

Let's talk about **SEX**

Jane Labous meets the forward-looking *alangizi* (or 'initiators') who are revolutionising one of Zambia's most ancient traditions



Honesty*, 14, is demonstrating how to gyrate her hips. The teenager lies beneath Emma*, 56, her *alangizi*, or 'initiator', legs bent, pelvis jammed up to the older woman's. She grinds as the five other *alangizi* ululate and beat the drums.

'Slowly,' murmurs Emma.

Honesty has the boyish figure of a young teenager and is spotted with charcoal, chalk and mielie meal. It is a rare insight into the mysterious world of the *chinamwali*, a secret Zambian initiation ceremony into womanhood.

Until two years ago, girls like Honesty would have spent three months - from the time they woke up, long into the dead of night, every night - undergoing training. They would have learnt how to shave their future husbands' genitals by practising with a raw blade on a live chicken and, eventually, on an *alangizi*; how to store and dispose of their husbands' pubic hair and how to dance for men in bed.

But lately the *chinamwali* initiation ceremonies in Chadzombe, a community in Zambia's Eastern Province, have undergone a subtle, yet radical, transformation. Giggling is still punished with a hard pinch of the thighs by the *alangizi*, and chickens, groundnuts and beads still feature as props, but the sexual content traditionally taught during the ritual is being replaced with lessons on health, HIV, contraception and the importance of school. Only the existing content on etiquette,

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coping with periods, how to keep a clean house and cooking has been kept. Moreover, girls are no longer being made to skip school to attend.

Honesty, who today underwent her passing out ceremony, is only demonstrating the skills that previous girls would have learnt. She even smiles wryly as Emma, who has been initiating girls for 25 years, kneels on the ground brandishing a giant penis fashioned from a spare *chitenge* (a coloured cloth often worn as a headscarf).

SEXUAL TESTING

Chinamwali ceremonies have been happening for centuries in Chadzombe and across the Chadiza district. Girls aged between 12 and 14-years-old - known as *namwali* - are 'initiated' into womanhood as a necessary stage of growing up, then sworn to secrecy about what they experienced.

'The ceremonies teach girls how to handle a man in the bedroom,' explains Anna*, a community worker who wishes to remain anonymous. 'Without being initiated, you are not considered a proper woman. At 11 or 12-years-old, when they reach puberty, they are taught how to

clean a man, how to shave his private parts - which is the traditional role of a wife in Zambia - and many other sexual techniques.'

Among Zambian teens, being initiated has become a necessary part of growing up, and many face peer pressure from other girls to undergo the *chinamwali*, leave school and get married. In the past, girls who passed their initiation would be 'tested' by an elder male in the community, to make sure they were good enough at sex.

Anna says: 'The initiators choose a man from within the community, who tests to see if a girl has been properly trained. If not, she goes back for further training.' Anna tells me that last week she met a tester who confessed to testing 12 girls in a matter of days; he said he made one girl return for further training because she 'knew nothing'.

Anna says that he was testing them without a condom. The man had been told that if he got one of them pregnant, he would not be held responsible because he had been appointed as a tester. 'Chadiza is among the least developed communities, illiteracy is still high, particularly amongst women, and the contributing factor is the initiation ceremony,' she explains. 'Not many girls reach secondary level because after the initiation ceremony, they test, get pregnant and drop out of school. Some get pregnant from the test, while others take the test and then want to continue to use their new skills.'

For the last three years, the *alangizi* have been modernising the ancient ceremony and

eliminating the practice of testing with help from rights organisations. The impetus has come from the initiators themselves, all of whom underwent the initiation ritual when they were as young as 12.

Emma and her counterparts say they want girls to leave the *chinamwali* until they are older - allowing them to complete their secondary education. The ceremony will either be delayed until the school holidays or put off until girls are older and ready to marry, much like the traditional 'kitchen parties' or hen parties that take place in Zambia's capital, Lusaka.

For the first time, the initiators are speaking out about the ceremonies they themselves experienced when they were teenagers - and are openly criticising the ancient rites.

'Our initiation ceremony is good because it is our tradition, given to us by our ancestors,' says Phyliss*, 44, another *alangizi*. 'But there are disadvantages, because once the girls are taught sexual skills, they want to try them out, so they get pregnant really quickly. Often, young girls aren't scared of men, even older men, because they say they know how to handle them. After the ceremonies, girls drop out of school because of what they been taught - all their focus is on sex and marriage.'

Phyliss says boys prey on initiated girls because they are curious about what they've been taught. 'So girls are tempted into having sex,' she explains. 'And because of this focus on respect for and submission to the men, even if they meet a man in

ABOVE: young girls in Zambia have been feeling an overwhelming sense of pressure to undergo the *chinamwali* ceremonies and start families, often at the expense of their own education or health

the street, they're very submissive. They defer to them. This puts them at a great disadvantage because men can easily prey on them.'

CHANGING CURRICULUM

The Umoyo Wama Youth Project or Young Health Project (YHP), run by Plan Zambia, AstraZeneca and Planned Parenthood Association of Zambia, works with the initiators, as well as community elders and schoolchildren. The project helps local women change the curriculum of the *chinamwali*, so that whatever the *alangizi* teach, it does not harm young girls.

Rebecca*, 48, is an initiator in the Chilenga community. She underwent the entire initiation package when she was 15, and says learning how to update the ceremony was a revelation. As girls, she and her peers sensed that they were being taught things that they were too young to know, but were helpless in the face of tradition.

'We used to feel very bad [when we were initiated], but we had no choice, because it was tradition,' she explains. 'If a girl didn't go through that ceremony, she wasn't considered a complete girl who was going to turn into a complete woman.'

Now Rebecca has retrained to take out the sexual training and introduce health messages into the initiations. 'The initiators would beat us if we did not manage to dance to please them,' she says. 'I didn't want other young girls to go through this and that's why I trained with this project, trying to talk to parents and other initiators to help the young girls reach a certain level of education. None of us even reached secondary school.'

She says the project has been welcomed by women and girls. 'Before we used to teach girls between 12 and 15 everything to do with sex; how to handle a man in the bedroom, how to shave him, clean him after sex, dancing to please a man during sex and how to serve a man. Now we no longer do this. We teach hygiene, respect, periods and cooking. But we do not teach them how to dance in bed.' Rebecca is now spreading the message on how good it is to send girls to school. 'I've noticed that a lot of girls no longer get pregnant and go on to secondary school because of the change in initiation ceremonies,' she says.

MODERNISING TRADITIONS

Girls themselves are shy when the subject of initiation ceremonies comes up. Most have it drummed into them that it is forbidden to discuss the subject of *chinamwali*. But it is clear that changing the ceremony will have a beneficial ripple effect on a society where girls are not considered successful unless they get married.

Young girls in Zambia face pressure not just from boys and men but from other girls and their families to start relationships and think about sex and marriage. Gladys Phiri, 32, a teacher in Nsadz, was initiated when she was 14. 'No matter how many degrees you have, if you're not married, you're nothing here,' she laughs. 'Even if you're

educated like me, they say my home is just a house because it's not complete without a man! Even my mother's not proud of me because I'm not married. So the girls don't get inspiration from anyone - all the women just bear children.'

Gladys is a single mother and believes changing the initiation would be a good thing. 'Initiation ceremonies talk about sex, getting married and having children - while at school we talk about prevention,' she says. 'The girls are taught that you can't say no to a man - if they can find courage and a voice they'll be able to tell them they don't want sex or that they want to use a condom. There's nothing wrong with these ceremonies, they teach some good messages - respect, manners, how to deal with periods. They just need updating.'

All the girls I speak to clam up when asked about the tradition - but some teens are saying no to initiation until they are older. Senzeni, 18, got pregnant accidentally - her baby Hannah is just three-weeks-old. But the teenager is back at school and says she will refuse to have an initiation ceremony until she gets married. 'I'm very young and I want to continue learning,' she says. 'I want to be a nurse. I haven't had an initiation ceremony and I will wait until I get married to have one.'

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However, some admit that an initiation teaching about contraception and HIV/Aids would be useful as long as it is in the school holidays.

Anastazia, 18, got pregnant at 15 and refused an initiation when she was younger. She says: 'If I had passed through the ceremony, somebody would have taught me about contraception and protecting myself from pregnancy.'

Elizabeth, 19, got pregnant when she was 16. 'The community here is all about initiation and marriage,' she says. 'There's loads of peer pressure to get married; many say there is no gain from school and that it's better to get married. For most girls, once they get initiated, lots of men come after them, asking them to get married. This isn't right. It's not right to take girls through the initiation when they are so young, because it means everyone thinks they are ready for marriage.'

The essence, says initiator Phyliss, is to keep the tradition but update the message of the *chinamwali*.

'We want to wait for the girls to finish school and only put them through the ceremony when they are ready to get married. This is the ideal way to update our tradition.'

*Some names have been changed in this article to preserve anonymity.



RIGHT: pressure groups such as the Umoyo Wama Youth Project have been campaigning to introduce modernity to the ceremonies, moving the emphasis away from sexual techniques and pleasing men, and towards hygiene, contraceptive methods and sexual health messages