

A Zulu Girl's Coming of Age

by Edward L. Powe

Queenie, a Christian church-going teenager who was born in 1986 in Nongoma KwaZulu, South Africa, celebrated her 14th (Coming of Age) on January 3 - 4, 2000 and relates a faithful account of exactly what happened during the ceremony. She says:

One day my mother and relatives - after having congratulated me on still being a virgin - told me that I was now old enough to perform the teenage ceremony (**ukuthomba**) because I was having my periods. Starting on Sunday, I had to stay in a special room (from which all furniture was removed) for 7 days. I was supposed to stay alone in my grandmother's hut; but that place was falling apart and I cried. So they put me in the other room and let some other virgin girls stay with me. They would come and go; but had to leave in the afternoon.

When I was in the room, I had to wear a blanket around my shoulders. The things I wore that week could never be worn by me again. They must all be destroyed or given away. This includes even the plate I used. I also had to bathe in that same room. I was supplied with a dish in which to urinate and if I had to defecate I was completely covered with a blanket (including my face) and led by someone to the toilet. I could eat anything I wanted at any time and I amused myself dancing the **ukusina** (a dance which involves lifting the leg high in the ground and stamping the earth) and the **ukhuba** where one stamps hard on the ground after lowering the back. I danced with the other girls because boys were not allowed. I don't remember the words to any of the songs.

On the 6th day (Friday) a sheep was fetched and slaughtered and the bile (**inyongo**) was sprinkled on my hands, feet, and face at noon. It smelled a lot like urine; but I was not allowed to wash it off. They made Zulu beer ("khaki juice") and the girls came to stay with me all night singing Zulu songs and dancing. Boys brought meat into the room. When a boy came in, he carried a palm frond to protect himself because when he entered the other girls would hit him with their fronds. It was a lot of fun, but it was possible to get hurt.

We sang and danced until 1 or 2 in the morning. Then I had to go naked to the nearest river (the kwaZiphethe) and bathe. The other girls didn't want to bathe because the water was so cold. I then put on a skirt and returned. You must sing as you walk and the boys are awaiting your return to hit the girls with their fronds. We then went to the forest to gather **izinkuni** (firewood). When we returned we had to announce it loudly so the boys could hear us; but fortunately the boys were all asleep by then. We were supposed to stand by the gate and not go in for maybe an hour to await the beginning of the ceremony; but I was hungry and went into the hut and food was then brought for me. I then put the blanket on again and went outside to wait for the boys.

At about 9:10 AM the boys came and tried to hit us with their palm fronds and we hit back. The losing side always runs away. Since the boys were winning, I ran into the toilet to hide. Finally, however, we girls were able to drive the boys away. At 10:00 AM I went back alone into the room and was dressed by my grandmother and aunts. During this whole time you can grimace; but you can't talk back. Then boys and girls enter the room and a fight is started. When the fight is over, everyone sings and dances.

I no longer have to hide myself and anyone who enters the hut gets hit. If a boy comes in, he is hit by girls; and if a girl comes in, she is hit by boys. Then I was supposed to wear the apron (*umbhelenje*) with no panties or bra; but God had mercy on me and so I was permitted to use panties and a breast apron. I then had to go into the cattle kraal to salute the ancestors and then returned to the courtyard to dance. It was I who had to start the songs.

People put money into a collection plate on the ground while others pinned money on my head. The money came out to be more than R100. They also gave me gifts of grass mats, blankets, dishes, vegetables, sweets, razors (for shaving armpits and legs), lotion, roll-on deodorant, and perfume.

Then they took photos. After that, we returned to the room to eat and drink. The boys were in one room and the girls were in another. The drinks included juice, soft drinks, Zulu beer, European beer, vodka, wine, etc. and the food included fried meat, boiled meat, rice, salad, and curried stew.

At about 2:00 PM we finished eating and had an "after-party" where we danced to R & B, Soul, Pop, and Rap. This party lasted into the evening. At about 3:00 PM I was ridiculed for wearing jeans and was obliged to change into a skirt. Then the boys all praised me for still being a virgin, etc. At 3:00 we burned all the palm fronds and no more hitting was allowed. The party went on until 2:00 AM and then I went to sleep. And that's it.

I thanked Queenie for her narration and after a few more questions discovered that she is presently in her second year of study at a Senior Secondary High School and that she hopes to become a doctor one day. She also hopes to have time to be a part time musician or actress since she sings well and can already play the flute. She says she did well in primary school; but poorly in her first year at the High School. Now, however, after having undergone the "teen ceremony" she is one of the top students in her class. When asked if she had any boyfriends, she smiled and said that she was still unattached.

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I thank Queenie for her narration and after a few more questions discover that she is presently in her second year of study at Sunnyside Senior Secondary High School and that she hopes to become a doctor one day. She also hopes to have time to be a part time musician or actress since she sings well and can already play the flute. She says she did well in primary school; but poorly in her first year at Sunnyside. Now, however, after having undergone the "teen ceremony" she is one of the top students in her class. When asked if she had any boyfriends, she smiled and said that she was still unattached.

After the interview, before returning to our "home away from home", Sibusiso gives us some insight into Zulu games that are still in vogue.