

Tobacco Smoking as a Superstition/ Medicine

By Vita Mithi



Tobacco smoking is understood to have superstitious elements in some parts of rural Rumphi and Balaka districts. Superstition can be defined as any belief or practice that is considered absurd to scientists; it can also be referred to as a religion not practiced by the majority of a given society regardless of whether the prevailing religion contains irrational beliefs. It is also commonly applied to beliefs and practices surrounding luck, prophecy and certain spiritual beings.

Some communities in the country believe and consider tobacco smoking as medicine which “god” gave to man, “tobacco smoking help to maintain the health of our people and cures diseases such as tuberculosis and *Nyamakazi* (diseases for the aged) in ageing people” explained one of the local natives in Balaka. Whilst in Rumphi district, tobacco is linked to superstition “it is believed that if one stop smoking in spite of the fact that the habit run in the family and is supposed to pass to the next generations as it was done by their forefathers then that individual’s life will be short-lived” an inhabitant in Rumphi- Bolero put in plain words.

Chingambwe (a local name for raw tobacco) is said to be used as an ailment for headache, stress, spiritual attacks, fainting, better breathing and nurture development of strong bones. In addition, Chingambwe is used to enhance sight. Both young men and aged people consider tobacco as a source of clear eyesight.

Science says tobacco smoking causes health problems such as lung cancer, diabetes, cardiovascular diseases etc. even though science has proven this to be true, some people living in rural areas where tobacco is commonly grown consider the plant as part of their religion and deem science and its findings as a myth; thus, they claim to have never experienced the health implications of smoking as science puts it.

Most of the interventions that non- governmental organization, government and other networks work in Malawi target the youth and women, but they forget the aged people who initiate the youths on their social roles and practices that govern their society. The aged people initiate most of the young men to local medicinal ways of living, as they intended to sustain their culture from one generation to the next.

To crown it all, tobacco smoking is considered as a medicine in some communities of Malawi, while to others it is considered as a superstition, whereby its power surpass that of science. However, is tobacco smoking really a medicine? Is the perception that people have towards science a myth? Should the aged be left out in behavior change initiatives? This entails that there is need for more evidence based research that would give more details on the effects of tobacco smoking.