

YES I DO. Initiation ceremonies in Traditional Authority Liwonde in Machinga District in Southern Malawi:

What do they look like now and before; and do they influence young people's behaviour regarding sex and relationships?



YES I DO.



by

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Abbreviations

AIDS	Acute Immuno-Deficiency Syndrome
GVH	Group Village Headman
HIV	Human Immuno-Virus
IDI	In-depth Interview
KIT	Royal Tropical Institute
MHRC	Malawi Human Rights Commission
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
SRH	Sexual and Reproductive Health
STI(s)	Sexually Transmitted Infection(s)
TA	Traditional Authority
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
YID	YES I DO

Definitions of terms

(A)lombwe	Person(s) attached to initiates as guardians and counsellors.
Amichira	Counsellors, also known as anankungwi.
(A)nankungwi	Initiator(s) in female initiation ceremony.
(A)ngaliba	Initiator(s) in male initiation ceremony. They are the ones who perform the circumcision.
Asela kwenda	Song sung during nsondo initiation ceremony.
Chidontoto	Initiation ceremony for boys of Chewa tribe, including partial circumcision.
Chinamwali	General term for initiation ceremony for girls.
Chindimba	Overnight pounding of maize during the litiwo ceremony.
Chiputu	Initiation ceremony for young girls, mostly conducted together with nsondo.
Chitabu	Quran.
Ganyu	Piece work.
Jando	Initiation ceremony for boys, including circumcision, specifically for Yao.
(Ku)sasa fumbi	A rite that prescribes that after the initiation ceremony, boys and girls should experiment with sex. Literally, it means: throw away the dust.
Kusupa	Showering of money of initiate during graduation ceremony.
(Ku)taya fumbi	Same as (ku)sasa fumbi.

Kutsirika	Protect against harm by using traditional medicine.
Likalele	Whistle.
Litiwo	Initiation ceremony for young women who just delivered.
Madeya	Maize bran.
Madrasa	Islamic school.
Makochi	Singing and clapping during initiation ceremony.
Mbepesi	Maize flour/ sprinkling of initiates with maize flour.
Michira	Female initiator.
Mkanda	Bead.
(M)simba	Initiation camp.
Mwambo	Advice on traditions.
Nachilongola	First girl in nsondo initiation ceremony.
Nachitatu	Third girl in nsondo initiation ceremony.
Nachiwiri	Second girl in nsondo initiation ceremony.
Nakanga	President/ leader of a male initiation camp.
Ndagala	Initiation camp.
Ndakula	Initiation ceremony for girls who just started menstruation.
Nsima	`Local staple food made from maize.
Nsondo	Initiation ceremony for girls ages from 6-8 years upwards.
Sokosoko day	Last day of initiation ceremony, when initiates are showered with money.
Zikomo	Thank you/ excuse me.
Zitagu	Advice on good behaviour.

Executive summary

Introduction

The baseline study of the YES I DO (YID) programme found, among other issues, that initiation ceremonies stimulate young people to experiment with sex, leading to teenage pregnancy and consequently (child) marriage. This study was initiated to explore how initiation ceremonies have evolved over the last 30 years and especially how they have impacted on youth sexual and reproductive health behaviour.

Objectives

The overall objective of this study was to explore how initiation ceremonies in Machinga district in Malawi have evolved over the last 30 years and have impacted on youth sexual and reproductive health behaviour. The specific objectives of the study were as follows: (i) To explore how initiation ceremonies were being conducted during the period just before the advent of the HIV epidemic; (ii) To determine how initiation ceremonies are being conducted now; (iii) To explore factors which have brought about the changes in the conduct of initiation ceremonies; and (iv) To determine people's (including young people's) perceptions about initiation ceremonies.

Methodology

This was a qualitative study conducted in Traditional Authority (TA) Liwonde in Machinga District, where the Yao tribe is most dominant. Data collection took place in November 2017 and the study was approved by the National Commission for Science and Technology. In-depth interviews were conducted with girls (2) and boys (2) aged 15 years or less; young male (1) and young female (1) aged 18-24; females (1) and males (1) aged more than 24 years of age; old male (1) and female (1) aged 50+ years; one male and one female initiator; and two male and two female *lombwes* (people involved in initiation ceremonies on a daily basis). All interviews were conducted by trained research assistants, were tape-recorded and transcribed. The data was analysed using content analysis aided with the use of the NVivo software.

Results

Type of initiation ceremonies: The following initiation ceremonies were mentioned by informants as prevailing in TA Liwonde: (i) *jando*, male circumcision; (ii) *nsondo* is for girls aged 6-13 and before they start menstruation; (iii) *ndakula* is for girls who have started menstruation ; and (iv) *litiwo* is for girls pregnant or delivering for the first time. These initiation ceremonies take place either in the bush or in a house within the community. One of the responsibilities of initiators, who are called *angaliba* for boys and *anankungwi* for girls, is to protect the venue for initiation ceremonies against witches.

Age at initiation: The age at which initiation ceremonies take place ranges from around 6 up to 18 years. Some boys and girls attend initiation ceremonies quite late, for example at the age of 18, mainly due to lack of money for food and gifts, including the purchase of clothes and shoes that initiates wear at graduation.

Duration of initiation period: Most informants reported that initiation ceremonies usually last for one month. There were some, however, who reported that in these days the ceremonies last for three weeks or less. The availability of food and money for gifts including and clothes is one of the determinants of the length of the initiation period. Initially the initiation period for boys was long, because it took a long time for the wound from the circumcision to heal. This is not the case anymore

Decision making to attend initiation ceremonies: In most cases, parents make decisions for their children to attend initiation ceremonies after observing that they have grown. Once this decision has been made parents formally inform the chief. In very few cases the children will also make decisions on their own to go to initiation ceremonies, because they may be influenced by peers who have already been initiated.

Reasons for attending initiation ceremonies: Boys and girls attend initiation ceremonies for them to be counselled on several issues including the need to respect their parents and other elderly persons. What also attracts boys and girls to initiation ceremonies are the fine clothes and other gifts they receive when they graduate from initiation ceremonies. Some informants including the initiators reported that people attend initiation ceremonies because it is their culture. Both boys and girls also reported that in some cases they attend the ceremonies out of peer pressure from other boys and girls who have attended the ceremonies. Other reasons for attending initiation ceremonies for boys was the perception that circumcised men are 'sweet' in bed and that they are clean compared to those who are uncircumcised. The attendance of initiation ceremonies was also an indication that a boy or girl has grown and it is believed that only those who have been circumcised can read *chitabu* (Quran) in the mosque.

Reasons for not attending initiation ceremonies: Most informants reported that there are some people in their community who have not been initiated. Some informants perceived it as normal these days, although in some cases they are laughed at by their friends. In the past everyone went for initiation ceremonies: those who went for initiation never freely mixed with those who have not been initiated, as they were perceived as still being children regardless of age. There is no punishment given to persons who have not been initiated. Still, as reported by study participants, the major challenge with those who have not been initiated is that they have not been properly counselled and they will not know how to behave towards others according to traditions. The failure for children to attend initiation ceremonies can also be due to the lack of money for food and gifts. Another reason for not attending initiation ceremonies is that people from other tribes than the Yao who residing in TA Liwonde, such as the Chewa and Lomwe, may not send their children for initiation.

Disadvantages of attending initiation ceremonies: There were some informants who said that there are no disadvantages associated with attending initiation ceremonies. A few disadvantages were however mentioned. A lot of food is consumed during initiation ceremonies and this may put households where initiates are coming from at risk of food insecurity and there are also cases where parents and guardians take loans in order for their child to be initiated. Only one informant mentioned that there was a general lack of hygiene in the initiation camps and that initiates were being beaten in order to ensure that they become respectful. One informant aged 50+ mentioned that one disadvantage of attending initiation ceremonies is when initiates are being advised to experiment with sex.

Events at initiation ceremonies: On the day initiates are taken to the initiation camp, they go through the chief where they are sprinkled with flour after which they go into the camp. At the initiation camp most time is spent on advising boys and girls on respect, sex and related issues including pregnancy and delivery. While initiators, both male and female, reported that advising boys and girls to experiment with sex is longer being done, some informants especially those aged above 18 reported either that they were informed to do this or they knew their friends who did *kusasa fumbi*¹. Boys and girls attending initiation ceremonies are actually threatened that their private parts will wilt/rot if they do not engage in *kusasa fumbi*, or they may not be able to reproduce at a later stage. Initiators do not spend a long time at the camp: for example, after the *angaliba* have done the male circumcision, boys are left with

¹ A rite that prescribes that after the initiation ceremony, boys and girls should experiment with sex.

the *nakanga*, the president or leader of the initiation camp, who is responsible for counselling on a day to day basis, and the *lombwes*, who are persons attached to initiates as guardians and counsellors. A girl aged 13 reported that her friends were actually advised to pull their labia minora. Girls are also taught about marriage and how to 'treat' their husbands. In addition to this both girls and boys are taught household chores, advised to go to school as well as going to the church or the mosque. On the day the initiates graduate, they are taken to the chief: parents redeem their children by paying money to the chief.

Changes in conducting initiation ceremonies: This study found that a number of things have changed over the years in the conduct of initiation ceremonies and these included: (i) while in the past initiation ceremonies were being conducted in the bush, these days in addition to the bush, they are also taking place in selected houses within the village; (ii) in addition to the traditional way of circumcision, this is also being done by health workers either in initiation camps or in health facilities which was not previously the case; (iii) the period of conducting initiation ceremonies has been reduced to a few weeks; (iv) the conduct of the *litiwo* rite has changed: it is only for those who have delivered for the first time, and not conducted before delivery; and (v) there are claims by initiators and *lombwes* that the encouragement of boys and girls in TA Liwonde to experiment with sex is not being done any more. One of the reasons for this is that boys and girls are being initiated at a very young age – say less than 10 years – unlike in the past when older girls and boys aged 15+ were being initiated. The experimentation with sex is also not being done to prevent the spread of HIV. The coming in of non-governmental organisations such as Plan and AMREF has contributed to these changes as they have created awareness among people in the community.

Conclusion

This study was aimed at exploring how initiation ceremonies in TA Liwonde in Machinga district in southern Malawi have evolved over the last 30 years. Initiation ceremonies for both boys and girls are still being conducted. While some changes have been observed e.g. the age of initiates, venue and duration for initiation ceremonies and the coming in of health workers to conduct male circumcision, some things have not changed much. Initiators claimed that rites such as *kusasa fumbi* in which boys and girls are encouraged to experiment with sex after attending initiation ceremonies are no longer there, other informants including those who were recently initiated had other views saying that they were told to do this after graduating. The *lombwes* spend a lot of time with the boys and girls in initiation ceremonies; hence they should also be targeted for interventions such as comprehensive sexuality education.

1. Background and justification

In Malawi, teenage pregnancy and child marriage are major problems for young people's sexual and reproductive health (SRH). Their rates are high and the problems are mutually reinforcing, leading to school drop-out, health and social problems, particularly among young women (Munthali and Kok, 2016). YES I DO (YID) is a five-year programme (2016-2020) which aims to contribute to enhancing young women's decision making space on whether, when and who to marry as well as on whether, when and with whom to have children (YIDA, 2016). The programme, funded by the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, is implemented in seven countries namely Ethiopia, Kenya, Malawi, Mozambique, and Zambia in Africa and then Indonesia and Pakistan in Asia. In Malawi, the programme is implemented in traditional authority (TA) Liwonde in Machinga District in southern Malawi. The research component of the programme in Malawi focuses on the interlinkages between teenage pregnancy and child marriage. The YID programme is implemented by a consortium consisting of Plan Netherlands, Amref, Rutgers, Choice for Youth and Sexuality and the Royal Tropical Institute (KIT). In Malawi, Plan Malawi, Amref Health Africa, the Family Planning Association of Malawi, the Centre for Youth Empowerment and Civic Education and the Centre for Human Rights and Rehabilitation together implement YID in TA Liwonde.

The Malawi baseline study of the YID programme, conducted in 2016, found a teenage pregnancy prevalence of 64% among female 20-24 years and a child marriage prevalence of 20% among females 18-24 years in Machinga district (Munthali and Kok, 2016). The baseline study also highlighted the main causes and consequences of both issues. Widespread poverty, combined with lack of opportunities, social and cultural norms around gender and youth sexuality were main causes; consequences were school drop-out, further poverty and social exclusion, especially for young girls. Many participants referred to the role of initiation ceremonies: it seems that they stimulate young people to experiment with sex, leading to teenage pregnancies and later on (child) marriage. However, more information is needed, as a lot remains unclear: what happens during these ceremonies? Did the initiation ceremony change over time and if yes, what can we learn from this? How do these initiation ceremonies influence young people's behaviour, specifically with regard to sex and relationships?

2. Literature review

Culture, as a community level factor, has been widely suspected to have a role in influencing sexuality and age of first sexual debut. A number of studies have looked into this and in particular in relation to HIV. It includes cultural beliefs and practices which are encountered along the life course particularly at birth, puberty, marriage, divorce or death (Moyo and Muller, 2011). These cultural practices exist for both males and females. When discussing young people's sexuality, it is crucial to focus on initiation ceremonies which are conducted in the period of adolescence.

Initiation ceremonies, although varied, usually consist of a puberty rite which may or may not include circumcision and genital mutilation. Brown defined female initiation rites as consisting of "one or more prescribed ceremonial events, mandatory for all girls of a given society, and celebrated between the 8th and 20th years" (Brown, 1963). Initiation ceremonies have been widely written about, across cultures but also by different fields of study. In anthropology, functional or transactionalist views have dominated the understanding of initiation rites (Rasing, 2004). Rasing, in her extensive work on Zambian female initiation ceremonies, quotes La Fontaine (1986) who defines it as a "patterned performance whose purpose is action to achieve transformed individuals but whose effect it is to demonstrate the power of knowledge and legitimize a continuing social order" (Rasing, 2004)². Van Gennep was one of the first to critique this approach and framed initiation ceremonies in the context of the life cycle (Van Gennep, 2011)³. Using his approach, Turner expanded the narrow functionalist view that dominated the field and spoke about liminality of the ceremonies (Turner, 1966).

A cross-cultural study conducted by Brown was the first of its kind to look at 60 culture areas of the world. She found that initiation ceremonies take place in societies which are matrilineal and where women contribute substantially to subsistence activities (Brown, 1963).⁴ One of the most distinguished work comes from Richards who documented the Chisungu ritual in Zambia (Richards, 1956). Richards not only described the ritual but also interpreted its various components, symbols and attitudes (Dauphin-Tinturier, 2016). Dauphin-Tinturier revisited this ritual in 1989 and 1998 and compared it to Richards' account of 1931. She demonstrated how these rituals still exist but have been modified over time due to, among others, external factors (Dauphin-Tinturier, 2016). Rasing has been studying Zambian rites, including initiation ceremonies since the 1990s (Rasing, 1995; Rasing, 2001; Rasing, 2004). In Malawi, the Malawi Human Rights Commission (MHRC) undertook a very comprehensive study on the influence of culture on human rights which detailed the various cultural practices and documented individual experiences of these (MHRC, 2006). The Protecting the Next Generation study conducted by the Guttmacher Institute and other institutions was also crucial in shedding more insight into these initiation ceremonies (Munthali et al., 2006).

Initiation ceremonies usually take place before the appearance of the first menstrual period or anytime between 7 and 20 years of age. In Malawi, the MHRC reports that in the central region initiation ceremonies for girls take place at first menstrual period while in the eastern region they could have two initiations: the first, called *nsondo* which takes place between 6 and 13 years of age prior to menstruation and the second, called *chindakula* which is conducted after girls start menstruation (MHRC, 2006). Munthali and Zulu (2007)

² Rasing quotes from La Fontaine, J.S., 1986. Initiation (Vol. 3). Manchester University Press.

³ The English translation published in 2011 has been quoted but the original was published in 1906.

⁴ She also found that painful ceremonies are a result of a conflict in sex identity as per Witting's theory of identification.

found that if the ceremony is timed before bodily changes associated with puberty occur, the initiation ceremony can be a positive experience, as it prepares girls and boys for adulthood by giving them the necessary information. There is extensive variation in duration, involvement of the community, timing and the actual practice of the ceremonies across different tribes in Malawi. Ceremonies can range from being structured to loosely organized, can involve groups of young people and can also focus on a single individuals (Munthali and Zulu, 2007). The duration of the ceremonies can range from a few hours to a few weeks depending on the type as some include periods of seclusion. In Malawi the *angaliba* are the initiators for the boys while *anankungwi* are the initiators for the girls. In some cases, during initiation parents are supposed to abstain while in others, they are encouraged to have sex. In some cases, community members including the chief must abstain from sex until the ceremony is over (MHRC, 2006). Male circumcision, referred to as *jando* in Malawi, forms part of the initiation ceremony for boys. Female circumcision is very rare and was last reported to have been practiced by only very few communities in Malawi (MHRC, 2006). However, it is worth noting that labial stretching or elongation is practiced in Malawi (Katongo, 2014; Undie et. al., 2007). This, in turn, has its own adverse health implications.

Initiation ceremonies have come under close scrutiny mainly because they relay contradictory ideas about sexuality, adulthood and gender roles. Van Gennep, in his path-breaking work, conceptualized it as a transition from one life stage to another – namely childhood to adulthood – and therefore it serves as a ‘rite of passage’. He also states that it represents the transition from an asexual world into a sexual one (Van Gennep, 2011; Munthali and Zulu, 2007). Initiation ceremonies are about the cosmology of a specific society and contain not only practical information but also religious and spiritual/supernatural elements (Rasing, 2004). For women, it signifies the move from passivity to activity and revisits notions of child and adulthood, initiated and uninitiated and the ‘boundaries between genders’. It deconstructs and reconstructs these to form a new identity for young women (Rasing, 2004). In a changing socio-political context, Rasing (2004) argues that initiation ceremonies persist as a form of resistance as it is a means to build a relationship between past and present, and it draws on collective memory in a changing and globalized world to keep rooted in a sense of communal identity. She states that ‘the rite is a representation of continuity’ (Rasing 2004). As an act of transition, these rites are expected to prepare and help young people of pubescent age to transit into ‘adulthood’. Hence, the rites are meant for character building and include counselling on a variety of matters such as how to raise a family, be married and be financially able. It teaches important values of respecting elders, but also teaches young people about puberty, bodily changes, reproduction and sexuality.

Much concern has been expressed over the implicit connotation of the initiation ceremonies. Several young people believe that the ceremonies now give them a social sanction to engage in sexual activity as they have transitioned to being ‘adults’. Munthali and Zulu (2007) and MHRC (2006) also found that these ceremonies explicitly encourage young people to engage in sex as part of the ritual. In central and southern Malawian communities “initiates are encouraged to experiment with sexual intercourse through *kusasa fumbi* or ‘cleaning the dust’” (Munthali et. al., 2004). This is also the case for male initiation ceremonies where completion of sex marks the end of the ritual. This act is motivated by myths around sexuality⁵ (MHRC, 2006). In Malawi, in the eastern region, *fisi* constitutes part of the initiation for young women. This is also true among some Chewa communities (Munthali et al., 2004). Of the three types of *fisi* identified by Kunkeyani in the case of Malawi, one takes centre-stage at puberty (Kunkeyani, 2013). A *fisi* or a hyena is a man designated to have sex with girls to initiate them into womanhood (Banda and Kunkeyani, 2015).

⁵ These include myths such as that their penis will shrink if they do not complete the rite in that manner.

Kusasa fumbi occurs after the first menstruation and is meant to cleanse and purify the girl (Banda and Kunkeyani, 2015). Kamlongera highlights the experience of Nagama, a 34-year-old woman in Malawi who recounts her experience of this rite and brands it as statutory rape, emphasizing its non-consensual nature and adverse impact on the emotional well-being of young women. She discusses the culture of silence that persists around this rite (Kamlongera, 2007). Instances of one *fisi* sleeping with several girls on the same night without the use of condoms is also a concern (Banda, 2015). Hence, it is important that these initiation ceremonies should be investigated further in order to determine the extent to which some of these rites are still being practiced.

Sex education is also a central issue during initiation ceremonies. As mentioned above, young people are counselled about matters of reproduction, sexuality and puberty. Overall, while initiation ceremonies may have some valuable contribution in teaching young people how to be responsible adults, they can be very gendered and focused on the needs of men (Munthali et al., 2004). Several scholars have noted that the content of initiation ceremonies differ for men and women, where women's education has more emphasis on how to avoid pregnancy and on how to please men (Kapungwe, 2003). Hence, even in the absence of *fisi*, these ceremonies focus on how girls must perform sexually (MHRC, 2006). For instance, this is through teaching them how to sexually wriggle their waist to facilitate sexual intercourse (Banda and Kunkeyani, 2015). At the same time young women are also discouraged to engage in sex so that they can avoid falling pregnant. On the whole, these counselling sessions are entrenched in gendered norms and patriarchy which consider men to be more dominant (Munthali et. al., 2004). This is not in complete alignment with Rasing's analysis of the ceremonies, where she asserts that such a 'sexual dance' (referring to the teachings on how to move their waist) informs women that they are the owners of their own body and sexuality; and that ceremony on the whole gives much importance to women and their experience of sexuality (Rasing, 2004).

Even if some young people do not undergo initiation ceremonies, they do undergo counselling. The language used in these situations is not always explicit and is filled with metaphors, often through songs and dance (Dauphin-Tinturier, 2016; Munthali and Zulu, 2007; Banda and Kunkeyani, 2015). These can prove to be incomplete or confusing for young people and they may misinterpret metaphors such as 'playing with boys' (Munthali and Zulu, 2007). Furthermore, the 'sex education' also includes several myths regarding menstruation⁶ (Munthali and Zulu, 2007). Contraceptive methods or use of condoms are not featured as a major component of sex education in initiation ceremonies. For the girls' initiation ceremonies, they simply focus on abstinence, also highlighting the gendered nature of this message (Munthali and Zulu, 2007). Munthali and Zulu (2007) further shed some light on male initiation ceremonies and argue that a lack of a distinctive sign that denotes the arrival of puberty in boys does not facilitate the community to plan for formal ceremonies in Malawi. This implies that young men simply get counselled on an ad hoc basis. In most parts of the Northern Malawi these ceremonies are not organized for boys⁷, however in the Central and Southern regions they can take an elaborate form⁸. The YID baseline found that initiation ceremonies are often a source of information on sex and reproductive health in Malawi. In the

⁶ These include myths such as having sex while menstruating can hurt men due to the menstrual blood or that they must not put salt in food or cook while menstruating as it would make people sick.

⁷ The ceremony only for girls and it is not as elaborate as is the case in central and southern Malawi.

⁸ While they are also taught values such as respecting elders and about sex, they are also taught not to beat women (Munthali and Zulu 2008).

latter, however, grandmothers constituted a central resource for this information as they were also the ones that conducted the ceremony (Munthali and Kok, 2016).

Usually, young girls are ordered by their older female relatives to undergo the ceremony and the initiator has the authority during the ceremony to instruct the young girl⁹. Kapungwe documents literature where several young girls themselves express a desire for initiation and favour the ceremonies (Kapungwe, 2003). Rasing (2004) conducted interviews with girls who had gone through the ceremony and found that they are able to gain a new sense of identity, belonging and womanhood on undergoing the ceremony. The girls do acknowledge that the ceremony can be a difficult or a painful process but they perceive this 'difficulty' as mirroring the difficulty of life in itself. They find the information in the ceremony useful, as their school curricula solely gives them the biological aspect of procreation but evades the social responsibilities (Rasing, 2004). The situation has changed as currently HIV and life skills education is being taught in schools in Zambia (Kapata, 2012). Kapungwe (2003) also highlights that for many girls in Zambia, the initiation ceremony is the only socially sanctioned source of information about sex and that young women find it difficult to discuss these matters with their parents. In addition, those young people who have undergone initiation ceremonies also qualify to be part of a specific social group. Belonging to the group that has been initiated advertises that they are now 'adults' and have a more exclusive status. Hence, this can also be a source of envy. This was also highlighted by young men in Mangochi districts in Malawi (Munthali and Zulu 2007). However, during the initiation ceremonies the agency of girls is contentious according to Banda and Kunkeyani (2015) who assert that in such a context, girls "are led to believe that it is necessary for them to sleep with a man on the day of the initiation". Also, Kamlongera (2007) makes it clear that girls may not realize that they have been 'cheated' and "they may not distinguish between voluntarily going to the initiation and not sleeping with the *fisi* when it is only one part of the ceremony."

The role of initiation ceremonies was highlighted in a baseline research conducted for the YID programme in Malawi (Munthali and Kok, 2016). The baseline study found that initiation rituals promote specific (and often misinformed) ideas about sexuality and sexual practices, which exposed young people – both women and men – to the likelihood and accompanying risks of unprotected sex. This includes an early sexual debut which is also often unprotected. In Malawi, the baseline research found that initiation ceremonies and the influence of pornographic videos were cited as prominent reasons for early sexual debut. Stephenson et al. (2014), in a multi-country study of several African countries including Malawi, found that there is an association between participation in a puberty rite and increased odds of early sexual debut: they argue that further research into types of puberty rites is needed to unravel this association (Stephenson et. al., 2014). It has also strongly been linked as an indirect cause of the high HIV prevalence due to early unprotected sex (Kapungwe, 2003; Menon, 2014; Kamlongera, 2007; Banda and Kunkeyani, 2015; Moyo and Muller, 2011). The risk of unprotected sex brings many consequent dangers. These include the risk of sexually transmitted infections (STIs) and unintended (teenage) pregnancies. In the YID data, it was found that 64% of the girls experienced a teenage pregnancy¹⁰ and that 20% were married under the age 18 in TA Liwonde in Machinga and there was a strong indication that child marriage followed teenage pregnancy.

On examining the sample of young women who experienced both a teenage pregnancy and child marriage, the YID data suggest that early sexual debut (caused by initiation ceremonies as one of the major factors) is followed by teenage pregnancy, which is consequently followed by (child) marriage. In a context where

⁹ Rasing (2004) explains that this authority is one of the aspects of the rites in itself.

¹⁰ This question was only asked to those who indicated that they ever had children.

teenage pregnancies, which are particularly pre-marital, are greatly disapproved and where (safe) abortion is uncommon, young women are often married early to avoid shame or dishonour on the family (Munthali and Kok, 2016). Other external factors such as the lack of employment opportunities also influence the relationship. While some prior research has merely touched upon the links between initiation ceremonies and marriage, not much has been explored with regard to (teenage) pregnancy. In the past, as noted by Richards (1956) and Dauphin-Tinturier (2013), marriage followed soon after the initiation ritual, but this has changed over time. Kapungwe (2003) notes that the period between initiation ceremonies and marriage have now lengthened. This, in turn, also widens the time that young women have to engage in multiple relationships which could expose them to the risk of HIV or unintended pregnancies.

It is crucial to note that the initiation ceremonies have also evolved over time but also as a response to the advent of the AIDS epidemic, non-governmental organization (NGO) interventions and changes in the social and political circumstances¹¹. It has been widely researched how cultural practices can be modified or renegotiated to serve the purpose of preventing HIV (Banda and Kunkeyani, 2015; Kapungwe, 2003; Dauphin-Tinturier, 2016). Banda and Kunkeyani (2015) document several examples in eastern Malawi and explored how such practices are 'repurposed' and remediated for example through the use of herbs to symbolize sexual acts. It is crucial to note that some cultural practices are violations of human rights and that a larger transformation is needed for these to change. Dauphin-Tinturier (2016) observed the *chisungu* initiation rite in Zambia which had become adapted due to UNICEF's intervention on HIV prevention. On comparing her observations in 1989 and in 1998 to Richard's account of 1931, she noted that the significance of the ritual was modified and now included elements of HIV/AIDS and storytelling. She notes how the 'chicken rite' is also different from Audrey's account in 1931 and the role of the extended family has faded away. In essence, the modified initiation ritual also emphasizes the ability of women to say no. She also contextualizes these changes in view of the shift in power from the chiefs to the state and the changing roles of men and women in these societies (Dauphin-Tinturier, 2016).

The persistence of initiation ceremonies cannot be viewed in isolation of the socio-political changes that have occurred in the last four centuries. These ceremonies can be traced back to 400 A.D. Colonization and the advent of Christianity brought a different understanding of the role of men and women and how society can be organized¹². This had particular consequences to the matrilineal context of Malawi where women held central roles in political, religious, economic and social avenues of life, and society was organized on the basis of kinship (Rasing, 2001). It has been argued that the changes in the last two centuries introduced elements limiting the power of women to the profit of men (Dauphin-Tinturier, 2016). Christianity shifted the balance of power in favour of men and "missionaries imposed Western concepts of domesticity on Africans" which resulted in the marginalization of women¹³. Rasing argues that while some elements of Christianity were liberating, others were oppressive including *some* of their conceptions of sexuality and related frameworks of morality. Hence, the initiation ceremony became a target for policing by the Church. Later, the position of the church underwent a change as well, where it has attempted to harmonize controversial elements of the initiation ceremonies¹⁴. As mentioned earlier, this relates to Rasing's claim

¹¹ See Kapungwe's study (2003) which also includes a short historical overview of initiation right in Zambia.

¹² In addition, the Western mode of economy and state also were rooted in patriarchy and women's role in the economy became side-lined.

¹³ For instance, prior to colonization and before the 16th century, Rasing explains that the ritual specialist had both political and religious power but with the change in power of the *beni ngandu* clan which began to rule the Bemba region in Zambia, the power shifted to the male chiefs.

¹⁴ In Zambia, particularly, in 1950s the Church began to acknowledge some of the positive functions of initiation ceremonies and in 1980's adopted the policy of enculturation or dialogue to Christianize some of the controversial or 'morally disapproving elements' which resulted in some harmonization but also friction between ideologies, traditional and religious priests and communities. Rasing documents this in her works in 2002 and 2004.

that the persistence of initiation ceremonies can be framed as a form of resistance in an increasingly globalized world. Hence, it is integral to mention the role of religion in a country like Malawi.

Links between religiosity and sexual debut have also been previously explored. Stephenson et al. (2014) found that living in a community with a larger percentage of young people belonging to a predominant religious group is associated with lower odds of early sex among females and males in Malawi. On the other hand, Agha et. al. (2006) found that the sexual initiation and condom use patterns of young women in Lusaka were not influenced by their religious affiliation. Furthermore, the sexual education advocated by faith-based institutions usually has a focus on abstinence and is unfavourable to contraception including condom use. Due to these concerns, churches have also instituted their own initiation ceremonies (Munthali et. al, 2007; Rasing, 2004). Religious ideologies also influence how young women themselves view the ceremony. Moyo (2010) recounts a story of Malumbuse who underwent the traditional ceremony. She stated that as a born-again Christian she felt that she had sinned against God with this ceremony. Hence, a tense relationship exists between these institutions and their views on the traditional initiation ceremonies. It remains to be explored whether religion and its institutions present an opportunity to intervene.

Despite the many socio-political changes, initiation ceremonies remain relevant and persist in Malawi. However, it is clear that the initiation ceremonies, the accompanying counselling and community norms provide young people with mixed and contradictory messages which do not allow them to develop a holistic understanding of their sexuality, their body and their roles as men and women in society. A study by Undie et al. (2007) on how young people in Malawi experience sexuality found that although pleasure and passion form core components, young people take a utilitarian view to sex. The transmission of myths about sexuality which are rooted in unequal gender norms also influence how young people interact with their partners and the wider community. This is reflected in the countries' poor position in the Gender Inequality Index where Malawi ranks 145¹⁵. In conclusion, the above literature indicates that there is an indirect relationship between initiation ceremonies and teenage pregnancy and child marriage and that these ceremonies play a major role in shaping young people's view of sexuality and gender. The dearth of literature specifically exploring these links warrants further research into this topic. Furthermore, the evolution of initiation ceremonies over time, due to the advent of HIV/AIDS, NGO interventions and other contextual factors presents a new opportunity for the YID Alliance to revisit initiation ceremonies and use the already existing cultural frameworks and institutions to reach young people with a holistic view of sexuality.

¹⁵ The Gender Inequality Index (GII) is an index for measurement of gender disparity that was introduced in the 2010 Human Development Report 20th anniversary edition by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). The ranking can be found: <http://hdr.undp.org/en/composite/GII>.

3. Study objectives

The overall objective of this study was to explore how initiation ceremonies in Machinga district in Malawi have evolved over the last 30 years to recommend YID on strategies that could improve youth sexual and reproductive health outcomes. The specific objectives of the study were as follows:

- To explore how initiation ceremonies were being conducted during the period just before the advent of the HIV epidemic.
- To determine how initiation ceremonies are being conducted now.
- To explore factors which have brought about the changes in the conduct of initiation ceremonies.
- To determine people's (including young people's) perceptions about initiation ceremonies.

4. Methodology

4.1 Type of study

This was a small scale qualitative study where 16 in-depth interviews (IDIs) were conducted with a variety of participants in TA Liwonde in Machinga district in southern Malawi. Data collection took place in November 2017 over a period of two weeks. Some data were also collected in April 2018, especially the interviews with the *lombwes*.

4.2 Data collection methods and study participants

The following data collection methods were used in order to collect data on how the conduct of initiation ceremonies has evolved over the last 30 years.

- IDIs with young girls (2) and boys (2) aged 15 years or less who recently underwent an initiation ceremony.
- IDIs with young girls (1) and boys (1) aged 18-24 years who underwent initiation several years ago.
- IDIs with female (1) and male adults (1) aged >24 years who underwent initiation 10 or more years ago.
- IDIs with 1 old male and 1 female aged 50 years or more.
- IDIs with current initiators (2): one *ngaliba* (initiator boys) and one *nankungwi* (initiator girls).
- 2 male and 2 female *lombwes* (persons attached to initiates as guardians and counsellors).

For young girls and boys aged 15 or less, the focus of the interviews was their own experience of undergoing the initiation ceremonies: who made the decision for them to undergo the initiation ceremony, reasons for undergoing the initiation ceremony, the activities which took place during the initiation ceremony including what they were informed on, issues around sex, pregnancy and marriage and their own perceptions about what they experienced. These experiences were also obtained from informants aged 18-24, > 24 years and then those aged 50+ years. These issues were also raised with the current initiators and the *lombwes*. The idea was to determine whether there have been changes in the way the initiation ceremonies are conducted. Sampling was purposeful and aimed for information rich cases. Recruitment of participants was done with the assistance of leaders of youth clubs including the Champions of Change.

4.3 Data collection and analysis

A topic guide was used to collect data from the different study participants. This tool was pre-tested before data collection started. The IDIs were conducted by trained research assistants and young female and male participants were interviewed by young female and male researchers, respectively. All interviews were moderated in the local language to ensure maximum participation. During the training of research assistants, key terms were translated to Chichewa and translated back by others, confirming that the terms were understood in the same way. Interviews were tape recorded after having obtained consent from participants. During data collection, daily review meetings were held to identify emerging themes, completeness of work and inconsistencies coming out of the work as data collection progressed. Interviews were then transcribed and translated into English; and independently checked by someone not involved in

transcribing. Content analysis of the data was carried out using a comprehensive thematic matrix which was developed based on the topic guide. NVivo software was used to support the analysis of the data.

4.4 Ethical considerations

Issues around initiation ceremonies can be socially or culturally sensitive. A variety of approaches were used to ensure that study participants felt comfortable and free to express what they genuinely believed; the researchers explicitly focused on eliciting in-depth responses to the questions as detailed in the guide. The research team was trained to listen and observe intently without displaying any judgmental attitude towards information they received from participants. Participation in the study was voluntary. Before conducting interviews, consent forms were read, explained and signed for each category of participants. For children under the age of 18, consent was obtained from their parents/caregivers regarding their participation. All participants received a copy of the consent form, and in the case of minors, parents/guardians received the consent forms while minors received the assent form. All data collection was done in a private and comfortable place for participants.

In order to increase participants' comfort level, efforts were made to recruit both young and older and female and male persons as data collectors for interviews with young and older; female and male participants, respectively. The availability of a person with basic skills in child communication and counselling was assured. However, during the conduct of interviews no counsellor was required. All research assistants who participated in data collection were trained on ethical issues to ensure that guidance on ethical conduct was clearly understood and implemented. Such training included focused sessions and exercises regarding the meaning and process of informed consent, the importance of protecting the privacy of participants, and confidentiality of the information obtained from them. This training was facilitated by the principal investigators.

Furthermore, the research team adopted procedural measures in relation to matters such as data recording style, personal identifiers, transcription and processing procedures, lifespan of unprocessed data, type and places of storage, and put all measures in place for data safety. Specifically, all data was kept separately from identifying information. Access to data was strictly limited to the research team. Tape recordings were destroyed after data had been transcribed and independently checked.

The approval to conduct this study was obtained from the National Committee on Research in the Humanities and Social Sciences at the National Commission for Science and Technology.

5. Results

5.1 Migration background of informants

There were only two informants who reported that they were born in TA Liwonde, grew up in that community and never migrated to anywhere else. The rest of the informants, regardless of their age and gender, reported that they were either born elsewhere and came and settled in the community or they were born within the community but migrated elsewhere before returning to their homes some years later. For example, a 25-year-old male informant reported that he had gone to Nselema within Machinga District where he worked on a tobacco farm and returned after one year because his contract had come to an end. One 50-year-old woman reported having lived in the community for eight years: initially she stayed in her mother's home village in Zomba and then she migrated to her father's home in Machinga. Most migration was within the country. However, there were four informants who went outside Malawi and stayed and worked in Mozambique, South Africa, Zambia and Zimbabwe and this included two *lombwes*.

Apart from migrating for work purposes, people also migrate due to marriage reasons: for example, one 50-year-old man reported that he moved into this community because of marriage.

“Yes, I stayed in a village known as Likulungwa because of polygamy my first wife is there. I am a polygamist. I came here because of my second marriage”, (50+ year old man).

There were also some people who have moved into TA Liwonde because they were looking for land. One *nankungwi* reported that her original home was in TA Chikwewo, a neighbouring TA: her family moved to TA Liwonde because they were looking for land. She also reported that not all her children stay with her: there are others who stay away from the village including in Blantyre. Migration is, therefore, common in this community and, as reported at baseline, many young people travel to South Africa for work purposes as well (Munthali and Kok, 2016).

5.2 Types of initiation ceremonies

All informants in this study had attended initiation ceremonies and they were selected because of this reason. Informants in this study mentioned different types of initiation ceremonies being conducted in their communities and these were *chiputu*, *nsondo* and *ndakula* and *litiwo* for females and *jando* for males. One 26 year old female *lombwe* explained that *chiputu* starts and this is followed by *nsondo* and then *ndakula*. There were others however who said that *chiputu* and *nsondo* are actually conducted together.

Nsondo is for girls aged 6 or 8 years upwards. In this initiation ceremony, girls are counselled on 'the Yao way of life'. During *nsondo* there is *nachilongola* and this is a girl who leads the others: her parents were the ones who decided that they want their daughter to be number one (*nachilongola*) and they were the first to go and inform the chief about their daughter who is supposed to be initiated; then there is *nachiwiri* (the second one), *nachitatu* (the third one) etc. In everything that will be done during the initiation ceremony, *nachilongola* will be the first and these things include *mbepesi* (sprinkling of initiates with maize flour) and when going to the *simba* (initiation camp) the girls line up and she will be the first. If there are 20 girls who will be initiated, they are numbered like that and this is the way they are lined up as they go towards the initiation camp.

Ndakula is for girls who have just started menstruation. One 40-year-old female *lombwe* explained that when the girl has started menstruation, *amichira/anankungwi* are called to advise her on what she has experienced and such a ceremony is called *nyakuwenandi* or *chinamwali chaching'ono*¹⁶. This is not for a group of girls but just for one who has started menstruating. Some friends of the girl who have started menstruating can be with her during this ceremony. Among other things, these girls are advised to avoid having sex when they are menstruating as the boy/man who has sex with them during this period may die or contract diseases. They are also advised to wear pieces of cloth during such periods so that other people should not see what happens and also to avoid one making a mess of herself. They are also advised that when they start having menstruation they can get pregnant anytime they have sex with men.

“Yeah *ndakula* when it's time they [*anankungwi*] go inside the house and they dig a hole in the house. They take an egg [and] they mark black and red. They put it on the hole. They put the soil I mean the egg is underground. Then they take a winnower and put it there. The girls enter and sit somewhere there. Then she is asked 'what have I put there?' 'We know not' then they remove the winnower. Mind you, they put maize flour on top. When they remove the winnower the flour is seen. Then each girl takes a stick and they do like this. Then the egg comes to visibility. Then they are told that 'it has black and red marks. The red means blood. The black means that when you experience menstruation periods, it's hard and it's mixed. When white stuff comes out, it means the period is about to end. If you are in this situation, do not have sex because is hazardous for men. When white stuff comes out it mean you are okay and you can do sex.' [During the] old times we were taking a white *mkanda* [bead] the day you are in period you take red beads and put it on the bed. The husband knows that today he cannot have sex. When you are done, you take the white beads and put it on the bed and the husband knows that today I can have sex. This is why they have the *ndakula* initiation”, (26-year-old female *lombwe*).

Litiwo is an initiation ceremony only for those who have recently given birth and one woman aged 50 years mentioned that initially this ceremony was conducted before a pregnant girl delivered but this has since changed and is conducted after the baby is born. One-26-year old *lombwe* explained in details what happens during *litiwo* as follows.

“.... Then they counsel you the day you go to the labour ward ... you give birth to your baby. After that the mother [of the young woman who has just delivered] says 'my daughter has a baby' then she is initiated [in a rite] called *litiwo*. At *litiwo* we pound maize and we do this overnight and it's called *chindimba*. We do dance till the morning. In the morning we take the mother who has just given birth indoors. Then we go and move around be it at the market or wherever. Then there comes time when we go and let her outdoors. She puts her wrapper to this far and the breast are open. We take her out and put her on the ground and tell her how to behave. We tell her that 'you have a baby now and you have a husband. You have to handle your husband well. This is what we mean. A husband he is but a kid. If you sleep together with your husband sometimes he says 'come close to me so that I should feel warm' and you say 'no the baby is too small for me to have another one' if you do this and you allow him to have sex with you.... you will kill your husband.' You have to raise your child to 5 months and others 6. In our time it was 9 months before having sex with husband. Now because of life style we have only 6 months you start having sex. You go and tell

¹⁶ “Small” initiation ceremony.

your granny that ‘the husband wants to have sex with me, what should I do?’ ‘Allow him to have sex with you’ that’s *litiwo*”, (26-year-old female *lombwe*).

This 26-year-old *lombwe* added that during *litiwo* young women are mainly advised about how to take care of their babies and that this *litiwo* ceremony only takes place after the baby’s umbilical cord drops off and it is completely healed. This is only done once and when the young woman has a baby for the first time. One 40-year-old *lombwe* explained that even if the girl is not married so long as she has a baby this rite is done for them.

“*Litiwo* is after the baby is born. ‘You have a baby and the baby is young, yes, you have to take care for yourself. If you do not follow what we are telling you. You will end up in mess. For you to grow, it means your parents tried to raise you. You have to raise her also. Do not have sex with men. Men do not raise the child, the child is raised by the mother. If you will not follow this you will end up having sex and then after sex you give suck to the baby. You have killed the baby. You have to care for the baby’”, (26-year-old female *lombwe*).

Jando is circumcision and, according to one initiator, there are two types of initiation ceremonies for the boys: (i) *chidontoto*: this is for the Chewa where the fore skin of the penis is cut but not the whole of it or it is cut on one side of the penis; and (ii) *jando* in which the whole foreskin of the penis is removed. One 40-year-old female *lombwe* explained that boys get initiated once while girls attend different initiation ceremonies.

All informants were asked about the age at which they attended initiation ceremonies, where these ceremonies took place, who made the decision for them to attend initiation ceremonies, the reasons people attend initiation ceremonies, the existence of people who have never attended initiation ceremonies.

5.3 Age at initiation

The age at which initiation ceremonies are conducted varies greatly and this also depends on the type of initiation ceremony one will undergo. Girls who attend *ndakula* are only those who have started menstruating. Girls aged 6-10 attend the *nsondo* initiation ceremony and one 26-year-old female *lombwe* said that these girls, being initiated at a very young age, could be joined by older girls who have already been initiated to cheer up their friends. There are some girls who attend the *nsondo* initiation ceremony at a much older age. According to one 40-year-old *lombwe*, this can happen when her parents were working or staying elsewhere: she gave an example of a girl who stayed for some time in the northern region with her mother, where there are no elaborate initiation ceremonies. The moment she returned to her home she attended *nsondo*. Since she had already started having her periods, she did not sleep at the camp but was just attending during the day and listening to advice which was being given to the girls. For *nsondo* and *jando* the society’s preference is that girls and boys, respectively, should attend initiation ceremonies at less than 10 years and not when they are much older.

“We consider that if we take 15 years old, then they have already developed breasts. If you take this age, people will laugh at you to say ‘where were you all this time. Were you sickly?’” (34-year-old male *lombwe*).

“According to our traditions, we believe that if we get a child initiated at that [young] age then she is going to grow up with good morals. She will understand that living with people is like this”, (34-year-old male *lombwe*).

These boys and girls are therefore initiated at a very young age. Although this is the case, the initiates understand what they are taught and they do not share or reveal the issues they are taught to others including their friends who have not been initiated.

“They do not tell it out. They simply say that ‘you will also go there and you will experience the same’” (26-year-old female *lombwe*).

“Yes, they said that we shouldn’t share any experience we’ve had there with the children or the parents at home. They said that we should set boundaries and no longer go into our mother’s bedrooms. They also said that ‘tidzikataya mafuta’ [Sleeping with girls] when we get home”, (25-year-old male informant).

One male initiator mentioned that it is difficult for children who have been initiated to disclose what they have been told during the initiation ceremony as initiates are given traditional medicine to make them not disclose what they have been told.

“Whose? Never! That’s impossible after eating the medicine. I am telling you even a young boy like this one, you ask him, he will just say I was initiated and they will not tell you; they can’t tell you”, (Male initiator).

One female informant said that some girls attend these initiation ceremonies at a time when they do not even have breasts.

“No, the children from 8 [years] upwards, there is an age, some feel shy to go there with breasts”, (18-year-old female informant).

Attending initiation ceremonies at the age of 18 years is considered very late. One 50-year-old female informant reported that she went for initiation at the age of 18 and this was mainly because she used to refuse to go for initiation. She also explained that her father and mother had separated and she was staying with her mother who could not on her own financially support her to attend the ceremony.

“... Going to this ceremony required money both to feed me and shower me with gifts so that I do not feel left out on the day I get out of the initiation ceremony. She could not afford to get me clothes that my friends could wear during graduation from initiation. My mother was worried that I was the only child, but she still could not afford to support me through the initiation ceremony so she consulted my aunt from my father’s side. They are the ones who convinced me to go”, (50-year-old female informant).

Nowadays, both boys and girls go for initiation ceremonies when they are young even when they are less than eight years, so long as the parents have made the decision and can afford the ceremony.

5.4 Place of initiation ceremony

Informants said that initiation ceremonies take place either within the village where they erect a temporary shelter or they are conducted in the bush or along a river as practised by ancestors. The chief directs where the ceremony will take place.

“When we say the bush, what happens is that boys are taken to the village chief. The chief is the one who directs us in which bush the ceremony is to take place so that the children are free and comfortable. So, in that bush that is where we put up a shelter”, (20-year-old male informant).

“In the past, people were getting initiated in the bush, they would just build shelters. The kids would be there till they come out”, (50+ old male informant).

These shelters where initiation ceremonies take place are constructed by parents of the boys and girls who will be initiated. In the case of boys’ initiation ceremonies, parents are assisted by *lombwes* who will be the guardians for the initiates. In some cases, instead of erecting a temporary shelter, a house within the community is identified or borrowed and a fence is constructed around it for the conduct of the ceremony and they will not go to the bush.

“At the *chiputu* sometimes they just build a fence around the house in which they did *chiputu*, while others do it at the bush”, (50-year-old female informant).

The initiation camps for boys are constructed away from the girls. A male initiator reported that as an initiator he has a specific spot where he conducts initiation ceremonies which is also protected against witches.

“No reason, but it depends on the initiator’s spot, it is like my village, so anyone who follows me they will be taken care of right there, like the witches. Even the fire doesn’t go out, the fire that is made there, stays there as well”, (Male initiator).

The parents do not take the children directly to the initiator for the ceremony: an initiator reported that the parents will take the child to the village head first where they perform *mbepesi*: in this ceremony the village head pours maize flour on the bodies of the boys and girls who will be initiated while the mother is showering the village head with money. It is only after this that the children are taken into the initiation camp as explained below by a *nankungwi*.

“We build a shelter made of grass thatch. In the evening, we take the girls to the chief who sprinkles flour on them, ... Then they give the children to us then we walk with the children and enter them into the *simba* [initiation camp]. In the morning we take them to the bush to declare their presence in the *simba*”, (a *nankungwi*).

This initiator further explained that anything that is taken into the initiation camp (e.g. matches) is not taken back into the community and that if a chicken enters the initiation camp it does not come out until the children also come out. In this place men and women do not pass by. The *lombwes* take their mats from home and they sleep on these mats together with the children they are responsible for. Each child, both boys and girls, has his or her own *lombwe*.

“Every child has his own *lombwe*, a person to take care of him, they take beddings and mats as they go there. So after the *angaliba* circumcise the boys and leaves the initiation camp, the *nakanga*

and the *lombwe* remain. The *nakanga* is like a father figure to the boys inside there, that if anything were to happen there, he would be the one to do something about it. So we take all the beddings”, (34-year-old male *lombwe*).

5.5 Duration of initiation ceremonies

Most informants in this study mentioned that initiation ceremonies, especially *jando* for boys and *nsondo* for girls, last for a period of one month or so and this was mentioned regardless of age. There were very few who mentioned periods of three weeks or less: for example, a 12-year-old male informant reported that in some cases children go on Friday and they return on Sunday. A 20-year-old male informant explained that one of the reasons the ceremony takes one month or more is that there are some parents who are poor and are not ready to buy new clothes their children should wear when they are coming out or graduating. One 40-year-old female *lombwe* also said that the coming out of girls from the initiation camp can be delayed by some parents who do not have money to buy new clothing for their children as initiates are supposed to put on new clothes including shoes on this day. She emphasised that it is the *lombwe*’s duty to make sure that all the parents have managed to buy the clothes for their children and if this is not done then the children will just be staying at the camp for period up to two months.

The availability of food in the initiates’ home is another major determining factor for the initiation period.

“Some stay [for] two months. In the past we used to spend two to three months but these days they only spend one month depending on the availability of food”, (50+ old female informant).

“It was because of the life we were living then. Many people were poor, they did not have enough clothing or food to afford sending their children to *simba* but they were still doing it. So once the children go in, they were having a hard time gathering enough resources to manage the ceremony”, (50+ year old male informant).

A male initiator added that the period for initiation for males was also longer because after the boys were circumcised the wounds would take longer to heal, which is not the case nowadays. A *lombwe* also acknowledged that wounds on the boys’ penises cannot heal properly within a week and not all the boys can be healed at the same time; hence they wait until all are healed:

“There is no way the child can heal completely just in one week ... you cannot expect him to study properly whilst he has an open wound. The same with maize, if you were to plant maize in a field today, it is not like all the maize will be ready for harvesting at the same time. The same with *simba*, not all of them can heal at the same time. We wait till all of them have healed that is when the books come in”.

One thing which also came out was that the period of the initiation ceremony was also dependent on the type of initiation ceremony conducted. For example, a 50-year-old female informant said that for the *chiputu* ceremony they only stayed at the initiation ceremony for two weeks. Initiation ceremonies are conducted at the end of the third term in July/August of each year and one 20-year-old female informant explained that girls and boys do not go into initiation camps at the same time: girls will only go into initiation camp after boys have been circumcised.

“What happens is after some weeks of boys going in, that’s when girls go in, it takes about two weeks, they say the boys should heal from the initiation then girls go in”, (20-year-old female informant).

This 20-year-old woman explained that when coming out of the initiation ceremonies, boys and girls get out together.

In general, it can be observed that the period for conducting initiation ceremonies has been reduced to less than one month.

“We wait for the third term after they close their schools. They come out before the schools open. Let’s say schools are opening next week they come out this week. So the books they were studying make them transition well back into school”, (34-year-old male *lombwe*).

As indicated, *jando* and *nsondo* take longer and on average three to four weeks. Other initiation ceremonies, however, take a shorter period such as *ndakula* and *litiwo* take one day.

5.6 Who conducts initiation ceremonies

Initiation ceremonies among the boys are conducted by the *angaliba*, while among girls it is the *anankungwi*. The *angaliba* are the ones who perform the circumcision but the *nakanga*, the president or leader of the initiation camps, together with the *lombwes*, who are attached to initiates as guardians and counsellors, are the ones who stay with the boys until they come out of the initiation camps.

“The main role for the *angaliba* is to initiate the children [boys]. After that he goes his own way. However, there is always an appointed person called *nakanga* who looks after the children, like for the boys, he is responsible for looking after them in the forests during their time there”, (20-year-old male informant).

This 20-year-old male informant explained that a *nakanga* is like a parent for these children as they are being initiated. While the *angaliba* and the *anankungwi* have the responsibility of initiating the boys and girls, respectively, anyone who has been initiated can visit the initiation camp and provide advice to initiates.

“ ... a person who has been initiated before is expected to be teaching her fellow peers ... things she learnt during her time”, (20-year-old female informant).

The *angaliba* and *anankungwi* move from one camp to another. These initiators also have the responsibility of protecting initiates against witches.

“The leaders, those that lead initiations, they put medicine (*kutsirika*), some talk about witches coming to such places and do bad things to the initiates, so those ones are like the ones that protect the place with traditional medicine and also teach the initiates”, (18-year-old female informant).

These initiators protect the camp a day before the initiates go there and with this no witch can harm the children. These initiators also need to have strong medicines otherwise they can be bewitched and die.

In most cases parents make decisions that their children should be initiated and then this is communicated to the village head. Parents are given the opportunity by the village head to choose the initiator, who may not necessarily be from the same community.

5.7 Events at initiation ceremonies

Parents tell the village head about their desire for their children to be initiated. Informants were asked to give a description of what actually happens at the initiation ceremonies.

5.7.1 Events during initiation ceremony for boys

A 40-year-old male *lombwe* explained that when they leave their homes they, meaning the *lombwes*, *nakanga*, *ngaliba* and the boys to be initiated meet at the group village headman's (GVH's) place and tell him or her that they are going to the initiation camp. Once the village head is informed then the team leaves for the camp where a shelter has already been constructed. The ones who first go to the camp are the ones who are already initiated. They make sure that each and every child has got his or her own *lombwe*. Some people like parents and other elders go to the initiation camp on this very first day to escort their children. As mentioned earlier, boys are circumcised during initiation ceremonies and a 12-year-old male informant reported that the circumcision is actually done on the first day when they arrive at the initiation camp. The boys remove all their clothes, are completely naked and they are called one by one by the initiator who signals the start of the circumcision by blowing a *likalele* (whistle).

"Yes, they got the whistle and he [*angaliba*] got out of the house and came to stand by the door and he blew the whistle, so after he does that those outside with the kids get to know that he has started calling on children", (24-year-old male informant)

"... be completely naked, then one by one we were proceeding towards the *angaliba*. Some people would hold you and others were not held by anyone, then the *angaliba* would cut off the foreskin of the penis", (20-year-old male informant).

A 26-year-old female *lombwe* reported that when the boys are in the initiation camp, their parents are not supposed to have sex.

"They go on this day and they are initiated. When they are there, you as parents you should not have sex until the sons are healed. After the second week you are told that 'all is well at the initiation camp' this means that they are healed ... you know that the son is well and the parents can have sex", (26-year-old female *lombwe*).

It is important that parents should stick to the rule of not having sex when their son is being circumcised. If they have sex it is alleged that the wound will not heal and the parents have to confess that they did not stick to the rules. When this happens, the 26-year-old female *lombwe* said that the *nankungwi* takes traditional medicines and gives it to the boy whose parents misbehaved to drink, after which he gets healed. She explained that without the traditional medicines, the boy will not be healed.

5.7.2 Events during initiation ceremonies for girls

As is the case with the boys, the girls, as explained by a 40-year-old female *lombwe*, also see the chief before going into the initiation camp. The chief pours *mbepesi* on the forehead of those girls who go for the *nsondo* initiation ceremony. These girls go to the *nsondo* shelter in a line led by *nachilongola*, then *nachiwiri*, *nachitatu* up to the last one in the order (see Section 5.2). When they get to the shelter, they will find the *michira* (*anankungwi*) with their own *mbepesi*. Just outside the shelter, they will lay down flat on their stomach and start moving towards the shelter while the *michira* are singing, drums are beating and they enter the shelter on their stomach and at the same time the *michira* pour the *mbepesi* on the backs

of the girls. The beating of the drums is done by the women themselves as men are not allowed to get into the *nsondo*. They sing a song whose title is *asela kwenda* meaning the initiates are crawling on their stomach. Once they enter the house, they sit down and the *Michira* come in and do *zitagu* (advice on good behaviour) and the drums are put elsewhere, and they start to sing songs of *nsondo* and dance while going around where the girls are sitting. One of the songs goes like '*achochole mphanje! aaa leeeh! iii laah!....mphanje... pakukuli pachaka*' which means that the girls who have come for initiation should be initiated this year so that others should also get initiated next year. In such a song, according to this 40-year-old female *lombwe*, the initiates are being taught about life and that the following year they should in turn teach their friends who will also undergo the same ceremony. This dancing and singing goes on throughout the night and when the day breaks the children are left to sleep. The *lombwes* do not sleep as well, because their responsibility is to take care of the children. As is the case with the boys, each girl to be initiated has his own *lombwe*. The *anankungwi* leave and what remains is the work of the *lombwes*.

"Yes the *anankungwi* spends the night only that day, to make sure what they were doing is done. In the morning that is when they leave and go and perform their rituals somewhere else", (40-year-old female *lombwe*).

As is the case with the *angaliba*, the *anankungwi* can then go and do their other responsibilities including going to another *nsondo* ceremony.

A day before the girls get out of the initiation camp, one of the dances they engage in is moving with buttocks around the camp in a circle, referred to as a *car*, while just wearing panties. This movement is in the presence of other people including friends and parents who sing. Those girls who move fast are showered with money and this day, just before the end of the initiation camp, is referred to as *sokosoko* day. A *nankungwi* described what happens on the day the girls are taken to the chief at the end of the initiation camp.

"We take the girls at dawn to the river where they are fed food that was cooked by their relatives in the village and then they bath and dress into their finest clothes that have been bought for them in the village. After that they are taken to the chief's court yard where the chief tells the people to commence the celebrations and shower the initiates with gifts or money", (*Nankungwi*).

At the chief's compound the girls and boys from the initiation ceremony, their parents and others dance and the chief or initiator talks as narrated by an 18-year-old female informant.

"To the village head and the initiators, then we get to dance, there are a lot of different songs being played, then after that we get together and then the village head or the initiator talks: 'Have you seen your children?' People respond 'Yes'. 'Are they all here?' The people say 'Yes', then the village head talks as well: 'These are your children? Yes, is anyone hurt?' 'NO!' So after that, the parents pay the money of redeeming their children then go home with their child, and at home, there get to be a ceremony as well, where they get to shower you with money and dancing for you".

Parents pay money to the chief and initiators in order to redeem their children after which they take them home where the initiate is showered with money and people dance for him or her. One 34-year-old male *lombwe* said that this money that is showered on the girls on the day they come out of the initiation camp does not belong to the girl herself: the *lombwe* takes it all regardless of how much it can be. This is because the *lombwe* did a lot of work when the girl was in the camp. The time in the camp, as narrated by an 18-

year-old male informant, is spent on eating, singing, playing games and dancing to the beating of drums when they wake up.

5.8 Advice given to boys and girls during initiation

One issue which came out quite strongly was that most of the time at the initiation camp is spent on advising boys and girls on a number of issues including sex and other related issues, as highlighted earlier.

“We tell them that when they go home, they should not be disrespectful to their mothers or their fathers, or they should not say bad things about their parents. When they go home after being initiated, they should not go to their parent’s bedroom because you might find some private things of your parents and you are not supposed to see such things because you are too young. We encourage them to knock before entering a bathroom or the house, because the house belongs to the parents and not them, so they have to respect them as their parents. We tell them that entering a house without a knock, they could find their parents having sex in the house and they would say that the child is so rude. We tell them the truth and we do not hide any word from them. Before entering a house, they have to knock or say, ‘*Zikomo, zikomo, zikomo,*’ and when they do not get any response, they have to know that there is no one in the house and they then can enter into the house and do whatever they want to do and then they have to get out. This should also happen when they want to go the bathroom or toilet. Even when they finish eating food (*nsima*), children are the ones who are supposed to remove the plates and they are not supposed to wash their hands before their fathers do. Elders have to start washing their hands and they will be last to wash their hands. When parents are telling children to do any particular task, e.g. going to the market, the children are not supposed to refuse or say no to what their parents have told them to do. Even when they tell them to look after their younger siblings, they should not refuse because it means that their parents are occupied with other things or they want to do something that would benefit the children themselves. Parents tend to give children tasks according to their age and when the children refuse to do the tasks, the parents got worried”, (42-year-old male *lombwe*).

“Nothing out of the ordinary. This is just how it is practiced in a playful manner. There is nothing to it apart from telling them how to respect others, telling them about how they should conduct themselves when they go home. There is nothing obscene there. We just talk to them about how people behave. So, we stay there for as long as a month then let them out the following month ... But when you decide that your children go for *nsondo* only, we take the child. We do not build *simba*, we build a proper house like this one. Then we construct a fence all around it. We sprinkle the girls with flour there and then lay them down and make them crawl into the house. After that we tell them of good practices. In the next morning we bathe the children and sit with them telling them what they are supposed to be doing. This may take a month then we let them out. That is *nsondo* there”, (*Nankungwi*).

Most informants talked about the advice that is given during initiation ceremonies and this advice dwells on the importance of respecting their parents and other elderly persons and also the need to help their parents in performing chores. There are songs that people sing during initiation ceremonies which are aimed at advising initiates how to conduct themselves in the community for example the following songs: e.g. *Tachira gasala kokoya*: this song means children should go to their fields with their parents. What happens is that these boys just stay home as their parents go to the field; during the initiation ceremony

such a song is sang as a way of advising boys to be helping their parents in the fields. The song continues like *kulima kungulimaku skatenji malayi timalisye* (singing in Yao). In Chichewa this means *kulima ndikulimaku, ndasiya katchile'ka mawa ndimaliza*: this means I am working in the field and I have left some bush which I will clear tomorrow. In this song the boys are being advised that this is an insult. There is no way you can clear all the weeds in the field and leave only in the middle. The other song is *kulaga kwangulagaku okuluma ngodyi ndineno kwachiwanangu wandala kwa ndandala* (singing in Yao). In Chichewa this means *kuvutika komwe ndikuvutikaku koluma luzi ndi mano*. This means the problems I am facing now, cutting ropes with my teeth and the father has so many children but he is busy doing everything alone, he is making a fence, he is holding the fence together by himself and tying the ropes together alone as well yet the children are just there watching him struggle which is not good. These songs therefore teach young people to help their parents.

One 50-year-old male informant reported that in the past, as soon as the child stopped breastfeeding, he or she would go and live with his or her grandparents and that such a practice is uncommon these days. Therefore, nowadays, children spend less time with grandparents than in the past. In addition to this, boys were also threatened that women actually can infect boys with diseases. They were also told about how women delivered.

Informant: They used to tell us how a woman can kill you with diseases so you have to be careful, how a woman gives birth, this and that.

Interviewer: Used to tell you how a woman gives birth?

Informant. Yes, everything, even the little ones were able to know how things go, how to respect elders and especially in the bedroom.

In addition to respecting parents, initiates are also told to have sex as narrated by a 24-year-old male informant below.

Interviewer: So, in the three weeks, they just keep you, or what happens?

Informant: We get some advice, like when you go home respect parents.

Interviewer: What do they tell you to do?

Informant: [Laughing] Those ones they tell us indeed [laughing].

Interviewer: About what? I have no idea.

Informant: About sex, they tell us to have sex with girls before we go home.

Interviewer: Do they tell you specific age?

Informant: Ah, some just say, when you leave here, you will start feeling like that so you should do it, you should *taya fumbi* [throw away the dust], some call it that.

Interviewer: So, at seven years, what did they tell you?

Informant: They told me that and I just said mmmh at six years to start doing this, is not good, it is good I abstain and continue with school maybe in the future, so I continued with school up to Standard 4.

Although this informant was small and was aged six or seven years old when he went for the initiation ceremony, he reported that he was told to have sex but did not do it at the time and only started having sex when he was 14 years old. He, therefore, did not take the advice.

“I didn’t take the advice, because when that happens, you don’t respect parents and see what is happening, all good things turn and you feel if I am able to do this, I am [a] grown [up], you stop respecting parents, stop going to school, so I chose not start [having sex]”, (24-year-old male informant).

Kusasa fumbi or *kutaya fumbi* involves having sex and some informants said that they were informed that if they did not undergo this rite their penis would rot/wilt. A 24-year-old male informant reported that while he did not have sex after the initiation ceremony as advised, he, however, knew some friends who he was with in the initiation camp who were involved in *kusasa fumbi* after they graduated from the initiation camp. Some informants reported that in their time they were not told to engage in *kusasa fumbi* as things had started changing, as narrated by a 24-year-old male informant.

Interviewer: Ok, what are some of the things you are told to do and not to do once you are out of there [initiation camp]? Let us start with those you are told to do, be it something that on your own you would not think of doing but you were simply told to do them?

Informant: Like in our time, the only thing that I found strange was about *kusasa fumbi*. But what I can say is at this time things had started changing, we were told that our friends that came before us were being told to do so to avoid the genitals wilting.

Interviewer: Wilting?

Informant: Yes, they said the penis would develop holes if we are not using it. They said this is what your friends were being told but since things are changing you will not face this. However, the only thing I found strange was that we were told that a person who has not been initiated should not be allowed to go to the graveyard.

The issue about initiates being advised to experiment with sex seems to still be happening: a 12-year-old male informant who had just been initiated, at first was hesitant to tell the interviewer about the things they were told during the initiation ceremony, but later he did disclose that when he was in the initiation camp he was advised to have sex once he graduated. There was a 65-year-old male informant who said that *kusasa fumbi* was ‘no longer common’ in his community, which implied that to some extent this was still being practised. Some informants argued that previously older girls and boys, for example those aged 15, 16 or 17, were the ones who were being initiated but as of now very young girls and boys are being initiated¹⁷ hence there is no need to tell them about sex and related issues.

“In the past they were told to sleep with women when they go out. I didn’t find this in my time but I hear they were told to *sasa fumbi* which means have sex. So after the chief told us stop doing this, we stopped telling them”, (34-year-old male *lombwe*).

A *nankungwi* confirmed that *kusasa fumbi* used to happen but not now:

¹⁷ From this study, it did not become clear what the main reason is why initiation is taking place at earlier age.

Interviewer: How about the issue of trying out to have sex after they get out of initiation ceremony?

Informant: No, that is not what we tell them. We tell them to abstain, growing up does not mean to engage in sexual intercourse.

This 34-year-old male *lombwe* said that these days boys are even threatened that if they go and have sex, the *ngaliba* will come and cut you again hence the children are scared of doing it. Instead of engaging in sex, this 34-year-old male *lombwe* said that they tell the initiates to work hard in school. Unlike in the past, this *lombwe* added that they even carry books to the initiation camp so that initiates can also study while they are out there.

“We tell them that after they go out they should work hard in school and after school they should not just be roaming up and down they should be studying so that maybe in the future they can help us”, (34-year-old male *lombwe*).

“We give them now the advice (*mwambo*) about respect and everything. Then we take the school books they brought because the chief told us that the children should be studying when they are there during their free time instead of just playing. They do this till it is time to go out”, (34-year-old male *lombwe*).

“One way of making sure we encourage them on their education is to remind them that when they are out of *simba* they should go back to school. We already make sure that *simba* takes place during school holidays so that we do not coincide with their school calendar. Some of them would finish *simba* on a Friday so that they should go to school on the next Monday...”, (*Nankungwi*).

With regard to *kusasa fumbi*, female informants also acknowledged having heard about this, some engaged in this rite while others reported knowing friends they went to the initiation ceremony with who did this. For example, a 28-year-old female informant reported that she fell sick when they went to the initiation camp but her friends were informed about *kusasa fumbi*.

“I can say that as for me being totally honest I fell sick at the *simba*, so it turned out that some of my friends were told to do *kusasa fumbi* because they said they were getting *dusty* as they were there. The process of dusting off was not properly explained but in literal sense it meant sleeping with a man”, (28-year-old female informant).

This 28-year-old informant reported that she only started having sex at 15. In some cases, girls for example, are threatened that they will feel a lot of pain if they do not have sex (i.e. *kusasa fumbi*) after attending the initiation ceremony.

“... but the main reason why I started having sex was that I had met a woman who asked if I had ever slept with a man before, and I said no. So, she told me that I should know that if I do not sleep with a man soon I will feel a lot of pain in the future if I ever decide to sleep with a man. She said that there is a certain vein inside my vagina that needs to be broken by a man so that I mature. If you do not do it now the man will break it in a very painful way because the man will use all his force, so to avoid that you have to do it now. So, I used to fear the pain the woman had warned me about. However, thanks to God I started having my period before I even slept with a man. I then realized the woman was just lying to me”, (24-year-old female informant).

During initiation ceremonies, girls were also taught how to have sex, as for example narrated by a 24-year-old female informant:

Informant: We also learn how to dance. These dances, however, more of teach us how to handle a man in bed only that we were young we did not realise this. Little by little as I was going through puberty I started realizing what the dances were for.

Interviewer: What type of dances are these? Are these to make you bodies loosen up?

Informant: Yes.

Interviewer: Which part exactly, the waist?

Informant: Yes, there were some songs that made us lie down not the whole body though, then another girl would come on top and would be dancing in a way you are moving the waist towards each other. They would also be shouting 'yes do it like that, you will see that things will be well for you' as you are dancing.

This dance mimicked the sexual act. Men and women who have been initiated are free to go to the initiation camps and provide advice to the initiates. Some actually stay there for the period of the initiation ceremony. A 28-year-old female informant who attends initiation ceremonies as a *lombwe* reported that the songs contain very strong messages and she explained that there have been minor changes in the language used in these songs and such songs tend to encourage girls to engage in sex.

"Kangaika kogona usiku ndi mwamuna kangaika ndimatele changer sitepe (You sleep with a man at night you have to be changing positions) so the time we started having sex we could relate with those songs", (28-year-old female informant).

On the other hand, one 26-year-old female *lombwe* said that during the initiation ceremonies they do not tell the girls about sex as they are too young. She said that the girls learn these things at school.

"Mm for the girls we do not tell them about sex. When they start periods, they do learn this at school, they learn sex at school. They are told that they should take contraceptive methods at school. What do they mean by this? It means they should have sex. At initiation camp, we do not tell them about this", (26-year-old female *lombwe*).

Informants were also asked if they felt that the conduct of initiation ceremonies should change. One informant narrated that the initiation ceremonies should continue but that all things which encourage children to start having sex should be removed.

"I think there can be a few changes and additions to how these initiation ceremonies take place. I am not saying that they should end because they are part of our culture. However, we need to look at these practices in relation to the times we are passing through because the time our elders were initiated in the 1960's, 70s or 90's there is a difference. Back then they were being initiated as grown-ups, after they have already started their periods which meant they were just doing all the ceremonies including the *ndakula* together. What I would have wanted to change is about sex, they explain them very well. They should remove the parts that act more of encouraging the children to start sex and put in concepts of how they can avoid these ways", (24-year-old female informant).

This implied that girls and boys who attend initiation ceremonies are still encouraged to experiment with sex and hence there is a need to effectively communicate to them SRH information as narrated by a 28-year-old female informant.

“We should not teach them songs that give out negative meanings. Like some of the songs I was singing for you if you were to teach them to a child now they would want to try them. Like the ones one had to lie down and another person comes on top teaches them bad behaviour. Nowadays, girls start their periods very young 8, 10 they have started. Just yesterday the child of my friend who works together with me has started [having periods]. The child that lives with me asked me how old she is, I told her she is 12. She is like I was saying she is 11, she is sick, she has started having her period. She is very young, 12 years old, in standard 5 but has started having her period, so if we are not frank with her, what will happen by the time she reaches standard 8. We have to tell them about their health. Ways on how they can refrain from sex and deal away with sexual feelings. That would make a good *simba* which is relating to the times we are going through. Initiation ceremonies should still be there”, (28-year-old female informant).

As for the girls, one 50-year-old female informant said that they were taught about marriage and how they should treat their husband. In addition, issues around menstruation were discussed, as reported in Section 5.2

“Some of the things were about how when we get older we would get married and there were some things that they said we were to do for our husbands. Things like carrying them on our backs as they got out of the bathroom, that when the husband arrives at home, the wife is to kneel as she greets him and should massage the husband on every part of their body”, (50-year-old female informant).

“Then afterwards they started to counsel us saying now that we have started our periods we should not be climbing trees because we risk making the cloth that we use during periods to fall which would be embarrassing. Of all the initiation ceremonies that girls go through, this is the scariest. They tell us not to pass our fathers at their back, we should not be the ones that fry maize for our fathers. Even when it’s your husband and you are in your periods, you should not sleep in the same bed with them but make yourself comfortable somewhere else until you finish your periods. They tell us to be observant of the colour of the secretions from the vagina as they turn from reddish to clear or white. In the time that one is in the periods, they should display red beads to indicate to the husband that they are in their periods. When you are finished, you display white beads and that will tell your husband that you are now finished with your periods and they would be able to sleep with their wife”, (50-year-old female informant).

A *nankungwi* further said that during initiation ceremonies girls were advised to take care of their marriages and satisfy the man’s needs including boiling bathing water for him, preparing food and washing the genitals after sex so that ‘if the man wants to sleep with them again the same night, the man should be able to do so when they are clean’. In addition to this, a 50-year-old woman also said that initiators did not advise them to experiment with sex but advised to pull each other’s labia.

Informant: We were not told that but during our time when we were being initiated, we were told to pull on each other’s labia. We were not told to experiment [with sex] but to pull on each other’s labia.

Interviewer: Why did they tell you to pull on each other's labia?

Informant: They said there are some men that do not like girls without extended labia. Most of us Muslims found it disgusting but others were doing it.

The pulling of the labia was also mentioned by a 13-year-old female informant:

"there is something they also said – that we would have to pull our labias but for me they didn't tell me, they said this on the first days as I missed them, so this is said to be done at home, that your guardian should show you how."

There are also some songs which are sung to encourage girls to pull their labia as sung by a 28-year-old female informant during the interview.

Anyamata aku chanco (Boys from Chanco (Chancellor College))

Amafuna kundimenya (They wanted to beat me)

Kundimenyela nyini zanga (Beating my vagina)

Ndavutika ndikukoka (I have spent time/energy pulling them)

Machendevu nandiluma (Translation unclear)

Amayi ede eehh ndalawulidwa (My mother ede eehh I have been obscenized against)

The 28-year-old female informant said that these songs were to make girls know that the vagina/labia must be pulled so that men should have something to play with. An 18-year-old female informant echoed this and emphasised that the extended labia help when one is having sex as the man plays with them.

5.9 Decision making on attendance of initiation ceremonies

Most informants reported that they did not make their own decisions to attend the initiation ceremonies: their parents made the decision for them and this was regardless of the age and sex of the informant.

"Like in our time, it was not up to you to decide, our parents were the ones responsible ... You were just told by your parents that 'I want you to get initiated'", (20-year-old male informant).

"They didn't tell me, they were talking like husband and wife, this boy has grown, he needs to go for initiation so after they agreed, they called on me and said: 'our son you have grown and you need to get circumcised' and I said ok fine then I went", (20-year-old male informant).

One female *lombwe* also reported that it is really up to the parents to make the decision when (and at what age) their children will be initiated. A 25-year-old young man emphasised that the whole process of initiation is managed by the village head but parents are the ones who make decisions that their children should be initiated: parents are the ones who bring the issue to the village head after they have made the decision. Parents, according to informants, make these decisions after they have observed that their child has 'grown'.

While in most cases parents are the ones who make the decisions for their children to attend initiation ceremonies, there are also situations when girls and boys make their own decisions. For example, an 18-year-old female informant reported that she lived in Lilongwe at the time with her parents who at some

point sent her to their home for a holiday, and when she saw her friends going for initiation, she decided to attend.

“I came for a holiday and when I saw how people were running for initiation, yearning for it, then I started getting interested and wanted to go as well”, (18-year-old female informant).

Her grandmother did not object when she said she wanted to attend the initiation ceremony and before this time she did not know anything about it. In addition to this, children can also be influenced to attend initiation ceremonies by their friends who have been initiated and this is despite the fact that their parents may not be prepared to send them for initiation.

“What happens is that girls who have been initiated before attract those who have not yet been initiated. It is more like mockery for all those who have not yet gone for initiation. As a result, they get attracted. Sometimes children just enter *simba* without the consent of their parents because their parents are not fully prepared to send them there. Once the child has entered *simba* that is it”, (28-year-old female informant).

“Sometimes as we socialise with the boys that have already been initiated they would tell us we are missing out on good things that are found at the *simba*. They would tell us that when you are there you sleep on a mattress. So being village people, you have never slept on a mattress before, always sleep on a mat, so you were attracted like let me go and have a feel of this mattress”, (20-year-old male informant).

Lastly, one female *lombwe* aged 26 years said that children are not forced to undergo initiation ceremonies: she added that if parents say that they do not want their child to be initiated, they are not initiated. She, however, acknowledged that while she has never forced any child to be initiated, there are such cases of force, and the main reasons why some *lombwes* do this is that they want the money that parents are supposed to pay them. This demonstrates that while parents can make decisions about their children attending initiation ceremonies, in some cases children can also make their own decisions, being influenced by their friends, or they can actually be forced to attend these ceremonies.

5.10 Reasons for attending initiation ceremonies

One of the main reasons for conducting initiation ceremonies is to inculcate discipline in boys and girls and ensure that they are properly counselled on issues regarding their life including the need for them to respect their parents, as also discussed in Section 5.8).

“If I remember correctly, it was said that if a child does not get initiated that child lacks discipline. So, our parents used to say we should go and get disciplined”, (20-year-old male informant).

“The benefit is the behaviour changes from the way it was before, if we were rude to parents, we get to be respectful”, (24-year-old male informant).

One advantage for attending initiation ceremonies which was stressed throughout most interviews was its impact on the behaviour of initiates as they learn about respect, the importance of treating others well and how to behave towards others. These initiation ceremonies are, therefore, aimed at transforming the behaviour of girls and boys.

“Whatever they were doing around their father: they used to enter their bathroom anyhow, they used to enter their bedroom anyhow, they were disrespectful to their father, they could swear at their mother, sister and brother. They have to change all of this behaviour and adopt the behaviour that we have taught them in *simba*. Some of them listen but there are others that do not listen to the advice”, (70+ years old *nankungwi*).

“We can say that nowadays most of the children are not taking into consideration the advices that we gave them because in the past, children were grasping the advices and they were able to practice them when they go home. The children are not taking the advices seriously [nowadays] because they are initiated while they are very young. This happens because some people are just interested with the money that they would receive in course of initiating the child and they do not mind about the age of the child in as far as initiating ceremony is concerned”, (42-year-old *lombwe*).

During the initiation ceremony, children, both boys and girls, are advised not to go into their parents’ bedroom and are told, as narrated by one female *lombwe*, that if they go there they may find a snake referring to the piece of cloth that parents use after having sex: it might be wrinkled and the boys/girls may ask what it is when they find this in the bedroom, or they may find that their parents are having sex. If they mention the piece of cloth, they will know it but they refer to it as a snake. These pieces of advice come from the *anankungwi* and when these leave the initiation camp, *lombwes* continue giving such advice. A 50-year-old female informant acknowledged that she was disrespectful to her father before she was initiated as, for example, she would give water to him while standing (without kneeling down) and hence her aunt advised her that it would be good if she attended an initiation ceremony. During the initiation ceremony, initiates are taught lessons using different channels including songs.

“Ok what was happening is that as we are getting initiated we used to sing and clap hands which we call *makochi*. These songs had a lot of meanings so they used to explain to us in details what these songs meant”, (20-year-old male informant).

There were some informants who reported that, apart from the advice they get, they did not benefit anything from the initiation ceremonies.

“Ah, nothing I benefited, just going there to play, there is nothing I gained”, (18-year-old female informant).

This 18-year-old women further explained that while initiates are showered with money, this money does not necessarily go to them: it goes to the initiator and *lombwe* and the initiated girl gets nothing. What attracts boys and girls to these ceremonies are the fine clothes including shoes they get when they graduate. This was echoed by both male and female initiators who also emphasised that there is no financial or material benefit from participating in initiation ceremonies: the initiates gain good morals and for girls, any man who sees them can observe how well-mannered these girls are. A 28-year-old female informant shared an example of how the initiates were taught to have good morals including the fact that stealing was bad.

Respondent: mmhhh [clears throat] ok sometimes we are taught good cultural practices like they would hide some things and tell us to look for them.

Interviewer: Where?

Respondent: They could just hide them anywhere they wanted like around the house since we live inside a fence. They could just show us the object, lock us inside the house then tell us to go look for it outside. The person who finds it was given a bit of a punishment because she has shown that she likes to look for things inside her parents' house like she likes to steal. So, they were teaching us that stealing is not allowed and we do not have to be look for things anyhow.

One issue which strongly came out from this study was that the conduct of initiation ceremonies is a cultural practice and, for example, as mentioned by a 50+ year old male informant, this has been passed on from one generation to another: 'our parents went through it and we had to go through it as well'. A *nankungwi* also said that the conduct of initiation ceremonies is a cultural thing.

"You should listen carefully. I said they should learn our traditions [*mwambo*], they should listen to and learn our morals so that they should respect parents at home. They should be of good behaviour which respect their fathers. They should learn good behaviours and roles relating to household chores. What is there is to teach girls work, about how to behave towards their parents and not go to their bathroom anyhow ...", (*Nankungwi*).

"We just do it because of culture, the way our ancestors were doing, they should just go and get advice maybe they will stop being rude, that is what happens not like there is something odd, no", (40-year-old female *lombwe*).

In addition to initiation being a cultural practice, boys are also circumcised because this is written in the Quran and the Bible.

"Yes, the Islamic books. Apart from the Islamic books, even in the Bible, there is circumcision as well. So we tend to follow what was happening in the historical times. The Quran also explains clearly the time when a boy is supposed to get circumcised. For religious purposes, boys ... are supposed to get circumcised", (42-year-old male *lombwe*).

While, in general, there was a feeling that there was no problem if a boy is not circumcised, one 42-year-old male *lombwe* had some concerns: it is wrong if a boy is not circumcised because according to the Bible or Quran, a person who has not been circumcised, is said to do something that is contrary to the word of God/Allah and he is, therefore, looked at differently.

"We take him as an abnormal/mad person because he is doing things that are against the Bible or Quran; things that are contrary to what Bible or Quran says, since the Bible or Quran encourages us to do circumcision. We preach using the Bible or Quran to the people and the same Bible or Quran clearly says that a male person has to be circumcised, so if you do not get circumcised it means that you are worshipping idols", (42-year-old male *lombwe*).

As discussed in the previous Section, messages which are communicated to uninitiated boys and girls by their friends who have been initiated tend to attract them to go for initiation ceremonies and it does not really matter whether these messages are correct or not. For example, a 50-year-old female informant said that her aunt told her that she will get money after attending the initiation ceremony and this is what attracted her to go. Two *lombwes* added that it is important that the boys should attend initiation ceremonies and be circumcised to prevent the spread of sexually transmitted diseases.

“Boys are initiated and I believe even on the radio they say that initiation is very important for boys because if they are not initiated, they can infect the females with infections. If one is circumcised, he does not”, (26-year-old female *lombwe*).

The 26-year-old female *lombwe* gave examples of STIs such as syphilis, gonorrhoea and HIV and a 42-year-old male *lombwe* also emphasised that circumcision is a way of preventing HIV.

“Nowadays, it is good for a boy to be circumcised because it helps them to be protected against HIV unlike the person who is not circumcised. For example, uncircumcised persons have less protection against STIs because when a person is being circumcised, they remove the foreskin of the penis. Uncircumcised persons tend to have something like maize bran (*madeya*¹⁸) in their foreskins and it is very unhygienic because even water does not go or penetrate to the foreskins. You need to clean it by yourself and when you forget, the bran remains there. So, it is very disgusting to be an uncircumcised person. People who are circumcised do not have foreskins hence they do not have something like maize bran that is found on the foreskins of the penis which could result in certain problems or diseases”, (42 year old male *lombwe*).

A 34-year-old male *lombwe* further elaborated that the person who is circumcised is like a good ‘peeled cassava’. The boys were also being told by their peers that a boy who has been initiated is sweet in bed and this was especially related to the conduct of circumcision.

“Others say to avoid contracting sexually transmitted diseases, others say it is just for sweetness purposes when you are sleeping with a girl”, (20-year-old male informant).

The widespread belief in the community that men who are circumcised are sweet in bed made some boys to be circumcised. One 25-year-old female informant actually mentioned even the girls also accept boys who have been initiated and it is not difficult to get them: girls do not accept uncircumcised boys because they say you have *madeya* inside you. While among the Yao, the whole foreskin of the penis is removed, for other tribes a small cut is made in a rite called *chidontoto* and hence they are said not be as sweet.

“This part complicates [things] and yet with ours it [penis] has no disturbance, it is free, it just goes in easily, when about to come, they come so deep”, (25-year-old male informant).

“With us we are able to have breaks, and you can control, you can remove for some time but the Chewa eh, when they are coming, they come with the *madeya* inside from the foreskin, so in that way there get to infect the girl with diseases easily, but with us, we are clean”, (25-year-old male informant).

Some male informants reported that circumcision is good because after having sex with a girl all the sperms come out and they do not remain anywhere and this is unlike those who are not circumcised, as narrated by a 24-year-old young man.

“Because when those things [sperms] remain huh, today they remain, tomorrow they remain, they may get rotten and they start some diseases”, (24-year-old male informant).

¹⁸ Madeya is maize bran referring to the stuff which remains in the penis.

One male initiator also added that a male person who has not been initiated is not allowed to stand and read the *chitabu* in the mosque: the desire by boys to read this attracts them to be initiated.

“The other thing is, at the mosque, for someone who is not initiated, they cannot stand and read out *chitabu*”, (Male initiator).

While initiation ceremonies aim at impacting on the behaviour of boys and girls, there was a feeling that this can as well be done by the parents themselves.

“... However, I still see that those things are possible for parents to tell their children ... the only problem is that parents do not have the capability to be free and open with their children. They end up sending their children to be counselled by others who they do not know so well. What if those people teach your children things you would not like. We end up sending our children to *simba*. At times parents also go there and report what their children do at home and they are sleeping around ... they just end up telling the child you should stop doing what your parents are saying. They do not elaborate on what exactly the child should stop doing so I do not see any reason for sending children there”, (28-year-old female informant).

The attendance of initiation ceremonies is an indication that one has grown up and several informants mentioned that they attended the ceremony ‘because I was a grown up’. In some cases, boys and girls attend initiation ceremonies out of interest: for example, as mentioned earlier, an 18-year-old female informant who stayed with her parents in Lilongwe and went home to Machinga for a holiday: when she saw how people were running for initiation she became interested and went for it. These results generally demonstrate that there are quite a number of reasons for attending initiation ceremonies: getting counselled, initiation being part of the prevailing culture, the perception of circumcised boys being ‘sweet’, circumcised boys being *clean*, the perception that circumcision prevents HIV infection and once these boys are initiated/circumcised they can read *chitabu*.

5.11 Reasons for not attending initiation ceremonies

There were some informants, both young and old, who said that at the time they decided to go for initiation ceremonies, there were no people who decided not to attend these ceremonies because the event is perceived as good.

“No there was none. I can say that initiation ceremonies are seasonal and are taken as a good thing, so when they are happening everyone wants to be part of them”, (20-year-old male informant).

“Mmmhh I have not seen anyone of my age who was never initiated in this area. Every one of my age has gone either to *jando* or the hospital”, (50+ old male informant).

One *nankungwi* said that there are some people in her community who have not been initiated and they can grow and have children of their own. This statement was also echoed by a number of other informants, for example one 25-year-old male informant said that this is especially the case when parents are of the Chewa origin who do not want their children to be initiated. While it is mainly Muslims who go for initiation, one *nankungwi* reported that other religious groups, including some Christians, also attend these ceremonies. There are people of the Yao origin who are also not initiated and nowadays this is perceived as normal.

“Mmmhh nowadays it is normal. Like I stay with my sister’s daughter who is 16 years old and has never thought of going for initiation ceremony. I have also convinced her that there is nothing important really about these ceremonies. She is 16 years old and in Standard 7 but has not been initiated and it is very okay with us. However, some of her friends do laugh at her for that. Even my friends do sometimes try to convince me in taking her to *simba* [initiation camp] to get *mwambo* [advice on traditions]. But I really do not take it seriously because we are okay like that. I do not see any alarming thing that if she does not go to *simba* [it] can have a big impact on her life”, (28-year-old female informant).

This 28-year-old female informant emphasised that in the past, only the very stubborn children could not attend initiation ceremonies, but most children went to attend as per prevailing culture. It was perceived as culturally wrong for a child not to grow without being initiated. Even children who grew up elsewhere away from their natal villages would be called to attend initiation ceremonies. In the past it was difficult for a child not to be initiated as, for example explained by a 50+ old male informant, the uninitiated persons were not worthy to be among their initiated peers and they were actually discriminated. This 50+ year old man explained that as long as someone was not initiated he or she was perceived as a child regardless of age.

“Yes, even if the person who is a grown-up did not get initiated, [he or she] was taken as a child as compared to a child who got initiated”, (50+ year old man).

This is why in order to avoid being ridiculed, people went for initiation ceremonies so that they should be taken as grown-ups. This 50+ year old man further said that he never saw anyone of his age in his community who did not attend the initiation ceremony. One 12-year-old male informant, however, reported that these days people who are initiated and those who are not do play together. The *nankungwi* and other informants explained that there is no punishment which is given to children who have not been initiated.

“Nothing would have happened as there are others who have never gone to initiation ceremonies and there’s nothing bad that happened to them”, (50-year-old woman).

The major problem, however, with children who have not been initiated is that they have not received the necessary counselling which children receive during initiation ceremonies and will never know how to properly behave towards others including respecting their parents and other elders in their community.

“Yes, there was going to be a difference. We learn a lot of things at the initiation ceremony such as respecting our elders. Being initiated allows one to know their limits when talking to older people. One knows their boundaries and that if they violate that they will be slapped. If you see an older person carrying a heavy load, we are trained to help them by carrying that heavy load. We were also told to go to school, go to church and then attend *madrasa* [Islamic school]”, (25-year-old male informant).

As mentioned before, initiation ceremonies are not cheap: once a child is sent to the initiation camps, parents are supposed to send food on an everyday basis and when they graduate they are supposed to wear new clothes. One 12-year-old boy explained that there are some people who have not been initiated because their parents or guardians do not have enough food to last for the duration of the initiation ceremony.

5.12 Disadvantages of attending initiation ceremonies

There are a number of reasons why children, both boys and girls, attend initiation ceremonies. Informants were also asked about what they considered to be the disadvantages of attending initiation ceremonies. Some informants had the view that there were no disadvantages of attending initiation ceremonies for example as stated by a 24-year-old male informant.

“I do not think there is any, maybe the generations coming will be the ones to mend the flaws of how things are done now ...”, (24-year-old male informant).

However, a number of disadvantages of attending initiation ceremonies were mentioned by informants. There is a lot of food at the initiation ceremonies and there was a general feeling that this can put households at risk of food insecurity.

“Sometimes when we go there we get to put our households at risk of food insecurity as the food gets to be used through the initiations, and during the coming out, it is like a party and food gets finished”, (24-year-old male informant).

“The disadvantages I will say in brief... It happens that you have accepted your child to be initiated. You have little food remaining with you. When the child comes out from the initiation camp, you worry ... ‘I had food but I am starving now because I spent all of it at the initiation ceremony’. You have to prepare otherwise you will regret that ‘initiation has depleted my food’”, (26-year-old female *lombwe*).

Some children who have not been initiated tend to complain as to why their parents are not taking them to the initiation ceremonies when they see that all their friends have gone there. A child may, therefore, run to the initiation ceremony and once s/he enters the camp, s/he does not return until s/he is initiated.

“Because if a child enters there, he doesn’t come back until they initiate him, so the parents are pressured to bring him food anyway”, (25-year-old male informant).

Parents are, therefore, forced to take the food to the camp every day for the duration the child is there. They may even get loans in order to ensure that the child and other people in the camp have food for the whole initiation period, as narrated by a 25-year-old male informant below.

Interviewer: What needs to happen on the food issue, as you said people want the process but the issue is food?

Informant: There is nothing that can happen. The food is needed, and it is every day for a month.

Interviewer: Does it happen for parents to miss a day?

Informant: No, it doesn’t happen.

Interviewer: Does it happen people getting into loans for initiations?

Informant: It happens a lot, because some people start initiations on the condition that they should have MK10,000 in the house and this may not be there, they may get a loan, I will give you back, I will do some farm *ganyu* (piece work) for you, so the loans are there and it gets hard for parents.

This was also narrated by a 26-year-old female *lombwe* who explained the various amounts that parents pay to the TA, group village headman and the *ngaliba*.

Informant: Nowadays, for someone to be initiated, it requires his/her parents to have money since initiation ceremonies are very expensive ...

Interviewer: Approximately, how much does it cost for a child to be initiated?

Informant: It does not require a lot of money when the child is going to the initiation ceremony. May be the group village head would be given MK 500, the TA would charge MK 500 and the *nakanga* would charge MK 300.

Interviewer: Almost MK 1,300?

Informant: Yes. The *ngaliba* charge the same amount the TA charged. For instance, if the TA charges MK 300, the *ngaliba* would also charge MK 300. For the Yao people, if we spend a lot of money at the initiation ceremony, we spend it on the day when the child would be going home as part of our celebration. We give money to the child (*kusupa*)¹⁹. Sometimes, it happens that, you can keep up to MK 10,000 or MK 7,000 in preparation for *kusupa* or the celebration, after paying all the charges to the TA, group village head, *nakanga* etc. During the day of releasing the children, parents also pay money before taking the child. The parents pay the money on top of what they already paid the time when the child was going for initiation. The parents also give the money to the *lombwe* who was responsible for taking care of their child while he was at *simba*, so that he could use it to buy soap. That is why it cost a lot of money...

Interviewer: Indeed! For a child to get initiated, parents need to have a lot of money.

This 26-year-old *lombwe* explained that if the parents do not have the money the child can grow up to 10 years without being initiated.

There was only one young male informant who was initiated in 2017 who said that one of the disadvantages of the initiation ceremonies is the general lack of hygiene, as the waste including foreskins of the penis are just thrown around. In addition to this, this boy did mention that initiates are actually beaten up in order for them to learn to be respectful. In some cases, the messages which boys and girls are told during the initiation ceremonies are not really understood. One 24-year-old male informant said that during the initiation ceremonies, they are told that they should not enter their parent's bedroom and bathroom.

"One, the things told are not good; like they say don't enter your mother and father's bedroom, don't use their bathroom, that's the bad thing as a child cannot build its own house and we go there [initiation ceremony] at 6, can we build a house?", (24-year-old male informant).

One 50+ year old male informant reported that one of the problems with initiation ceremonies is when initiates are being told to experiment with sex. After attending initiation ceremonies, communities and initiates see themselves as grown-ups hence they start engaging in things which are for grown-ups.

¹⁹ The child is showered with money, actually not given the money. The money is meant for the initiators and *lombwes*, not for the child.

“Usually when a girl comes back from *chinamwali* [initiation ceremony] people take her as a grown-up. The girl also sees herself as a grown-up just because of being initiated. This encourages the girl to start doing things that are for grown-ups”, (28-year-old female informant).

This 28-year-old female informant talked about ‘things of grown-ups’ but did not elaborate. What she meant was that when girls feel like they are adults they start having sexual intercourse. Lastly, during the period of initiation children stay in-doors and such type of life was perceived by some informants as hard as mentioned by one 10-year-old male informant.

5.13 Changes in the way initiation ceremonies are conducted

5.13.1 Changes in initiation ceremonies for boys

There were some informants who reported that the conduct of initiation ceremonies has not really changed, for example, a 25-year-old male informant. A 10-year-old boy also explained that he did not see any changes in the way circumcision is conducted: both in the past and now the foreskin of the penis is removed. However, most informants in this study reported that there have been changes in the way initiation ceremonies are conducted. For example, initially, temporary shelters were erected in the bush where initiation ceremonies including circumcision were conducted. Informants reported that some circumcisions these days are conducted in the hospital: one 12-year-old boy said that he was offered to go to the hospital for circumcision; his father, however, just told him to undergo the traditional circumcision done within the community. Other informants also explained that circumcision is sometimes conducted in the hospital environment. In some cases, the health workers visit initiation camps within the community and conduct circumcision there.

“Yes time, in the past we did not care about the medicine. Nowadays, the doctors are the ones who provide the medicines in the *simba*. They come and circumcise the boys in the shelters and, after they are done, they leave. The boys end up just staying there for two weeks then come out”, (50+ year old male informant).

The major change, according to this 50+ year old male informant, is that these days people just go to the hospital to be circumcised and when they are back to the community they put on their clothes (go for graduation).

“Once they are back they put on their clothes and life goes on. If the parents want to celebrate they are free to do so, they just call a few friends and celebrate”, (50+ year old male informant).

Previously, traditional medicines were applied on the wound and it would take a long time to heal but these days, according to informants, boys who have just been circumcised are given medicines from the hospital to aid in the healing process. The *lombwes* get the medicines from the health facilities.

“Exactly! That’s what we do. Even if I have 20 children, I go there and tell them the number of children that are expected to be circumcised, so we request the health workers to provide us with some medicine that would help the children to recover after a short period of time. Sometimes, the parents go and request medicine from the health workers to be issued for the treatment of their children. They send the medicine to the *simba* through the *lombwes*. The *lombwes* then give the medicine to the children, as one way of reducing the pain. Some people would even go to the

health facility and request the health worker to inject the medicine to the child while he is still at the *simba*, it is also possible”, (42-years-old male *lombwe*).

According to informants, the hospital circumcisions in TA Liwonde started in 2015/2016. In the past, it was not allowed to conduct circumcision in the hospitals or with the help of health workers as it was considered a taboo.

“In the past there was no hospital circumcision, people were only circumcised at initiation ceremonies. It was more of a taboo and quiet ridiculing for initiation ceremonies if a person went and got circumcised at the hospital. As of now, things have changed”, (20-year-old male informant).

One of the contributing factors to the acceptance of hospital-based circumcision has been the involvement of the police, especially if schools opened and the children were still in the initiation camps.

“I can say that this has been very common in the past five years. What has been happening is that if people are taking longer to bring the boys the police would come and burn the *simba* down. So, people were afraid of this happening to their *simba*”, (20-year-old male informant).

One 42-year-old male *lombwe* reported that there are some people who do not like the circumcision conducted in health facilities: such people cannot send their children to be circumcised at health facilities. When boys come from the health facility after being circumcised, parents are supposed to send these boys to the *simba* so that they should get some advice (*mwambo*). If a boy gets circumcised at the health facility, he would not be allowed to enter into the *simba*, because he does not know the advice which is given there. A person who has been circumcised at the facility is just the same as someone who is just staying at home as both of them have not been advised. There is no advice given to the boys at the health facilities after being circumcised; and there is a need to get this advice when circumcision is done at the hospital.

While circumcision is taking place at health facilities, it also still takes place in the initiation camps. One change which has occurred in the way initiation ceremonies are conducted is that instead of using one razor blade for circumcising many boys, these days one blade is used for one boy and then thrown away for fear of transmission HIV, as narrated by a 34-year-old male *lombwe*.

Another change which has occurred in the conduct of initiation ceremonies in TA Liwonde is the age at which this is done: one 24-year-old male informant mentioned that while in the past age was one of the main determinants of boys’ initiation, these days this is done on request regardless of age.

“Yes, these days they are not focused on age, they are just based on request, even children of three or four years may go so long as their parents allow and yet with us it was from five years and above”, (20-year-old male informant).

A few informants also mentioned that in the past, *kusasa fumbi* was emphasised as has been mentioned earlier, this seemed to have stopped. However, a 20-year-old male informant said that the group which was initiated before them was informed to do *kusasa fumbi* in order to avoid the wilting of the genitals as explained earlier. Some informants reported that *kusasa fumbi* is no longer being practised and that initiates are told to wait with sex and use condoms.

“[*Kusasa fumbi*] No longer there, they are young, before we would go with boys that age, the one who was talking to that girl there, 15, 16, 17 years old, but now very little, dwarfs”, (*Male initiator*).

“We tell them you are still young you cannot start having sex at 10 years of age. This is going to injure you. You can start maybe when you reach 18 years old or above”, (34-year-old male *lombwe*).

“Yes, we advise them not to be having plain sex because they will end up impregnating girls or even very young girls and therefore destroying their future. So we tell them if they want to have sex they should be using condoms”, (34-year-old male *lombwe*).

As mentioned earlier, the *lombwes* also said that they encourage boys and girls to work hard in school and they make sure that all initiation ceremonies are completed before the schools start.

The period of conducting initiation ceremonies seem also to have changed or to be changing: in the past initiates would be in the camp for a minimum of a month. Nowadays, however, for example as narrated by a 20-year-old male informant, initiates can be in the camp for periods of two to three weeks or less. He further explained that the rest of the lessons are done at home.

“... Like one group we were guarding was only there for three weeks and it did not really make any difference. The time their peers were starting school they were already at home and started school with them; as a result you could not even tell that that child had gone to *simba*. The main issue was that the boys should get circumcised and off we go home. Being there for more than a month was a waste of time”, (20-year-old male informant).

This 20-year-old young man added that a certain group of boys was at the initiation camp for only a week: they were circumcised at the hospital and after they came back home they were isolated for only seven days and this is mainly for boys who can only come out once the wounds are healed. The shortening of the period of initiation has also come about in order to save food: if the child is at the initiation ceremony, his or her family is supposed to provide food every day as mentioned earlier:

“Yes, and the other reason was to save food. As I said that having a child at *simba* meant cooking food every day and give him or her. The food would not only be for your child but for others as well. It could happen that a whole bag of maize would finish just because of these initiation ceremonies. On the contrary, getting circumcised at the hospital meant only paying little money and then the boys would come back home and life would go on”, (20-year-old male informant).

5.13.2 Changes in initiation ceremonies for girls

As far as initiation of girls is concerned, a number of changes have also been observed in the way these are conducted. Unlike in the past, it was mentioned by a number of informants that these days younger girls and boys are the ones who are going for initiation ceremonies unlike in the past when older girls and boys went for these ceremonies.

One of the major changes in the conduct of the initiation ceremonies for girls, as narrated by a 50-year-old woman, was that previously female genital mutilation was being practiced among young women and this was not during her time but rather during the time of her grandparents.

“Those that were counselling us told us that in the time of our grandparents they used to perform genital mutilation by cutting off the clitoris which regrettably caused a few deaths and was discontinued. They said that was the reason they made us drink the medicine”, (50-year-old woman).

Female genital mutilation was, therefore, stopped a long time ago.

None of the younger informants mentioned the changes in the conduct of *litiwo* which is, currently, an initiation ceremony for girls who have just given birth for the first time. However, a 50-year-old female informant explained that initially this ceremony was conducted before a girl delivered.

“At first, we used to do *litiwo* before the girl gave birth but that was stopped because other people could interfere and kill the unborn child and the parents wasted money”, (50-year-old female informant).

As it has been mentioned earlier, during initiation ceremonies girls were told to pull their labia as men liked playing with them. A 24-year-old female informant, however, said that this is not being done now.

“Yes, I just heard from my friends but these days as very young children are the ones joining, these things are not said”, (24-year-old female informant).

Younger people aged five or six years are also going for initiation ceremonies. Hence, they cannot talk about pulling the labia as they will not understand a thing, but a 13-year-old female informant did mention that her friends were told to pull the labia minora. Lastly, a 50-year-old woman also said that girls do not really adhere to the advice given to them during initiation ceremonies as it used to be the case previously.

“I don’t know, maybe it is this English life these days when Bakili [Bakili Muluzi, former President of Malawi] said “*Kwacha*” [dawn] then that must have given them freedoms. Another thing that has brought lack of adherence to tradition is school because some of the illustrations in books like a woman giving birth ... and this has led to disrespect to our traditions. The girls think they know everything and there would be nothing important that they can gain from us. When they explain about child birth, you wonder, did I take you at the time I was giving birth?”, (Nankungwi).

In addition to education, the coming in of organisations such as Plan Malawi has led to these changes among young people. These NGOs have created awareness among people in the area. A 20-year-old male informant explained that people have also realised that keeping children in the bush for a whole month was not really right as over this period a stubborn child cannot be changed and made upright: parents are the only ones that can help change a child because they have lived with the child for long.

5.14 Becoming a *ngaliba*, *nankungwi* and a *lombwe*

Informants were asked about how one became a *ngaliba* or a *nankungwi*. There are a number of ways in which a person can become an initiator and one of them is that the community looks at persons whose parents were initiators.

“Mostly it is a person who we know had parents that were once initiators as well. We know that that person might have inherited or learnt the skills from one of his family members. Either that person has learnt about initiating or has once conducted it”, (20-year-old male informant).

In addition to this, one can also become an initiator through dreams as explained by a male initiator.

“Being an initiator came through a dream: my uncle was an initiator, so then he was complaining to say when and where will I find someone to pass on this work to, so he found me and started

teaching me about the medicine, how to care for the *msimba* for the witches to not reach the initiates, that if they just touch them, they will die”, (Male initiator).

The uncle of this initiator had died and he appeared to the initiator in a dream and taught him how initiation is conducted. One *nankungwi* added that she was chosen because she had a sense of humour: she explained that when she went to initiation ceremonies she made people laugh and she told the initiates the truth and she was chosen because of these reasons. Lastly, one male initiator also reported that people can actually be taught or be trained to become initiators.

“There is some training or teaching: like how I initiate a boy, how do I care for them, so the training goes in that line”, (Male initiator).

This initiator added that it all depends on the person’s (potential initiator’s) interest to learn: ‘he can come and tell me I want to learn.’ One female initiator explained that in some cases there is no actual learning but one learns through observing and listening when one visits the *simba*.

“There was no actual way of learning, I just observed from when I visited *simba*. So, I learnt by observing and listening. I had my own ideas of how things should be like. So, when it comes to learning, I continually learn when parents send for me to be the counsellor to their children”, (Female initiator).

It is evident, therefore, that one can become an initiator because of parents or other family members having been initiators, through training including observing and listening, through dreams and being appointed based on one’s humorous character and knowledge of issues. As mentioned earlier, in addition to the *nakanga* and the *angaliba* and *anankungwi*, there is also a *lombwe*: this is a person who works under a *nakanga* and a 42-year-old *lombwe* explained that a *nakanga* is the one who is overall responsible for the *simba* and tells the *lombwe* what to do during the initiation ceremony. The *lombwe* is actually a guardian for the initiate and in case of male initiation, he is the one who takes care of the wounds of the boys who have been circumcised. While modern medicines are used, one 34-year-old *lombwe* said that they also apply traditional medicines which are given to them by the *angaliba* for healing the wounds: the *lombwes* themselves do not know the medicines. There are a number of ways of choosing a *lombwe*. First, one can learn from a mother who was a *lombwe* and work with her closely, as narrated by a 26-year-old female *lombwe*.

“When she takes the girls to be initiated she gave them in my hands to look after ‘take care for these girls and counsel them accordingly’ ... (26-year-old female *lombwe*).

One can also become a *lombwe* due to the fact that he or she is the one who gave the name to the child being initiated, as narrated by a 40-year-old female *lombwe*:

“To be chosen to be a *lombwe*, it is like this, when a person is pregnant, she has stayed with the pregnancy and has delivered, we give the child a name, this child’s name is so and so, so when it comes the time to initiate the child we are called as a person who gave the child the name to finish with the job and get paid money, so you go there and do everything, care for the child, cooking, [providing] bathing water, firewood is served to the child by you, the day they are coming out all the money that is given as gift in a plate for the child is yours: the person who took care of that child, that is how we do it”.

One needs to work for some time and then the community can consider promoting him to the position of *nakanga* as narrated by a 40-year-old male *lombwe*.

"At first you learn as a *lombwe* so that so should be able to know what happens at the *simba*, and how to take care of the child, whom you are responsible for. When we take good care of the children, and we have been working as a *lombwe* for several years, the community members do observe all those things and they agree that, that *lombwe* is really good because he treats the children well and he does not beat the children, the parents become happy and then you get appointed or promoted to become the president [*nakanga*] of the children at the *simba*. As a president you are entitled to tell the children what they are supposed to do. For example, when there are 40 children at the *simba*, you are responsible for taking care of all the children and everything that happens at the *simba*. It means chiefs and parents have put their trust on the *nakanga*, that is why they give him the responsibility of taking care of their children while they are at home. For the parents to be happy, it depends on the *nakanga's* work so as a *nakanga* we try our best to make the parents happy...", (42-year-old male *lombwe*).

A good *ngaliba* visits the boys in order to monitor the children's progress after being circumcised up to the day they would be released. When the *ngaliba* visits the *simba*, he meets the *nakanga* and asks him about the children's welfare and the problems they are facing, and then he is told that the children are all fine after which he goes back to his home. These days the *nakanga* even calls the *ngaliba* to inform him about the progress. The *nakangas* also inform the *ngaliba* the date when the children would be released from *simba*. A 40-year-old *lombwe* further explained that the parents of the children are also informed about the date: this is done to prepare the them and ensure that this does not crush with the school calendar.

6. Discussion

In TA Liwonde, there are a number of initiation ceremonies that are being conducted. This study reports that, while a number of initiation ceremonies exist, *nsondo*, *ndakula* and *litiwo* are the ones that are popular for females. *Nsondo* takes place before puberty, in line with what other scholars report, that this rite takes place when girls are between 6 and 13 years (Kunkeyani, 2013). Scriver et al. (2016) have reported ages ranging 7-10 for girls attending *nsondo*. The *ndakula* initiation ceremony takes place after a girl has started menstruation. The key message during *ndakula*, as reported by the MHRC (2006), is that girls should avoid sexual intercourse in order for them to prevent pregnancy. The other initiation ceremony for girls, as found in this study, is *litiwo* and this targets girls who are pregnant for the first time. Other studies have also reported that the mother of the pregnant girl is the one who organizes the *litiwo* so that elderly women can advise the girl (Kalilani-Phiri and Taulo, 2009). As for boys, there is only one initiation ceremony for them among the Yao and this is *jando* where boys are circumcised as other studies have also reported (Kalilani-Phiri and Taulo, 2008; MHRC, 2006).

As the boys and girls are taken to initiation ceremonies, they are smeared with flour and in the current study informants did not explain why this is the case. Kalilani-Phiri and Taulo (2008), however, report that this is done to request the spirits to guide the initiation ceremony so that it is peaceful throughout the time the boys and girls are there at the *ndagala* (initiation camp). This study has generally demonstrated that initiation ceremonies are still quite prevalent among the Yao in TA Liwonde, but there have been some significant changes in the way they are conducted.

The first change is the venue for initiation ceremonies: these rites were previously conducted in the bush outside the village as most informants in this study reported. These initiation camps, as for example reported by Kalilani-Phiri and Taulo (2008), were generally declared out of bounds for those who have not been initiated. Only persons who have been initiated can visit the initiation camps as reported in the current study and other studies (Kalilani-Phiri and Taulo, 2009). The current study has, however, shown that things have changed: some initiation ceremonies actually take place within the village and a house is identified where this takes place, which was never the case previously. Girls are no longer brought to the bush by traditional counsellors for extended periods to undergo initiation but are counselled in their homes by their parents, community or church elders or they camp within the house in the community (see also Scriver et al., 2016).

This study has also found that initiation ceremonies take place during school holidays to make sure that the ceremonies do not coincide with the school calendar, emphasising the importance of education. This is a major change in the conduct of initiation ceremonies: previously various studies found that initiation ceremonies coincided with the school calendar and since participation in initiation ceremonies was mandatory, girls and boys missed classes (Munthali and Zulu, 2007; Chimombo et al., 2000). In some extreme cases, girls never even returned to school because they perceived themselves as mature enough to get married as a result of having gone through the initiation rites (Chimombo et al., 2010). In the neighbouring district of Mangochi, some bylaws have been established in some communities which forbid the conduct of initiation ceremonies during school terms and cases have been reported in which village heads who disobeyed the bylaws have either been fined or been suspended by a TA (Zinga, 2017; GoM and USAID, 2013). Initiators are supposed to torch the initiation camps a week before schools start (Zinga, 2017). In the current study, it has been reported that police have intervened and torched the temporary

shelters if these were not closed by the time the schools open. There have been cases as well when police have actually intervened and rescued boys from initiation camps where they were held after schools opened (Silumbu, 2014).

The other major change which has taken place in the way initiation ceremonies are conducted is the period the initiation ceremonies take place. In the current study some informants reported that these initiation ceremonies last for one to four weeks unlike in the past when they would last for a minimum of one month. Scriver et. al. (2016), Kalilani and Taulo (2008) and MHRC (2006) have also reported that initiation ceremonies lasted for a period of not less than one month. Other scholars (e.g. Scriver et al., 2016) have also found that the period for conducting initiation ceremonies have reduced to a few weeks as reported in the current study. This current study found that factors such as costs of conducting the initiation ceremony including the fact that a lot of food is used during such events, and that since circumcision is done by health workers and wounds heal faster, there is no need for boys staying in the camp for long periods.

Initiators, both male and female, reported that encouraging boys and girls to experiment with sex as was the case previously is no longer being done in their community. It was also found that previously one blade was being used for circumcising many boys but these days one blade is used for one boy. As has been shown in this study, the advent of the HIV and AIDS epidemic is a major factor that has contributed to the discouragement of experimentation with sex after initiation ceremonies. While some informants reported that experimentation with sex is discouraged, one thing which came out was that some informants who underwent initiation ceremonies recently reported that this message was still being given to initiates: with some reporting that they knew of their friends who did *kusasa fumbi* after being initiated. Some recent studies conducted in Mangochi, a neighbouring district to Machinga, also found that *kusasa fumbi* was still being practiced and for girls this is done before or after girls have their first menstruation (Munthali et al., 2017; Banda and Kunkeyani, 2015). It has been found in this study that boys could be threatened that their private parts would rot if they did not experiment with sex rights after the initiation. Other studies have also found that the boys are threatened, for example that if they do not experiment with sex after being initiated they will experience difficulties during child birth, will become barren, will not be able to sexually satisfy women (Banda and Kunkeyani, 2015) or they will be perpetually sick (Banda and Kunkeyani, 2015; MHRC, 2006). Other changes in the conduct of *kusasa fumbi* have also been observed. For example, Kalilani-Phiri and Taulo (2008) report that *anankungwi* use medicines to do the ritual of *kusasa fumbi* themselves, as opposed to encouraging the girls to have sex with boys (and the other way around) after coming out of initiation ceremonies. In addition to *kusasa fumbi*, Kunkeyani (2013) found that during initiation ceremonies, a boiled egg is inserted into the vagina of the girls with the aim of breaking their virginity. Both issues were not reported by the informants in the current study.

This study has also found that in addition to experimenting with sex, there are also other things which boys and girls are taught during initiation ceremonies and these include respecting their parents and not entering their parents' bedrooms. Kalilani-Phiri and Taulo (2008) also found that initiates are advised not to enter their parents' bedrooms for fear of finding their parents naked or having sex. Other studies have also found that initiation ceremonies for both boys and girls emphasise on advising initiates to respect their parents and other elderly persons and grow up in a responsible manner (Kalilani-Phiri and Taulo, 2008; MHRC, 2006). Other studies have found that the emphasis during initiation ceremonies is on the teachings around SRH issues including how to perform sex (Kalilani-Phiri and Taulo, 2009). Some informants in the current study reported that some of these SRH issues are no longer being focused on during initiation

ceremonies, mainly because the age at which boys and girls go for initiation ceremonies has gone down hence initiates would not understand. None of the female informants reported having been advised to pull the labia minora, but a 13-year-old female informant reported that her friends had been told to do this. The pulling of the labia minora, according to some informants, increases sexual pleasure for men as they play with them. Other studies have also found similar results, for example Kalilani-Phiri and Taulo (2008) and MHRC (2006).

Another major change in the conduct of initiation ceremonies concerns circumcision for boys. Previously, circumcision, as found in the current study, was only being done by the *angaliba*. Currently, however, the circumcision of boys is also being done by the health workers either in health facilities or in the initiation camps, which was previously considered as a taboo. A number of earlier studies have also found that hospital personnel are also performing circumcision (Scriver et al., 2016; MHRC, 2006; Kunkeyani, 2013; Munthali et al., 2017). After being circumcised in a health facility, the initiates are taken to the initiation camp to get counselling, advice and techniques on life as an adult (Kunkeyani, 2013). In addition to this, in some cases the initiates are also transferred to the mosque or church (MHRC, 2006; Munthali and Zulu, 2007) where respective religious leaders take the role of *ngalibas* to provide advice to the boys and girls. However, when religious leaders give life lessons to initiates, they preach abstinence from sex until marriage, which is opposite of what is communicated during the traditional initiation ceremonies, where sex is encouraged (see Munthali et al., 2007). In the current study, it was found that some girls deny sexual relationships with boys who have not been circumcised preferring those who have been circumcised. Informants also reported that circumcised men are perceived clean. Kalilani-Phiri and Taulo (2008) also reported that the foreskin of the penis stores a substance that is perceived as unclean and every man is checked before getting married to see if they are circumcised: otherwise, he is considered unclean and therefore not suitable for marriage. Traditional initiation ceremonies in TA Liwonde are still being conducted but informants did not elaborate a lot on the instruments which are being used by the *angaliba*: Scriver et al. (2013) mentioned that among the Yao the *angaliba* have been trained and equipped with clean blades which they use during circumcision.

This study was conducted in one GVH in TA Liwonde, Machinga. Findings are applicable to initiation ceremonies in the Yao culture. Although the research team has been able to interview several people of different ages with different roles, some aspects of initiation ceremonies might have been missed, and this could be because of recall bias and the secrecy around this subject. YID will make efforts to complement findings in its future research and programming activities.

7. Conclusion

The overall objective of this study was to explore how initiation ceremonies in TA Liwonde in Machinga district in southern Malawi have evolved over the last 30 years. This study has generally demonstrated that initiation ceremonies are still being conducted in this community and these include both the ones for boys (*jando*) and girls (namely *nsondo*, *ndakula* and *litiwo*). One of the major concerns with initiation ceremonies has been that boys and girls are advised to experiment with sex as soon as they leave the initiation ceremony and girls, especially, are taught how to sexually satisfy a man. Messages on sex and sexuality which are communicated to boys and girls during initiation ceremonies make them to start engaging in sex and these consequently lead to teenage pregnancy and then (child) marriages. It seems that initiation ceremonies indeed contribute towards high prevalence of teenage pregnancy as well as child marriage in TA Liwonde.

Issues surrounding the conduct of initiation ceremonies are quite sensitive and in some cases it is difficult for people to openly talk about these issues. The results of the current study demonstrate that there are some changes in the way initiation ceremonies in TA Liwonde are conducted: both male and female initiators reported that during the initiation ceremonies issues to do with *kusasa fumbi* are no longer communicated to boys and girls these days and instead initiates are encouraged to go to school as soon as they get out of the initiation camps. Other informants, however, reported that such messages are still being communicated to boys and girls during initiation ceremonies, including through songs which use strong language. Initiation ceremonies provide an opportunity for providing comprehensive sexuality education to boys and girls. It will be worthwhile for NGOs including Plan Malawi and alliance members to consider providing comprehensive sexuality education to *lombwes* who spend a lot of time with initiates, so that in turn they can be able to teach boys and girls in TA Liwonde. It is advisable to involve chiefs in these efforts, as they seem to have quite an influence on the conduct of initiation ceremonies, as well as the *lombwes* and other actors involved.

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