

INITIATION CEREMONIES AND LEARNER OUTCOMES IN RURAL ZAMBIA: EVIDENCE FROM A SECONDARY SCHOOL IN KATETE DISTRICT

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Abstract

Initiation ceremonies remain a significant component of indigenous knowledge systems in many African societies, including Zambia. This study examines the influence of initiation ceremonies on learner outcomes in a rural secondary school in Katete District. Guided by the social constructivist paradigm, the study employs a qualitative case study design to explore how cultural practices such as Chinamwali and Nyau shape learners' attitudes, behaviour, and academic engagement. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions involving learners, teachers, and community members. The findings reveal that initiation ceremonies function as informal educational systems that transmit cultural values, reinforce gender roles, and shape social identity. Verbatim evidence indicates that while these practices promote discipline and respect, they may also contribute to reduced academic focus and tensions with formal schooling expectations. The study further identifies emerging community adaptations aimed at aligning initiation practices with schooling demands. The article concludes that initiation ceremonies exert both positive and negative influences on learner outcomes, highlighting the need for culturally responsive educational strategies that integrate beneficial traditional practices while mitigating adverse effects.

Keywords: *Initiation ceremonies; learner outcomes; cultural practices; rural education; Zambia; social constructivism*

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

Initiation ceremonies constitute a foundational component of African indigenous knowledge systems, functioning as structured socio-cultural processes through which adolescents transition into socially recognized adulthood. Across many African societies, these rites of passage are not merely symbolic cultural events but highly organized systems of socialization and education that transmit community values, norms, and expectations. In Zambia, particularly among the Chewa-speaking communities of Eastern Province, initiation ceremonies such as *Chinamwali* for girls and

Nyau for boys remain deeply embedded in rural life and continue to shape the lived experiences of young people. These practices are widely regarded as essential cultural institutions that sustain social cohesion and ensure the continuity of indigenous knowledge across generations (Munthali et al., 2018; Serpell, 2019; Rasing, 2021).

Within these traditional systems, adolescents undergo structured and often intensive learning processes that include periods of seclusion, mentorship by elders, ritual instruction, and symbolic performances. Through these processes, initiates are systematically taught culturally sanctioned knowledge related to morality, sexuality, gender roles, social responsibility, and community identity. For example, *Chinamwali* traditionally prepares girls for womanhood by emphasizing respect, domestic responsibility, and marital expectations, while *Nyau* initiation equips boys with values of bravery, discipline, endurance, and leadership. In this regard, initiation ceremonies function as parallel educational systems with defined “curricula,” instructors, and expected outcomes, operating alongside formal schooling structures (UNFPA, 2020; UNESCO, 2022). However, the relationship between initiation ceremonies and formal education is complex and often ambivalent. On one hand, these cultural practices reinforce values such as discipline, respect for authority, and social responsibility, which are also central to educational success. On the other hand, certain teachings embedded within initiation practices—particularly those related to early transition into adult roles, rigid gender expectations, and marital preparedness—may conflict with the goals of formal education systems that emphasize prolonged schooling, gender equality, and delayed entry into adulthood (Phiri & Banda, 2022; Chileshe & Sampa, 2023). As a result, learners who participate in initiation ceremonies may experience shifts in attitudes and priorities that influence their engagement with schooling.

The coexistence of traditional initiation systems and modern formal education therefore creates a dynamic and sometimes contradictory socio-educational environment. Learners are required to navigate dual systems of knowledge and authority, each with its own expectations and values. This duality can shape learner outcomes in multiple ways, including attitudes towards schooling, classroom behaviour, peer interactions, and long-term educational aspirations. For instance, initiation teachings that emphasize social maturity and readiness for adult responsibilities may reduce learners’ commitment to academic pursuits, while culturally constructed notions of masculinity and femininity may influence participation and performance in school contexts. Despite increasing scholarly interest in the intersection between culture and education in Africa, there remains a notable gap in empirical research that specifically examines how initiation ceremonies influence learner outcomes at the secondary school level, particularly within rural Zambian contexts. Much of the existing literature has focused on primary education or has treated cultural practices in general terms without providing in-depth, context-specific analysis. Furthermore, limited attention has been given to how both male and female initiation practices interact with contemporary educational demands in ways that shape learners’ everyday school experiences.

It is within this context that the present study is situated. Drawing on evidence from a rural secondary school in Katete District, the article examines how initiation ceremonies influence learner outcomes, with particular attention to attitudes, behaviour, and academic engagement. By foregrounding local experiences and incorporating participants’ perspectives, the study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of the complex relationship between indigenous cultural

practices and formal education. In doing so, it responds to calls for culturally responsive educational research that recognizes the enduring significance of indigenous knowledge systems while critically engaging with their implications for schooling in contemporary African societies.

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Initiation Ceremonies in African Contexts

Initiation ceremonies have long been recognized as central components of African indigenous knowledge systems, serving as structured mechanisms through which societies transmit cultural values, norms, and identities across generations. Across sub-Saharan Africa, these rites of passage mark the transition from childhood to adulthood and are often embedded within broader systems of social organization and cultural continuity (Munthali et al., 2018; Rasing, 2021). Unlike informal socialization processes, initiation ceremonies are typically highly organized, involving designated instructors, defined stages, and specific learning outcomes, thereby functioning as indigenous educational institutions.

Scholars such as Serpell (2019) argue that African cultural practices, including initiation ceremonies, should be understood as legitimate knowledge systems rather than peripheral traditions. From this perspective, initiation rites are not merely symbolic but constitute structured pedagogical processes through which individuals acquire culturally relevant competencies. Similarly, UNFPA (2020) highlights that initiation ceremonies often include instruction on sexuality, morality, and social responsibility, indicating their role as comprehensive life-skills education systems. However, while there is consensus regarding the cultural importance of initiation ceremonies, scholars differ in their evaluation of their contemporary relevance. Some studies emphasize their continued significance in preserving identity and social cohesion (UNESCO, 2022), while others question their compatibility with modern societal transformations, particularly in contexts characterized by expanding formal education systems and shifting socio-economic realities (Chileshe & Sampa, 2023). This divergence in perspectives underscores the need for context-specific analyses that move beyond generalized assumptions about cultural practices.

2.2 Initiation Ceremonies and Formal Education

The relationship between initiation ceremonies and formal education has been widely debated in the literature, with studies highlighting both complementary and conflicting dynamics. On one hand, initiation ceremonies are seen to reinforce values such as discipline, respect for authority, and social responsibility, which are also central to educational success (Serpell, 2019). In this regard, cultural practices can support the development of behaviours conducive to learning, particularly in structured school environments. On the other hand, several studies point to tensions between traditional initiation teachings and formal educational objectives. For example, Phiri and Banda (2022) argue that initiation ceremonies may promote attitudes that are inconsistent with prolonged schooling, particularly when they emphasize early transition into adult roles such as marriage and economic independence. This is especially evident among girls, where initiation practices may reinforce expectations of domesticity and marital readiness, potentially undermining commitment to continued education.

Similarly, Daka et al. (2018) found that participation in initiation ceremonies can lead to disruptions in schooling due to absenteeism during initiation periods and shifts in learner priorities

thereafter. However, these findings are not universally consistent. Other studies suggest that the negative impact of initiation ceremonies on education is often mediated by contextual factors such as parental attitudes, school support systems, and community adaptations (UNFPA, 2020). For instance, some communities have begun scheduling initiation ceremonies during school holidays to minimize disruption, reflecting an emerging alignment between cultural practices and educational demands. This mixed evidence suggests that the relationship between initiation ceremonies and education is not inherently oppositional but rather context-dependent. It also highlights the importance of examining how specific elements of initiation practices interact with schooling processes, rather than treating cultural practices as uniformly beneficial or detrimental.

2.3 Cultural Practices and Learner Outcomes

Learner outcomes in educational research are increasingly conceptualized as multidimensional, encompassing not only academic performance but also attitudes, behaviour, engagement, and social development. Within this broader framework, cultural practices such as initiation ceremonies play a significant role in shaping how learners perceive themselves and their educational trajectories (Serpell, 2019). Research indicates that initiation ceremonies influence learner behaviour by reinforcing culturally defined norms of adulthood and responsibility. For example, boys who undergo initiation may adopt notions of masculinity associated with authority and independence, which can affect their interactions with teachers and peers (Rasing, 2021). Similarly, girls who participate in initiation ceremonies may internalize expectations related to gender roles and domestic responsibilities, which can shape their aspirations and engagement with schooling (Phiri & Banda, 2022).

At the same time, cultural practices can also foster positive learner attributes. Values such as respect, perseverance, and community orientation—often emphasized in initiation ceremonies—are associated with improved classroom behaviour and social cohesion. This dual influence highlights the complexity of cultural practices, which can simultaneously support and constrain educational outcomes. Recent studies have also drawn attention to the role of cultural identity in shaping learner engagement. Learners who perceive their cultural background as respected and integrated within the school environment are more likely to demonstrate positive attitudes towards education (Chileshe & Sampa, 2023). Conversely, when there is a disconnect between school culture and community practices, learners may experience tension and disengagement. This suggests that the influence of initiation ceremonies on learner outcomes cannot be understood in isolation but must be examined in relation to the broader socio-cultural and institutional context.

2.4 Empirical Literature on Initiation Ceremonies in Zambia

Empirical studies in Zambia consistently demonstrate that initiation ceremonies remain influential in shaping identity, behaviour, and educational outcomes. Mutale (2017), studying the Chewa people of Katete District, found that *Chinamwali* plays a central role in transmitting cultural norms and defining femininity. The study revealed that girls are socialised into expectations of marriage, respect for elders, and domestic responsibility, reinforcing culturally constructed gender roles. This supports the argument that initiation ceremonies function as structured systems of cultural reproduction. Similarly, Daka (2020) observed that while *Chinamwali* is valued as a rite of passage, it may have implications for learners' educational participation. The study noted that teachings embedded in initiation processes can contribute to early assumption of adult roles, which in turn may reduce learners' focus on formal education and affect school attendance.

In relation to male initiation practices, Zulu (2016) found that the *Nyau* cultural system serves as a mechanism for moral education and masculinity construction among boys. The study emphasised that *Nyau* instils discipline, respect, and socially accepted masculine behaviour, reinforcing the idea that masculinity is culturally defined rather than biologically determined. Further studies in Eastern Province indicate that traditional leaders have begun modifying initiation practices to reduce conflict with schooling. Chiefs in areas such as Katete have adjusted the timing of initiation ceremonies to school holidays, demonstrating a growing effort to balance cultural preservation with educational continuity (Ministry of Chiefs and Traditional Affairs, 2019). Collectively, these studies suggest that initiation ceremonies in Zambia are dynamic institutions that continue to shape identity formation while simultaneously interacting with modern education systems. However, they also highlight persistent tensions between cultural socialisation processes and formal schooling, particularly regarding learner engagement and retention.

2.5 Theoretical Framework: Social Constructivism

This study is guided by social constructivist theory, which posits that knowledge is constructed through social interaction and shaped by cultural context (Vygotsky, 1978). From this perspective, learning is not confined to formal educational settings but occurs through participation in culturally meaningful activities, including initiation ceremonies. These ceremonies can therefore be understood as sites of knowledge production where learners construct meanings about identity, gender, and social roles. Social constructivism provides a useful lens for understanding the interaction between initiation ceremonies and formal education. It emphasizes that learners are active agents who interpret and negotiate knowledge from multiple sources, including cultural traditions and school-based instruction. As such, the influence of initiation ceremonies on learner outcomes is not deterministic but mediated by how learners internalize and reconcile different forms of knowledge. Furthermore, this theoretical perspective highlights the importance of context in shaping learning processes. In rural African settings, where cultural practices remain influential, initiation ceremonies play a significant role in structuring learners' experiences and worldviews. Recognizing these practices as legitimate forms of knowledge is essential for developing educational approaches that are both culturally responsive and contextually relevant.

2.6 Research Gap

Although existing literature provides valuable insights into the role of initiation ceremonies in African societies, several gaps remain. First, much of the research has focused on primary education or general community-level analysis, with limited attention to secondary school learners who are at a critical stage of identity formation and academic progression. Second, there is a lack of context-specific studies that examine how both male and female initiation practices interact with schooling in rural Zambian settings. Third, few studies have integrated participants' lived experiences through qualitative approaches that capture the nuanced ways in which cultural practices influence learner outcomes. This study addresses these gaps by providing an in-depth, qualitative analysis of the influence of initiation ceremonies on learner outcomes in a rural secondary school in Katete District. By incorporating learners', teachers', and community members' perspectives, the study contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of the complex relationship between cultural practices and formal education.

3.0 METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design

This study adopted a qualitative case study design to explore the influence of initiation ceremonies on learner outcomes within a specific socio-cultural and educational context. A qualitative approach was considered appropriate because the study sought to gain an in-depth understanding of participants' lived experiences, perceptions, and interpretations regarding initiation practices and their impact on schooling. Unlike quantitative methods, which emphasize measurement and generalization, qualitative research allows for the exploration of complex social phenomena within their natural settings (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The case study design was particularly suitable as it enabled a detailed examination of a single bounded system - Chimtende Day Secondary School and its surrounding community—thereby providing rich, context-specific insights into the interaction between cultural practices and formal education.

3.2 Participants

The study involved a purposively selected sample of learners, teachers, and community members. Purposive sampling was employed to ensure that participants had direct experience and relevant knowledge of initiation ceremonies and their influence on learners. Learners were selected based on their participation in or exposure to initiation practices, while teachers were chosen for their professional engagement with learners and their ability to observe behavioural and academic changes. Community members, including elders and parents, were included due to their roles as custodians and facilitators of initiation ceremonies. This diversity of participants enabled the study to capture multiple perspectives, thereby enhancing the depth and credibility of the findings. The inclusion of different stakeholder groups also facilitated triangulation of data, which is essential in qualitative research for validating interpretations and ensuring a holistic understanding of the phenomenon under investigation.

3.3 Data Collection Methods

Data were collected using semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions, which are widely regarded as effective tools for qualitative inquiry. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with teachers and community members to allow for flexibility in probing participants' experiences and perspectives while maintaining a consistent focus on the research objectives. This method enabled participants to articulate their views in their own words, thereby generating rich, detailed data. Focus group discussions were conducted with learners to encourage interaction and collective reflection on shared experiences. The use of focus groups was particularly appropriate given the communal nature of initiation practices, as it allowed participants to build on each other's responses and reveal socially constructed meanings. The combination of these methods enhanced data richness and provided complementary insights, thereby strengthening the overall quality of the data collected.

3.4 Data Analysis

Data were analysed using thematic analysis following the framework proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006). This method was selected due to its flexibility and suitability for identifying, analysing, and interpreting patterns within qualitative data. The analysis process involved several stages, including familiarization with the data through repeated reading of transcripts, initial coding to identify meaningful units of data, and the development of themes that captured recurring patterns across participants' responses. These themes were then reviewed, refined, and defined to ensure coherence and alignment with the research objectives. Thematic analysis was particularly appropriate for this study as it allowed for both inductive and interpretive analysis, enabling the

researcher to identify patterns grounded in participants' experiences while also linking these patterns to existing theoretical and empirical literature.

3.5 Trustworthiness

To ensure the rigor and credibility of the study, several strategies were employed in line with established qualitative research standards. Credibility was enhanced through data triangulation, achieved by collecting data from multiple sources (learners, teachers, and community members) and using multiple methods (interviews and focus groups). This approach allowed for cross-verification of findings and reduced the likelihood of bias. Dependability was ensured by maintaining consistency in data collection procedures, including the use of interview guides and systematic documentation of the research process. Additionally, confirmability was addressed by grounding interpretations in participants' verbatim accounts, thereby ensuring that findings were derived from the data rather than researcher bias. Transferability was supported through the provision of detailed descriptions of the research context, enabling readers to assess the applicability of the findings to similar settings.

3.6 Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations were central to the conduct of this study, particularly given the sensitivity of cultural practices and the involvement of minors. Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection, with additional assent sought from learners and consent from their guardians where necessary. Participants were fully informed about the purpose of the study, their right to withdraw at any time, and the intended use of the data. Confidentiality and anonymity were strictly maintained by using pseudonyms and ensuring that no identifying information was included in the reporting of findings. Furthermore, cultural sensitivity was observed throughout the research process by respecting community norms and engaging with local stakeholders in a manner that upheld ethical and cultural integrity. These measures ensured that the study adhered to established ethical standards in social science research.

4.0 Findings

4.1 Theme 1: *Chinamwali* and Female Identity Formation

The findings reveal that *Chinamwali* plays a central role in constructing and reinforcing female identity within the community. The initiation process is not merely a cultural ritual but a structured socialisation mechanism through which girls are introduced to expected adult roles, particularly marriage and domestic responsibilities. Participants consistently indicated that the ceremony marks a symbolic transition from childhood to womanhood.

One participant explained:

“After initiation, girls are expected to behave like women and prepare for marriage.”

This statement reflects a deeply embedded cultural expectation that initiation is directly linked to readiness for marriage. The use of the phrase *“expected to behave like women”* suggests that womanhood is not viewed as a gradual developmental process but as a socially assigned status activated through ritual participation. In thematic terms, this demonstrates how *Chinamwali* functions as a normative identity-producing institution, shaping not only behaviour but also self-perception.

The findings further indicate that such expectations may limit alternative identity pathways for girls, particularly those related to education and personal development. The early imposition of adult roles contributes to a redefinition of adolescence, where schooling may be perceived as secondary to marital preparation.

4.2 Theme 2: Nyau and Masculinity Construction

The *Nyau* initiation ceremony emerged as a key cultural mechanism for constructing masculinity and reinforcing male social hierarchy. Participants described it as a defining rite through which boys acquire legitimacy as men within the community.

This was captured in the following response:

“If you have not gone through Nyau, you are not considered a real man.”

This quotation highlights the exclusivity embedded in cultural definitions of manhood. The phrase *“not considered a real man”* indicates that masculinity is socially validated rather than biologically determined. Through thematic analysis, this reflects a gatekeeping function of initiation rituals, where access to masculine identity is conditional upon participation in culturally sanctioned practices.

Moreover, *Nyau* appears to reinforce authority structures within the community, where initiated males may gain elevated social status. This can influence peer relations, leadership roles, and decision-making power. The findings suggest that masculinity is closely tied to cultural conformity, discipline, and recognition by elders, thereby perpetuating traditional gender hierarchies.

4.3 Theme 3: Influence on Learner Behaviour and Academic Engagement

The data indicate that initiation ceremonies significantly influence learners’ attitudes towards schooling and academic participation. A recurring concern among participants was the shift in behaviour following initiation, particularly among adolescents who begin to perceive themselves as adults. This is illustrated in the following statement:

“Some learners lose interest in school after initiation because they feel grown up.”

This reflects a critical transition in self-identity that affects educational engagement. The phrase *“feel grown up”* suggests that initiation ceremonies accelerate the social perception of adulthood, which in turn alters learners’ motivation to continue with formal education. From a thematic perspective, this demonstrates a conflict between cultural socialisation systems and formal education structures.

The findings further imply that once learners adopt an adult identity, schooling may be reinterpreted as unnecessary or inferior to socially valued adult roles such as marriage or economic independence. This behavioural shift can contribute to absenteeism, reduced concentration, and increased dropout tendencies, particularly among female learners after *Chinamwali* and male learners after *Nyau* initiation.

4.4 Theme 4: Emerging Adaptations

Despite the strong cultural significance of initiation ceremonies, the findings also reveal adaptive changes within communities aimed at reducing educational disruption. Participants acknowledged that there is increasing effort to align cultural practices with the school calendar.

This is captured in the following excerpt:

“Now ceremonies are done during holidays so that learners do not miss classes.”

This statement reflects a pragmatic shift in cultural practice, demonstrating that communities are beginning to negotiate between tradition and formal education. The timing of ceremonies during school holidays suggests an emerging awareness of the importance of uninterrupted schooling.

From a thematic analysis perspective, this represents a cultural adaptation strategy, where traditional practices are modified rather than abandoned. It also indicates a form of social negotiation in which education is gaining increased value within community priorities. However, while this adaptation reduces direct absenteeism, it does not fully address the deeper identity-related tensions between initiation and schooling.

5.0 DISCUSSION

The study demonstrates That Initiation Ceremonies Function As Deeply Embedded Cultural Systems That Shape Identity Formation, gender expectations, and learner engagement in education. Across the themes, it is evident that these practices operate as powerful socialisation mechanisms that influence how individuals interpret adulthood, masculinity, femininity, and schooling.

5.1 Cultural Construction of Identity and Gender Roles

The findings suggest that initiation ceremonies such as Chinamwali and Nyau play a significant role in constructing socially defined gender identities. These identities are not biologically determined but are socially produced and reinforced through cultural interaction and symbolic meaning. This is consistent with Symbolic Interactionist theory, which argues that meaning and identity are constructed through social interaction (Mead, 1934; Blumer, 1969). In the Zambian context, Mutale (2017) found that Chinamwali among the Chewa people in Katete District plays a central role in transmitting norms of femininity, including expectations of marriage, domestic responsibility, and respect for elders. This supports the view that initiation ceremonies act as structured systems of identity formation rather than informal cultural practices.

Similarly, Zulu (2016) observed that Nyau functions as a cultural institution through which boys are socialised into accepted masculine behaviours such as discipline, respect, and authority. This reinforces the idea that masculinity in Zambian communities is culturally constructed and validated through ritual participation rather than biological age alone.

Goffman’s (1959) concept of identity performance further explains how individuals “perform” culturally approved roles after initiation, reinforcing socially expected gender identities in everyday life.

5.2 Social Cohesion and Structural Function of Initiation Ceremonies

From a Functionalist perspective, initiation ceremonies contribute to social stability by preparing individuals for adult roles and ensuring continuity of cultural values (Durkheim, 1912; Parsons, 1951). In Zambia, Daka (2020) notes that initiation ceremonies are widely regarded as important mechanisms for moral education and social preparation, particularly in rural communities where

cultural transmission remains strong. However, Merton's (1968) concept of latent dysfunctions is useful in explaining unintended consequences. While initiation ceremonies strengthen cultural continuity, they may also create tensions when cultural expectations conflict with formal education. Daka (2020) further highlights that certain teachings within initiation contexts may encourage early assumption of adult roles, which can negatively affect learners' school engagement and attendance.

Thus, initiation ceremonies simultaneously perform integrative functions while producing structural tensions within modern educational systems.

5.3 Group Identity Formation and Social Belonging

The study also reveals that initiation ceremonies create strong distinctions between initiated and non-initiated individuals, reinforcing group identity and social belonging.

This aligns with Social Identity Theory, which explains that individuals derive self-esteem from group membership (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). In Zambian studies, Zulu (2016) found that participation in Nyau is often a prerequisite for social recognition as a "complete man," reinforcing in-group status and exclusion of non-initiated males. This demonstrates how cultural rituals function as mechanisms of social classification and boundary maintenance.

Such dynamics strengthen group cohesion but also reinforce social hierarchies based on cultural participation.

5.4 Tension Between Cultural Socialisation and Formal Education

A key finding is the tension between initiation ceremonies and formal education. Learners often experience a shift in identity after initiation, which influences their engagement with schooling.

From a Symbolic Interactionist perspective, this occurs because learners reinterpret themselves as "adults" after initiation, altering their behaviour and priorities (Blumer, 1969). This is supported by Daka (2020), who found that learners who undergo initiation sometimes adopt adult-like identities that reduce their motivation to remain in school. Similarly, Mutale (2017) observes that in some communities, initiation teachings emphasise marital readiness, which may indirectly reduce emphasis on prolonged schooling, especially for girls. This contributes to early disengagement from formal education systems. From a structural perspective, this reflects a conflict between cultural and educational institutions. While initiation ceremonies prepare individuals for immediate adult roles, education systems promote delayed adulthood and extended academic progression (Parsons, 1951). This institutional mismatch creates tension that affects learner retention and academic continuity.

5.5 Cultural Adaptation and Institutional Negotiation

The findings further reveal that communities are increasingly adapting initiation practices to align with education systems, particularly through scheduling ceremonies during school holidays. This reflects a broader trend of cultural negotiation observed in Zambia. Studies by Daka (2020) and local traditional leadership reports (Ministry of Chiefs and Traditional Affairs, 2019) indicate that chiefs and communities in areas such as Katete and surrounding districts have begun modifying initiation schedules to minimise school absenteeism.

From a Functionalist perspective, this represents adaptive change aimed at maintaining equilibrium between cultural traditions and formal education (Parsons, 1951). From a Symbolic

Interactionist perspective, it also signals a shift in meaning, where education is increasingly prioritised in social interpretation, leading to modification of traditional practices (Blumer, 1969). However, despite these adaptations, deeper identity tensions between cultural adulthood and student identity remain unresolved.

6.0 CONCLUSION

The study set out to examine the influence of initiation ceremonies on identity formation and learner engagement in education. The findings, interpreted through Symbolic Interactionism, Functionalism, and Social Identity Theory, demonstrate that initiation ceremonies remain powerful cultural institutions that shape how individuals understand gender roles, adulthood, and social belonging. The study concludes that *Chinamwali* and *Nyau* are not merely traditional rituals but structured socialisation systems that produce and reinforce culturally defined identities of femininity and masculinity. These identities are socially constructed through symbolic meanings attached to initiation, which individuals internalise and enact in everyday life. However, while these ceremonies contribute positively to cultural continuity and social cohesion, they also generate unintended consequences for education. In particular, initiation processes may alter learners' self-perception, leading to reduced engagement with formal schooling as individuals begin to identify more strongly with adult social roles than student identity.

Despite this, the study also finds evidence of gradual adaptation, where communities are modifying ceremonial practices to reduce disruption to schooling. This indicates an ongoing negotiation between traditional cultural systems and modern educational structures. Nevertheless, underlying tensions between cultural identity formation and academic participation remain evident. Overall, initiation ceremonies represent both a source of cultural strength and a challenge to educational continuity, requiring balanced approaches that respect tradition while safeguarding learners' academic progression.

6.1 Recommendations

Based on the findings and discussion, the study makes the following recommendations:

For Policy Makers (Ministry of Education and Local Authorities)

There is need to strengthen collaboration between education authorities and traditional leadership structures. Policies should formally recognise cultural practices while ensuring they do not interfere with school attendance. Community-based education frameworks can be developed to harmonise schooling schedules with cultural calendars.

For School Administrators and Teachers

Schools should intensify learner sensitisation on the importance of continuous education even after initiation ceremonies. Guidance and counselling programmes should be strengthened to help learners manage identity transitions without abandoning schooling. Teachers should also engage parents and guardians in monitoring attendance patterns following initiation periods.

For Traditional Leaders and Community Elders

Traditional leaders should continue the positive trend of adjusting initiation ceremonies to school holidays. They should also integrate messages that emphasise the importance of education as part of modern adulthood. Cultural teachings can be reoriented to complement rather than contradict formal education.

For Parents and Guardians

Parents should actively support learners in balancing cultural participation and educational commitments. They should discourage early withdrawal from schooling based on perceived adulthood after initiation and instead reinforce the value of long-term educational attainment.

For Future Researchers

Further studies should explore longitudinal impacts of initiation ceremonies on academic performance and dropout rates. Comparative studies between regions or ethnic groups in Zambia would also help to better understand variations in cultural influence on education

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