

Zilengo

(Clay figures used in the past as visual aids to teach the *mwambo*)



Themes

1) Marriage, preparation & instructions

Etymology

The word derives from *zilengolengo*, meaning 'mysterious phenomena'.

Description

Zilengo are clay figures, moulded at the time of the girls' initiation ceremony, which provided sexual education. As recently as forty years ago (in the Eastern Province of Zambia), the Chewa made these clay figures. Today this practice has largely died out among the Chewa of both Zambia and Malawi. They resemble closely the *Inyago* of the Yao and the L'homwe of the Southern region. Their pedagogical method and their subject matter are very similar. Furthermore, songs related to them and collected in the Eastern Province of Zambia are still in use at girls' initiation along the Lakeshore but without necessarily involving their actual making.

The moulding of such figures offers a striking resemblance to the moulding of the girls' head bonnets (*timbwidza*). They portray animals familiar to *gule* and are daubed with clay dots of various colours. In the Mankhamba Region, the head of the initiate is smeared with maize flour and decorated with red and black dots. This type of headgear is clearly related to the tradition of

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the **Zilengo** and shows its recent evolution. Similarly, the animals represented in the **Zilengo** all feature as *gule* structures. Chewa of the Lakeshore trace the origin of *gule* to the women. It is only later that the men stole it from them and made it their own. One is tempted to look at the clay models as an early form of masquerade. Even today, some *anamkungwi* (mistresses of initiation) still make clay models used during the girls' initiation. They decorate them with dots.

Zilengo were traditionally made in the bush by the tutors (*aphungu*) of the initiates. Early in the morning of the last day of the initiation, the tutors took the girls to these models. There the girls were taught songs and dances proper to each one of the models. The best known were the python (*nsato*), the mythical snake (*thunga*), the crocodile (*ng'ona*), the tortoise (*kamba*), and the hare (*kalulu*). Items other than animals were also modelled, such as a water container called *kachifulu* and a human couple called *wanjala*. After these clay figures were left in the sun unfired to dry, they were decorated with dots of various colours: black made from charcoal (*makala*) or soot (*mwaye*), red made from anthill clay (*katondo*) and white corn flour (*ufa*). The tutor sang a song for each of the models and the initiates performed a dance peculiar to each figure. For example, the *phungu* sang: 1) *"The python left a mark, left a mark behind (with its genitals)."* The girls knelt down and made their shins and waists move backward and forward, imitating sexual intercourse with the python, identified as the male organ. As they finished singing and dancing around the models, the clay figures were buried in the ground while the bodies of the maidens were painted with similar spots in the three colours replicating the pattern of the python. Then the girls were sent home where they were welcomed with this song: 2) *"Come and see, look carefully at the girls who have grown up. Look at what is appearing on their bodies. They have patches like the python, come and see, look carefully!"* The python represents the messenger of God (Chisumphu) who brought rain and ensured the fertility of the land and of the women. Through their initiation, the fertility of God's messenger was passed on to the initiates.

Songs

1) *"Nsato yalembe mbuyomu (2x) yalembe!"*

2) *"Bwerani mudzawone, muwone anamwali akula. Muwone mangamanga a nsato. Bwerani, mudzawone muwone!"*

Source

Interviews in 2000

Reference

Yoshida, K. (1993). Masks and secrecy among the Chewa. *African Arts* 26(2): 34–45.