared to the killer (*echikoma*) because it is believed that someone with jealousy may damage or kill someone else. In the tale *Wakapanya wa Mino* (The Carving Teeth), the badly carved young woman feels jealous of Rose, whose teeth are well-carved, and throws her into the river. The tale states that: (*Awalema Rose awakazyana wawo nakafipi, uwuzuwa, awamusumbila Muluzi*)**.** Her colleagues forced Rose to show them her teeth and learned a secret: they were beautifully carved. Those jealous girls, evil spirits, and killers grabbed Rose, threw her into the river, and made their way back to their village of *Kazipila*. Among the Namwanga, jealousy is punished severely, as the five girls are in the story. Therefore, the tale indicates that jealousy is destructive for young Namwanga women.

The young Namwanga women should also avoid deceit, as the story shows. "Deception is the deliberate attempt, whether successful or not, to conceal, fabricate, and/or manipulate in any other way factual and/or emotional information by verbal and/or nonverbal means to create or maintain others ' belief that the communicator considers false" (Masip, Garrido, and Herrero 2004, p. 148). In the story, the girls deliberately lie about Rose's whereabouts after throwing her in the river. The narrator says, *Kumulandu na wakazyana ukukana kuno watamsumbizile e Rose muluzi, nyina wa mwana wawayanizizye ichakulya, walile walya awatalika ukufwa wenga* (As the girls lied regarding their attempt to kill their fellow, they all died on the spot after eating the food that was prepared for them). For that deception, the young women are given the death penalty as a lesson in not deceiving. For the Namwanga, lying is a bad personality trait. It is argued, "In African societies, no parent would like to see their children […growing up] rude; people warn their children against telling lies" (Mnenuka 2017, p. 169). In Namwanga, lying (*Uufi*) is one of the offences for which any person can be severely punished. The Namwanga also compares a liar to a killer. The Namwanga say, ukwikala nu mufi, chazipa nukwikala nu mulozi, umufi e

chikoma (to live with the witch is better than to live with the liar; a Liar is a killer). This speaks to the harsh punishment young women in the story face. Parents and all older adults always warn young women not to lie.

The tale *Umulumendo ni Ng'wina* (The Boy and the Crocodile) portrays a need for young women to abandon the desire for a luxurious life. This tale is about a young woman who wants to marry a wealthy man who can provide her with delicious food and elegant things. The story explains that one young man, who did not want to lose a woman because of her beauty, told the young woman to marry him, and he would provide her with delicious food. In the tale, the young woman wants a man to give her the crocodile eggs. As the man initially agreed, he managed to find the crocodile eggs on the bank of the river, but as he went the next day, he was caught and killed by the crocodile, and the young woman remained a widow. Arguably, "it has become a cultural issue that every young woman wants to make a beautiful bride, marry a rich man and have a family of her own" (Seboni 2010, p. 39).

The story depicts a young woman who loves a luxurious life and marries a rich man. The narrator says, *Umwanachi anena umonsi ati ndi utakundonda ntayanga* (If you don't need to marry me, stop; other men can marry me, and they can feed me crocodile eggs so that you can go). The phrase "crocodile eggs" in this story symbolises expensive, luxurious things. The young woman is depicted as wanting costly things. In the story, the crocodile catches the man as he struggles to get crocodile eggs to entertain his wife, suggesting that the desire for an expensive, luxurious life ends badly. Seboni (2010) contends that "a woman should avoid any matter that may affect her husband's well-being" (p. 40). In the story, the narrator says: *Umwanachi walindilizile umonsi impindi yino wawelelanga apotwa, walemilwe ni ndolo kuluzi.* (A woman waited for a long time without her husband returning and decided to follow her husband to the river, where she found her husband torn into pieces by a fierce crocodile, and he had lost his life.)

Among the Namwanga, young women are expected to marry a hardworking husband and one of good conduct (Jere 2010). Traditionally, in Namwanga, young women were not responsible for choosing whom to marry. Parents had the right to choose a man for their daughter to marry.

Neither young men nor women in Namwanga could choose a spouse. However, due to sociological changes, the question of marriage in Namwanga and elsewhere has shifted to the spouses. The parents are either informed or not informed about the marriage arrangement. They may agree or reject it, but the marriage will still take place. According to Ogoma (2014) and Fedeo (2016), parents play a little or no role in their children's decisions on whom to marry. This is evident in Namwanga, where youngsters choose their spouses independently. However, their choices follow some traditional norms and values: young women should choose a spouse who seems hardworking and does not value material wealth over love, which the Namwanga consider unacceptable.

In the tale *Umwanachi umung'o* (The Thief Girl), young women are advised to avoid being thieves. The story is about a man who married a lady thief from a distant village. The young woman turned out to be a thief. While staying with her mother-in-law, she was stealing food. Whenever she was suspected, she denied it. One day, the young woman was caught red-handed. She stole a fish, and while eating, the fish's spike pierced her neck, and she could not pull it out. Her mother-in-law pulled the spike out when she returned from the field. Finally, the young woman's husband chased her away and looked for another young woman with good conduct.

Traditionally, Namwanga families are not allowed to marry outside their villages or to families not well known to the Namwanga community. "Boys were prohibited from marrying girls from other villages [...]" (Kabaji 2005, p. 84). This aimed to protect and maintain the family's good manners. People feared bringing a new member from an unknown clan because they might exhibit unacceptable behaviour or diseases, as the lady in the story did. For a young man in the tale, *Umwanachi umung'o,* marrying a woman from a remote village violates Namwanga culture. Mnenuka (2017) argues, "Cases of personal discretion against family recommendations are becoming increasingly common. This includes marrying women from other ethnic groups. This is largely violated, especially by young people" (p. 119). However, the current situation allows young women to marry anyone and join any family they want, as long as the spouse has a good personality.

The story warns young women against theft behaviour. Among the Namwanga, theft by women is one of the strong reasons for divorce. In the story, the woman is divorced because of stealing. The narrator says: *"Lello umulume wakanile ati awe ukwikala nu mwanachi umung'o, amuzinga"*

(Nevertheless, her husband felt ashamed of marrying a thief woman. He decided to divorce her, and he said, "It is a taboo to live with a thief woman in their family). In Namwanga, marriage places more emphasis on conduct than on shape and beauty. Mkandawile et al. (2019) and Jere (2010) note that, for young men in Africa, parents look for more than just a bride's shape and beauty in marriage. "The emphasis was on her conduct and behaviour" (p. 89). Similarly, among the Namwanga, marriage depends on good conduct.

Namwanga Tales for Making Good Wives and Mothers

This section is about the roles of wives and mothers as represented in Namwanga folktales. The section focuses on shaping young women to become effective wives and mothers, emphasising their crucial role as family caretakers as depicted in three folktales: *Infumu na Wamangwe* (The Chief and His Wives), *Enyina wa Pambali* (The Stepmother), and *Umwanachi Ing'umba* (The Barren Woman)

Umwanachi Ing'umba (The Barren Woman) is about a woman who mistreated her daughter. The woman was believed to be barren because she delayed having a child after marriage. For an extended period, the barren woman was disrespected and abused by her husband and her in-laws because she had no children. However, the woman remained calm and tolerated the family's harsh treatment without responding. Later on, the woman received a miracle from God. One day, she went to the field to pick fruit. She chose one fruit, which seemed better than the rest. As she looked at the fruit, it turned into a beautiful baby girl. The girl asked the barren woman if she could take care of her without any disturbances or segregation. Happy, the woman told the baby she could not mistreat her because she had wanted a child for a long time, and now she had one. The woman took the new baby girl home. However, after the baby had grown up, the mother started to abuse her whenever she made a mistake. Finally, because of the mistreatment, arrogance, and abusive words, the girl returned to the field, leaving the mother childless.

The story represents the issue of tolerance towards the mistreatment of women who are perceived to be barren. "Traditionally, the experience of

marriage and motherhood dominates women's lives and identity in Africa. Women who do not bear children are less valued and disregarded" (Theodorou 2007, p. 08). Theodorou explains that a woman's value is determined by her reproductive ability. Similarly, "when a married woman gets her first child, her status changes, and she is more respected in her new home. The more the children she bears, the better she is regarded in the family" (Seboni 2010, p. 41). Thus, against this backdrop, in the tale under discussion, the woman is less valued by her husband and her in-laws, and she even dares to kill herself:

> Fertility is the main aim of marriage, and every young bride should know that her happy stay at her in-laws' house depends on that aspect. If a couple cannot produce children, the curse is usually placed on the woman. For a new bride, childbearing also secures her marriage (Seboni 2010, p. 41).

In some families, a barren woman is likely to be divorced. An unfruitful marriage is not only a misfortune but also a curse because the couple has not contributed to the family community and, therefore, society. To Africans, "the greatest desire and requirement in marriage is to have children" (Jere 2010, p. 96). To marry and mother a child, […] entitles a woman to respect from her husband's relatives as she is thence addressed as mother of someone" (Kabaji, 2005, p. 92). This parallels the tale under discussion: *wamulamu wakwe wamuvuzizizye amazwi nkaninye. Wakumbuchizile ni infwa* (Due to her inability to give birth, this woman was scolded and insulted by her husband's brothers. The woman even prefers to die rather than be abused by her husband's relatives, which is an unacceptable personality trait.

The preference for death for the mother in the tale symbolises how, for the Namwanga, childbearing is valued and barrenness is useless. "Motherhood means sacrifice and self-denial, and [...] a woman loses hope in life because she is not able to endure the shame of not bearing her husband a child. A woman is subjected to psychological torture and is abandoned (divorced) by her husband (Ng'umbi, 2015, p. 33). A woman in the tale is scolded and abused by her husband and his relatives for being barren. Among the Namwanga, children symbolise power for women and families. This speaks to Ng'umbi's observation that "motherhood in some quarters is seen as a sacred and powerful spiritual path for a woman to take" (p. 33). Thus, in

Namwanga, every woman and family will struggle to have a baby for power and respect.

Despite all the mistreatment associated with barrenness, in Africa, "folktales prepare young women to be more tolerant and accept the life conditions and limitations they may face. In this manner, folktales offer a safe shelter that lets young women and others tolerate social repression" (Touzani 2021, p. 49). In the tale of *Umwanachi Ing'umba*, the barren woman has to accept abusive words and much mistreatment from her husband and his brothers for her barrenness. Finally, she has a mystical baby in the field while picking fruit. The narrator says: "*Mwewanji ichizungusyo, mwindi weyo wapilusile awa amulawa-amuntu swinya amukazyana umuzima wenga uwa mpee*" (Surprisingly! The fruit suddenly changed into a very light-skinned girl child with immeasurable beauty). A Namwanga woman who cannot tolerate the challenges of her marriage is believed to have a bad personality and is considered weak; the strong Namwanga woman tolerates and overcomes all the challenges she faces.

On the other hand, "folktales teach moral lessons on child upbringing. One should be kind to a child no matter […] the relationship" (Umar and Fema, 2018, p. 58). In the tale of 'Umwanachi Ing'umba,' one learns that a mother should be kind and set a good example for her children. A woman as a parent should use polite language to calm the situation; abusive language is not acceptable. The narrator says: *Nyina Wapitilizizye indandile ati "Choo chikuntamya amuno chafumilila mumilala mwe mwindi."* The mother complains, saying, "This child is bothering me because she was born from a fruit. If normal, she would be unable to do what she is doing. In the story, insults and abusive words from the barren woman to the daughter are some of the bad personalities that mothers are warned to avoid.

From early childhood, "young women are told how to behave as [… young women] and how to become good women. They are taught moral lessons and are encouraged to see examples of how their parents or other relatives live" (Raising 2003, p. 02). Raising adds that young women are instructed to obey and respect their parents, husbands, and other people in their places (p. 03). Thus, *Umwanachi Ing'umba* fosters young women to be obedient and respectful to their parents. It prepares them to become good mothers and

wives. The narrator says: "*[…] Umukazyana weyo wayaya wazinvile apitilizya ukulusye uwanda wa kutalika*" (The next day, the mother sent her daughter to the maize milling machine; the daughter once again returned home later than the first day). This narration signifies that the young woman erred several times. It implies her disobedience and disrespect to her mother.

Folktales help young women adopt attitudes that conform to cultural norms. They can also denounce and disapprove of unwanted behaviours (Touzani 2021**).** In Namwanga, women and mothers shape children's behaviour. But in Namwanga, women must shape children with good words. Insults and other abusive words are not allowed because it is believed by nature that those words will likely be imitated and used by those young women. Thus, *Umwanachi Ing'umba's* (The Barren Woman) story discourages young women from using abusive words.

Enyina wa Pambali (The Stepmother) is a tale about a stepmother and how she mistreats her stepson. The storyteller narrates that a man married two women. Each gave birth to a son, and the man gave both boys the same name, Mwilumbe. Unfortunately, one woman died. The woman who remained alive abused, tortured, and discriminated against her stepson. But her son loved his brother. The mother hated the stepson so much that she threw him into a pit when her husband was not around. Her son cried for his brother until his father came back. Finally, when her husband discovered what had happened, he rescued his son and divorced the woman.

Magnus and Simon (2006) state that "discrimination brings unequal treatment of otherwise similar individuals due to their ascribed membership in a disadvantaged group or family" (p. 19). The stepson (Mwilumbe) is treated unequally compared to his brother. Discrimination against children is an unacceptable practice among the Namwanga. The story says, "*Impindi yonsi, umwinandekwa awino wachemanga ivikwato umuuye alanga asyazile pakaya*" (All the time the stepson is the one who was grazing cattle while his brother remained at home). The stepmother assigning the stepson to cattle grazing while his brother stays at home stresses that the mother segregated and mistreated her stepson by giving him more chores than her biological son. In raising children, "one should be kind to a child no matter the relationship...this is because children are important persons to help the community in the future days" (Umar & Fema 2018, p. 58). Thus, from the story under discussion, young women are taught to become good

mothers to all children, whether biologically related or not. For the Namwanga, bias and segregation are regarded as one of the most significant offences for women and wives.

Infumu na Wamangwe (The Chief and His Wives) narrates the story of a hunter Chief with four wives. Young women are taught not to steal or commit adultery. Among the four wives, one was a thief and an adulteress. The woman steals the Chief's Guinea fowl. The same woman had an extramarital relationship with another man. The Chief heard about the woman's adultery, but whenever he asked his wives, they all denied it. Finally, the Chief hired a traditional medicine man to find a woman who was engaging in such behaviour. The woman was caught and sentenced to death. She was thrown into a river.

Women engaging in adultery in African society are regarded as misfits. In the story under discussion, the adulterous married woman is punished by being thrown into the river. In African tradition, young girls learn to respect their husbands, remain faithful and obey them (Agha 2018, p. 67). There are different penalties for a woman who is caught committing adultery. For example, adultery and other forms of immoral behaviour are strongly discouraged; the suspect would be taken to a soothsayer or take an oath for proof of innocence (Idang 2015, p. 103). Similarly, in Namwanga, traditional methods are also used to identify the wrong door. As the story is narrated, the traditional healer uses conventional medicine (*Umwavi*) to identify the suspect. The one believed to have committed a crime will develop constipation. The one who is not guilty remains normal, as the narrator states: *Sing'anga asenda Umwavi awapa awang'wa. Mangwe wenga alolanga munda zyuu. Avimbilwa.* The traditional healer took the medicine and gave it to everyone, and they all drank the medicine (Mwavi). The cunning and adulterous Chief's wives protruded. While the other three were perfectly well.

Nwankwo (2021) accentuates that sexual acts like premarital sex and the like are considered abominations and are against African social norms. Traditionally, Africans encourage sexual activity within the family unit (marriage) and discourage premarital sex (p. 53). Young women in Namwanga are strongly discouraged from premarital relationships. To

avoid that, Namwanga young women are checked for their virginity before marriage. "Once […one is] proven to have had sex before marriage, she is beaten in public and fined, which is a shame to herself and her parents" (Sinkamba 1984, p. 42). Similarly, Nwankwo (2021) adds That Chastity before marriage among […] young girls is highly valued across Africa. A faithful woman who is found undefiled at marriage brings pride to her family, and gifts are given not only to her but also to her parents (p. 58). Similarly, young women in Namwanga are restricted from pre-marital affairs because of the pride and the rewards to the family for being a virgin, and the punishment for those who are found unvirginal is for the family. By checking for women's virginity, Namwanga believes that women who marry while still a virgin will also remain faithful in their marriage. Functionalists Giddens, A., Duneier, M., Appelbaum, R.P. & Carr, D.S. (2000) have long argued that "the purpose of encouraging sexual activity in the confines of marriage is to intensify the bond between spouses and to ensure that procreation occurs within a stable, legally recognised relationship" (p. 56). In Namwanga, young girls are encouraged to get married while still a virgin. However, as time goes on, the traditional practices of checking virginity are likely to be dormant because it is believed to be against women's rights.

For married women among the Namwanga, the adultery penalty differs according to family and clan. In some clans and families, the rival would pay ten cows for divorce. Ejikeme, U, & Nneka, J. (2024) assert that "the penal code for adultery includes public humiliation, madness, standing naked in the shrine during purification (nudity), death, divorce, and the hands of the seducers are amputated" (p. 143). Meanwhile, in some Namwanga families, the women who are approved to commit adultery, including other penalties, are chased away from the village. Okechi (2018) notes that "In some societies, when adultery is discovered, it is severely dealt with. The guilty person may be whipped, stoned to death, made to pay compensation or parts of his body mutilated" (p. 335). In a similar vein, "Adultery in Africa remains one of the strong reasons for legal, cultural and religious divorce" (Ndoma 2019, p. 74). In Namwanga, besides the story under discussion in which the Chief decided to punish his wife severely, adultery with women is taken as an intolerable offence; a husband is even free to divorce her. In an oral interview with the Namwanga head of rituals, he mentioned several traditional punishments a Namwanga woman faces. The head of rituals said:

> Under Namwanga norms and traditional culture, infidelity is considered morally wrong. A woman who has proven to have committed adultery with any person has to pay one, two, or three cows, depending on whom the crime is committed against. As part of that payment, a woman must also pay one goat and two buckets of alcohol to ask for forgiveness**.** […] in Namwanga, it is taboo for the wife of someone to be touched by another man at any part of her body; one cow is to be paid. [Aston Sichalwe. Personal interview. 23 July 2025].

All these rules in Namwanga are there to safeguard the Namwanga woman against extramarital affairs and their associated effects, such as sexually transmitted diseases and the presence of street children.

Namwanga uses folktales to warn its young women against theft. Stealing (*uung'o*) is an unacceptable behaviour for young women. Namwanga has harsh traditional laws that prohibit stealing. In the story, the thief's wife was punished according to tradition by being thrown into the river. The narrator says: *Pano mangwe weyo wavimbilwa, munda mwizula, Imfumu imuuzya iti walola wewe? We mungo, ulinakapumilila ukusenda chino utapilwe, […] Nantikuzimba wayaya, imfumu inena awinamfumu awalema mangwe weyo awaya awamusumbila Muluzi* (The Chief asked her, saying, "You see, you are a thief, you have a habit of taking things that are not given to you, now your death penalty is suitable for you." […] The Chief ordered Sub Chiefs to arrest the thief woman and throw her into the river. As stated above, the Namwanga tradition treats stealing harshly. The tale shows how the Namwanga community condemns stealing. In Namwanga, young women and wives are warned against stealing.

Any Namwanga woman who is married or expected to be married ought to behave well; otherwise, she will not attract marriage. In Namwanga, young women are urged to behave well because any bad behaviour directly reflects on their families. To avoid shame for the whole family, parents and relatives discourage immoral behaviour in their daughters, including theft. The tale *Infumu na Wamangwe* explains the importance of wives and mothers being obedient and trustworthy. Similarly, the *Enyina wa Pambali*

(The Stape Mother) story teaches young women how to act as mothers in families.

Conclusion

Namwanga folktales offer a rich tapestry of guidance for young women, emphasising strong character development and the avoidance of harmful behaviours. These narratives consistently caution against jealousy, stealing, and a preference for a luxurious life. Among the Namwanga, jealousy is particularly condemned, equated with witchcraft, and subject to punishment. Other prohibited behaviours include discriminating against children within families and promiscuity. Respectful communication is also a key theme. Young women are advised to use respectful language when teaching children and to avoid abusive words toward both parents and children, as the tale of Umwanachi Ing'umba illustrates. Beyond what to avoid, the folktales also highlight the positive qualities young women are encouraged to cultivate. Hard work and culinary skills are presented as crucial to a successful marriage, as underscored in the story *Wakapanya wa Mino*. The stories also stress maintaining beauty alongside good manners, with the understanding that beauty without good behaviour is worthless. Additionally, the story depicts a virtuous Namwanga woman as tolerant, kind, and a good mother. Obedience and respect for elders are also highly valued traits. In essence, the folktales analysed in this study serve as moral compasses, clearly delineating behaviours to shun and virtues to embrace for the betterment of Namwanga society.

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