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AIDS Now Compels Africa to Challenge Widows' 'Cleansing'

By SHARON LaFRANIERE

MCHINJI, Malawi — In the hours after James Mbewe was laid to rest three years ago, in an unmarked grave not far from here, his 23-year-old wife, Fanny, neither mourned him nor accepted visits from sympathizers. Instead, she hid in his sister's hut, hoping that the rest of her in-laws would not find her.

But they hunted her down, she said, and insisted that if she refused to exorcise her dead husband's spirit, she would be blamed every time a villager died. So she put her two small children to bed and then forced herself to have sex with James's cousin.

"I cried, remembering my husband," she said. "When he was finished, I went outside and washed myself because I was very afraid. I was so worried I would contract AIDS and die and leave my children to suffer."

Here and in a number of nearby nations including Zambia and Kenya, a husband's funeral has long concluded with a final ritual: sex between the widow and one of her husband's relatives, to break the bond with his spirit and, it is said, save her and the rest of the village from insanity or disease. Widows have long tolerated it, and traditional leaders have endorsed it, as an unchallenged tradition of rural African life.

Now AIDS is changing that. Political and tribal leaders are starting to speak out publicly against so-called sexual cleansing, condemning it as one reason H.I.V. has spread to 25 million sub-Saharan Africans, killing 2.3 million last year alone. They are being prodded by leaders of the region's fledging women's rights movement, who contend that lack of control over their sex lives is a major reason 6 in 10 of those infected in sub-Saharan Africa are women.

But change is coming slowly, village by village, hut by hut. In a region where belief in witchcraft is widespread and many women are taught from childhood not to challenge tribal leaders or the prerogatives of men, the fear of flouting tradition often outweighs even the fear of AIDS.

"It is very difficult to end something that was done for so long," said Monica Nsofu, a nurse and AIDS organizer in the Monze district in southern



Jeffrey Barbee for The New York Times

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After the death of her husband, Fanny Mbewe forced herself to undergo "cleansing" sex.

Zambia, about 200 miles south of the capital, Lusaka. "We learned this when we were born. People ask, Why should we change?"

In Zambia, where one out of five adults is now infected with the virus, the National AIDS Council reported in 2000 that this practice was very common. Since then, President Levy Mwanawasa has declared that forcing new widows into sex or marriage with their husband's relatives should be discouraged, and the nation's tribal chiefs have decided not to enforce either tradition, their spokesman said.

Still, a recent survey by Women and Law in Southern Africa found that in at least one-third of the country's provinces, sexual "cleansing" of widows persists, said Joyce MacMillan, who heads the organization's Zambian chapter. In some areas, the practice extends to men.

Some Defy the Risk

Even some Zambian volunteers who work to curb the spread of AIDS are reluctant to disavow the tradition. Paulina Bubala, a leader of a group of H.I.V.-positive residents near Monze, counsels schoolchildren on the dangers of AIDS. But in an interview, she said she was ambivalent about whether new widows should purify themselves by having sex with male relatives.

Her husband died of what appeared to be AIDS-related symptoms in 1996. Soon after the funeral, both Ms. Bubala and her husband's second wife covered themselves in mud for three days. Then they each bathed, stripped naked with their dead husband's nephew and rubbed their bodies against his.

Weeks later, she said, the village headman told them this cleansing ritual would not suffice. Even the stools they sat on would be considered unclean, he warned, unless they had sex with the nephew.

"We felt humiliated," Ms. Bubala said, "but there was nothing we could do to resist, because we wanted to be clean in the land of the headman."

The nephew died last year. Ms. Bubala said the cause was hunger, not AIDS. Her husband's second wife now suffers symptoms of AIDS and rarely leaves her hut. Ms. Bubala herself discovered she was infected in 2000.

But even the risk of disease does not dent Ms. Bubala's belief in the need for the ritual's protective powers. "There is no way we are going to stop this practice," she said, "because we have seen a lot of men and women who have gone mad" after spouses died.

Ms. Nsofu, the nurse and AIDS or-



Evance Joseph Fundi, headman of Ndanga, with sons, from left, Joseph, 7; John, 9; and Patrick, 10. He believes in "sexual cleansing."

ganizer, argues that it is less important to convince women like Ms. Bubala than the headmen and tribal leaders who are the custodians of tradition and gatekeepers to change.

"We are telling them, 'If you continue this practice, you won't have any people left in your village,'" she said. She cites people, like herself, who have refused to be cleansed and yet seem perfectly sane. Sixteen years after her husband died, she argues, "I am still me." Ms. Nsofu said she suggested to tribal leaders that sexual cleansing most likely sprang not from fears about the vengeance of spirits, but from the lust of men who coveted their relatives' wives. She proposes substituting other rituals to protect against dead spirits, like chanting and jumping back and

forth over the grave or over a cow.

Headman Is a Firm Believer

Like their counterparts in Zambia, Malawi's health authorities have spoken out against forcing widows into sex or marriage. But in the village of Ndanga, about 90 minutes from the nation's largest city, Blantyre, many remain unconvinced.

Evance Joseph Fundi, Ndanga's 40-year-old headman, is courteous, quiet-spoken and a firm believer in upholding the tradition. While some widows sleep with male relatives, he said, others ask him to summon one of the several appointed village cleansers. In the native language of Chewa, those men are known as fisis or hyenas because they are supposed to operate in stealth and at night.

Mr. Fundi said one of them died recently, probably of AIDS. Still, he said with a charming smile, "We can not abandon this because it has been for generations."

Since 1953, Amos Machika Schisoni has served as the principal village cleanser. He is uncertain of his age and it is not easily guessed at. His hair is grizzled but his arms are sinewy and his legs muscled. His hut of mud bricks, set about 50 yards from a graveyard, is even more isolated than most in a village of far-flung huts separated by towering weeds and linked by dirt paths.

What Tradition Dictates

He and the headman like to joke about the sexual demands placed upon a cleanser like Mr. Schisoni,



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When Paulina Bubala's husband died, she was sexually "cleansed" by his nephew. She is H.I.V. positive.

who already has three wives. He said tradition dictates that he sleep with the widow, then with each of his own wives, and then again with the widow, all in one night. Mr. Schisoni said that the previous headman chose him for his sexual prowess after he had impregnated three wives in quick succession.

Now, Mr. Schisoni, said he continues his role out of duty more than pleasure. Uncleansed widows suffer swollen limbs and are not free to remarry, he said. "If we don't do it, the widow will develop the swelling syndrome, get diarrhea and die and her children will get sick and die," he said, sitting under an awning of drying tobacco leaves. "The women who do this do not die."

His wives support his work, he said, because they like the income: a chicken for each cleansing session. He insisted that he cannot wear a condom because "this will provoke some other unknown spirit." He is equally adamant in refusing an H.I.V. test. "I have never done it and I don't intend to do it," he said.

To protect himself, he said, he avoids widows who are clearly quite sick. Told that even widows who look perfectly healthy can transmit the virus, Mr. Schisoni shook his head. "I don't believe this," he said. At the traditional family council after James Mbewe was killed in a truck accident in August 2002, Fanny Mbewe's mother and brothers objected to a cleanser, saying the risk of AIDS was too great. But Ms. Mbewe's in-laws insisted, she said. If a villager so much as dreamed of her

husband, they told her, the family would be blamed for "allowing his spirit to haunt their community on the Malawi-Zambia border."

Her husband's cousin, to whom she refers only as Loimbani, showed up at her hut at 9 o'clock at night after the burial.

"I was hiding my private parts," she said in an interview in the office of Women's Voice, a Malawian human rights group. "You want to have a liking for a man to have sex, not to have someone force you. But I had no choice, knowing the whole village was against me."

Loimbani, she said, was blasé. "He said: 'Why are you running away? You know this is our culture. If I want, I could even make you my second wife.'"

He did not. He left her only with the fear that she will die of the virus and that her children, now 8 and 10, will become orphans. She said she is too fearful to take an H.I.V. test.

"I wish such things would change," she said.



Photographs by Jeffrey Barboe for The New York Times

Amos Machika Schisoni working with his tobacco crop. His unofficial job is to have sex with women who have lost their husbands.