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Icisungu – Divining Mother Earth in the Bemba Puberty Rite

Abstract

The Bemba culture celebrates two distinct rites for young women. The first rite is celebrated at puberty (*icisungu*) and the second is celebrated at marriage (*imbusa*). This article focuses on the first rite called *icisungu* which is a puberty rite for girls among the Bemba people of Zambia. The significance of the *icisungu* rite is its centrality in the possible promotion of female agency and reproductive health awareness among Bemba girls. This is vital as it establishes a solid connection between their cultural practices and their relevance in contemporary discussions about sexual reproductive health. Young girls are separated during *icisungu* in order to receive instruction on their journey into womanhood and how to safeguard themselves from an early childhood debut into sexual activity. *Icisungu* is a safe space for young girls to learn agency and comprehensive sexuality education. Drawing on African feminist cultural hermeneutics and focusing on mothering as a framework, this article demonstrates how the divine Mother Earth and Bemba women offer agency to the girls at puberty.

Significance: The article retrieves indigenous knowledge for promoting women's reproductive health and demonstrates how the puberty rite of passage for girls among the Bemba can be linked with agency in addressing contemporary challenges of health and the climate crisis.

Keywords: *Icisungu*, puberty, agency, reproductive health, Bemba, Zambia, Mother Earth

Introduction

African women theologians such as Oduyoye (2001), Kanyoro (2002), as well as Phiri and Nadar (2011) have argued that there are life-giving aspects within the various African cultures that can be leveraged for women's and girls' emancipation. Among the Bemba people of Zambia, a woman is critical and central to the family and community. This means that when girls reach puberty, they are given instructions on how to take up their responsibilities in the family and in their community. Being a matrilineal group, lineage among the Bemba is through a woman. Bemba people orally pass on indigenous knowledge for women and girls to secure the agency that they need to live in society. It is therefore necessary for girls to learn the important responsibilities that they have to

execute in the family and in their respective community. A Bemba girl in precolonial Zambia was prepared to take up the role of *cibinda wa ng'anda* (this could be interpreted as *head of the home*), *kabumba wa mapepo* (*creator/initiator of prayers*), *nacimbusa wa cisungu* (*guardian of tradition*). These were the three important leadership positions that Bemba women held in their communities. It has been argued that in holding 'these positions women were taught to be industrious and not to be idle. Women were to work in partnership with their husbands in order to provide for their families' (Kaunda, 2024, p. 49). For the Bemba women to fulfil their leadership roles in their families and communities, it was necessary to receive training through *icisungu* and *imbusa* rites respectively.

The term 'divining' in this article is used as a knowledge seeking approach to discovering and understanding the hidden knowledge that Bemba women offer to Bemba girls for their agency. This knowledge and wisdom is drawn upon from nature. Divining does not take a supernatural interpretation in this article, but refers to the wisdom of grasping life and learning from nature that surrounds us. This broadly means that the earth is the source of all motherhood. In light of this, *icisungu* is considered a miracle. When a young girl reaches puberty, it means that she has begun participating in working mutually with Mother Earth and motherhood. This rite of passage inspires respect for the motherhood of all motherhoods – the earth. The earth is central to the rite and participates in divine connections with humanity. During the rite of *icisungu*, older women rally around the young girls to inspire them and welcome them to womanhood and share knowledge around hygiene and sexual reproductive health (SRH). The young girls are given opportunities to learn about womanhood and the agency that they have as females. Throughout the rite of passage, the girls are considered to be in a liminal state (the time that a pubescent girl or novice spends in isolation receiving instructions and lessons from the older women). At this stage, the girls are considered to be 'between and betwixt', as they take on a liminal persona as noted by Victor Turner (1969, p. 95). Chammah Kaunda (2015, p. 26) also argues that '[t]he "liminal personae" are neither living nor dead but both living and dead. This is the ambiguity of the anti-structural period. They are considered neither male nor female, deprived of rank, status and property'. This is a period of formation, the time they can begin to interpret and reflect on what agency means for them as girls. The rite has three aspects: Separation, the liminal stage, and integration, according to anthropologists who were the first people to write on rites and rituals. Girls are separated when they have their first period/menstruation so that the women would give undivided attention to the teachings. The liminal stage is the period during the separation when the girls are reflecting on who they are becoming and what would be expected of them in their family and community. Integration is the period after the teachings when they are presented back to the community with great jubulations. Arnold van Gennep (1960) gives a detailed account of the separation, the liminal stage, and integration of rites of passage.

There are many gems that are taught in *icisungu*, but in order not to romanticize the culture there are also teachings that have been quite demeaning and dehumanizing for girls and women in the rite. Kanyoro (2002) argues that there are certain cultural aspects that are life-giving and need to be embraced while life-denying aspects of culture are to be rejected. That is why feminist cultural hermeneutics calls for African women to be suspicious of certain aspects of culture that are dehumanizing for women. In this article I focus on one aspect of the rite that is done in the bush where a girl is given knowledge about the importance of having a symbiotic relationship with nature in order to access wisdom and medicine from the environment. This article uses mothering as a frame for understanding the rite of passage and its connections with Mother Earth.

Framing *Icisungu* in Mothering

Mothering is not represented as a biological concept in this article. It is a way of nurturing young girls during the rite of *icisungu* among the Bemba of Zambia. Among the Bemba people, women who are around the age of one's mother are referred to as 'mother'. The community works together in raising children, hence the adage, 'it takes a village to raise a child'. Within the family for instance, one's mother's sisters are never referred to as 'aunt' – they are also referred to as 'mother' (a younger or older mother depending on whether it is the mother's younger or older sister). In fact, even a mother's brothers are referred to as *bamayo lume* (*male mother*). In a similar way, one's father's brothers are also referred to as 'father' and not 'uncle'. A father's sisters are *mayo senge* which can loosely be translated as *a mother I embrace*. During *icisungu*, the young girl that has reached puberty is

surrounded by a caring community of women who shares their wisdom of life with her. This community of women is believed to mother her into participating in the life of the community.

Mothering is what a caring community does in being concerned about every member of the community. This form of mothering is associated not only with women, as men also sometimes mother children and the community in various ways. It is the action of being human together as a community and can be associated with what the late archbishop Desmond Tutu stressed that one's humanity is bound up with the humanity of others (Tutu, 1984) because we either humanize or dehumanize each other by our actions. Being able to have empathy and sympathy toward the community members even if they may not be one's family is what it means to be human, and mothering is one of the most fundamental human experiences. Mothering is not done solely by the biological mother of a child among the Bemba of Zambia, as the family and the community come alongside the mother to help build the life of the young one. The Bemba of Zambia have a proverb that says, *mayo mpapa, naine nkakupapa* (*mother, if you carry and safeguard me today, I will reciprocate tomorrow/future*) which implies that 'I am mothered because we mother together' (Kaunda *et al.*, in press). Since Zambia has no old age homes, children often have to take the responsibility of caring for their parents who have reached a particular age. Mothering is communal caring that exceeds family bonds as it is caring that is radical and rooted in deep care and love for the good of both the one mothering and the one being mothered. This in short is among many understandings of what mothering means in the Zambian worldview and context. It therefore goes beyond biological mothering and extends to community mothering where all adults around one's mother's age are called 'mother' and within the family, a sibling's child is not a nephew or niece but a daughter or son.

During *icisungu* a Bemba girl is surrounded by a host of women from within and sometimes outside the community who shares with her the knowledge and wisdom about her new state of being *ku mwenshi* (literally, *being on the moon*; *umwenshi* can also be translated as *month*). This host of women are mothering her into adulthood. The imparting of wisdom on girls who have reached puberty is done through the *icisungu* rite of passage where girls are given instructions on how to care for themselves and be hygienic during menstruation and how to use certain herbs that assist with alleviating cramps among many things. This care to teach and guide is in essence mothering. The *icisungu* rite is a critical space of formation and also a space for sexuality education where women within the community come together to co-mother the girl (Kaunda, 2024). Paternal aunts and grandmothers (both maternal and paternal) are central to sex education of young Bemba girls. In the Bemba myth of origin, it is noted that a beautiful woman with big ears, Mumbi Mukasa Liulu, was found in the forest. She later became the wife of the Bemba king and bore him three sons. Kaunda and Kaunda (2016, p. 164) affirm that due to Mumbi Mukasa Liulu's mysterious appearance in the forest, she had vast wisdom and knowledge over the forest mysteries, the sky (which she claimed to have fallen from), the seas, and the earth. These are some of the wisdoms that the Bemba women pass on to young girls during the *icisungu* rite. This knowledge and wisdom that Mumbi Mukasa Liulu possessed, made her less sexually vulnerable because she commanded authority around her sexuality and how she was treated sexually by her husband. In fact, it can almost be argued that Chief Mukulumpe (the great chief) was the one who was probably vulnerable to her sacred powers and her eco-wisdom and knowledge (Kaunda and Kaunda, 2016). Some of her forest knowledge would include herbs for health remedies among many other things that she possibly shared with the Bemba women.

The paternal aunt and both maternal and paternal grandmothers share wisdom with the girls in the family on the reproductive health conversation. The rite is a liminal point for comprehensive co-mothering on two important levels: First, co-mothering means disseminating critical knowledge necessary for the girls' understanding of herbs and home remedies that can be used in their new life as girls, with agency for their lives. Mother Earth that produces these herbs is central in the rite of passage of *icisungu* and in fact, if one takes a critical look at *sangomas* or herbalists, they speak to the plants, roots, and animals before they get any part of the plant for remedy use. This is similar to what has been depicted in the movie *Avatar* (Cameron, 2009) where someone is apologizing to an animal that is killed to give sustenance to human beings. Second, the girls are given wisdom to be young women who can advocate for the equality and justice of all. This means that during *icisungu*, using symbolisms, songs, dance, and proverbs, young girls' minds are mothered – nurtured into finding

their own agency regarding their autonomy, safeguarding their sexual debut, how to live harmoniously with their families and communities, and having a mutual and symbiotic relationship with the forest and nature. Unlike the Zulu tribes in South Africa where there is virginity testing, among the Bemba people, a girl is taught to be protective of her virginity during the *icisungu* rite and no one has to physically test whether she has maintained her virginity. She might be asked once in a while whether she is keeping herself from being sexually active. In the end, no one physically searches to see whether she is still a virgin or not – she keeps that knowledge by and for herself. The instructions received are enough for Bemba girls to protect their virginity. Of course there are difficult cases of rape and defilement where the girls might not be able to protect themselves and their virginity which is unfortunate. However, beside the unfortunate incidents of rape and defilements, a girl has the right to decide whether she wants to stay a virgin or not. The encouragement is always that they should stay virgins until they are married. They are also aware that they can talk with their paternal aunts and grandmothers if they need to get more information about their struggles. This does not mean they cannot speak with their mother/parents whenever they want to. The belief among the Bemba was that it was easier to speak with a trusted adult beside their mother/parents.

The *icisungu* rite for adolescents in precolonial Zambia was a space that sought to expel sexism even though the women did not have these terminologies for the work that they were devoted to at the time. This means that the women among the Bemba were vested in radical emancipation of young girls' minds and developing them into the next generation of women that would be aware of the concept of mothering one another in the community and sharing knowledge that was empowering especially for women knowing that their humanity was bound up in each other's humanity – hurting one meant and still means hurting everyone. Going into the woodlands or bush, the sharing of herbs that are ideal for female hygiene, the nursing of certain ailments, and remedies for minor ailments were necessary. A woman had to have this knowledge as a leader in the family and the community. The rite was celebrated through songs, dance, and proverbs. This is because historically, the Bemba were oral-centered, like many other African societies. *Icisungu* teachings are still orally transmitted and visually with symbolic references at times. This explains why the Bemba developed their visual aids, such as drawings on the wall or on the ground, and songs as a part of the teaching criteria.

***Icisungu* – Bemba Puberty Rite**

For centuries, women among the Bemba people have been passing on wisdom to young women and girls to demonstrate the cultural agency that is within the Bemba culture through rites of passage like *icisungu*. Using the *icisungu* puberty rite and *imbusa* premarital rite is in a sense like calling women and girls to *Thalita cum!* (*Rise!*) The Bemba culture's two distinct rites for young women as mentioned above, demonstrate their commitment to girl child education and empowerment. *Icisungu*, being the first rite for girls at their first menstruation, is derived from the noun *icisungusho* (*a miraculous event*) and refers to virginity and also the first menstruation or miraculous event. Experiencing the first menstruation is shocking for most if not all girls:

It is also celebrated as *ukuwa icisungu* or *ukuwilwa ne cisungusho* (a miracle) among the Bemba, through which the girl receives the divine gift of feminine sexuality from Lesa. But it is also a miracle/*icisungusho* due to the girl's astonishment at her first menstrual blood – for nothing prepares her for the first menstrual blood (Kaunda and Kaunda, 2016, p. 162).

Aspects of this rite of passage used to take place in the bush/woodlands as mentioned above. This means that 'the girl was perceived as being on a journey from the forest into the village with *nacimbusa* (her liminal guardian). Out of the liminality of the Divine as well as the dark and cold forest, she brought new life into the village' (Kaunda and Kaunda, 2016, p. 162). Through the process of puberty when the young girl starts her menstruation, it is understood to mean that through the menstrual blood, she has requested the inspiration of the Divine in granting her life through children that she will bear at an appropriate time.

In the Bemba creation myth, two genderless beings were created by Lesa (God):

In the beginning, there existed two genderless beings. Lesa (God) gave one of them two parcels with an order not to open them before they had reached mutual understanding and friendship. In these parcels were hidden feminine and masculine attributes of the Divine respectively. After some time, one of the parcels began to smell bad, so the being that carried it threw it away and decided to open the other (parcel). At once 'it' was endowed with Divine maleness and became *umwaume* (male). This new status caused it to feel desire for the other being, who could not respond. Realizing that the desire was a result of opening the parcel, the second being returned to Lesa, who bestowed on 'it' divine femaleness. This is how the beings were 'reduced' into two sexes. Therefore, the quest to become whole (full person) is through realization and acquisition of the other (Hinfelaar, 1994, p. 6).

The insertion of this creation myth is important because in many African religio-cultural contexts, myths capture the worldviews around human origins and engage with the destiny of human beings including the relationships that humans have or need to have with each other and with the rest of creation (Kaunda and Kaunda, 2021). In the Bemba worldview, boys and girls are believed to be equal especially when they can mutually understand and hold each other accountable in their everyday life experiences. That is why girls are presented with important life teachings in the bushes/woodlands to be able to guide them in their mutual existence with their male counterparts and other creation.

Boys do not have a specific event that tells everyone that they have now reached puberty except for the voice change and hair growth in various parts of their body while girls get this flow of blood. As blood is representative of life, Bemba people cherish this and celebrate life through puberty by having an organized rite of passage to celebrate the girls. With reference to boys, Simon Kapwepwe (1994) clarifies that among the Bemba they do not have a specific school where they are initiated into becoming men. They generally learn from their fathers, uncles, friends, and grandfathers during socializing at *insaka* (palaver equivalent – this is where Bemba men and women used to meet and discuss issues affecting the community) and while working and hunting with friends and parents. While the boys and men are taught precariously, they have no structured and organized rite of passage like *icisungu* for girls. *Insaka* is a general space where girls and women can also learn. Little research is done on the rite of passage among Bemba boys or men apart from what Sylvia Mukuka (2018) has written in her doctoral thesis and other journal articles following her doctorate.

The focus of this article, however, is on a few aspects of *icisungu* for girls among the Bemba. Mukuka (2018) and Kapwepwe (1994) elaborate on boys' teachings, stating that while boys are taught about being men, it is not similar to girls who might take between a week to a month being separated in a room with older women. Boys will sit at *insaka* for a few hours and leave and continue their everyday activities. A girl stays isolated until the teachings are done and then she is integrated back into the community with much celebration, festivities, songs, dances, and gifts from the family. The Lunda People of the North-Western Province of Zambia have a structured *umukanda* male circumcision rite where boys are secluded and taught for a period of time in the bushes/woodlands at puberty or a particular age. Bemba boys do not have that similar structure where at puberty they go through a rite of separation, liminality, and then integration back into the community.

Within Zambia, various ethnic groups have similar rites to *icisungu*, for instance *chinamwali* among the Chewa, Chikunda, and Tumbuka. There is also *Kankanga* among the Ndembu, while the Soli have a rite for girls as well that is called *moye*. These rites have similarities and on the Copperbelt province they are all called *icisungu* as Bemba is the mostly spoken language in that province. *Icisungu* has become a code word for various puberty rites on the Copperbelt province just like variations of *icilanga mulilo* which is a Bemba rite of initiating the groom into the bride's family and being shown what types of foods the bride's family eat, and *amatebeto* which is interpreted as a feast where the husband is celebrated by the wife's family and friends for how the two have been exemplary in their marriage to the community. In precolonial Zambia, the husband would move to his wife's house after the wedding. Bemba women had property, a house, a farm, and much more. At marriage a husband would move to his wife's house which was one of many houses in her family's compound, and if the husband managed to live in harmony with his wife and her family, he was

celebrated by the wife's family with *amatebeto* – a feast. This celebration has continued in contemporary Zambia even though the husbands are most often the bread winners in the families and women move into their husband's houses. Now various ethnic groups in Zambia call their similar rites *icilanga mulilo* and *amatebeto*, mostly compared to the general term *icisungu*, even though it may be referred to by a different name in a different language. Rachel Lebese *et al.* (2022) have clarified that various rites of passage are celebrated in different ways within African cultural societies. These symbolize a time when there is change in an individual, community, or on a cultural level. The rite of passage can be a ceremony by performing a ritual when an individual leaves one group to join another or an experience that marks or constitutes a significant milestone or a change in a person's life. It involves a substantial change in status and how an individual is viewed in society.

Prior to puberty, the girls are taught to elongate their labia minora using some herbs and oils. The belief is that labia elongation enhances sexual satisfaction for both the woman and the man and also helps open the birth canal during childbirth (Kaunda, 2024; Rasing, 2017/2018). The girls have to elongate their labia when they are at a young age as it also helps them discover their erogenous zones. The grandmothers and paternal aunts have these reproductive health conversations to assist the girls in understanding the feelings that they experience when they are touched, and in general they are given a SRH conversation. Grandmothers and paternal aunts are a safe space and resource for the girls to ask questions around puberty, sex, and life skills at a tender age. In a similar way Sylvia Tamale discusses in detail the functions of labia elongation among the Baganda women of Uganda and argues that labia elongation introduces girls to 'the act of self-stimulation or masturbation and thereby leading to the discovery of other erogenous zones. The girls who were unable to pull their labia could receive some help from their friends and even grandparents' (Tamale, 2011, p. 265). For the Bemba people, girls' and women' rites and rites like *icisungu* and *imbusa* are mothering in nature as the older women equip the younger women in Bemba time-honored traditions. Older women give the girls wisdom that they have learnt or acquired over the years on how the girls should take care of and safeguard themselves. Oduyoye (1995, p. 26) affirms that '[n]urturing the next generation is a communal duty and all the women of the community become one's mothers'.

In the precolonial and colonial times, young girls were also shown three different trees as part of the comprehensive sex education from the women among the Bemba who were mothering them in the communities during *icisungu*. These three trees were explained in much more detail during *imbusa* when one was preparing for marriage. The first tree is one that gives red sap when it is cut – it is called *umulombwa* in Bemba. Its botanical name, according to Taryn Hourie (2021) of Africa Check, is *pterocarpus angolensis*. This tree is believed to offer some medicinal qualities: The red sap can be used for curing eye problems, ringworms, and even malaria (Hourie, 2021). Malaria has been present in Zambia for many years and communities have found ways of using indigenous means to cure the ailment. For instance, many women in these communities would boil eucalyptus leaves and steam the family with it (by placing the hot boiling leaves with water in the middle while the family sits around the pot and covers themselves with a blanket) in order to heal flu and colds. Using this *mulombwa* tree as a symbol in the instructions to the girls, they are instructed on hygiene and how they need to take care of their blood as menstrual blood is believed to be sacred among the Bemba. Tan, Hatthothuwa, and Fraser (2017, p. 121) affirm this, stating that '[m]ythical tales about menstruation abound in the legends and prehistory of ancient cultures. These tales characterize menstrual blood variously as sacred, a gift from the gods, or a punishment for sin, but it is almost always magical and powerful'. While she talks about menstrual blood among the ancient cultures and among the Bemba even in contemporary times, menstrual blood is still considered sacred. During the *icisungu* rite the bloodwood tree is referred to as a female tree and due to the sacredness attached to the menstrual blood, young girls are taught not to expose this blood to anyone. This blood should only be seen by them unless they are sick and unable to care for themselves, when a family member can assist. In the Bemba belief, menstrual blood can be used to harm girls in various ways if someone who means them harm gets hold of it.

The second tree is the *umwenge* that gives a thick white sap when cut. This is referred to as a male tree and its sap is symbolic to semen. In the bush/woodlands the adolescents are given this education guiding them to know and to understand that as they have started menstruating, if they indulge in sexual activities, a man/boy will release semen like the *umwenge* tree and their bleeding will stop because they would become pregnant, or they may have one or more infectious diseases.

Among the Bemba people a saying continues to this day, *ukufunda umwana kufikapo*, interpreted as when one teaches young individuals, they have to hit the nail on the head and not beat about the bush – hence the symbolic way of explaining certain teachings. Bemba people also believe that once someone has been instructed, they rarely forget.

The third tree is the *mupundu* tree which is fruitful throughout the year. This is symbolic of conception and the possibility of having children in the future. In fact, when one gives birth to twins, the first twin is called Mpundu which is derived from the *mupundu* tree to signify fruitfulness. These are important aspects of *icisungu* that demonstrate the importance of a human symbiotic relationship with nature. Furthermore, also at an early age, messages that are appropriate to their age are given about the human life cycle using nature. It is fascinating that the girls are described as *akula*, which means she has matured, or *abalula*, which means she has bloomed at puberty. Blooming and being guided about life in the bush is an important aspect of *icisungu* as Bemba people often describe life symbolically using nature or food. The symbolic female, male, and fruitful trees shown to the girls in the bush/woodlands are also retaught during *imbusa* when the girl is about to get married, and an in-depth meaning is given at that point.

Bemba girls were isolated at puberty to rid them of childhood as they were initiated into adulthood. Ridding them of their childhood was often about them learning that certain behaviors they had should be left behind and they need to begin to behave in a way that was more appropriate of the new stage they had reached. The *icisungu* rite is a transition of Bemba girls from one stage in life (child) to another (adult). Jean La Fontain (1986), in her book *Initiation*, notes that the performances of initiation rites are full of symbolism and the meaning of teachings is acquired. For example, Edith Turner (1987) writes that the Ndembu people of Zambia would make a girl lie down in a fetal position as the rite is being performed. This (fetal) position symbolically presents the girl as being a child and that at the end of the rite she would have gained enough wisdom to be considered and transition into a young woman. Further, while in the bush/woodlands, the novice was made to lie down as symbolic to the death of their younger self and transitioning to a young adult/woman. Mukuka (2018, p. 158) argues that during the seclusion in the bush, the girls' lying down is taken 'as a symbolic death of a girl, who metaphorically dies to the old self in order to acquire a new status. This symbolism is inevitable and critical as she undergoes a transformation from being a child and attaining a status of adult or young woman'. In precolonial times there would be a hut built temporarily for the girl to stay in during *icisungu* and the hut would be destroyed after the rite (Richards, 2021). This symbolizes that the girl has symbolically attained maturity and left their childish behaviors behind. The destroying of the hut was symbolic of their childhood being left behind.

During the separation and liminal stage of the *icisungu* rite when the novices or initiates are in the bush, the novices/initiates are taught about the importance of the land as a symbol of fertility. Using their mouth, the initiates would pick the seeds that are on a plate and plant them in the soil with their mouth, symbolizing that life can be hard at times but they need to do what they can to not blame hardship but find ways of making a living for themselves. Mukuka (2018, pp. 154-155) argues that 'the plates are opened with the mouth to plant the seeds from the plates into the soil to symbolize the connection between the seeds and a woman. The planting using the mouth symbolically means that seeds are a representation and survival of the people'. Further, Mukuka (2018, p. 161) explains that 'the significance of edible seeds that symbolize fertility and fecundity is introduced to a girl whilst in the bush. Through the planting of the seeds, a girl is taught to be innovative and virtuous'. This means that from childhood, Bemba women are given the agency to be industrious and to make important decisions about their lives as well as to work hard to provide for themselves and their families. In these processes and ritual performances, the girls are in the presence of the divine Mother Earth and the women who lead them into the path to womanhood. While there are various activities that the initiates and the women engage in, the focus of this article was to demonstrate their connection to female agency.

Conclusion

This article explored the puberty rite of passage for girls among the Bemba to show the connectedness with female agency in relation to SRH. The Bemba people of Zambia are a matrilineal group that has two distinct rites of passage – one is *icisungu* which is celebrated at puberty for girls. *Icisungu* is a

space that embraces and celebrates the girls who have reached puberty as the women in the community offer them instructions on various aspects of their lives. The teachings are very important as they are an outline of the importance that girls and women have to the matrilineal Bemba of Zambia. This article has demonstrated that the girls among the Bemba people are given life instructions regarding SRH by the women in the community at puberty. The process of separation, the liminal stage, and integration back into the community gives the women an opportunity to instruct the girls on various life skills. Therefore *icisungu* is an elaborate rite of passage that is relevant even in contemporary Zambia for young girls' indigenous access to information and awareness of reproductive health and also comprehensive sexuality education. *Icisungu* is a rite that is versatile and can be adapted in various ways to teach young people about agency, justice, and life skills using indigenous perspectives that would intersect with contemporary trends. For instance, the connection between the plants' fertility and a woman's fertility among the Bemba could be taught in the contemporary Bemba understanding of taking care of nature and living in a symbiotic relationship with mother nature.

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