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Change and *Chisungu* in Zambia's Time of AIDS

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Abstract:

Through an examination of *amafunde* – a Bemba word meaning “instruction,” which refers to the training given to a young woman before her marriage – this article explores the social changes that have followed widespread HIV infection on the Zambian Copperbelt. *Amafunde* today are marked by openness between senior women and those they train for marriage, an openness that they encourage their charges to adopt in married life. This emphasis on direct or “straight” speech stands in stark contrast to earlier accounts of female initiation in Zambia, which highlight “obscure” modes of communication. An analysis of this change reveals the increased importance of both secrecy and disclosure in Zambia’s time of AIDS, as well as the influence of Pentecostal Christianity. Most importantly, it indexes changes in the social forms that the interplay of secrecy and disclosure have traditionally produced.

Keywords:

Female initiation, social organization, Pentecostalism, HIV/AIDS, Zambia

“[What] is significant is not *what* is secret but that there *are* secrets.”

Jean la Fontaine  
(la Fontaine 1977: 424)

In his well-known studies of the Ndembu of Zambia (e.g. Turner 1967, 1968, 1975), Victor Turner used the analysis of ritual life to trace the contours of social organization. To take an example that fits neatly into the discussion that follows, Turner’s treatment of the *nkang’a*, a female initiation rite, foregrounds the fault lines along which Ndembu society is situated, most famously the tension between matriliney and virilocality. The *nkang’a* highlights this conflict through the social boundaries it draws. This ritual simultaneously reinforces and severs the uterine tie, celebrating the role of a mother in caring for her daughter even as it removes a girl from her mother’s care and hands her over to those responsible for training her for marriage – that is, for life in her husband’s household (Turner 1968: 222-234).

In this article, I offer an analysis of female initiation that is similar to Turner’s. In what follows, I will show how female rites of passage among Pentecostal Christians on the Zambian Copperbelt bring particular points of conflict and change in contemporary urban Zambia to the fore. [By invoking Turner here, I wish to draw a distinction between my argument and a number of other recent discussions of the intersection of Pentecostalism and sexuality in Africa. Such studies have typically emphasized changing modes of subjectivity and personhood, especially with regard to the regulation of the body \(e.g. Cole 2010, 2012; van de Kamp 2011, 2013; Mate 2002\). In contrast, my analysis examines the broader relational contours of this intersection, paying particular attention to how social boundaries are formed, and the way that membership in various social groups and relationships is articulated and actualized through ritual life \(Bochow and van Dijk 2012\).](#) To be a bit more specific, I argue that a careful reading of *amafunde* – a Bemba word meaning “instruction,” which refers to the training given to a woman before her marriage – reveals social shifts that have followed widespread HIV infection. In part, the changes evident in Copperbelt *amafunde* suggest that the boundaries of secrecy that have traditionally protected certain kinds of relationships have been strengthened in the light of the HIV/AIDS pandemic. More importantly, *amafunde* also demonstrate a marked shift within these same bounded relationships from an emphasis on oblique, indirect speech to appeals to openness and disclosure. This shift in turn indexes a change in how relational boundaries are negotiated, and indeed, in the character of the relationships themselves.

I begin my analysis by describing *amafunde* as they have traditionally been carried out in Zambia. This first involves an examination of Audrey Richards’ analysis of the Bemba *chisungu*, based on fieldwork from the 1930s, followed by a discussion of Thera Rasing’s study of female initiation on the Copperbelt in the 1990s. I then turn my attention to my own data, *amafunde* given to a young Pentecostal Christian bride by senior churchwomen, in order to show how these rites have changed in recent years. I conclude by addressing the social shifts set in motion by HIV/AIDS in southern Africa more generally, paying particular

attention to secrecy, openness, and disclosure, before returning to *amafunde* to show how they reflect these changes. First, though, let me provide a bit of background for my ethnography.

My argument is informed by twenty-two months of fieldwork on the Zambian Copperbelt, nearly all of it in a neighborhood that I call Nsofu.<sup>1</sup> This township, located on the outskirts of the city of Kitwe, is home to around 25,000 people. Nsofu is an economically diverse community, in which a number are in formal-sector employment. Many others earn a living through what is locally glossed as “business,” which may mean anything from selling frilly dresses purchased in Lusaka to trading dried fish from Zambia’s Northern Province.

Most people in Nsofu claim some sort of Christian affiliation. My time in the field was spent primarily with Pentecostal believers, especially members of three small, independent, locally initiated congregations (for more on these churches, see Haynes 2012, 2013). During my fieldwork, I lived in a Pentecostal pastor’s home, and being part of this household provided me with exceptional access to various aspects of church life that were not visible to me in the formal meetings of other congregations. Among these unique opportunities was the *amafunde* that I discuss here, which took place in the family’s sitting room.

As we will see, the religious commitments of those who facilitated and participated in these rites played an important part in the way they were performed, and I describe these influences in what follows. However, I do not believe that the changes to *amafunde* that I observed can be explained completely by the fact that my informants are Pentecostals. It has therefore been necessary to examine other factors that influence marriage, sex, and sociality on the contemporary Copperbelt, especially the HIV/AIDS crisis, and it is on this issue that I spend the most time. Understanding how *amafunde* have changed requires us to first examine what female initiation in Zambia has historically entailed, and it is to this topic that we now turn.

### **Some Examples of Female Initiation in Zambia: 1931-1996**

In 1931, Audrey Richards observed a month-long female initiation rite among the Bemba of northern Zambia, which served as the basis for what is probably her best known work, *Chisungu* (Richards 1982). Richards’ detailed description of the *chisungu*<sup>2</sup> provides us with a helpful [comparative case through](#) which to understand contemporary *amafunde*. As Richards notes, the Bemba *chisungu* was one example of a common set of female initiation rites performed across much of what is now Zambia (Richards 1982: 24), which have come together in an urban context as the *amafunde* examined in this paper. In addition, my own ethnographic data were informed at several points by customs that were specifically Bemba<sup>3</sup>, [and the Bemba material in Richards’ analysis is therefore an especially helpful basis of comparison](#). One of the women in charge of the training was Bemba and appealed to Bemba proverbs and ideas throughout the *amafunde*. This input was welcome, as the family of the groom was described as “proper Bemba,” and would therefore evaluate the bride’s training according to their cultural expectations.<sup>4</sup>

Central to Richards' analysis of the *chisungu* is the fact that, although it was described as a ritual meant to "instruct" young women (*ukufunda, ukubacenjela*), initiates were not given any skills that they did not already possess or would not acquire with time (also see la Fontaine 1982: xxii-xxiii). Most girls had been helping to care for their family homes for years, and therefore did not need to learn how to tend a fire, cook, or clean. Additionally, by the time of their *chisungu*, girls had also already had some sexual contact with their future husbands, so here again instruction was not really necessary. Not only did the *chisungu* not have much to offer in the way of new skills, the content of the ritual itself was, to employ a term that Richards uses repeatedly, rather "obscure." In her analysis, this was as much the case for her as an outsider as it was for the girls being initiated. As she puts it, "I never heard any part of the ceremony explained. If any useful information was handed down during the *chisungu* one would be inclined to think that the candidates themselves would be the last people to have a chance of acquiring it" (1982: 126). The *chisungu's* obscurity is particularly evident in the songs and emblems employed in the rite.

In her monograph, Richards records dozens of songs, most of which feature oblique, sometimes archaic, language and dense symbolism. She also notes that the girls participating in the *chisungu* did not understand the meaning of these songs until much later, perhaps when they assisted in subsequent rites after they were married. Their esoteric quality meant that the true meaning of the songs remained in the grasp of senior women. In particular, female ritual knowledge was controlled and maintained by those who had earned the title of *nacimbusa*, a status that Richards demonstrates to be the female analogue to male chieftaincy.

The term *nacimbusa* (pl. *banacimbusa*) is derived from the emblems, or *mbusa*, which play a major role in the *chisungu*. There are several types of *mbusa*. Most are clay sculptures, specially made for the rite and destroyed or buried soon after they are revealed to the initiates. *Mbusa* can be animals, such as a lion or snake, or everyday objects, like a mortar and pestle. Although her informants were able to tell her what many of the *mbusa* meant – for example, that a hoe indicated both the kind of work a married woman should engage in and her role as a metaphorical garden to be "plowed" by her husband – it is clear in Richards' analysis that these objects are not primarily pedagogical tools or mnemonic devices. Instead, Richards glosses the word *mbusa* as "sacred emblems," but adds that the literal meaning of the term is, "things handed down" (Richards 1982: 59). And therein, she concludes, lies their true significance: "The essential fact about the *mbusa* is not their exact meaning but the fact that they are what they are – 'things handed down'" (Richards 1982: 164).

The primary outcome of the *chisungu* is therefore not the education or instruction of young women, but rather the reproduction of social boundaries. Through the interplay of secrecy and disclosure, *banacimbusa* created and reinforced divisions between senior and junior women, and between women and men. That is, they drew a distinction between those who had access to secret knowledge, those who had access to it to a lesser degree, and those who had no such access at all (la Fontaine 1977). In addition, through the marriages it made

possible, the *chisungu* produced a boundary between the household, particularly a married couple, and the rest of the community. Traditionally, the marital hearth was the center of Bemba religious life, and sexual relations between a husband and wife were sacred, giving both partners access to the divine (Hineflaar 1994: 8). In the context of Bemba paramount chieftaincy, sexual relations were also connected to the fertility of the land (Richards 1968).<sup>5</sup> This meant that sex, and the ritual purification it made necessary, “[linked] the couple by strong spiritual bonds; each was thrown into a position of dependence upon the other for ritual purification which neither could carry out alone” (Epstein 1981: 90). In all of these cases, then – junior and senior women, women and men, and a couple and the rest of their community – a barrier of secrecy demarcated social boundaries.

According to Richards, the rites she observed were likely different than *chisungu* ceremonies carried out as little as twenty years earlier; at the very least, they did not last as long as her informants said that previous rites had (Richards 1981: 139). Richards connected the changes she observed in Bemba ritual life to the effects of labor migration and the influence of Christian missionaries (Richards 1981: 28, 139). Her expectation was that the *chisungu* would become less and less important with time, and that it might one day disappear completely (Richards 1981: 133-135). There is some evidence to suggest that Richards’ predictions were at least partly correct. For instance, in the early 1950s, a newspaper editorial was published on the Copperbelt connecting what the writer perceived as urban social breakdown to a lack of *amafunde* for young women (see Epstein 1981: 65). While this opinion should be taken with a grain of salt, it does suggest that in the wake of urbanization these rites were less frequently performed. According to Moore and Vaughan (1994: 171), the same can be said of rural Bemba more recently.

Despite the fact that the influence of *amafunde* has waned over the course of the past century, however, the ethnographic record nevertheless presents a notable amount of continuity in the importance and content of these rites. Here we can cite Bennetta Jules-Rosette’s discussion of initiation among Maranke Apostolic Christians in Zambia, who maintained that the “content of their instruction [had been]... altered very little” (Jules-Rosette 1980: 401), despite clear changes in its form. A more striking example of continuity is found in Thera Rasing’s (2002) study of female initiation among Catholic women in the Copperbelt city of Mufulira during the 1990s.

The central argument of Rasing’s analysis is that, despite the influence of Christianity, the globalized labor economy, and the shift in values associated with “expectations of modernity” (Ferguson 1999), the initiation rituals she observed on the Copperbelt were “remarkably similar” to the rites recorded by Richards sixty years before (Rasing 2002: 12). For instance, though some traditional songs had fallen out of use, many were still featured in the rite; the same was true of clay *mbusa*. Just as songs and *mbusa* figure in Richards’ work as mechanisms of social boundary-making, in Rasing’s analysis these same elements of initiation also mark out distinctions between junior and senior women, between women and men, and between a married couple and those

outside their household. As in the Bemba *chisungu*, these boundaries are created through secrecy.

Moreover, Rasing underscores the importance of euphemistic or oblique communication *within* these bounded relationships, similar to that which we have already witnessed in the modes of teaching that Richards described. *Banacimbusa* on the Copperbelt, like their grandmothers before them, “[taught] by talking indirectly, through symbols, songs and stories,” employing an “oblique and implicit mode of the transfer of knowledge” (Rasing 2002: 246). In Rasing’s analysis, initiates were instructed to keep the “secrets of the house,” and not to discuss their marriages, particularly the sexual components, with anyone apart from the *banacimbusa* who trained them (Rasing 2002: 147). At the same time, they were also taught to keep the details of their sexuality secret from their husbands, for example by not telling them directly that they were menstruating, but instead employing symbolic means of communication, such as hanging a string of red beads on the wall. Women should likewise refrain from revealing to their husbands that they had used any medicines (*muti*) to increase their sexual arousal, or that they had experienced an orgasm. As Rasing put it, “A woman should keep these secrets concerning her femininity from her husband to protect her female identity and to continue the separation between the male and female affairs” (2002: 184). Some of Rasing’s informants confessed that they would have preferred more open communication with their husbands about sexuality – particularly, she notes, in the light of growing concern about AIDS. However, while Catholic leaders advocated such openness, it was not present in the traditional teaching that Rasing observed, including that carried out by Catholic laywomen.

Taken together, the analyses of female initiation provided by Richards and Rasing reveal two interrelated points. First, initiation is marked by the careful interplay of secrecy and disclosure, and produces social boundaries as a result.<sup>6</sup> Second, within these bounded groups, indirect communication predominates, particularly at those points where the composition of one group overlaps with another, conflicting division. So, for example, while a married couple is separated from those outside their household by a barrier of secrecy, their relationship is crosscut by a division between men and women, which is reinforced by the training that makes their union possible in the first place. The same can be said for the relationship between junior and senior women. Although on the one hand they are separated from men and bound together in the shared world of female knowledge, on the other they are divided by seniority. At these points, relationships that are hemmed in by secrecy with regard to outsiders are characterized by oblique communication, which promotes the crosscutting social boundary. It is along these lines that we will focus our attention in the analysis of contemporary Copperbelt *amafunde*. What we will be watching for in this discussion are the ways that secrecy and disclosure, obliqueness and openness, figure in the rite, particularly in the relationship between the bride and the senior women responsible for training her, as well as in the way that they instructed her to relate to her husband.

### **Contemporary Copperbelt *Amafunde*: “Straight” Speech**



Although, as we will see, *amafunde* have not been incorporated into Pentecostal practice without difficulty, marriage training is nevertheless much in demand among Copperbelt believers. Over the course of my fieldwork I attended several events – and was invited to many more – that offered instruction from senior Pentecostal women, usually pastors’ wives. Topically, these were focused on running a home and pleasing a husband, sexually and otherwise. While this sort of instruction was especially important to women who had not been trained or were experiencing problems in their marriages, including some who suspected that their spouses were being unfaithful, even those who had already received instruction or were happily married expressed a desire to undergo what they called a “refresher course” now and again. These group events, which sometimes serve as fundraisers for Pentecostal churches, inform the discussion that follows. However, the primary site of my ethnographic analysis of *amafunde* is the instruction given to a young Pentecostal bride who I call Gift.

Gift’s *amafunde* took place in the gathering August heat of 2008. I had just returned to the Mwanza family home after attending an academic conference to learn that Gift would be trained in our sitting room. Eager to participate, I asked my neighbor, Bana Ilunga<sup>7</sup> – a Pentecostal pastor whose patience with my questions was boundless – how I should go about seeking permission to sit in. As an unmarried woman, I was not sure I would be given access, but Bana Ilunga encouraged me to approach the *nacimbusa*, who was a Pentecostal and a longtime friend of the Mwanza family. Following Bana Ilunga’s instructions, I waited at home for the *nacimbusa*, a matronly woman named Bana Jomo. After she arrived and was settled in the sitting room with a cup of tea, I slipped through the door, crouched on the floor as a sign of respect, and asked (*ukulomba*, literally, “to beg”) for *amafunde*. Bana Jomo smiled and agreed to let me observe. Over the course of the next week I sat in the corner while Gift received instruction from half a dozen women in being a Pentecostal wife. Occasionally, I was quizzed on the information, and was told when it was all over that if I ever decided to marry a Zambian I would be well equipped.

Without question, Gift’s *amafunde* was one of the most interesting and intense experiences I had during fieldwork. Had I not been there in person, I am sure I would not have suspected that the pious Pentecostal women charged with training the young bride – nearly all of them the wives of pastors or church elders – had it in them to spend hours singing suggestive songs in a very warm sitting room, the curtains tightly closed against the prying eyes of their children and neighbors.<sup>8</sup> The *nacimbusa*, and sometimes her helpers, as well as Gift, stripped down to nothing more than cycling shorts before rolling *citenge* wrap skirts to tie like belts around their waists, sometimes knotting them to represent a phallus while they instructed the bride in how to move her hips during intercourse. For both Gift and me the *amafunde* were something of an ordeal, and it is not surprising that we formed a strong friendship as a result of this shared experience.

To a certain extent, I was surprised at how similar Pentecostal *amafunde* were to the earlier ethnographic examples of initiation outlined above. The women sang

a small selection of Bemba songs during Gift's training, and Bana Ilunga, who was ethnically Bemba and played a central role in the instruction, peppered her conversation with traditional Bemba proverbs. Much of the time was devoted to "dances" (*amasha*), a euphemistic term also employed by Richards' and Rasing's informants that refers to practice in various sexual positions, meant to inculcate stamina and skill (also see White 1953; Turner 1968). The relational emphases of Gift's instruction were also similar to those recorded by previous analysts. Over and over again her marriage was described as something fragile – an egg that is easily cracked and irreparably broken, and Richards records that the fragility of the conjugal bond was a prevalent theme among the Bemba as well.

Most importantly, as in the case of the initiations that we have already examined, Gift's *amafunde* worked to create a protective boundary between her future marriage and the rest of her community. While Pentecostals do not subscribe to a traditional Bemba understanding of sexuality that requires ritual purification, they do emphasize the need to keep the details of one's sex life a secret. Gift was told not to talk to her friends or family about any problems she and her husband might have in the bedroom, though she could seek out the help of one of the women who had trained her. She was also instructed to exercise great care in disposing of any evidence of intimacy with her husband – for example, by being discreet about where she dumped the dirty water she had used when shaving her husband, a skill she practiced during her *amafunde*. In addition, Gift was warned not to tell her friends or neighbors if she was upset or angry with her husband, but instead to keep domestic quarrels private, so as to protect her family's reputation. In these ways, *amafunde* separated the married couple from others with a now-familiar barrier of secrecy – in this case, by prohibiting disclosure to people outside the marriage except those individuals, such as the *nacimbusa*, who already had authority there.

Despite these many similarities between Gift's *amafunde* and earlier examples of female initiation in Zambia, however, there were other important differences between these rites. Paramount among these in the eyes of my informants was the fact that their *amafunde* were Christian practices. On the first day I was present, Bana Zulu, a senior woman from the church who was to act as the matron in Gift's wedding, stopped the *nacimbusa* to verify that the rites that were about to proceed were "things of God" (*ifya kwa Lesa*). The *nacimbusa* confirmed that this was the case, and only after she had done so did Bana Zulu allow the training to proceed. Alongside the Bemba proverbs and songs, the women incorporated Pentecostal terms and phrases into their discussion, punctuating Gift's dancing with cries of "Amen!" and "Alleluia!" Similarly, they employed biblical texts in making their points, drawing in particular on a verse from Proverbs that reads, "The wise woman builds her house, but with her own hands the foolish one tears hers down."<sup>9</sup> Insofar as these particular Christian additions are concerned, one can still see the connection to traditional themes, especially the fragility of marriage and the duty of a woman to protect it.

Beyond these Pentecostal elements, which ultimately complimented the content of *amafunde* as they have historically been carried out, there were other differences in the rite that represented clear deviations from traditional

practices. Chief among these was the absence of *mbusa*. Not only were these symbolic clay figures excluded from the *amafunde*, the women responsible for Gift's training also forbade her from using similar indirect forms of communication in her marriage. For example, she must not employ colored beads to indicate that she was menstruating, and therefore unavailable for sex. Rather than relying on coded messages of this type, they said, Gift and her husband ought to simply talk about their sex life. Bana Ilunga underscored this point a few days later, when Gift's future in-laws came to evaluate her training. The groom's classificatory mother (MZ) suggested that the bride use colored bed sheets to indicate when she was or was not sexually available. Unexpectedly finding herself on territory that Bana Ilunga had openly rejected, a small discussion ensued, which ended when the groom's mother deferred to the women who had trained her future daughter-in-law on the grounds that church people were also instructing her son and that the couple would therefore understand one another.

About a week after Gift's *amafunde*, I called on Bana Ilunga, armed with a notebook full of questions about the rite. When I asked her to explain the difference between traditional *amafunde* and those she administered, Bana Ilunga explained that a key point of distinction was her emphasis on what she called "straight" speech. Whereas *amafunde* have traditionally relied on obscure songs or symbols, Bana Ilunga said, she would simply tell a girl "straight" what was expected of her in marriage. Indeed, even at those rare points where some symbolic tools were used – when Gift was asked to crack an egg into a bowl, for instance – their meaning was clearly explained. In this case, Gift was told that just as her hands had easily broken the egg, they could just as easily destroy her marriage if she was not careful. As we have seen, Bana Ilunga advocated similar forthrightness between a husband and wife. The *amafunde* she administered can therefore be understood as setting a precedent for open communication within marriage.

In the light of what we know about how initiation has historically been carried out in Zambia, this change is striking. Writing about the Copperbelt in the early 1930s, Richards notes that people of Bemba ethnicity had a reputation for prudish speech. Euphemism, she notes, was the favored way of communicating sexual matters, particularly in the presence of members of other age groups (Richards 1940).<sup>10</sup> Rasing reports that this same sort of discretion was alive and well during her fieldwork. As she puts it, "In my experience polite conversation in mixed company in urban Zambia today tends to be far more reticent on matters of sexuality..." (2002: 226) – to the chagrin, she notes, of church workers who advocated greater openness in marriage.

Given this historical precedent, [and the many other points of continuity that we have observed](#), we might expect that the traditional preference for euphemism would also have pervaded during Gift's *amafunde*. However, as we have seen, this was not the case. Bana Ilunga and the others responsible for Gift's training faced indirect communication head-on and deemed it inappropriate for twenty-first century Copperbelt marriage; obliqueness was replaced with openness both during Gift's *amafunde* and after her wedding. In other words, those

relationships that we have identified as marked by indirect speech in the light of their convergence with other social boundaries have lost this characteristic, even as they continue to be bounded by a barrier of secrecy. It therefore appears that, at least as far as obliqueness is concerned, a shift has occurred in *amafunde*. Before turning our attention to what Bana Ilunga's emphasis on "straight" speech reveals about social life on the Copperbelt more broadly, [particularly as it relates to HIV/AIDS](#), it is important to first address one other factor at play in the changes Copperbelt Pentecostals have made to *amafunde*: the fear of demonic influences.

### **Trampling Tradition**

While there are several reasons why Copperbelt Pentecostals do not employ *mbusa* in instructing women, one of these is surely the fact that they believe these objects, like all material components of traditional ritual practice, to be vectors of demonic influence. My informants explained that because prayers were spoken over the clay before the figurines were formed, the latter were imbued with the power of traditional spirits. For believers on the Copperbelt, as in other parts of Africa, traditional spirits are understood to be demons (Meyer 1999). Pentecostals must therefore exercise extreme caution with regard to traditional ritual objects, and, if they have had contact with something like the *mbusa*, even by proxy through the practices of a relative, undergo "deliverance" – that is, exorcism.

This aspect of Copperbelt Pentecostal views on *mbusa* was illustrated dramatically in a fundraiser for an Nsofu Pentecostal church. The printed invitations for the event bore the header: *Intambi chinshi?*, which the organizers had glossed as "What is Culture?"<sup>11</sup> Despite the high price of admission (K100,000, at that time, \$20), roughly fifty adults, both men and women, attended. The program featured Mrs. Mumba, whose husband was the pastor of the church sponsoring the event. Both Pastor and Mrs. Mumba are children of Bemba chiefs, and Mrs. Mumba drew on her knowledge of Bemba custom in her discussion of *amafunde*. Dressed in jogging trousers and a knit top, her hair wrapped in a scarf made from *citenge* material, Mrs. Mumba sang, danced, and told jokes that elicited whoops of approval from her audience. To my surprise, *mbusa* had been made especially for the event, and Mrs. Mumba held them up in turn as she explained their meaning to her audience.

Mrs. Mumba spoke positively about many of the messages contained in traditional marriage teaching, such as the need for wives to respect their husbands, and for both men and women to be concerned with their partner's sexual satisfaction. These ideas were greeted with an enthusiastic response on the part of her listeners, who shouted their support and came to the front of the room to throw money on the speaker, a sign of appreciation shown both to skilled dancers at events like weddings and to Pentecostal preachers. Despite the positive tone of Mrs. Mumba's teaching, and of her listeners' reaction, however, the meeting culminated in the dramatic destruction of the objects that had been used to communicate her message. As the gathering drew to a close, Pastor and Mrs. Mumba smashed the *mbusa* to pieces on the floor, covered them

in “anointing oil,” and trampled them with their feet. Raising their voices in prayer to break the power of the demons associated with these emblems, they invited anyone in the audience who had participated in a ritual employing *mbusa* to come forward and receive prayer for deliverance.

Not only did Mrs. Mumba make a clear connection between *mbusa* and evil spirits, she concluded her instruction with advice that echoed Bana Ilunga’s emphasis on straight speech. All that couples needed to do to ensure that their sex lives were satisfying, she said, was speak to each other directly. Mrs. Mumba provided the example of conversation during intercourse, which she highlighted as especially important. While talking to one another, she continued, believers could also be talking to God when they had sex, a suggestion that adds another Christian dimension to the emphasis on straight speech identified in Gift’s *amafunde*.

Although it is clear that Pentecostals reject the use of *mbusa* because they perceive there to be a connection between these objects and non-Christian spirits, I do not think that Pentecostal beliefs about demons alone explain their appeals to straight speech. Rejecting the *mbusa* does not necessarily entail instructing young women to talk openly with their husbands about sex, as Pentecostals could easily have developed ways of speaking about this topic that were just as indirect as the *mbusa*, but did not involve problematic traditional objects. It is therefore worthwhile to ask what other reasons there might be for the changes we have observed in *amafunde*. Doing so requires us to return to the interplay of secrecy and disclosure on the one hand, and openness and obliqueness on the other, which we have situated at the heart of the social processes of *amafunde*. As we do so, our attention will be focused on the impact of HIV/AIDS on African social life.

### **Secrecy, Stigma, and Sociality**

Zambia, and in particular urban areas like the Copperbelt, has one of the highest HIV infection rates in the world.<sup>12</sup> Despite the prevalence of infection, however, during my fieldwork I almost never talked, or heard anyone else talk, about HIV/AIDS in specific terms. That is, I almost never heard people speak of those they knew had died from AIDS, or who were HIV positive, much less of their own HIV status. Doubtless there were several reasons for this omission. For one, because I lived in a pastor’s home, I am sure that at least some of my informants were wary of mentioning specific examples of people they knew to be HIV positive, for fear that Christian leaders would find out, and the people in question would therefore be subject to moral judgment. What’s more, I rarely broached the topic myself, as I worried it would make my informants uncomfortable. Even taking these factors into account, however, in my data AIDS is notable in its absence – How, in twenty-two months of living in a place where so many people were infected with HIV, did the topic so rarely come up? The fact that the subject was almost never raised points, I would argue, to a more general tendency among people on the Copperbelt to remain silent about HIV/AIDS, and it is this silence, this secrecy, and its social implications, that I explore below.

The most obvious aspect of the relationship between secrecy and HIV/AIDS in sub-Saharan Africa more generally is the resistance people have to being tested for the virus, or, if they do agree to be tested, to disclosing their status. Both of these tendencies – widespread in Zambia (Jürgensen et al. 2013, Bond 2010) – stem from worries about the social ramifications of letting others know that one is HIV positive. In the Zambian case, at least, such worries often turn on the fact that revealing one’s HIV status collapses the distinction between what is public and what is private. That is, what people fear is that “the secrets of the house” will be exposed to the community – that their various sexual relationships, and lack of ability to protect themselves from HIV, will be made public (Simpson 2010). Were this to happen, the important boundary of secrecy that separates a household, particularly a married couple, from the rest of their community would be breached. Faced with the possibility that domestic secrecy may be compromised, secrecy with regard to one’s HIV status becomes even more vital. [Here it is worth pointing out that this sort of secrecy requires a great deal of finesse, as any knowledge of HIV/AIDS, even that communicated in asserting that one is not infected, can imply familiarity with the disease and therefore suggest that someone is HIV-positive because he has insisted this is not the case.<sup>13</sup>](#)

Silence about HIV is not limited to those who are infected, however. In situations where family or friends know that someone is HIV positive, they will often keep this information private. Eileen Moyer (2012), writing about Zanzibar, has argued that discretion on the part of family members and friends is an act of care that allows people living with HIV to abandon the “sick role” for as long as possible, and instead continue to function as healthy members of their communities (also see Bond 2010 for a similar argument about Zambia). Similarly, Josien de Klerk (2011), working among the Haya of northwestern Tanzania, describes what she calls “the compassion of concealment” in the silence of older caregivers, who are often nursing their own adult children. In this way, the social aspects of secrecy in the light of widespread HIV infection acquire another dimension, as others are drawn into the orbit of silence surrounding HIV in an effort to protect the dignity of the infected individual and of his or her family.

De Klerk’s discussion draws on Brad Weiss’ earlier work among the Haya, which emphasizes the importance of what he calls “enclosure” (see Weiss 1996). In this way, de Klerk points to the continuity between forms of secrecy operating before the advent of AIDS and the particular importance they have taken on as the disease has spread. Similarly, Fraser McNeill (2009) has helpfully contextualized silence about AIDS in South Africa in a wider framework of circumspection surrounding all mysterious or unexpected deaths. Refusal to speak about the disease is understood less in terms of contemporary controversies – most notably in the South African case that of “AIDS denial” – and more in terms of previously existing cultural patterns through which people engage death, in this case, discourses of witchcraft (also see Stadler 2003). Both of these examples highlight the relationship between secrecy as a preexisting cultural value and the current premium on discretion, secrecy, and silence in the time of AIDS.

While scholars working throughout sub-Saharan Africa have clearly emphasized the importance of secrecy and silence about HIV/AIDS, and while circumspection with regard to this topic was certainly evident during my own fieldwork, this does not mean that all of my informants thought that keeping one's HIV status quiet was a good thing. On the contrary, as we might well guess, the possibility that some people were able to do so was considered extremely dangerous. One of the few conversations I had about AIDS while living in Nsofu took place in the home of one of my best informants, Bana Sinkala. Over the course of my fieldwork I spent hours in the cool darkness of her sitting room, and I had come to rely on Bana Sinkala to provide me with background information on the complicated relationships that crisscrossed Nsofu's many Pentecostal congregations. On this particular day, while lounging comfortably on her dilapidated brown sofa, Bana Sinkala and I started talking about antiretroviral drugs (ARVs). In Bana Sinkala's opinion, ARVs were a problem. In the past, she explained to me, before these drugs became available, it was possible to tell who in the community was suffering from AIDS – the symptoms of the disease are difficult to hide as it progresses. However, Bana Sinkala continued, things were different in the light of ARVs, and a person could now be infected for a very long time and not get sick. More worrying still, he or she could look exactly the same as relatives or neighbors who did not carry the virus.<sup>14</sup> The problem with all of this, she added, was that it was dangerous. Before ARVs made it possible for HIV-positive individuals to live longer and healthier lives, it was easy to tell whom one ought to avoid as a sexual partner. Now, however, discernment in this area was much more challenging.

While secrecy has acquired new meaning in the light of HIV/AIDS, then, it has not been unproblematically strengthened as a result. In part, this has to do with the dangers associated with secrecy, as expressed in Bana Sinkala's worries about ARVs. Beyond the individual fears of those for whom sexual relationships have become increasingly risky, however, a further, and arguably stronger, challenge has been posed to secrecy by HIV/AIDS activism. Here, a bit of explanation is necessary.

While it was rare to speak to my informants in Nsofu about specific people they knew to be HIV positive, or to have died from AIDS, this did not mean that they had nothing at all to say about the disease. On the contrary, when the issue was raised in general terms people spoke quite easily about the dangers of "stigma," which they felt was especially problematic insofar as it kept individuals from disclosing their HIV status. Zambia has been the target of numerous interventions on the part of transnational bodies, such as UNAIDS, aimed at stopping the transmission of HIV. To anyone familiar with these types of efforts, my informants' discourse should not sound new. Clearly, people in Nsofu had adopted the language of public health and of AIDS activism, bemoaning the pervasive presence of "stigma" – a word they always used in English – and the way it kept people silent about the virus. By taking this particular tack, people in Nsofu indexed a larger cultural process, associated with the globalized response to HIV/AIDS, through which ideas about secrecy have been challenged. Key here is the emphasis that various organizations working in AIDS prevention have

placed on disclosure, treating it as “an *a priori* psychological and social good, a presumed condition of psychic and social health and an ethical imperative in the concerted effort to de-stigmatise HIV/AIDS” (Hardon and Posel 2012: S2; also see Nguyen 2009, Burchardt 2009).

So, while on the one hand the impact of HIV/AIDS has led to changes in the way that secrecy and silence operate in various African communities, as these have become invested with new importance, on the other these same communities have witnessed a challenge to the value they place on secrecy because of the emphasis on disclosure in the transnational response to the disease. In other words, widespread HIV infection, coupled with various efforts to stop the spread of the virus, have complicated the relationship between secrecy and disclosure in places like Zambia, especially when it comes to sexuality. Given that *amafunde* are about sex, and that they have also always been about negotiating the boundaries of secrecy and disclosure, often through indirect speech; and, given that these boundaries have clearly been affected by the AIDS crisis, we could reasonably expect *amafunde* to reveal the social changes just outlined. In closing, I would like to argue that this is indeed the case.

### **Conclusion: Secrecy and Disclosure, Obliqueness and Openness in Zambia’s Time of AIDS**

As we have seen, there are important ways in which contemporary *amafunde* among Pentecostal Christians resemble female initiation rites as they have historically been carried out in Zambia. On the Copperbelt today, women are trained for marriage through practices that emphasize secrecy with regard to marital sexuality. However, the key difference between past and present rites – that is, the rejection of indirect communication in favor of what Bana Ilunga called “straight” speech – is instructive. What we see in Gift’s *amafunde* is a move from obliqueness to openness both between marriage partners and between senior women and those they train for marriage. This change indexes several recent social transformations associated with HIV/AIDS.

At its most basic, the emphasis on direct communication in marriage reflects the premium placed on openness by AIDS activists, as well as a general understanding that secrecy around sexual matters has a higher cost than ever before. More broadly, this new way of speaking about sex in relational contexts where traditionally the topic has not been so directly engaged can be seen as part of a larger social process through which sexuality is discussed in increasingly open, public terms in an effort to stop the spread of HIV.<sup>15</sup> In those relationships where sexuality must be dealt with – that is, relationships in which women are taught about or engage in sexual activity – the intersecting social boundaries that have historically necessitated oblique, indirect speech have given way to the contemporary mandate for openness.

At the same time, although I hope it is clear that the framework of competing social boundaries that has traditionally required indirect speech has been challenged and largely broken down, the same emphasis on secrecy that forms the boundary *around* such relationships appears to have been invested with new



importance. This is especially true of the boundary between a married couple and the rest of their community. At stake now in this relationship is not the ritual importance of sex, but the integrity of the “secrets of the house,” which are easily betrayed by one’s presence at an HIV clinic or by the rapid weight gain associated with ARV treatment (Schumaker and Bond 2008) – [indeed, as mentioned above, even by an indication that one has any knowledge of HIV at all.](#)

In short, where social boundaries have required indirect speech, rather than secrecy, the new premium on openness seems to have prevailed. In contrast, those relationships that have always been bounded by secrecy seem to be hedged by an even stronger barrier of silence of the very kind that efforts to promote direct communication have tried to break down. On the Copperbelt today, *amafunde* therefore reveal not just the importance of secrecy and disclosure in the context of widespread HIV infection, but the way that the interplay between these competing demands maps onto social relationships that have historically been situated at this nexus. Here we can conclude with a final nod to Victor Turner, who showed that ritual can provide the key to understanding the conflicting social forms and demands present in Ndembu – and indeed any – society. In the case of the contemporary Copperbelt, the key tension between secrecy and disclosure, which has historically been approached through various levels of indirect communication, has been necessarily reconfigured as a result of HIV/AIDS and efforts to control it. In other words, a central axis along which social organization has been worked out has shifted, and the dynamics of ritual life reflect and reinforce this change.

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### Notes:

<sup>1</sup> The name of this township and the names of all individual informants are pseudonyms.

<sup>2</sup> In Bemba the "ch" sound, as in "church" is usually written with only the letter "c." However, Richards used the spelling, "*chisungu*" rather than "*cisungu*." For the sake of consistency, I follow her example.

<sup>3</sup> While Bemba custom was a central part of the *amafunde* I observed, ethnicity more generally also informed the rite. The women who trained Gift drew on their own ethnic backgrounds to support their points, or on those of others (including myself) to illustrate what one ought and ought not to do in marriage. For example, Gift was told that white couples (*basungu*) spend a year on a "honeymoon" to make their marriages strong; in a similar pattern, she and her husband should not bring any relatives to live with them (a practice common throughout Zambia) for the first year of their marriage.

<sup>4</sup> Women on the Copperbelt today are typically trained both according to their own ethnic backgrounds and those of their future husbands; however, should there be a difference between the two those in charge of the training defer to the husband's side.

<sup>5</sup> The *chisungu* that Richards records took place near the geographic center of the Bemba paramount chief's power, and it must be remembered that the rise of the paramount chiefs brought about significant changes to Bemba religion. Despite these changes, however, those initiations that took place after the establishment of the paramount chieftaincy through the

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colonial period and onward, still reflect the historical religious importance of women (e.g. Hinfelaar 1994).

<sup>6</sup> A similar pattern obtains in the controversial practice of “virginity testing” in South Africa, which, as Fiona Scorgie (2002) has shown, produces cohorts of senior and junior women through ritual practice.

<sup>7</sup> The feminine prefix “na,” which we have already encountered in the term “*nacimbusa*,” carries more respect in the plural Bana, and it is more commonly used on this form on the Copperbelt, particularly when employed by young, single women such as myself. “Bana” can be used as a Bemba translation of “Mrs.,” or, as in the case of Bana Ilunga, to denote a tekonym. Some women on the Copperbelt use the English “Mrs.” instead, a preference that Rasing (2002: 93) connects to the prestige associated with marriages that are licensed in court, and not just accomplished through traditional means.

<sup>8</sup> In the light of the clear emphasis on pleasure in the literature on sexuality in both Zambia and other parts of Africa (e.g. Rasing 2002; Spronk 2005), I realize now that I ought not to have been surprised that this had such a central role to play in Gift’s *amafunde*.

<sup>9</sup> Proverbs 14: 1

<sup>10</sup> Epstein reports that these perceptions were inaccurate by the time of his fieldwork in the 1950s, and that he observed that Copperbelt young people would speak openly about sex in the presence of their elders (Epstein 1981: 83). However, in the light of the wider context of Epstein’s argument, we might well question how far his observations reached. First, Epstein situates his remarks on the lack of discretion about sex in a study of traditional courts, a space where public testimony is expected and required. Second, his observations are made within a broader discussion of what his informants believed to be a decline in morality, neatly summed up as the lack of *mucinshi*, or “respect.” While some of my informants would be inclined to agree with Epstein’s informants here – they too felt that the Copperbelt lacked a moral compass – Gift’s *amafunde* were undertaken in direct opposition to this perceived trend. In other words, Gift’s *amafunde* were concerned with maintaining traditional forms of respect, and particularly with protecting the details of her marriage with a barrier of discretion.

<sup>11</sup> As noted above, it is probably more appropriate to translate *intambi* as “tradition,” rather than “culture,” though the word carries connotations of both. In either case, *intambi* refers to the past, to things that have been handed down from one’s ancestors.

<sup>12</sup> While the national HIV infection rate for Zambia is, according to UNAIDS, 12.5 percent, the seventh highest in the world, the virus is more prevalent in urban areas like the Copperbelt, where the infection rate is 17 percent. Broken down by sex, the rate is 22 percent for women and 12 percent for men.

<sup>13</sup> I thank an anonymous reviewer at *Ethnos* for pointing out this aspect of secrecy.

<sup>14</sup> While this remark reflects Bana Sinkala’s worry that ARV treatment might conceal HIV infection, others in Zambia have expressed concern that these medicines will reveal their HIV status, for example, through weight gain (see Schumaker and Bond 2008: 2131).

<sup>15</sup> I thank Barbara Bompani for this point.