

Epistemicide of Indigenous Knowledge Systems: A discourse on the initiation rites of passage among the Bemba speaking people of Northern Zambia

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ABSTRACT

Epistemicide is a conceptual approach for understanding and analysing ways knowledge systems are silenced or devalued. The *Ichisungu* and *Ifimbusa* rites of passage for the Bemba speaking people of Northern Zambia involve inducting girls into young adulthood and marriage adult life respectively. The socio-cultural functions of these rites provide the Bemba community with a sense of cultural identity and continuity. The rites embrace and enhance the unity, cohesiveness, and social fabric of the Bemba community through the impartation of indigenous knowledge and skills to the young generation about marriage as a social institution. In addition, the rites promote traditional norms, values, and customs through the preservation and respect for the Bemba cultural heritage. The two rites of passage are still viable. However, there has been decreased frequency in the performance of these rites sometimes necessitated by lack of natural spaces and other ritual-related items. It has been observed by various stakeholders that the value of intangible cultural heritage and its contribution to national identity is under threat of dilution or extinction and the initiation rites of the Bemba-speaking people of Northern Zambia are a case in point. The *Ichisungu* and *Ifimbusa* rituals involve brief seclusion of the initiates in the bush for training and acquisition of societal values and skills. The bush seclusion does not take place in some places because forests have been cleared. These rites provide apprenticeship, mentorship and the transfer of knowledge and leadership skills. Therefore, it is important to safeguard these rituals by mentoring a new generation of young elders with knowledge and skills for the continued enactment of these rituals for posterity.

Keywords: Initiation rites, indigenous knowledge, Ichisungu, ifimbusa, culture, Bemba community

INTRODUCTION

Epistemicide which is derived from ‘episteme’(knowledge) and ‘cide’ (killing) refers to the destruction, silencing or devaluation of a knowledge system. It often involves the systematic undermining of knowledge systems outside of western traditions, favouring instead a Eurocentric perspective (de Sousa Santos, 2005; Asante, 1991; Sefa Dei, 1994) Therefore, cultural epistemicide is the intentional destruction or erasure of knowledge, cultural heritage or ways of knowing. This can occur through various means such as colonization and cultural suppression, censorship and book burning, intellectual property theft or the destruction of cultural artifacts. The reality of epistemicide in Africa is the basis for the fundamental quest for the liberation of the knowledge paradigm of the indigenous people of Africa. Some scholars who are sympathetic to the cause of resurrecting the knowledge paradigm of the indigenous people of Africa have presented positions in defense of the necessity of liberating the epistemological paradigm of the indigenous people of Africa from its forced dormancy (Dussel, 2000; Nkrumah, 1964; Ramos, 2016). Asante (1991) who is one of major exponents of Afrocentricity has challenged the suppression of the indigenous people of Africa’s contribution to the knowledge canon by the western dominant culture. Asante (1998) and Mazama (2001) call for the liberation of the indigenous people of Africa so that they can exercise their rights as genuine contributors to the global stock of knowledge (Chawane, 2016). Therefore, epistemic liberation is one of the foremost objectives of the Afrocentric paradigm (Mazama, 2002; Mekoa, 2006).

The rites of passage for the Bemba speaking people involve two interrelated rites known as *Ichisungu* and *Ifimbusa*. *Ichisungu* is the induction of girls leading to initiation at puberty, while *ifimbusa* is initiation leading

to married adult life for the bride and the bridegroom. Initiation is part of a living culture and as such is still evolving. Today's *ifimbusa* are modernising and Christianising the initiation rites. For example, in the new initiation rites, the bride and bridegroom are taught together, since they have to follow the teachings together. However, this is an innovation that is somewhat repugnant for the traditionalists as traditionally the bride was the only one initiated. During initiation leading to married adult life, the bride and groom are instructed through songs and symbols known as *imbusa* drawn on the walls or floor inside a house. Traditionally, these teachings were regarded as sacred and shrouded in secrecy. A lot of songs and symbols (*mbusa*) are used which can only be understood by insiders. There are different types of emblems (*mbusa*) used in traditional marriage and initiation such as the sacred emblems of the forest, emblems of the floor, emblems of the basket and emblems on the wall. In this chapter, we shall focus on the emblems drawn on the wall.

Puberty rites or initiation for girls involve traditional ceremonies where the initiation changes from one state of being to another, that is, from childhood to womanhood. In these rites, girls are taught the cultural rules of etiquette, and obedience and warned not to sleep with boys before marriage. These initiation rites are seen as an expression of fundamental social values and the focus of which is on relations established by marriage and the community. In addition, initiation rites create solidarity among women and are used for passing knowledge from one generation to another. The initiation rites use secret language to teach the initiate (Raising, 1995). Paige and Paige (1981) refer to the initiation rites for girls as the menarche rites and are described as mechanisms for initiating girls into adulthood. Puberty rites mark the attainment of menarche as a sign of sexual maturity, fertility, and social maturity. Lincoln (1981: 90) refers to them as women's initiation, a process that a woman goes through, resulting in a change of status and becoming 'fertile, productive, experienced and whole.' Puberty rites practices differ from one language group to another and from area to area. As in any other initiation, the puberty rites are secretive and are open only to females who have been initiated.

Sexuality does not just mean sexual activity, it is a concept that encompasses sexual behaviour and function, as well as the individual's awareness of their body. Feminists see limiting sexuality to sexual intercourse as a patriarchal definition based on men's needs and satisfaction. Sexuality is further described as a form of expression that begins at birth and continues throughout the individual's life involving the physical, emotional, social, and intellectual aspects of the individual. It includes the full range of issues that relate to the sexes and the relationships between them. It is influenced by the societal norms and social conditioning around sexual behaviour (Maluleke, 1997).

It has been observed that information regarding initiation is difficult to obtain especially for a male researcher. This difficulty results from the fact that it is taboo to discuss female initiation with men. The secret language, symbols, and figures used in *Ichisungu* is always under the leadership of *banachimbusa* who supervises the initiation. The functions of *banachimbusa* are similar to the functions of a mentor which are mainly to facilitate, guide, assist and support the novice in learning new skills, adopting new behaviour and acquiring new attitudes. For example, among the Tonga of Southern Zambia, girls go into a seclusion period as soon as they reach menarche (Maambo, 2007). During this period, they are taught how to take care of themselves and not to get deflowered. The focus of *Ichisungu* is on nobility, fertility, and motherhood and was usually done for girls who were betrothed. It is characterised by singing, dancing, special drum beats and mimes. Richards (1956:17) gave an outline of the *Ichisungu* rite, which was about twenty-three days in duration, and after the rite, the girl was married off.

Content

There is a growing awareness in Zambia regarding the value of intangible cultural heritage and its contribution as a determinant of national identity. Invariably, there are also growing concerns that the purity of traditional expressions is under threat of dilution, thereby eroding the traditions and identity of local communities practicing a diversity of cultural expressions. To mitigate this threat, it is important to ensure that communities have the capacity to take measures to safeguard their cultural heritage.

The Bemba-speaking people of Northern Zambia, like all other African societies, had an education system even before the coming of Europeans. In traditional Zambian society, traditional education was a tool used to train young ones to fit into communities. Education involves the passing on of cultural heritage, values, traditions,

language, knowledge and skills, good attitudes, and aspirations from one generation to another. One of the most important components of the unwritten curriculum of traditional education was the initiation of schools. An initiation school was a structured and more formal part of traditional education, in which a course of instruction was given to girls or boys upon reaching puberty (Kibera and Kimokoti, 1981).

In Zambia, different ethnic groups have different types of initiation schools which include *Mukanda* for boys among the Luvale, Lunda, and Chokwe; *Sikenge* for girls among the Lozi; *Ichisungu* for girls among the Bemba and *Nkolola* for girls among the Tonga. In spite of the differences in names, the initiation schools' methods of teaching and subject content followed similar lines (Raisings, 2001). Over the years, the number of parents sending their children to attend initiation schools has been on the decline. Increased westernisation in terms of western education and urbanisation have all contributed to making parents reluctant to allow their children to attend initiation schools. Consequently, initiation schools have been undermined by modern life. The increased abandonment of initiation schools has come with a price as a moral vacuum has been left. The exclusion of lessons on human values and relationships in modern education has led to superficially educated young ones with questionable morals and attitudes (Singani, 2012). In contemporary times much of what was good and useful in initiation schools is fast disappearing and the tragic consequence is that many Zambian parents have been thrown into a state of confusion between two worlds, the modern and the traditional.

Initiation schools had a heavy component of moral education, the neglect of initiation schools seems to have contributed to the Zambian society's experiences of social disorder and moral decay. Sexual crimes seem to be on the increase (Singani, 2012). Initiation schools had special teachers that were equipped with relevant knowledge and skills which they imparted to the young generation using the ascendant approach. The aged were the repositories of knowledge and skills. In contemporary society, conditions have changed drastically as modern family life cannot be modelled on exactly the same line as older ones. However, certain values inherent in initiation schools which constituted the foundation of humanity or *Ubuntu* should not be ignored but instead should be revisited. There were elements of real value in initiation school and it should not be forgotten that the past has a way of asserting its influence on the present (Castle, 1966). Alternative ways of preserving the precious heritage and important elements of *Ichisungu* and other initiation schools has to be found.

Historical perspectives of *Ichisungu* initiation rite

The Bemba speaking people of Northern Zambia believed that growing up was not a simple process of maturation, but involved a thorough preparation for the role to be played in adult life. For the Bemba girl, one of the most important rites of adolescence was that of puberty. As it is with other ethnic groups in Zambia, the culmination of education and training given to a girl came when she reached puberty stage. Immediately the girl had her first menses, as Colson (1958) observes, she was secluded to a solitary place, which was mostly a bush hut for a period of time. The confinement was meant for the initiate to learn without interruptions. The seclusion or confinement ended with a public ceremony or graduation, to celebrate the girl's attainment of adulthood status (Read, 1959). The new status of the initiate was made public at the re-birth ceremony. Usually, the graduation ceremony was characterised by killing of chickens, goats and drinking of *munkoyo* and other traditional brews. The puberty ceremony was a necessary prelude to marriage. It was after the puberty ceremony that a girl's full sexual life could begin (Colson, 1958). A girl-child who conceived before undergoing initiation was a disgrace to the family and community.

The role of initiation schools

Initiation schools among the Bantu people of Central Africa were considered to be of central importance in the life cycle of an individual (Ocitti, 1973). Initiation schools inculcated the values of life that had evolved from experience and tested in the continuing process of living. Initiation schools not only conferred adulthood status on the initiates but were an orientation towards marriage (Datta, 1984; Musonda, Hambulo, Kalimaposo, Milupi, Mubita, Simui, 2024). Initiation schools were often the first real opportunity for an individual to loosen the bonds which linked him or her as a child to the parents. The purpose of seclusion was for the initiates to be taught tribal norms, values, observance of certain taboos and for them to be subjected to hardships and ordeals. Generally, they were not harshly treated as during the lessons of trials of courage and endurance, older women tried to reform the girls of the defects they had earlier observed in them. If the girl had been impolite, she was rebuked and even

beaten (Pierre, 1981). Folk songs, folk dances and folk tales punctuated the girls' training in women's social obligations and etiquette in marriage (Read, 1959). Strictly guarded secrets of sex techniques were taught to the initiates. The seclusion period also played the role of socializing individuals to fit and participate adequately in the development of the society (Sheffield, 1973). During this period, instruction was given on the importance of one's loyalty to the clan. Much emphasis was laid on the solidarity of the extended family as being supreme (Brown and Hiskett, 1975). Benetta (1976) notes that initiation schools mainly focus on marriage matters, which result in stable marriages. Such schools go beyond marriage issues to include all aspects of everyday life. The uncleanness of menstruating women is a wide spread idea among the Bantu people (Klepp, 1988). Therefore, knowledge about personal hygiene especially during menstruation was given to the initiates. Other instructions that were given to the initiates included obedience to elders, child-care, cooperation in communal work, hospitality and self-discipline (Castle, 1966). Initiation schools also fostered the spirit of pride of membership to the ethnic group. Stardate (2003) argues that initiation schools promote cohesiveness at the expense of individualism. Kimilu (1975) states that the function of initiation school was that of social stability and social control. Initiation schools also preserved the cultural heritage of a given group (Ocitti, 1973).

Cosmological ideas were passed on to the initiates during initiation schools. Initiation sessions were usually accompanied by prayers and worship of the Supreme Being and the ancestors in the form of libation and sacrifices (Raising, 2001). The supernatural aspect of initiation schools included instruction in the respect for sacred objects. In this way, the initiates' faith in the supernatural was deepened (Ocitti, 1973). Initiation schools also taught the initiates to be intimate students of their physical, social and spiritual environment. Initiates were taught how to manipulate their natural environment so as to survive (Kimilu, 1975). Snelson (1970) spells the economic benefits of the initiation school to the individual as well as to the community. During the initiation period, the initiates were taught various practical skills and small crafts and other household utensils were made. Herbal medicines for common local diseases were also taught to the initiates (Wanjhi, 1999). Initiates were equally taught how to make beauty enhancing oils. During initiation, the initiates were taught the values of keeping their virginity before marriage. They were also properly instructed on the choice of marriage partners. They were warned not to be misled by external beauty when looking for marriage partners.

Attitudes towards initiation schools

Attitudes towards initiation schools are divided. People who have adopted western ways of life have rubbished initiation schools as old fashioned, outdated and conservative institutions which should be done away with completely (Wanjohi, 1999). Some parents who are Christian have labelled initiation schools as pagan institutions that perpetrate harmful traditional practices and horrors to the young ones which go against Christian teachings (Loretta, 2001). Some parents who are advocates of human rights view the practice of confining or keeping initiates indoors against their will as a form of slavery that should be done away with (Wallis, 1984). It has been argued that initiation schools have somewhat limited women's participation in the formal sector. Women have at times appeared as the custodians of tradition and thus agents of their own subordination. Initiation schools have been viewed by other people as tools for women's subordination to men (Ocholla-Ayayo, 1976; Kalimaposo, Mukando, Milupi, Mubita, Hambulo, 2022). Some parents think that sexuality values inculcated into girl initiates during initiation prompt them to experience what they have been taught and then go on rampage having sex before marriage, resulting in unwanted pregnancies, early marriages, prostitution and sexually transmitted diseases including HIV and AIDS (Maambo, 2007). Nonetheless, Singani (2012) has strongly objected to this proposition on grounds that initiated girls are taught self-control and are able to exercise restraint in sexual matters as compared to uninitiated girls. On the other hand, some people argue that initiation schools put young people at risk of getting infected with HIV and AIDS as they tend to encourage graduates to have many sexual partners to prove that they were taught well during initiation school. It is argued that the initiation school teachings on the use of herbs and love portions to enhance sex have exacerbated the problem. However, some parents have argued that initiation schools could be avenues through which traditional instructors and marriage counsellors could teach the initiates about the dangers of pre-marital sex and risks of being infected with HIV and AIDS (Wanjohi, 1999). Equipped with such knowledge, graduates from initiation schools could be able to make informed decisions. Other people contend that culture is dynamic and we cannot expect the modern family to be modelled on exactly the same lines as older ones (Ocitti, 1977). They feel initiation ceremonies cannot be practiced the way they used to practice it in the colonial times as increased urbanisation and the fact that many girls now reach

puberty while at school makes it difficult for them to be initiated (Mundumuko, 1990). However, some people feel that good aspects of the initiation schools should not be left to fall into oblivion (Ocitti, 1977).

Modification of initiation schools

Urbanisation has contributed to some parents to regard *Ichisungu* rite of passage as old fashioned and conservative with limited goals that cannot adequately meet the basic needs of a modern girl-child. Some parents view the rites of passage as an outdated tradition, a liability without monetary gains. This radical parental attitude change towards rites of passage as a result of modernity and urbanisation is in line with Max Weber's comparative perspective theory which states that traditional people consider certain actions right and proper solely because they have been accepted for so long.

The spread of Christianity as an extension of the western culture has an influence in the change of parental attitudes towards initiation rites. Some Christian parents have abandoned sending their children to attend these rites of passage because they are regarded as pagan practices not in line with Christian values and principles. It has been noted that Christianity has somewhat undermined the traditional rites of passage.

Initiation rites among the Bemba, which is one of the largest ethnic groups in Zambia, expresses the spiritual, social and ceremonial mores of the community and is integral in defining cultural identity. These initiation rites contribute to social cohesion among the people. The need to capacitate communities has been identified by various stakeholders such as church organisations, civil society organisations, government and the academia for enhanced capacity to safe guard intangible cultural heritage in the rural communities that are the custodial sources of cultural heritage.

The need to mitigate dilution of initiation rites by traditional leaders who have expressed concern that traditional initiation rites of passage in particular were in danger of being diluted and misrepresented when performed in urban areas away from the custodial source. The urban context has presented a threat in the form of diverse influences from contemporary sources, in particular that of western oriented cultural expressions. Consequently, the art form as practised by the urban *ifimbusa* has become diluted; purity of form and imbued knowledge is gradually being lost. Urbanisation and modernity has resulted in a displacement of the inter-generational transmission of intangible cultural heritage leading to a loss of knowledge and cultural identity among the Bemba.

Initiation rites are an intrinsic part of traditional societies and have existed for many centuries. Jafaney (2004) in his work on initiation contends that initiation is as old as human society and that the age at which one attains this stage varies from society to society and from one individual to the other. Raising (2001) has shown that initiation rites or ceremonies are similar from one culture to another with few differences across cultures. During initiation ceremony, norms and values concerning gender, production and reproduction as well as cosmological ideas are passed on to the initiate.

During initiation, the girl is instructed by elderly women who are well vest in the society's culture. Emphasis is placed on reproductive roles within marriage. These include domestic and agricultural duties, respect for elders and her husband to be, sexual and food taboos. The girl is taught how to behave in marriage, and how to run a home by performing most of the domestic duties.

Initiation is part of a living culture and as such is still evolving. Today's *ifimbuusa* are modernising and Christianising the initiation rites. In the new initiation rites, the bride and bridegroom are taught together, since they will have to follow the teachings together. However, this is an innovation which raises eye brows for the traditionalists as traditionally the bride was the only one initiated.

The instructions for the bridegroom were not as complex as those of his bride. As he grew up, he was allowed to listen to chats at the palaver hut (*insaka*) of married men. For the initiation of his bride, he too would be taken to the forest by his male instructors and given instructions to hunt for *nakantebele*, get the material for the bow and arrow he was going to use to shoot at the target in the initiation hut and gather leaves of *musuku tree* to make the parcels. The male elders would add some instructions on the night of the wedding, but it did not amount to much. Nowadays, the palaver huts (*insaka*) have disappeared and unless they join the fiancée in her initiation, young men have no traditional preparation for marriage except the wedding night talk.

Previously, girls' initiation rites were banned as they were regarded as pagan and immoral by most missionaries in Zambia. The missionaries proposed no substitute, however, the traditional rites continued in secret. Today the Catholic Church is one of the church organisations that has changed its point of view and tries to revitalise and re-evaluate initiation rites.

Description of symbols or emblems (*mbusa*)

The element consists of two interrelated rites of passage *ichisuungu* and *ifimbuusa* of the Bemba community. *Ichisuungu* is the induction of girls leading to initiation at puberty, while *ifimbuusa* is initiation leading to married adult life for the bride and the bridegroom. Initiation is part of a living culture and as such is still evolving. In the new initiation rites, the bride and bridegroom are taught together, since they have to follow the teachings together. However, this is an innovation which is somewhat repugnant for the traditionalists as traditionally the bride was the only one initiated. During initiation leading to married adult life, the bride and groom are instructed through songs and symbols (*mbusa*) drawn on the wall inside a house. Emphasis is usually on reproductive roles within marriage, domestic and agricultural duties, family life, respect for elders, sex taboos and chastity. Traditionally, these teachings were regarded as sacred and shrouded in secrecy. A lot of songs and symbols (*mbusa*) were used which can only be understood by insiders. For example, the drawing of a snake represents a man, so the girl is not supposed to jump over him, meaning she is not supposed to pass the boundary of marriage by having extra marital affairs with other men. The small and big spots in the snake represent the small and big problems she might face in her marriage. The white spots in the snake refer to the good things in marriage while the red spots refer to the dangerous things in marriage including menstrual periods.

The waves of the snake represent the ups and downs in marriage. The snake was usually drawn on top of the white square representing a house, meaning that the husband was the head of the house. The snake is also a sign of danger and sexuality, as it comes to seduce.

The drawing of an eagle symbolises the penis which should be strong and erect. The eagle represents strength, a woman is supposed to love her husband for the way he makes love to her. His strong penis is likened to an eagle when it is catching prey. The drawing of finger millet is a sign of love. It is drawn as two different parts, which means a man and a woman have different tasks which should not be crossed, but are supposed to be harmonious. The right branches of the finger millet represent the genitals of a woman while the left branches symbolise the genitals of a man. Extra marital affairs are regarded as an abomination.

The drawing of a tortoise means that one should be generous. If a friend has a problem, one should put out the neck. Withdrawing the head inside the shell means that one should not meddle in the affairs of other people. A tortoise is a symbol of generosity, prudence and humility. On the other hand, the drawing of a dog means that a woman should not talk too much whenever she has problems with her husband, she should not run away or tell other people as that would bring more trouble. The initiation rites use various symbols (*mbusa*), songs and poetry in order to reinforce the teachings.

The drawing of a woman with a basket on her head and a basket in her hand means that she should not leave her husband when there are problems. A clever woman is always near her husband and she shows respect to her husband. The basket on her head represents the marriage which she should honour, and also the in-laws whom she should treat with respect. Similarly, the basket in her hand represents her own relatives whom she should not forget. If she treats one kin group better than the other, the other will leave her and so she will be dependent on only one group, which is not good. The husband comes first, then parents and relatives are second. A woman needs wisdom to keep the marriage, otherwise the marriage would fail.

The drawing of a man who is sewing his trousers symbolises that men cannot look after themselves, so the woman should keep her husband tidy and look after his clothes because through him people will know his wife. If the woman does not keep the husband well, the husband will dress badly, his clothes would be dirty and worn out. It also means that men are irresponsible and have to be looked after because they cannot look after themselves. A song is also sang that refers to a man who does not like to see problems but only wants to drink, the wife tries to advise but he will not listen.

The drawing of a bird on the roof of the house means that the bird watches the woman, symbolising the *banachimbusa* watching the girl. She should honour the *banachimbusa*, keep the rules and stick to one partner. The bird refers to the girl who should keep the problems inside the house. The house means that a woman has her own house, she should not tell others what happens in her house and she should not interfere with others. Another interpretation is that the house looks beautiful on the outside, but inside it are many problems. She should not admire things that she does not possess, she should be content with what she has. In addition, the woman is not supposed to tell others how she and her husband live and what they do. The house has a roof, which means the inside should be covered; it should be like the heart, and the mouth should not say what the heart knows. Everything in the house is for the husband, meaning that she is not supposed to tell others how the husband behaves, for example if the husband is a drunkard and does not have enough money. A song is sang to illustrate the picture.

The drawing of a woman who is delivering means that when a wife is pregnant the husband is not supposed to take a lover, otherwise his wife will die from *ncila* (adulterous behaviour of a man). This adulterous behaviour leads to maternal mortality. It is believed that a woman whose husband was sleeping about with other woman causes his wife to have difficulties at the time of delivering, consequently the woman in labour dies upon seeing her blood. This death is called *incila*. Conversely, a woman who sleeps about with other men dies before delivery, this death is called *incentu* (adulterous behaviour of a woman).

The drawing of a man and a woman with a stick between them means they are equal. The stick represents the balance between husband and wife. It means that in marriage one has to respect their own kin group and the relatives of their spouse. It is also believed that 'women are like salt,' one cannot eat relish without salt.

A picture of a big bird represents a bird called *Mung'omba* (vulture like bird) or *Ichipululu* (owl). This bird sings in the early hours of the morning, some believe it is the best time to have sex. At this time the woman can wake up her husband and ask him to have sex.

The drawing of the black bird with a white ring around its neck is a sign of love. It means that when a woman is young and beautiful, it is easy to love her. When she gets old the husband should still love her though she may not be attractive due to old age. It does not matter what you look like, what is important is how you look after your husband. The drawing of a big rectangle in the centre of the drawings represents the bed. A song is sang that talks about the conjugal rights of a man. Thus a woman should not deny the husband his conjugal rights. A woman has no excuse to refuse her husband, if she does not want to have sex then she better goes back to her parents. The small rectangle next to it represents the floor, meaning that a couple can make love everywhere in their house. Both rectangles have white and red zig-zag lines, representing fertile periods and the periods when it is taboo to have intercourse. The drawing of the pot symbolises the penis of a man which is supposed to be erected while having intercourse. This is explained in detail on the wedding day. Similarly, the drawing of the razor and soap means that the wife and husband have to shave each other's armpit hair and pubic hair. This has to be done by using hot water, a razor or pair of scissor. After shaving the wife has to anoint the penis with Vaseline, and the couple is supposed to make love. A song is sang by the women depicting a snake that comes to seduce. Some women dance with their hands behind their feet on the ground and their *chitenge* cloth high. They open and close their legs, the meaning is that the girl is supposed to keep her virginity until someone has paid the bride price.

The drawing of the Zebra has two meanings. The first meaning is that a woman is not supposed to be idle, because being so people will say that she is bad, not beautiful, she will not marry and people will laugh at her, and she will become ugly. She is supposed to know her duties and responsibilities as a wife and future mother. Another meaning is the opposite of the first one, meaning a girl should be proud of her beauty. Just like a Zebra represents different colours and is a sign of beauty. A girl is beautiful when she is young. When a husband takes another lover, his wife can tell him that she was as beautiful as her when she was young, so what he sees in his girlfriend, he used to see in his wife. Therefore, her husband should not leave her for she is still the same woman he used to know. It also means that she should respect old people and she should not forget that one day she will also be old.

The drawing of the groundnuts means that the girl is an adult now. Although 'women are small' like groundnuts, they have brains, they have wisdom and something to offer. This should not be hidden. The shell of the groundnut

can be thick, but the most important thing, the inner part is good. Although the girl is still young, she has a lot of knowledge because she has learned. The groundnut also represents richness, groundnuts are important for making traditional foods especially mixing with vegetables.

The drawing of the hands means that the hands are not only for the daily job, it is also nice to clean each other gently after having sex. The woman should clean her husband with her hands. She should put the sperm between her legs and clean his penis. There should be intimacy during and after sexual intercourse. The drawing of a woman who is pounding means that when the husband is sleeping with another woman, the wife should not say anything about it. Even when someone comes to tell her, she should refuse to listen.

The meaning of the clay model of a woman whose teeth stick out is called the jealous woman. Jealousy is not good, in marriage you need to trust each other and ignore small mistakes. Jealousy leads to divorce, so spouses should guard against unwarranted jealousy. Another reason for protruding teeth is that she talks too much. One is not supposed to talk about marital affairs with outsiders.

The clay-model of the lion traditionally known as *Mundu* is also called the whistle. During the ritual, two women dance while holding the clay model. They put it in the centre of the room and on their knees as they dance towards it. It has a hole on both sides, and the two women blow in it. It is like a drum which spreads noise, meaning that whenever the girl hears rumours she should not believe or spread them. Particularly when someone tells her that her husband is having another wife, she should not allow them to say this, because he is her husband, so she should not believe bad things about him. The blowing in the clay model means that husband and wife have become one. In the wedding ceremony it is taught as the lion is calling because it wants to eat someone. Husband and wife can make love at any time. Therefore, the woman must receive her husband when a man wants to make love, he is like a lion.

The clay-model of a man with an erect penis shows the girl the male genitals, which she is only supposed to see when she is married. She should not be frightened when she sees a penis for the first time. During the ceremony two women dance with their *chitenge* high up between their legs, one looks between her legs while the other one lets others look between her legs. The song says that it is natural to have sex, so do not think that it is an illness. But if you have sex with many men, you will get a disease.

The drawing of a naked man and woman means that children should never enter the bedroom of their parents, because they are not allowed to see their parents naked. So before entering the bedroom they have to knock and ask permission to enter.

Practice and transmission of initiation rites

The two rites of passage of the Bemba community are still viable. However, there has been decreased frequency in the performance of these rites of passage necessitated sometimes by lack of natural spaces and other ritual related items. The traditional modes of transmission of these rites have been weakened by reduced frequency and a shrinking participation in the practice of these rituals due to modernisation and change of life styles. The *ichisungu* rituals were usually transmitted to young girls in the bush. Nowadays, the bush seclusion of the initiates in the bush for instruction and acquisition of societal values and life skills rarely take place. Similarly, the *ifimbuusa* rituals also involve brief seclusion of the initiates in the bush for training and acquisition of societal values and life skills. In the forest the instructors (*banacimbusa*) would look for certain trees for instance *umufungo* or *umupundu*. These kinds of trees were used for initiation rites because they bear many fruits which are a symbol of fertility, meaning that the girl should bear many children. Such trees were believed to have herbal or medicinal properties. While at the tree, the *ifimbuusa* ululate and run around the tree as a sign of happiness. Girls are initiated in order to gain respect at home and in the community. After the initiation, they experience a change in the way their parents, siblings and community address them. Learning in initiation rites takes place through poems, rhymes and songs. The participants are encouraged to use their creativity to compose songs, poems and rhymes that can be used for sexuality education. The sexuality education in *Ichisungu* is about maintaining virginity by not indulging in sex before marriage. Cory (1956) posits that the teaching during puberty rites concerns sexual matters. All the secrets of sexuality are learned and observed by the initiated. The method

of instruction in the puberty rites involves songs and figurines, though not all the songs and figurines have an instructive purpose. The aim of puberty rites is to instil a sense of discipline into the initiate and to increase her self-confidence and bravery. For example, the song that is sung when *banachimbusa* are showing the penis figurine to the initiate seem to be aimed at discouraging the initiate from illicit sexual relationships. The song ‘*iyi ng’wena ilefwaya iwe mayo nakalanga....iyi ng’wena ilefwaya iwe...*’ (This crocodile is looking for you...mum nakalanga...). The elders also shout some additional information during the performance warning the girl not to indulge in premarital sex.

Hygiene is also taught during initiation rites. Initiates are taught to hide their menses from other people. The menstruating woman is expected to conceal her condition especially from men. Men are not supposed to know or see the menses. Menstruating women are supposed to keep themselves clean to ensure that people do not detect that they are menstruating. In addition to hygiene, initiates also learn morals and traditions of society. They learn the poems and rhymes of the initiation and the facts of life related to the morals of society.

CONCLUSION

Ichisungu and *Ifimbusa* are respected cultural practices that have been in existence for many years among the Bemba speaking people of Northern Zambia. It is important not to label cultural practices as evil before finding out what they are really about. Initiation rites of passage are cultural institutions that have been working for many years towards bringing women together. They give women a sense of belonging and respect in their community. It also gives them group power in the community during initiation rites. The sexuality education in *Ichisungu* and *Ifimbusa* covers abstinence from illicit sex leading to the prevention of HIV / AIDS. Although initiation rites have a sexuality education component, the content of the sexuality education needs to be in line with the current issues facing communities and young people. Some uninitiated women view initiation rites as evil traditional practices which should be abolished. Initiated and uninitiated women view initiation rites differently. Initiated women see it as an important cultural practice, while uninitiated women see it as an evil and demonic practice. The uninitiated women tend to have a limited knowledge of the rites leading to false assumptions and perceptions about its practice. On the other hand, initiated women seem to view initiation rites as a place of fun and freedom that teaches respect and *Ubuntu* among the initiated youths and women. It also brings together different age groups of women thereby uniting women. Africa needs to harness its usable past in order to construct an authentic African episteme. One important step towards correcting Africa’s dependence is to bring its indigenous knowledge to the service of its development by integrating indigenous knowledge systems into the education system.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations are provided as safeguarding measures for the cultural identity and continuity of the rites of passage for the Bemba speaking people of Northern Zambia.

1. The government line departments responsible for education, community and social welfare should empower local communities with knowledge and skills to safeguard intangible cultural heritage for continued enactment and practice for posterity.
2. Traditional leaders and other stakeholders should support initiation groups in their communities by preserving spaces such as forests for the practice to continue.
3. The Ministry of Tourism and related government departments should enhance inventorying of elements of the rites of passage in the Bemba land through photographic documentary and video on the intangible cultural heritage elements of the rites of passage.
4. *Banachimbusa* and other stakeholders being the bearers and custodians of the rites of passage should mentor the young adults through community meetings as this would present opportunities for exchange of ideas and resolving cross-cutting issues.

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