

## Resilience and adaptability: current *chisungu* practices in selected communities in Zambia

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### ABSTRACT

This paper explores contemporary practices of the *chisungu* female initiation ceremony in Zambia, focusing on selected communities in Kabwe, Lusaka, and Petauke. Employing qualitative methods, including participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and focus group discussions, the study engages traditional counsellors, women who have undergone initiation, church leaders, and church groups. Contrary to predictions of extinction, the research reveals that traditional teachings for girls and women persist in contemporary society. However, the findings present a nuanced picture of complexity. While *chisungu* ceremonies are still practiced, their prevalence has significantly diminished compared to the past. Where the ceremonies are still practiced, the research found that the practice of *chisungu* is influenced at individual and family level by various factors, including social class and religious orientation. The study also brought to the fore the fact that teachings have also adapted to contemporary concerns, incorporating education on issues such as HIV/AIDS. As such, the study sheds light on the resilience of *chisungu* in the face of changing societal dynamics. Hence, while acknowledging a decline in prevalence, the enduring significance of *chisungu* lies in its adaptability to contemporary issues. This is an adaptability that reflects an ongoing cultural evolution that balances tradition with evolving social norms and health considerations.

**Keywords:** *Chisungu*, traditional teachings, initiation ceremonies, social change, women and girls

### INTRODUCTION

The *chisungu* female initiation ceremony is a series of rituals and teachings held when a girl comes of age. Many cultural groups in Zambia observe these ceremonies, but they are known by different names. As is the case in this study, the term *chisungu* is used as a generic term owing to its initial popularisation on the Copperbelt and other mining areas owing to rural-urban migration which predominantly

hailed from the Northern part of the country where *chisungu* was practiced (Ferguson, 1999). This was later compounded by efforts by the United National Independence Party (UNIP) to make initiation ceremonies, particularly *chisungu* compulsory. Hence, despite various names for the ceremonies, the term *chisungu* encompasses various traditional ceremonies held for girls at puberty in different parts of the country.

*chisungu* in most groups such as the Chewa, Bemba and Luvale deals with the transition from girlhood to womanhood and involves public and private rites that formalize the entry of girls who have come of age into womanhood and their right to marriage and reproduction. Unlike similar ceremonies in some parts of Africa, *chisungu* does not involve circumcision or virginity testing. The rites, however, encourage initiates to elongate their labia, a common practice in some societies in Southern and Eastern Africa, which practitioners believe enhances sexual pleasure for husbands and helps women during childbirth (Perez et al, 2015).

Based on anthropological work done by Audrey Richards among the Bemba of Northern Zambia in 1931 and oral interviews on the history of the *chisungu* ceremony, the *chisungu* rites proper were central to (Bemba) society in the past as they prepared girls for marriage and motherhood at puberty (Richards, 1956). Then, during the *chisungu* rituals, a month-long secluded ceremony involved elderly specialized women known in Bemba as *Banacimbusa*, in Chewa as *Aphungu*, in Nsenga as *Alangizi* or *Nyamukhungwi*, in Luvale as *Chilombola* and in Tonga as *Babbazi*. The Bemba used a combination of songs, dances, performances, floor, and wall paintings, and, significantly, molded pottery figurines collectively referred to as *mbusa*, to impart esoteric knowledge to the initiates. This knowledge encompassed various practices and beliefs, spanning religion, sexuality, marriage, childbirth, child-rearing, family, and social obligations.

Key characteristic of the *chisungu* ceremony, perhaps contributing to its exoticization and intrigue, was that a substantial part of it occurred in secret. The details of the ceremony were highly esoteric and known only to those who had undergone it. The women guarded this cultural practice diligently, with a significant portion taking place in the forest away from prying eyes, while other segments unfolded in a specially chosen hut for the ceremony, where initiates remained in seclusion. Men and uninitiated women were

consistently excluded from the rituals (Mbewe, 2021; Richards, 1956, Rasing, 2002).

Following each *chisungu*, the *banacimbusa*/traditional counsellors destroyed the *mbusa*, the objects used during the ceremony, creating new sets for each succeeding ritual. The ceremony was considered highly sacred, deeply intertwined with religious practices and beliefs, and believed to contribute to societal regeneration and well-being. Women embodied their spiritual and sacred roles in the home and community through *chisungu*, with *banacimbusa* instructing initiates on various rituals, including the monthly cycle of a woman and the associated observances and taboos (Hinfelaar, 1994).

As the bearers of *chisungu* knowledge, women held critical ritual authority in society and within the home. These dimensions extended to the health and well-being of individuals, lineages, and the entire social body. Consequently, the significance of *chisungu* transcended the mere transition from girlhood to womanhood. It played a crucial role in ensuring the health and progress of society, defining differences between successive generations of women, between men and women, and between initiated and uninitiated women. One could argue that *chisungu* was even at the heart of the process of ethnic formation (Richards, 1982).

In line with the foregoing discussion, this paper discusses current practices in the teaching of girls/young women at puberty through *chisungu* initiation ceremonies. It must be noted that *chisungu* has been a subject of study in anthropological and ethnographic studies. The most prominent of these was the work of renowned British anthropologist, Audrey Richards who conducted fieldwork among the Bemba from 1930 to 1933. Another notable publication on *chisungu* was by the missionary ethnographer Jean Jacques Corbeil, a catholic priest who founded the Moto Moto Museum in the 1950s as part of the Catholic Church's ethnographic studies of African communities. These two classical studies have influenced the

understandings of *chisungu* ceremonies in anthropological and academic circles, including in museum representations of the ceremony in Zambia and elsewhere.

As is the case with many ethnographic studies of the colonial period, in the preface to *chisungu* Richards warns:

I thought it important to publish an account of the single *chisungu* I was able to see because such ceremonies are rapidly dying out in Central Africa. I think it certain that the *chisungu* is performed much less frequently now [in 1956] than during my two visits; it may even be quite extinct (Richards, 1956 :13).

Jean Jacques Corbeil sounded a similar warning in his publication on *chisungu* (Corbeil, 1982: iii). *Chisungu* did not become extinct. Arguably, it received even more attention and became a site of intervention and contestation by different actors, including scholars, Non-Governmental Organisations, the church, and the state. For example, during the colonial period, missionaries such as Mable Shaw at Mbereshi (Morrow, 1986), and the missionaries of Africa in Northern Province interfered in *chisungu* rituals by forbidding aspects of them they deemed anti-Christian, while at the same time constructing new Christianized ceremonies which couched as tradition (Mbewe, 2021). Additionally, with the advent of the HIV/AIDS pandemic in the 1980s, *chisungu* practices were deemed dangerous and blamed for exacerbating the spread of HIV/AIDS, leading to numerous stakeholders calling for the practices to be stopped. Currently and for the past several decades, *chisungu* practices have been placed at the centre of blame for early marriages and aspects of reproductive health and Gender-Based Violence. Given this history of evolution and contestation, this paper discusses the present-day status of *chisungu* ceremonies (Siwila, 2013).

The main objective of the study is to interrogate present-day practices of *chisungu* initiation ceremonies. Of specific interest is to ascertain the extent to which *chisungu* rites

are held for girls' puberty; to establish when the girls are taught the *chisungu* teachings, who conducts the ceremonies and what is taught.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Female initiation ceremonies in Africa have informed scholarship since the colonial period, predominantly as part of anthropological studies that were an important feature of colonialism. In Zambia, research has shown the continued practice thus significance of *chisungu* ceremonies in Zambia (Haynes 2015; Rasing 2002, 2014). Elsewhere in Central, East and Southern Africa, scholarship has demonstrated the continued significance of female initiation (Rasing, 2021; Johnson, 2018; Kratz 1994; Werbner 2009). However, it has become one of the most volatile cultural practices, experiencing profound changes in the ways it is understood and practised. That is why it is important to discuss present-day *Chisungu* practices as a way of interrogating the volatility of such practices.

Furthermore, scholars have focused on how *chisungu* ceremonies have been embroiled in the politics of societies. Using the analytical framework of *The Politics of the Womb*, Thomas (2003) explores how contestations and negotiations over the control of female excision and reproduction have been central to the political history of Africa, specifically the Meru region in Kenya. Showing how histories of female excision and the control of women's bodies and political domains of power were 'engaged in a process of historical entanglement', Thomas (2003:4) argues that the female body and its reproductive capacity "became the subject of colonial and postcolonial debate and intervention because so many people view its regulation as fundamental to the construction of political and moral order, and proper gender and generational relations". This provides an interesting framework from which the Zambian ceremonies such as contemporary *Chisungu* practices can be looked at.

Similarly, Hayes' (2006) work on the female initiation ceremony *efundula* in Namibia demonstrates how contestations and negotiations over control of the female initiation ceremony were embedded within wider processes of political and social change in the Kwanyama region of Namibia in both the pre-colonial and colonial era. Hayes (2006) demonstrates how the pre-colonial King Mandume sought to control aspects of the ceremony as part of the wider processes of ritual and political centralization that had started in the pre-colonial period.

Similarly, the colonial authorities sought to control and turn into spectacle certain aspects of the *efundula* initiation ceremony as part of the wider processes of colonial rule, especially the encouragement and construction of native traditions and customs which were so integral to the policy of indirect rule. Significantly, Hayes (2006) demonstrates the differing ways in which *efundula* came to be represented in public discourses through colonial photography and administrative discourses, missionary accounts, and ethnographic studies. These different representations, demonstrate the shifting meanings attached to the ceremony by different individuals and institutions with varied interests. Thereby forming an interesting space in which dialogue on ceremonies such as *Chisungu* can be built.

In the 1930s, one of the most profound changes introduced by missionaries was the creation of Christianized, sanitized versions of *chisungu*, were through processes such as inculturation, catholic missionaries removed aspects that were deemed heathen and replaced the ceremony with a Christian version which combined what missionaries view as acceptable African aspects with Christian ones (Mbewe, 2021). In the Kenneth Kaunda era in Zambia, as earlier pointed out, *chisungu* ceremonies were promoted by the state as part of the masculine nationalist agenda, which sought recourse to the past and an imagined authentic pre-colonial African culture to define an Afrocentric postcolonial society and the gender dynamics therein (Schuster, 1979: 163).

Since the publication of Audrey Richards' *chisungu* monograph published in 1956, several studies have been done on the ritual. Based on fieldwork done in Zambia in 1992, Rasing (1995) describes the conduct and nature of girls' initiation ceremonies in Luangwa Township on the Zambian Copperbelt. Rasing elaborates how female initiation has remained important in urban Zambia despite changes such as Christianity and the Westernisation of social life.

Another ethnography that engages with *chisungu* is Haynes' study of the ceremony in another township on the Copperbelt. Haynes focuses on the changes in relationships and teachings between the bride and her *banacimbusa*. Haynes (2015) argues that as a result of widespread HIV/AIDS infection on the Copperbelt, contemporary *chisungu* teachings show openness in communication and relationships that are missing in earlier accounts of *chisungu*, particularly Richards' (1956, 1982) account.

In the last decade, scholars have engaged with the subject of girls' initiation in Zambia. Lumbwe (2004, 2009) studied and analysed songs used during *Chisungu* and marriage initiation rites among the Bemba. Lumbwe also focused on the role of music in Bemba marriage rites while his PhD in the same field focused on a comparative analysis of the marriage and *chisungu* songs in pre-colonial and Post-colonial Zambia. In his studies, Lumbwe focuses on aspects of fluidity and change in the songs, arguing that they constitute an important part of Bemba Indigenous Knowledge Systems and Bemba identity. Lumbwe's results from several years of collecting the Bemba initiation and marriage songs are stored in the African Studies Library of the University of Cape Town, providing a rich archive for researchers on *Chisungu*.

Lillian Xheelo Siwila (2013) has argued that cultural practices such as initiation contribute to the spread of HIV/AIDS. Although not specifically on *chisungu*, her thesis exemplifies an avalanche of studies that have linked practices such as initiation

with the spread of HIV/AIDS. These discourses mirror positions of the feminist turn from the 1970s, which attacked *chisungu* ceremonies, viewing them as a tool for the subjugation of women to men, as sex schools for young girls, where the girls were taught to be sex slaves to men; basically, as sites where women's rights were violated (Geisler, 1997). *Chisungu* ceremonies have still not escaped this tag. However, his view that links girls' initiation and other practices deemed traditional with HIV/AIDS has been challenged in the past several decades. Recent studies and interventions have argued that some traditional practices can be used in the fight against HIV/AIDS.

Work by Chitungu and Mateke (2021) demonstrated how *chisungu* rituals and related practices can be sites where matters like HIV, GBV and reproductive health can be addressed. They argue that these rituals and spaces should not be viewed as negative, but instead can be spaces to curb HIV, and for gender empowerment. In these processes, museums in Zambia have emerged as sites in which Indigenous Knowledge Systems and cultural practices like *chisungu*, are promoted as key drivers of positive transformation to address and educate communities on matters such as HIV/AIDS and reproductive issues (Chitungu and Mateke, 2020; Mbewe, 2021). Other scholars on the ceremony have also highlighted the profound role that *chisungu* plays in our broader cultural landscape, by preparing and teaching girls what it means to be African women (Jules-Rosette, 1980: 393). *Chisungu* then becomes and remains a site of gender configuration and, conversely, contestation (Rasing, 2021; Richards, 1982; Strathern, 1993:41-42).

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The current study was carried out in communities in three towns in Zambia namely Kabwe, Lusaka and Petauke. In Kabwe, the communities where data was collected included Highridge, Pollen, Kambudula, Kamuchanga Muteteshi Area, Highridge, Lukanga, Mpima, Mine Area, Ngungu and Katondo. In Lusaka, the research was

conducted in Kaka, George Compound, Chalala, Longacres, Kabwata, Kamwala, Avondale and Kabulonga. In Petauke, data was collected at Sonja Girls Secondary School, and Ukwimi Villages A and B. The sample population for this research comprised three distinct groups: *traditional counsellors*, church groups or representatives, other community members and individuals who had undergone initiation.

To get diverse perspectives, a total of 11 traditional counsellors were interviewed from the three districts visited. In Lusaka four (4) counsellors drawn from Zingalume, Chalala, and Kanyama areas were purposively selected through snowballing because they are known *banacimbusa*. In Kabwe four (4) additional traditional councillors were selected purposively through the snowballing method from Highridge, Pollen, Kamuchanga, and Katondo and interviewed to ascertain the contemporary status of *chisungu*. Their insights aimed to reveal whether they are ever called upon to instruct when girls in the contemporary community come of age, the content of their teachings in such instances, and any changes observed in the initiation ceremony they have witnessed or instructed. In Petauke at Ukwimi Village A and B respectively, three (3) *alangizi* selected purposively were interviewed to ascertain the contemporary status of *chisungu*.

Representatives or members of church groups were interviewed as a way of gaining insight or understanding the intersection between religious practices and initiation ceremonies. Two Focus Group Discussions were held in Kabwata (8 participants) and Kamwala (5 participants) for members of the Catholic Church and a Pentecostal church respectively in Lusaka. Another focus group discussion, comprising 4 women from the community, was held at a Catholic Church in Lukanga to obtain perspectives of church members on *chisungu*. The researchers also interviewed a church pastor and his wife from the most prominent Pentecostal church in Ukwimi Village in Petauke. These were purposively picked because the *alangizi* interviewed had mentioned that this church was one of the



churches which discourages *chisungu* and related practices are discouraged. The interview sought to establish reasons for this.

Furthermore, the researchers included a total of 80 individuals aged between 18 and 70 who had undergone *chisungu* ceremonies in the study. A combination of simple random sampling and snowballing was used to select these participants. In Lusaka, 35 of these participants were interviewed to gain comprehensive insights into their experiences and perspectives. In Petauke, 20 Grade 12 girls aged between 16 and 20 were interviewed and questioned from Sonja Girls Boarding School. These were randomly picked as the researchers simply asked the Deputy Headteacher for any grade senior class in the school. In addition, 15 girls from the villages were interviewed and questioned using simple random sampling and snowballing.

**Table 1:** Summary of participants

	Participant Group	Number interviewed
1	Traditional Counsellors	11
2	Focus Group Church Members	19
3	Individuals-Women and Girls	80
Total		110

Primary data for the study was gathered through oral history, employing predominantly qualitative methods. Secondary data, on the other hand, was analysed using the content analysis approach. In the case of oral history, a combination of in-depth interview questionnaires and focus group discussions were utilized. The researchers also used participant observation to get first-hand experience in how the ceremonies are conducted. The researchers participated in a total of 4 *chisungu* ceremonies. In Petauke and Lusaka, researchers participated in two *chisungu* ceremonies respectively. Originally, the researchers had planned to participate in nine ceremonies, representing three

ceremonies in each district. However, it was not possible as the number of ceremonies conducted was not much, and in some cases, the actors in the ceremony were not comfortable. Most of the *chisungu* ceremonies are held during school holidays, but the research in all three districts was predominantly conducted in June and July.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents findings from the research. For the analysis, data has been arranged into themes based on the questions from the interview guide/questionnaire and data collected during participant observation. The researchers analysed the data using several methods including thematic analysis, constant comparisons, and narrative analysis.

### Summary of Research Participants

The research involved participant observation of a total of 4 ceremonies across the three districts. A total of 11 *traditional counsellors* were interviewed. Additionally, a total of 6 focus group discussions were held for different actors such as church members, community members and church leaders. Significantly, a total of 80 people who had potentially undergone initiation were interviewed across the three districts. These were aged between 18 to 70 years old.

### Extent of *chisungu* practices

Of these 80 participants, asked if they had undergone *chisungu*, participated in any *chisungu* or attended any *chisungu* in the last 2-5 years, in Kabwe 3 out of 10 responded in the affirmative. In Lusaka, 18/35 of those asked if they had undergone initiation ceremonies at puberty in the last few years indicated that they had. In Petauke, at Sonja Girls Secondary School, only 3 of the 20 girls aged between 16 and 20 questioned said they had undergone initiation ceremonies. This was contrary to results in the villages Ukwimi A and B, where 18/20 of the girls of similar age said they had undergone *chisungu* at puberty. When the researchers made follow-ups with the girls at Sonja Girls Secondary School

which is a boarding school, it was discovered that 16 of the 20 girls questioned actually came from Lusaka. From these results, 42/80 representing 52.5 percent of women interviewed underwent *chisungu* teachings at puberty.

In Kabwe and Lusaka, women in charge of *chisungu* ceremonies and elderly women from the communities talked to observed that there was a general decline in the prevalence of *chisungu* ceremonies at puberty. Concerning pre-marriage *chisungu* ceremonies that were carried out just before a marriage took place, the *traditional counsellors* confirmed that these were very popular, especially among the well-to-do families of Lusaka in the low-density areas of the city. Churches also welcomed marriage and all forms of pre-marriage teachings whether traditional or conventional. The *traditional counsellors* explained that those who did not undergo initiation ceremonies at puberty normally combined the puberty lessons and the marriage lessons.

During a focus group at a Catholic Church in Kabwe, a member of one of the women's groups responsible for traditional pre-marital counselling mentioned that most marriage teachings such as hygiene, respect e.t.c are simply *chisungu* teachings adapted to the marriage set up. A 52-year-old traditional counsellor confirmed this by observing that she found it easier teaching a potential bride who had undergone *chisungu* and hence already grasped the foundational marriage lessons such as 'umulandu wa *Chisungu*' (the case of *chisungu*) as she called it. This may be one reason that another *Nacimbusa* revealed that most women who did not undergo the ceremony at puberty felt inadequate and wanted to make up by combining the ceremonies at marriage. The *Nacimbusa* said the community have observed that most marriages that started with pre-marriage ceremonies lasted while most of those that did not, ended in divorce in most cases. The *Nacimbusa* indicated that this has made the pre-marriage ceremonies to be on high demand by both the Church and the community.

The preference to have traditional teachings just before marriage and not at puberty as was the case previously is one of the changes that *chisungu* proper has undergone over the past several decades. Anthropological studies done in the colonial period show the widespread practice of initiation ceremonies at puberty (Gouldsberry and Shane, 1911; Labrecque 1934; Richards, 1956). According to Richards and Labrecque, among the Bemba, every girl who came of age had to undergo *chisungu* rituals. Uninitiated girls and their families face ridicule from society. When she observed the *chisungu* ceremony in 1931, Richards was struck by the adamancy of her informants that every girl in Bemba society needed to undergo *chisungu*. Men refused to marry uninitiated girls. Furthermore, uninitiated women were denied access to other *chisungu* ceremonies. The uninitiated were called unsavory names such as 'a piece of rubbish (*cipele*); an uncultivated weed (*cangwe*); an unfired pot (*chitongo*); a fool (*cipumbu*); or just not a woman' (Richards, 1956:120); Hugo Hinfelaar, 1994) argued that the centrality of *chisungu* ceremonies was not only because they prepared women for the physical aspects of marital life and motherhood, but also for the religious and spiritual knowledge that women accessed through the ceremonies. This spiritual knowledge, such as the taboos related to women's monthly cycle, but also rituals for cleansing within the home, gave women immense power in the household and society. As a result, of changes in people's worldview especially in urban areas, people have generally abandoned these kinds of spiritual and religious beliefs. Additionally, in the old days, by puberty girls were already betrothed, and the *chisungu* rituals also included aspects of marital teachings. The wedding ceremonies were usually an extension of the *chisungu* rituals even when they took place later. Hence, we can conclude that the decline in *chisungu* teachings at puberty has partly been caused by the preference to prepare women for marriage much later when they are older through other forms of traditional pre-marital teachings.

### Association between class and *chisungu* ceremonies

Another important conclusion from our research was on the association between class and *chisungu*. We noted a higher prevalence of *chisungu* ceremonies in rural areas and in high-density areas of urban areas. In Ukwimi Village A and B, it was compulsory for all girls who had come of age to have a *chisungu* held for them, without exception. This was a requirement implemented forcefully by the Chief and other traditional leaders in the area. From interviews conducted within each cluster of villages, the Chief and other authorities have especially recognized high-standing *Alangizi* who are expected to lead in conducting *chisungu* ceremonies in the community. The chief declared that no woman should be allowed to get married if they had not undergone *chisungu* or *chinamwali*. When a girl gets her first menstrual period, the parents or guardians of the girl are required to report to these women who then report to the village headman and then they go ahead and appoint *apungu* to lead that *chisungu*. The issue is so serious that women who were married but had not undergone *chisungu* for whatever reason were required to undergo one despite being married. At the time we conducted this research in April 2023, one of the *chisungu* ceremonies we observed was for married women with two children.

Women who had not undergone the *chisungu* but attended a ceremony were severely punished. This was the case of one woman we interviewed who had experienced this fate. The Pentecostal church she belonged to discouraged *chisungu* and other traditional teachings, so she had not undergone the ceremony either at puberty or marriage. On the fateful day, the leader of the *Alangizi* in her village announced that there was a big *chisungu* happening and asked all women of age to attend the closed-door rituals. Out of curiosity, she went and attended the ceremony. Because of the huge number of women in attendance, she managed to slip into the *chisungu* house without giving *Alangizi* the required password which all initiated women must know. After the group dispersed, whispers went round that an

uninitiated woman had joined the *chisungu* proceedings. This became a big row, the woman was charged to pay chickens, a goat and other items. As further punishment, the *Alangizi* decreed that she be made to walk around the village half naked covered in mud and ashes. Only the intervention of her pastor and his wife, her husband and other senior people prevented this punishment from being implemented. As indicated earlier, in Ukwimi villages A and B, 18/20 of the girls questioned indicated they had undergone the rites at puberty.

In Lusaka, respondents from areas like Kabulonga, Longacres and Avondale expressed ignorance about *chisungu* rites at puberty. The *chisungu* ceremonies were not conducted there. In the three upper-class area our survey indicated that people in the area were not aware of any *chisungu* ceremony being held for girls/women at puberty in the area. However, the survey indicated that there were several traditional pre-married ceremonies such as Kitchen parties, Chilanga Mulilo and Matebeto for women who were past their puberty and were ready to get married.

In the Low-class areas, the survey indicated that *chisungu* ceremonies for girls at puberty were still taking place in the areas but not as prevalent as they were in the past. The pre-, marital ceremonies like *chilinga mulilo*, kitchen parties were common occurrences. For instance, in George compound 20 people interviewed could only remember one *chisungu* for a girl at puberty having taken place in 2022. However, they could not keep the count of the pre-marital ceremonies that occurred in 2022. They indicated that almost every weekend there was one kind of pre-marital ceremonies or the other.

In the mixed area of Chalala compound, the scenario was not very different from the low-class areas. Of the 15 people interviewed, 9 confirmed that *Chisungu* ceremonies for girls were occasionally held while 6 could not remember a *Chisungu* ceremony for girls at puberty being held in the area. However, all the interviewees confirmed that pre-marital ceremonies were very common in the area. It



is clear from this that in the high-density areas, *chisungu* ceremonies at puberty are still being held, albeit at lower incidents than in rural areas like Ukwimi. In Lusaka, kitchen parties, chilanga mulilo and other pre-marital ceremonies are more prevalent than *chisungu*.

What the research did find is that whether low or upper class, the motivation for *Chisungu* was based on individual choices which had nothing to do with whether initiation ceremonies were compulsory as was the case with the two villages in Petauke. One 63 old community member, lecturer by profession in one of the focus groups in Kabwe mentioned how she had organized *chisungu* for her daughters in 2017 just so that they could be exposed to their Bemba culture. Another woman, Mambwe by tribe in the community member focus group shared how although she had never witnessed any *chisungu* ceremonies in Kamushanga, she noted that the ceremonies were common among the Mambwe's who lived in Makululu area and Kanyama compound in Lusaka. Her observation brings to the fore how ethnic enclaves in urban areas or members of the same ethnic group living in the same area may in some cases stimulate seemingly extinct practices such as *Chisungu*.

### **Chisungu and churches**

This study also established an intricate relationship between the church that one belonged to and the attitudes toward *chisungu*. In general, focus group discussions in all three districts agreed that the Catholic Church was the most accepting of *Chisungu* Ceremonies while Pentecostal Churches usually discouraged them as evil or demonic.

A group meeting was organized for women from the Pentecostal Holiness Church in Kanyama Compound. Seven women from the Church's women group's group attended. One of them had undergone the *Chisungu* ceremony at puberty. She explained that their Church viewed traditional practices like *Chisungu* as evil. When she was baptized in the Church, she denounced all the things she had learnt in the *chisungu* ceremony to start a new life as a believer. She explained that

nowadays, the Church uses her to give presentations on the evils of the *chisungu* ceremony. She gave one example of the *chisungu* teachings that she uses to demonstrate the wrong teachings found in *chisungu*. The example is on a lesson that teaches the initiate that a man's sexual desires, which in the lesson are likened to the persistence of the sun; that even in bad weather, the sun takes every opportunity to shine each time the clouds or rain give way. In this lesson, she explained that the *chisungu* teaches women to accept men to sexually abuse them. Asked why she is asked to make these presentations, she explained that the presentations are meant to reassure the women of the Church that even if they may not have undergone initiation, there was nothing to miss. The other 6 women who had never undergone the *chisungu* ceremony explained that the presentations are important because those who have undergone *Chisungu* boast of knowing important things that those who have not undergone initiation may not know. Asked why their church accepts pre-marriage ceremonies and yet does not accept the *Chisungu* ceremony, the women pointed out that marriage was ordained by God and that any teaching that promoted marriage was accepted.

Similarly, in Ukwimi, the pastor of the most prominent Pentecostal church and his wife, informed the researchers that their church did not allow members to have *chisungu* or related traditional teachings. They said they discouraged these because the good in them was usually mixed with 'unchristian' teachings. Focus group discussion held in Lusaka women noted that Particular Churches, especially Pentecostal churches were identified as having strict rules against girls' initiation ceremonies. Some churches even excommunicated and even expelled members who went against this rule.

Another meeting was organized for women from the Catholic Church in Kabwata. 12 women attended the group discussion. They all agreed that the *Chisungu* ceremony at puberty was no longer popular due to individual family reasons and not their

Church. They indicated that most families did not take their children to undergo *Chisungu* ceremony because of various reasons such as the way modern society perceived *Chisungu*, limited time due to school systems, unconducive space in urban areas such as Kabwata and most of all due to the age at which young girls were attaining puberty which could be as young as 8 years old. Asked why their church had no restrictions on *Chisungu*, it was explained that the Catholic Church accepted teachings that taught good morals like the *Chisungu* teachings. Understanding the cultural practices of the people to whom the Gospel was preached was important to the church's growth. They explained that traditional teachings that were in conformity to the Gospel were embarrassed by the Church and incorporated into the Church teachings. They gave examples of the St Ann's Guild, a Catholic Church women's group, whose teachings they explained have incorporated many teachings from the *Chisungu* and pre-marriage ceremonies. For example, before a woman was given membership to the guild, she underwent lessons that sometimes took the format of initiation. Some practices of the *Chisungu* ceremony were incorporated where in some cases the women would even hold an overnight ceremony, the night before the membership was conferred to the new members. During this overnight ceremony, it was normal to perform both *Chisungu* and Christian songs and dances. Lessons from the *Chisungu* ceremony that could be supported by biblical lessons were also taught. One example given was the lesson on the importance of family which is represented by 'Mukowa' in the Mbusa emblems. They explained that the lessons of "Mukowa" resonated with biblical teachings and were very popular lessons. These views reflect those shared by women from the Catholic Church in Kabwe.



**Figure 4.** A Catholic *chisungu* ceremony, Chaisa Compound, Lusaka. Note the Catholic Chitenges won by *Alangizi*. Source Mbewe Family personal collection, Lusaka.

Even though our research established that the Catholic Church is one of the most accepting churches towards *chisungu*, this has not always been the case. In the early period of Catholic settlement in the territory, between the 1900s and 1950s, the Catholic church did not accept *chisungu* ceremonies, going as far as forbidding and even punishing its converts who practised these ceremonies (Mbewe, 2021). Hugo Hinfelaar (1994: xi,51,57-59) has speculated about the reasons why Catholic missionaries were so against this ritual and others that placed women at the heart of African religious and ritual practice. He suggested that missionaries could not control these practices that were at the heart of Bemba cosmologies and that these had posed a direct challenge to missionary enterprises. Later after the 1940s, in policies broadly known as inculturation, the church developed more tolerant attitudes towards *chisungu* ceremonies, even going as far as creating their own Christianised versions, which removed some aspects which were considered too traditional and incorporated Christian tenets into the Christianised ceremonies.

#### **When do the teachings take place and how long the *chisungu* ceremonies last today**

Most of the respondents indicated that the most ideal time for the initiation ceremonies is during school holidays. This is because most girls are school-going when they come of age. Hence the rites are held during holidays so as not to disturb the girls' schooling. In Lusaka,

we to connected with *Nacimbusa* Musonda Chaiwa, age 51 from Chalala area who indicated that there was going to be a *Chisungu* for two twin girls in August. The twins aged 18, had come of age 5 years prior but the parents decided to hold a *Chisungu* ceremony for them because the parents felt the girls were becoming out of control and they feared the girls could get pregnant and fail to complete their education. The girls were in Grade 10 and Grade 11. The ceremony was planned for August during the school holidays so that the girls' school programs would not be disturbed. On average the *chisungu* ceremonies took two weeks. In Kabwe, 6 respondents from out of the 10 questionered and the focus groups indicated that the *chisungu* ceremonies took 1 week. 1 respondent said they were isolated for a month. The community member from Kabwe whose daughters were initiated shared how her 2 daughters were isolated with a third girl for a week during the school holidays and how everyday they would return at the end of the day only to back to the lesson house, *banachimbusa's* house every morning. In Ukwimi, the *Alangizi* during the focus group discussion agreed that the ideal duration is a month but that most ceremonies took two weeks.

The *Nacimbusas* indicated that although the ceremony seemed like it was no longer common, it was present in most parts of Lusaka, but was in most cases done very privately so that people did not know of its occurrences. In Lusaka, two of the *Nacimbusas* disclosed that they had carried out four secret ceremonies between January and March 2023. One had done two and the other only one. In Ukwimi, the ceremonies were very public and heavily advertised. There was no expectation of secrecy (of course what went on during the actual rites is highly secret). The leader of the *Alangizi*, who was chosen by the chief seemed eager to announce the conduct of ceremonies. This might be because of the cultural revivalism that seemed apparent with the making of the *chisungu* compulsory. But it also seemed that the *Alangizi* advertised the *chisungu* to boost their authority and standing in the community.

Most of the teachings, including those that the researchers observed, took place in huts or houses. Unlike the ceremonies from Richards' 1931 observation that took place in the bush as well, none of the present-day *chisungu* took place in the bush. This is because of modernization and urbanization, especially in Kabwe and Lusaka, where there are no longer proper bushes for such a purpose. However, the women found innovative ways to resolve this.

In Kabwe, one respondent mentioned how with no bushes or rivers always available for localised teaching some instructors had to improvise. A participant in the Kamuchanga focus group shared how the initiate would just be told what would happen if they were in the village. Another interviewee mentioned how when she participated in an initiation in Chingola, the initiate and former initiates began singing songs while picking leaves only from fruit trees in the bush during initiation. According to the respondent, in the village, this was used to teach an initiate the sources of edible fruits. This was also an opportunity to see who had also undergone such teachings because only former initiates would identify fruit trees in the bush accurately.

#### **Who conducts the ceremonies and What is currently taught.**

On the question of who conducted the ceremonies, respondents across all three districts indicated that this was dependent on the circumstances of the family of the girl and what they preferred. For people in Lusaka and Kabwe, the response was that when a girl came of age, she informed her close female relatives. Her mother or grandmother or aunt would then approach a *nacimbusa* they knew and ask them to conduct the ceremonies.

Those who belonged to churches e.g. the Catholic Church which has specific women groups like St Anna who do the ceremonies went this route. In isolated incidents, the parish priest identified traditional counsellors in the church and asked them to teach youths issues pertaining to *Chisungu*, comprehensive sexuality and HIV/AIDS in the church. The Ministry of Social welfare is also known for

such engagement. In Ukwimi as said earlier, there are *Alangizi* who have been specially identified as do the ceremonies. The leader of the *Alangizi*, in consultation with the girls' mother or grandmother, identifies one *pungu* to oversee a particular ceremony. The chosen *pungu* then invites other *Alangizi* to be her assistants.

From the participant observations, interviews, and Focus Groups, the following were areas that were established as part of the curriculum.

1. Hygiene
2. Relationship with the opposite sex and male parent
3. Respect
4. Dressing
5. How to take care of the home
6. Conduct during menstruation
7. Culture
8. *chisungu* dances

The respondents and the *nacimbusa* had mixed reactions on the view that *chisungu* ceremonies at puberty are sites where girls are taught sexual matters such as dances to please men during intercourse, herbs etc. Many of the respondents responded that in old days this was the case because the onset of menstruation usually signalled that the girl was ready for marriage. However, they pointed out that this is not usually the girls these days especially in Lusaka and Kabwe. Here the *chisungu* rites proper do not usually include matters of preparing girls for their role as wives and mothers. These matters are tackled much later during pre-marital teachings when the women are ready to get married. One factor pointed out was that the age of the girls at puberty has also drastically dropped to as low as 8 years old from 13 to 16 years old in olden times. As a result of the misconceptions mentioned here, many parents are afraid that their children may be taught about sex. One member of the community mentioned that the other fear is that children may get bewitched or given certain charms that may make them barren. Some respondents disclosed that the coming of age early also discourages parents from holding ceremonies as the girls are too young to make sense of the ceremony. In such cases, the girls are only taught hygiene

routines, which most mothers managed to teach their children. However, they indicated that in normal circumstances the core lessons for a girl at *chisungu* is not only hygiene but also the biological makes-up of her body. The lessons were meant to make the girl be aware of the reproductive function of her body at that stage and lessons to abstain from sex were given since pregnancy before marriage was a taboo in most local cultures.

In Ukwimi, the leader of the *Alangizi* cautioned against the negative perceptions of *chisungu*, which she felt were influenced by external Western donors and NGOs. She argued that every culture has its own logic and the perceptions that *chisungu* ceremonies promote negative things like teaching young girls sexual matters was wrong. In their response on whether young girls are indeed taught sexual matters, she responded that what is taught is determined by the needs of each girl as presented by her guardians. In that case, if the girl came of age and the mother requested that she be taught 'everything', the *Alangizi* did as asked. The 'everything' here related to the above numbered themes and to aspect of preparing the initiate for marriage. These are highly secret things but include aspects like '*kutyola*', '*kumetha*', '*kusamalila*' and '*tukhatundu toyikamo nkhani*'. These are related to intimate matters between husband and wife.

In addition to negative attitudes to *chisungu*, other aspects such as formal education, Westernisation, technological advancements and related issues were seen as contributing factors to the low prevalence of *chisungu* in the districts visited in Zambia. One traditional counsellor in Pollen, Kabwe shared how, asked to instruct a girl who had come of age she found that the girl had already been instructed on how to take care of herself during menses by her Sunday School teacher at a Pentecostal church. As such one of the reasons cited for the reduction in the prevalence of *chisungu* is that because of education, Westernisation, and technological advancements, children are exposed to the teachings and aspects that were considered



taboo in the past, long before they came of age.

## CONCLUSION

In Conclusion, *chisungu* which is an initiation ceremony meant to instruct and celebrate the coming age of girls has been a site of contestation and dialogue from colonial times to the present. Thought to be growing extinct by colonial scholars such as Audrey Richards and Corbeil, the ceremony drew more attention to itself, the more it was talked about. Of particular note is how it was seen as a catalyst to female subjugation, early marriages and later the spread of HIV/AIDS. The preceding aimed at looking at the status of *chisungu* in the light of the aspects raised above, seeking to establish the players, setting and methodology involved in the ceremonies if they still exist in contemporary society. The findings of the study reveal that although in low prevalence, the ceremonies still exist albeit in complex ways that are adapted to present-day society. From the fieldwork done in Kabwe, Lusaka and Petauke, it was discovered that the *chisungu* lessons are in most cases combined with pre-marital teachings unlike in the past when they were held when a girl came of age.

In other cases *chisungu* ceremonies are held in places such as the villages in Petauke where it is compulsory, or as a result of ethnic enclaves in Kabwe and Lusaka or because of individual preferences for different families. Also discussed is how some churches such as the catholic church advocate for *chisungu* and have groups and individuals deliberately responsible for *chisungu* instructions during pre-marital counselling and as designated by the Parish priest. Of further note is how the *chisungu* curriculum by all intents and purposes remains pretty much the same, with the only difference being, as one Alangizi in Petauke noted, that the initiate's family can choose what they want to be taught to their daughter. The study identified a number of factors that have contributed to the decline in *chisungu* in Urban areas such as early maturity, education, religious beliefs and fear that a child will be taught about sex or how to

please a husband too early in life. Hence, the paper has demonstrated that, although not as common as they were in the past, *chisungu* lessons have been adapted to suit the contemporary society in curriculum, methodology and time at which they are held.

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