

# CHILDHOOD VULNERABILITIES

in South Africa

Some Ethical Perspectives



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# CHAPTER 6

## MALE INITIATION AND CIRCUMCISION – A SOUTH AFRICAN PERSPECTIVE

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## INTRODUCTION

I have been interested in and following this rite of passage for a long time, knowing that it creates contexts and opportunities within which children can be extremely vulnerable<sup>1</sup>. On top of this, so many responsible individuals and institutions have been relatively quiet – especially since the dawn of our new democracy (1994) in South Africa – about botched circumcisions, dehydration, infections and the annual loss of lives during this ritual. This chapter does not rely on statistical and other data as its primary resource, which would be a typical social science approach, followed by a number of chapters in this book, but rather on presenting important views and contributions by mostly African people and scholars who are/were in different ways involved in this ritual, with its accompanying culture. The role of religion in this ritual will not be discussed. I will often refer to the significant report on public hearings on male initiation schools in South Africa, published by the Commission for the Protection and Promotion of the Rights of Cultural, Religious and Linguistic Communities<sup>2</sup> (CRL Rights Commission)<sup>3</sup>. In their executive summary, they define culture as “the totality of human creation and expression in both tangible and intangible forms” (CRL Rights Commission 2014:5). For them, the tangible forms of culture “include all material products created by a society as a result of human ingenuity. Intangibles comprise, among other things, language, beliefs, tastes, attitudes, rituals, religion” (:5). They further state that these

intangible forms of culture are also created by humans in order to facilitate their individual and collective existence. Culture and cultural products are constantly being changed and altered. They

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- 1 The author of this chapter did not experience this ritual of circumcision and initiation first hand.
  - 2 Read more about the Commission’s partners, how they view certain concepts, factors influencing male initiation, and what they recommend in their Report on public hearings on male initiation schools in South Africa, 2010, pp. 2-76.
  - 3 This abbreviation will be used for all references to the resources of this Commission.

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are handed over from generation to generation. Cultures are never static. (p. 5)

They are “dynamic realities which are in constant flux. Cultures diffuse and also absorb influences and traits from other cultures” (CRL Rights Commission 2014:5). It is reasoned by this Commission that “it is cultures which distinguish us from the rest of the animal kingdom. Cultures create humans, as humans create cultures” (:5). According to them “cultural rights, that is the right to live and practice one’s culture without infringing on the rights of others” are today “acknowledged as a global human right, and enshrined in international human rights instruments” (:5).

Initiation practices occur in many cultures. They (CRL Rights Commission 2014)

come in many forms and institutional expressions. They are historical indicators used by human communities to mark the transit from one stage of life to another. It is in fact a rite of passage acknowledging the induction of an individual or individuals into a group or society. In a sense it recognises a social rebirth for the individual or individuals. The group into which the induction is made could be an open society or a secret society. Initiation rites are sometimes secret ceremonies with degrees of esotericism. (p. 5)

There are numerous universal examples of initiation such as Christian baptism and Jewish *bar mitzvah*. Puberty rites, common to some cultures, are another important set of initiation and attendant rites. These rites of puberty bear witness or testify to the transition from the state of being a child to adolescence and adulthood in some cases. Furthermore, shamans (witch-doctors or priests claiming to communicate with gods) or healers are initiated into their profession in many indigenous cultures throughout the world. These processes of initiation often involve specific rituals and rites of passage that (publicly) make known the advent of the new status of the individual

involved. Male circumcision is, in many cases, a critical part of the initiation process. However, it may be an entirely separate practice in some cultures and societies (CRL Rights Commission 2014:5).

In South Africa (CRL Rights Commission 2014)

male initiation is traditionally used as a transitional rite of passage from boyhood to manhood, conferring on the person the right to participate in the decision-making processes of the clan and the family; to share in the privileges, duties and responsibilities of the community and, in many instances, to marry a woman and raise a family. (p. 5-6)

Initiates may be as young as nine years old in some northern parts of Southern Africa (among the Venda, Pedi and Tsonga cultures). In these cases, the boy, however, is not expected to undergo additional rites before he eventually gets married. Furthermore, male initiation may parallel female initiation<sup>4</sup> as a rite of passage either from childhood to adolescence or from adolescence to adulthood in several different cultural communities. Initiation is seen as a tangible expression of both the person and the community's concepts, values, principles, ambitions and desires, embodied in the transmission of specific knowledge and practices during the rite. Initiation thus combines both personal experience and community values, expectations and heritage in a critical manner. The process of initiation and its protection,<sup>5</sup> properly and lawfully performed, is the cultural, spiritual and religious right of a community (CRL Rights Commission 2014:6).

With regard to the abovementioned statement that initiates may be as young as nine years old in some northern parts of Southern

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4 Female circumcision is a well-known, documented and studied practice in some African cultures such as the Gikuya of Kenya (cf Githiga 2009:30). Also see Dora, 2018.

5 Read more about the factors influencing male initiation in the CRL Rights Commission's report (2010: 21-30). Some of the broader problems surrounding the practice of the initiation rite, are: 'challenges in setting up and running the initiation schools; diminishing appreciation of the cultural value of male initiation; inappropriate circumcision seasons; unfavourable health conditions; causes of death in initiations schools; negative public influence on the initiation rite; and the commercialization of initiation schools'. Also see Rijken & Dakwa's article (pp. 10-12).

Africa, South African scholar Samuel Sindelo<sup>6</sup> (2019:n.p.) remarks that in some parts of South Africa, initiates must be, by law and tradition, 18 years and above but are rarely older than 23 years. However, boys of 16 and older may be circumcised with the permission of their parent/guardian. The logic for being 18 years old to be circumcised, is that a boy then normally is completing his high schooling years and will thereafter go and work or further his studies at tertiary level. “Way before the Xhosa speaking people made it fashionable to go to school, a boy would, once he drops out of school, go and work in the mines, and on his first home coming, would have accumulated enough money to pay for his passage to manhood” (Sindelo 2019:n.p.). It was unheard of that a “boy would be a multi goer to the mines (work) without being circumcised” (:n.p.).

According to the CRL Rights Commission, initiation schools are part of South African cultural practices and are protected by the Constitution. Such schools are considered to be cultural and educational institutions<sup>7</sup> where initiates are taught principles of the specific community inherent in courtship, social responsibility, discipline and acceptable behaviour as well as about their culture. Younger boys are taught filtered down values that are vital to their social and psychological growth and advancement (CRL Rights Commission 2014:6). Sindelo (2019:n.p.), in a nuanced way, emphasises that there is generally an acceptance in literature that circumcision and initiation processes are one and, therefore, often used interchangeably. However, there is a difference. The circumcision process relates to the procedure conducted by the surgeon (where some or all of the foreskin is removed from the penis), which takes a few minutes, and thereafter the traditional nurse, family elders and community take over to ensure that the healing process is expedited. On the other hand, the initiation process, much as it begins with circumcision, goes beyond circumcision. Strictly speaking, it is the induction of the initiate to the values, discipline, moral regime and ethics of a clan and a community at

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6 He belongs to the clan of AmaCube which are descendants of uMadiba.

7 Read more about the communal, educational and cultural aspects of ritual male circumcision and initiation among others in Brunson (2016:262–269).

large. There can be no initiation without circumcision, but the reverse is true: there can be circumcision while initiation is done outside the clan and community. This prevails when the young man decides on his own, or through other factors, to abandon traditional initiation which culminates in the young man graduating from *ubufana* to a man (*ubudoda*) and ultimately to an old man (*ubuxhego*).

Be that as it may, initiation (usually) forms part of the culture, discipline and principles of a specific clan, and the community begin their teachings on the day of the home coming celebration(s) (*umphumo*). This is normally after three weeks of seclusion from the broader society – and of the three weeks, the first week is the most critical in the life of the initiate (Sindelo 2019:n.p.). “In the first week, normality of the outside world is thrown out and only the critical and sacred life is tolerated. Individual democratic rights are seen as both dangerous and not to be tolerated” (:n.p.). This first week, Sindelo (:n.p.) continues, “is akin to a sterilised environment in hospital, and not everybody is allowed inside the hut where initiates stay”. To illustrate this point, he refers to “a man who had sexual intercourse the previous days who will not be allowed into and should not even come close to the hut, as there might be bacteria that could cause infections” (:n.p.), and “girls who are menstruating are also not allowed to come near the hut where the initiates are” (:n.p.). After seven days, “the community men converge in the hut (*boma*) to evaluate the progress with regard to the healing process of the initiate(s). It is only then that there comes some relaxation in the strict regime to the extent that it does not sacrifice sterility of the hut (*boma*)” (:n.p.). The traditional nurse is only at this time allowed to go and sleep at home, but he comes back to the camp on a daily basis to evaluate the progress of healing of the initiates, and in a situation where there is healing retrogression, he again sleeps in the camp to ensure that progress is made. “During the first seven days, initiates are taught how to take care of themselves in treating the ‘wound’” (:n.p.).

The home-coming celebration is the “moment when a new man is put in front of the elders and specific people from the clan, as well as respected community members, who are allowed to begin instilling

discipline, culture, and respect” (Sindelo 2019:n.p.) and show the initiates “milestones of which the first one namely circumcision, he has passed” (:n.p.). This happens in the kraal and ends up in a house where mothers do their part, imparting knowledge and thereafter presents the initiate with new clothes, bedding and other things. “At this point, all things like clothes, bedding, etc. of boyhood is donated to other (younger) boys and the young man starts a new life” (:n.p.). The process of initiation happens under the guidance of the clan members and community, and the boy is expected to be moral upright and must now learn from the elders.

Initiation is a much longer process than circumcision – even after home-coming has been celebrated, it continues until someone has gone beyond the young men group stage (*ubufana*). After this, there is another occasion which allows the initiate to graduate himself further to another level and be accepted by the next group. It is this occasion, strictly speaking, that ends the initiation process (Sindelo 2019:n.p.).

In the circumcision school, you are taught sacrifice, self-reliance and endurance through pain, but there are no cultural teachings or anything close to instilling clan and cultural values as during initiation, according to Sindelo (2019:n.p.).

Margaret Mead (1973), a cultural anthropologist, reasons that if adolescence is not monitored, individual adolescents, their families and their societies could be destructively influenced by it. This is, according to her, a delicate stage because the boy is neither child any longer nor adult during the intermediate phase of adolescence. Therefore, the role of initiation is vital in helping a young man to become a fully responsible person of dignity in his community. “This is the time when teenagers begin to look beyond themselves and they are in this stage faced with two choices: to join the ranks of responsible adults or follow the band with his peers in an alternative society” (Mead 1973:3).



## THE CURRENT SOUTH AFRICAN SITUATION

While the practice of initiation has persisted over the years, it has become necessary to bring this emotive cultural and spiritual issue or tradition – with its ethos of sacredness and secrecy – in line with modern times and technology, and to address the challenges that have arisen in recent times.

As far as we know, 714 boys died in the Eastern Cape from botched circumcisions during 2006-2018, and, even more surprising, is the fact that more than 1 767 initiates have died in South Africa during initiation since 1994, equivalent to 160 soccer teams (Jones 2019:n.p.).

In June 2018, as reported by Lubabalo Ngcukana (2018), the Deputy Minister of Cooperative Governance and Traditional Affairs, Obed Bapela, said that since 2006

at least 800 teens and men have had to undergo penile amputations after suffering complications related to traditional initiation. He also said penis transplants are expensive and unaffordable for government. We cannot run away from the issue of amputations. It is a very serious matter ... Suicides among those who are amputated is also a concern because when they have lost their manhood and they are in university, because of many challenges and pressures, they commit suicide. (n.p.)

Henry Mbaya (2020:n.p.), professor of Missiology at the Faculty of Theology at Stellenbosch University, reasons that it is important to refer to the ‘healthy’ and ‘un-healthy’ aspects of initiation. He states: “The death of many initiates relates to traditional male ‘surgeons’ not observing health rules” (:n.p.). According to the CRL Rights Commission<sup>8</sup> (2014), abovementioned cases

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8 Participants in the different provinces who took part in the hearings of the CRL Rights Commission attributed the following causes of initiates’ deaths to among others: “dehydration, septicaemia, accidents during the operation, gangrene, kidney failure, and assaults on the initiates during initiation.” (2010:24). It

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are almost without exception due to the negligence of some traditional ‘surgeons’, some found operating under the influence of alcohol, while others have used unsterilized instruments, contributing to the spread of blood-related infections such as HIV and AIDS, as well as tetanus. In some cases, initiates have died from septic wounds, blood loss and/or other easily preventable result of unprofessional circumcisions. (p. 7)

They (CRL Rights Commission 2014:7) further state that “[s]ome initiation schools are also opened for pure profit, with initiates having to pay exorbitantly expensive fees”, which means that poorer families cannot afford to initiate their sons. Some traditional or conventional ‘surgeons’ often misuse their power positions, while some ‘surgeons’ “are inadequately trained to perform traditional circumcision” (:7).

With the escalation of threats to the lives of initiates (CRL Rights Commission 2014),

some provincial governments and municipalities established legislation and by-laws to regulate certain aspects of the cultural practice. Different pieces of provincial legislation regulate medical, environmental and governance aspects of initiation, while municipal by-laws regulate community governance with specific reference to the role of traditional leadership ... surgeons and healers. (p. 7)

The Constitution of the Republic of South Africa “does make provision for cultural groups to practice their traditions, but also forbids cruel, inhuman and degrading behaviour” (Jones 2019:n.p.). The CRL Rights Commission (2014:7) reasons in this regard that our Constitution “guarantees people’s rights to perform their cultural practices” and that it is “not neutral on values” whilst it “challenges

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has also been “reported that the families of deceased initiates are often intimidated to withdraw complaints lodged at local police stations, resulting in perpetrators escaping prosecution” – CRL Rights Commission (2010:8).

South Africans to exercise their rights according to the values of, among others, respect, human dignity and freedom.” However, these rights are sometimes in “conflict with some traditional practices, necessitating further discussion and further public education” (:7). In this regard, academic Luvuyo Ntombana (in Jones 2019:n.p) argues that “cultural practices can only have value as far as it promotes human well-being ... Therefore, cultural practices must be subjected to the test of Ubuntu.” In my article ‘Do more to eradicate illegal initiation schools’, I argue that “[p]ower and material interests, often served by culture, may never be more important than human well-being” and that “initiation and circumcision should never be allowed to create a patriarchal hierarchy of authority – not between men, nor between men and women” (Jones 2019:n.p.).

The CRL Rights Commission (2014:7) makes the important point that “[c]ontemporary South African society requires initiation practitioners to re-examine their activities if they are to be responsive to their changing social environment.” For them the

challenge remains that cultural rights cannot infringe on the rights of others, e.g. unsafe traditional circumcision vs the right to health, bodily integrity, or indeed the right to life. Simultaneously, while cultural spaces are shared in the South African democracy, individual communities’ specific cultural practices should not be infringed, provided these are legal and constitutional. (p. 7)

Although it won’t be easy to design universal consensus on this matter, we must at all cost try to “reach viable solutions to inform individuals and communities to take action to stem the death toll and health consequences of bungled circumcision” (CRL Rights Commission 2014:7).

Sindelo (2019:n.p.) notes in this regard that, according to his knowledge, before 1990, the death of initiates was seen as a “legend in the Xhosa speaking communities. We only saw deaths of initiates after 1990 and a thorough study is still to be conducted on why initiates

starting to die only after this period. The procedure was once safe and sacred.”

In the process of circumcision, Sindelo (2019:n.p.) reasons that the following two forms of circumcision schools must be clarified, which is normally confused by those who have not undergone the process, namely:

- “Privately-owned circumcision schools” – this is owned by the surgeon and he charges a fee for initiates to stay there for anything between a week and a month depending on what the parent/guardian wants. The fee includes provision for food, nurses and the surgeon. This form has become a private business of the surgeon in more or less the same way as what a private hospital is to modern medicine. At this traditional circumcision hospital, there is always a group of initiates, sometimes up to 50 per any given point in time. It is specifically for boys whose parents are either not confident of doing it at ‘individually built for purpose circumcision school’ or those who don’t have time and expertise to monitor their boys at the ‘individually built for purpose circumcision school’. This is mainly preferred by single mothers as they often have no reliable brothers/relatives to handle this situation to their satisfaction. Even at this school, the surgeon rarely attends to the initiates, unless there is one initiate whose progress in healing is slow or retrogressing.
- “Individually built-for-purpose circumcision school” – this is a temporary structure built for the purpose of circumcision and, on the last day, it is razed to the ground. Here, the surgeon arrives on the day of the circumcision and conducts the procedure and then he leaves after he has been paid. After the procedure has been done, the surgeon is never seen again nor is he brought back. Sometimes, the surgeon does not even spend five minutes with an initiate, then he disappears and the initiate would probably

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never know the surgeon. The primary person responsible thereafter is a traditional nurse who is appointed by the family based on his experience in taking care of the boys. The nurse is called *ikhankatha*. Anything that goes wrong with the initiates, the nurse is held responsible for. Normally, this is an older person who is known to be strict in maintaining order and discipline at the school.

“It remains to be seen, as to whether botched circumcision is the negligence of the surgeons or nurses, but in my experience, surgeons play a little role or no role after the procedure. For three weeks, the nurse is the responsible person” (Sindelo 2019:n.p.). With regard to the abovementioned statement that poorer families cannot afford to initiate their sons, Sindelo (:n.p.) states that in the Xhosa speaking communities, there has never been a situation known to him that, where a boy from a poor family presented himself unannounced on the day of circumcision, was turned away. “The procedure is conducted and then elders are sent to the home of the poor boy to inform his parent/guardian that he has gone in and they should not look for him” (:n.p.).

## THE SOCIALIZATION OF BOYS/MEN AND THE IMPORTANCE OF RITES OF PASSAGE IN AFRICAN CONTEXTS

According to Gary Barker, executive director, and Christine Ricardo<sup>9</sup>, senior program assistant of the Gender and Health Initiative, at the Instituto Promundo<sup>10</sup> in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, “gender is increasingly being used as a framework for analysis and program development

9 These two authors “(i) reviewed literature on men and masculinities, conflict and HIV/AIDS in sub-Saharan Africa; (ii) consulted with colleague organizations to identify promising program examples that apply a gender perspective to work with young men; (iii) carried out 50 key informant interviews with staff at organizations working with young men in Botswana, Nigeria, South Africa and Uganda; and (iv) carried out 23 focus group discussions and interviews with young men in Nigeria, South Africa and Uganda.”

10 Promundo is a Brazilian NGO that works internationally to promote gender equality and child and youth development.

in youth and social development, HIV/AIDS and conflict in Africa” (Barker & Ricardo 2005:v). In the past, “gender has often referred to the disadvantages that women and girls face”, and of course, this has been absolutely necessary “given [the] gender inequalities in the region”, but all too often, the gender of men and boys has been overlooked by a gender perspective (:v). In this regard, White (1997:16) states the following with reference to men in Africa: “In the gender and development literature, men appear very little, often as hazy background figures. ‘Good girl/bad boy’ stereotypes present women as resourceful and caring mothers, with men as relatively autonomous individualists, putting their own desires for drink or cigarettes before the family’s needs.” Barker and Ricardo (2005:3) further say that “many of the problematic behaviors of young men – for example, the use of sexual coercion and violence against women, unsafe sexual behavior and participation in violence or local insurgencies – are often efforts by young men to publicly define or affirm themselves as men.” According to Connell (2003), Gilmore (1990) and Pollack (1998), an almost universal characteristic of manhood is that it has to be achieved – it requires specific actions and behaviour before one’s social group. “Achieving manhood is in effect evaluated or judged by other men and women; young men in diverse social settings frequently report a sense of being observed and watched to see if they measure up to culturally salient versions of manhood” (Barker & Ricardo 2005:4). Barker and Ricardo (:5) stress that the categories of manhood and the tensions that go with it, “are fluid and rarely mutually exclusive.” They (:5) further say that young men experience various and, at times, contradictory ideas about what is meant to be a man – and generally believe that for their acts as men they are continually being judged and evaluated. They (:5) also emphasise “the multiple dimensions of young men’s lives and identities” and that “African men have largely been seen as monolithic, and usually negative, and often seen as motivated purely by economic issues, including land use and work.” According to Lindsay and Miescher (in Barker & Ricardo 2005:5), young men “have less frequently been examined in terms of their domestic lives – for example, as fathers and partners – or in terms of how motivation to work interacts with their other social roles.”

Barker and Ricardo (2005:5) reasons in this regard that traditional gender analysis has often focused on criticising men's behaviour, emphasising their drug and alcohol use and violent actions against women and children. While it is important to highlight the negligence of men in their family responsibilities, it is also important to understand the complex nature of men's positions and roles in (their) households, as well as to take their cultural background and true functions and roles in social reproduction, into account (:5). In this regard, specifically referring to men's domestic lives as fathers, the latest South African statistics unfortunately say that only 42% of the 98% of living fathers are involved in the lives of their children, or the households in which they grow up. Of the 99% of living mothers in South Africa, 98% are involved in the lives of their children. Of all births that are registered in South Africa, 62.7% do not have information about the father (Jones 2018:12). "In the Western Cape, 35.6% of a total of 1.97 million children (approximately 650 000) live with their mothers only (Stats SA 2015:n.p.). In the 54% of homes where both parents are present, the level of engagement of fathers in the child's life varies considerably" (Jones 2019:n.p).

## WHAT DEFINES BEING A MAN?

According to Brunsdon (2016:264), "the main thrust of the process [of initiation] is instructional." Vincent (2008b:436) says that three main areas can be distinguished during the initiation process. Brunsdon (2016) indicates that except for the fact that "initiates are trained in the 'secret of the bush' to help distinguish them in future from unauthentic (hospital) initiates" and that "certain character traits such as courage, forbearance and strength are instilled upon them through deprivation, criticism and even physical punishment", they are (particularly) educated on

what it means to be a man or adult in their culture. Especially this part contains instruction on how a man should conduct himself in marriage, family and social life, and it has a strong cultural and

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sexual basis. The same pattern is discernible amongst the Gikuyu in Kenya<sup>11</sup> where knowledge on conduct in the community as adult and partner in marriage features prominently. (p. 264)

To briefly elaborate in this regard, the key mandate or social prerequisite for manhood in Africa, in other words to be a man, is to reach a certain level of financial freedom, work or wages, and then to start a family. If you're not married and have no children, you are seen as a boy, according to Barker and Ricardo (2005:5). According to the Social Sciences and Reproductive Health Research Network (in Barker & Ricardo 2005)

[a] mature, but unmarried man is viewed with suspicion and often precluded from occupying certain social positions. He is also viewed as irresponsible and perhaps even a 'homosexual.' ... In the Eastern zone the consequences of not marrying are very serious for a man. He is forbidden to hold certain titles and in the event of his death, he cannot be buried like a married man. (p. 5)

To be employed, brings social recognition beyond the family, and this makes people respect you. Barker and Ricardo (2005) states in this regard that

[a]mong ethnic groups in Africa that rely on cattle herding for subsistence, manhood begins when the father bestows land and cattle or other livestock to the son, which in turn can either serve as a bride-price, or enable him to achieve the status of manhood and form a family. In this way, achieving manhood depends on an older man – one who holds more power – deciding when a young man is able to achieve socially recognized manhood. (p. 6)

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11 See Githiga (2009:39) for more information in this regard.



Furthermore, one has to support one's extended family. To be able to do this, one has to be an employed man. You're not only a breadwinner, but you must provide in the needs of your extended family too. Some men have a remarkable sense of obligation to their families. For this you must have a stable job, but this leads to massive migration (Campbell 2001:n.p.) with certain (sexual) consequences. Young men who do not achieve a sense of socially respected manhood seem more likely to engage in violence (Barker and Ricardo 2005:8).

## rites of passage<sup>12</sup>

Brunsdon (2016:262) says that it "is generally accepted that ritual male circumcision forms part of a rite of passage that leads males from boyhood to manhood" and that this is how male circumcision is introduced in most literature.<sup>13</sup> Mtuze (in Brunsdon (2016:262) "depicts the completion of initiation as the 'greatest day' in a boy's life" and Githiga (2009:21) "describes initiation as a moment that youngsters 'yearn' for." Githiga (2009:21) is further of the opinion that "children knew that it was only initiation that would make them men and women."

Barker and Ricardo (2005) state that many

cultural groups in Africa have developed and continue to carry out initiation practices, or rites of passage, some of which include male circumcision, as part of the socialization of boys and men. Such practices are widespread ... with tremendous local and regional variations. These initiation rites ... often include seclusion of young men from their families (and from women and girls), and some informal learning process, during which

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12 Van Gennep (1960) coined the phrase "rites of passage" to "define the ritual practice, delineated it as a set of symbolic actions, either in ritual or ceremony, as a process intended to mark a transition in the human life cycle of both the individual and the community". According to Van Gennep "rites of passage are diverse, and are often recognised as such in the cultures in which they occur" - CRL Rights Commission 2010:12.

13 See Malisha et al. (2008); Meissner & Buso (2007); Westercamp & Bailey (2007); Broude (2005); Turner (1969).

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older men pass on information and/or skills that are considered necessary to be an adult male in their societies. This information and skills may include how to hunt, how to treat women, how to build a house, warrior or fighting skills and historical information about the cultural group and its rituals. (p. 9)

Ellis (1997:6) refers to numerous studies that confirm the cultural power of these rites of passage as “agents of political and social incorporation, notably of young men who are most likely to be the warlike element in any society.” These rituals may become particularly important when more formalised public institutions, such as education, institutional religion and political institutions are weak. Such rites of passage provide a mixture of social control, assistance, encouragement and guidance for young people to make the sometimes mixed-up and stressful transition from childhood to adulthood, as well as to create or reinforce a sense of cultural or tribal identity and social cohesion (Barker & Ricardo 2005:9).

Reinforcing a clear boundary or demarcation between children, or boys, and men, and between men and women, is a common factor in rites of passage. There are expectations or anticipations in many settings in Africa that boys need to be separated from their mothers. Once they reach puberty, boys are often taken to stay in a separate compound for boys. In some environments, it is expected from male children to be defiant, stubborn, and to refuse to take on tasks deemed female. Many of these rituals’ elements contain references to giving up boyhood in favour of adult manhood. Some of the rituals include a cathartic moment of being out-of-control or drunk or under the control of evil spirits before a clearly outlined and mature, ripe and seasoned identity is achieved. Along with the initiation rituals, the age-specific peer groups, also referred to as secret societies, set parameters for conflict resolution, male–female interactions, family and community life, and adult roles. While some elements of this socialisation reinforce traditional (patriarchal) gender norms that have negative effects on men and women, they have deep cultural significance and often act as a form of positive social control. These practices of initiation are

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often viewed as fundamental to their personal development. Some of these rites of passages have been, and still are, ways of gaining access to elders, where people have met with the chief and other members to resolve conflicts and prepare grounds for taking up political power. While many of these rites of passage perpetuate conventional hierarchies of gender, they sometimes also serve as a form of social confinement. Ceremonies that go with rites of passage and secret societies, are at times co-opted for armed insurgencies. Charles Taylor is said to have relied extensively on these rites of passage in Liberia in order to legitimise his strength. His warlords used elements from traditional rites of passage – such as talismans and tattoos – which allegedly left young men immune against enemy fire. Cross-dressing that is part of traditional passage rituals has been subverted in such a way that rebels often were dressed as girls while committing their extreme wickedness (Barker & Ricardo 2005:9-10).

According to Ellis (1997:n.p.) several scholars have suggested that armed movements have simply become modern iterations of passage rituals, continuing to draw on traditional elements – such as tribal seclusion, men’s and boys’ supremacy, a cathartic or out-of-control moment, among others. While it is difficult to generalise about rites of passage in Africa, what is obvious is that they can simultaneously perpetuate strict sex segregation and gender inequalities, while also acting as a form of positive social control. Such practices often include sexuality-related information with consequences for HIV, violence against women and intimate relationships between men and women in general. It is also clear and obvious that rites of passage are dynamic – integrating new information and realities – making them resilient and lasting (Barker & Ricardo 2005:10).

## BACKGROUND OF INITIATION AS A RITE OF PASSAGE IN SOUTH AFRICA

The CRL Rights Commission (2010:13) states that “even under conditions of colonial subjugation, the rite thrived in many African countries, including South Africa.” Acculturation was a cornerstone in the colonial era and this meant “that Africans were forced to abandon

their indigenous practices and structures and adopt the more, so-called ‘enlightened’ modern Western colonial belief systems and practices” (:13-14). Initiation practices were referred to as ‘barbaric’ and missionaries saw initiation as ‘pagan belief’ (:14). Christianisation made it “difficult for the institution of initiation to find legitimate expression” (:14). This ritual is deeply embedded in African culture and the community’s<sup>14</sup> value of this rite gives it the strength and resilience that it enjoys today. Turner (1969) warns against the simplification of the notion of initiation. It is about more than moving from childhood to adulthood. According to him, the rite of initiation is firmly embodied in the values, beliefs, identity and spirituality of a community. With the dawn of the democratic and constitutional dispensation in South Africa (1994), “individual youngsters have now the right to choose not to participate in the initiation practice” (CRL Rights Commission 2010:15) although it was expected of them before 1994 to be initiated at a particular age. It must be stated that “many young people are finding ways of making money out of the initiation practice” because of unemployment and not having access to economic participation (:14). The media has the right to exercise freedom of speech responsibly (Anon. 2011:6), however, many cultural communities are convinced that the “South African media has played a role in portraying negatively African cultural practices, by promoting stereotypes, misconceptions and demeaning perspectives about South African culture in general and the practice of initiation in particular” (CRL Rights Commission 2010:15-16). In some provincial governments and municipalities, there are certain “legislation and by-laws to regulate certain aspects of the cultural practice. Different provincial legislations regulate medical, environmental and governance aspects of the institution, while municipal by-laws regulate community governance with specific reference to the role of traditional leadership, traditional surgeons and healers” (:17). Although governments express their concern “primarily with the health aspects of initiation”, the initiation schools

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14 Read more about the communal and familial aspects of ritual male circumcision among others in Brunson (2016:262-264); Vincent (2008b:431-446) and Turner (1982:20-60).

“require holistic rather than cosmetic intervention” (:18). The CRL Rights Commission says in its 2010 report that despite the fact that

there is legislation or policy guidelines, there are still shortcomings when it comes to initiation, as legislation and policy do not address all the problems. They address only those relating to circumcision, without including the relevant social and cultural systems or their contexts. The overarching pitfall in all these legislative regimes is the presumption of the superiority of Western ways as reflected in the various powers given to government officials. The various legislations do not acknowledge and recognise the existence of indigenous problem-solving mechanisms. Most of the policy guidelines remove from the practice its cultural meaning; thus contributing in effect to cultural erosion. They give more powers to government bureaucrats, so they become like chief magistrates who regard themselves as ‘bureaucratic potentates’ directing everybody else under their unchallenged authority. (p. 19)

In this regard, it must be said that The National Assembly passed the new Customary Initiation Bill in December 2018 without any objections. Hereafter, it has been sent to the National Council of Provinces for agreement. According to Besent (2018) the “Bill seeks to regulate customary initiation practices to curb the deaths of male and female initiates due to the operation of some bogus initiation schools.” The Bill will also “create various structures that can regulate initiation schools in provinces and local municipalities” (2018). During the debate on the Bill, the Deputy Minister for Co-operative Governance and Traditional Affairs, Obed Bapela (in Besent 2018) said “that they have been facing challenges with initiation schools since June 2012.” Bapela (in Besent 2018) then continued by stating that the

Bill will also make provisions for municipalities to strengthen their by-laws, regulatory processes. Municipalities must ensure the provision of the necessary infrastructure such as land, clean water, and sites for initiations. Traditional initiation signifies

the transformation from boyhood into adulthood. And of significance is the preparation for manhood. Leadership, respect and responsibility is a rite of passage to adulthood. Since June 2012 to date, the challenges of initiations, deaths, amputations arise mainly from the illegal ... or bogus schools.

## INTERGENERATIONAL TENSIONS

Historically, in almost all of Africa, tribal society has been and often still is based on the authority and ultimate manhood of the chiefs, and references to the 'big man' and rigid community and tribal hierarchies that leave young men waiting to become men. According to Lindsay and Miescher (in Barker and Ricardo 2005:11) "[t]he African 'big man' provides perhaps the most enduring image of African masculinity. Across the continent and for a long sweep of history, ambitious people (usually men) have worked to enlarge their households and use their 'wealth in people' for political and material advancement." The accumulation of power in the hands of big men and elders, or the generation of older men, continues to be a factor in Africa, contributing to ongoing power struggles between older and young men and is connected to some of the region's insurgencies. Older men in many parts of Africa – whether as fathers, chiefs or elders – determine when young men can own land, access family goods or wealth resources, and marry. This institutionalised age group stratification places junior and younger men at the service of the aged, and older men's ownership of property and women creates conflict between younger and older generations of men (Barker & Ricardo 2005:12). Throughout contemporary Africa, this intergenerational tension manifests itself in many ways. There have been tensions in South Africa, for instance, between rural elderly men and wage-earning younger men who migrate to cities for jobs. Many, if not most, of these migrant workers send income to their families, keeping their status as men even if they are not physically present. City migration and transformation have become ways for young men to usurp the elderly's strength and power. Migration to work in cities

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has become part of a new rite of passage in some environments. Young men escape rural power hierarchies by moving to the city, earn money that allows for some freedom and independence, as well as access to women (:12).

### SEXUALITY AND MANHOOD

There are scholars and studies that say sexual experience is often associated with initiation into manhood and achievement of a culturally accepted manhood for young men in sub-Saharan Africa, as for many young men around the world. It encourages a view of sex as performance, in particular, a means of demonstrating masculine prowess. Young men, in many cultures, including Africa, are facing peer pressure to be sexually active and have multiple partners to be seen as men. Such sexual experiences can be interpreted as displays of sexual competence or achievement by peers, rather than acts of intimacy (Marsiglio 1988; WHO 2001, 2003 as referred to by Barker & Ricardo 2005:16). Sindelo (2019:n.p.), however, differs and says, as far as his knowledge goes, this does not apply to (all) Xhosa speaking people in South Africa.

### INITIATION AND ANCESTORS

To connect this ritual with ancestors, is of crucial importance, especially for amaXhosa. According to David Bogopa (2010:1), lecturer in the Department of Sociology and Anthropology in the School of Governmental and Social Sciences at the Nelson Mandela University in Port Elizabeth (South Africa), “[a]ncestor worship is founded on the belief that the dead live on and are capable of influencing the lives of those who are still living.” Ancestors are believed to be capable both of blessing and cursing those who still live. Therefore, their worship is motivated by “respect and fear” (:1). Hammond-Tooke (1994:2) reasons that all the different cultural groups have a special

name when they refer to their ancestors. They make use of the plural form with reference to these particular and special beings as a sign of respect. Bogopa (2010:2) further argues that “[r]itual ceremonies are performed through-out the life-span [of a person], marking different stages of life, such as the birth stage and maturity stage, and even after a person has died.” After the birth stage, “there must be a ritual ceremony (*ukushwana*) before the initiates can go through the *ukwaluko* process and after the initiates have graduated from the *ukwaluko* process. It is believed that performing the fore-mentioned ritual ceremonies is to thank the ancestors for protecting the initiates” (:2). In the Xhosa culture particularly, the reason for deaths during initiation is believed to be that “some parents have the tendency to not perform ritual ceremonies for their sons before sending them to *ekwalukweni*” (:3). Bogopa refers, in this regard, to the following example: “there is an important ritual ceremony known as *ukushwama*. In this ritual ceremony, a goat is slaughtered and a boy is given a right limb to eat in order to prevent misfortunes (*amashwa*) before he can be taken to an initiation school” (:3; Bogopa 2007:56). The purpose of this ritual “is to directly communicate with the ancestors so that they may look after the boy for the whole duration of the *ukwaluko* process” (Bogopa 2010:4) and to “protect the initiates from evil spirits” (:5). Bogopa then makes the very important point when he says that it

is evident ... that, within the context of many cultures in South Africa and beyond, health and ancestors are two sides of the same coin: one cannot live a healthy life without honouring the ancestors. The process of ancestor worship takes place in the form of a life cycle, proceeding from birth to death. (:5)

## IN CONCLUSION

Vincent (2008b:440) is of the opinion that “the main power of circumcision in the fear amongst the uninitiated that they might be



ostracised by the community.” Brunsdon (2016:268) indicates that because “circumcision is seen as a rite of passage in the journey to become fully human, the uninitiated are not regarded as human, earning them derogatory names such as ‘dogs’ and causing them to be excluded from certain privileges, especially in the social sphere.” A boy who has not been initiated, for example, “will not be included in a family’s budget for new clothing. The uninitiated will not be granted entrance to certain social gatherings either” (:268). But furthermore, they “will not be considered for sexual intercourse by females. The social perception that circumcised men are of stronger moral fibre than the uninitiated also causes African societies to lay the blame for crime or misconduct on innocent uninitiated men” (:268). This leads to the fact that “[c]andidates for initiation are thus constantly weighing the perceived dangers of initiation against the social ostracism that awaits them if they do not submit to this institution, and the fear of ostracism is clearly winning” (:268). Furthermore, “[t]raditional leaders ... discourage the use of regulated circumcision actively by labelling those who go to hospital for their circumcision ... (paper boys) or comparing them to women who gave birth in a hospital ward by plainly referring to these men as women<sup>15</sup>” (:268-269). With this in mind, “it should be understandable that ostracism may outweigh the risks of traditional circumcision for many young men” (:269).

With this in mind, thousands of boys are not destined to become adult men because circumcision costs them their lives. Some will not be able to have children in a normal way because their genitals are severely damaged by this practice. Mabuza (2010:2), chairperson of the CRL Commission, says in his foreword to the CRL Rights Commission’s 2010-report on public hearings on male initiation schools, that the present “South African Constitution guarantees people rights that enable them to carry out their cultural practices”. However, the same constitution “is not neutral on values. It challenges South African citizens to exercise their rights according to the values that are entrenched within it” (:2). These values include, according

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15 Also see Vincent (2008a:81).

to Mabuza, “respect, human dignity and freedom. However, these rights sometimes clash and need to be discussed and negotiated” (:2). One important question that must be asked is whether certain cultural practices and traditions in a modern democracy can be more important than, for example, the right to human dignity and life. In thinking about this, we must further listen to the boys themselves and their families rather than just to the cultural elite and traditional leadership. According to Du Toit (2014), Ntombana argues that, like all cultural practices, male circumcision has always been changing and, therefore, an argument against change as such is invalid. Shaka, for example, simply abolished this practice in KwaZulu-Natal because it interfered with the training of his Zulu warriors (Van den Heever 2014). Ntombana (in Du Toit 2014) further says that this initiation practice revived with the dawn of the new political dispensation, but that the initiation in the forest is symbolically more important than the circumcision itself. He, therefore, argues for the medicalisation of circumcision and says that if it is properly incorporated in the rituals, it should not be at all subversive. He wants to see young people organise themselves and that the practice is made more voluntary.

All the different problems that relate to male initiation and circumcision give rise to an important debate, especially in a country like South Africa “that is endeavoring to heal the divisions of the past, to promote respect and tolerance of its diverse cultures, and in particular to protect those cultural practices that were marginalized, and are still threatened in the new dispensation” (CRL Rights Commission 2010:9). It is possible – as seen elsewhere in the world – to realign some cultural practices with developed and developing value systems without losing the core values and ideals that are so fundamentally important to various traditional cultural and spiritual practices and beliefs. To achieve this, however, more than legislation is required. What is needed, are partnerships between different stakeholders, such as communities, the government, and traditional leadership, especially in enforcing the necessary requirements for opening and running initiation schools, as well as providing the necessary resources and expertise in order to better contribute to the health of initiates and to support destitute families.

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