Exploring Traditional Male Initiates at An Initiation School in Limpopo Province, South Africa: Cultural Health Practices

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Abstract: The purpose of this study is to explore traditional male initiates’ cultural health practices within initiation schools in the Limpopo Province in South Africa. Informants were six elders (70-80 years old) who directed initiating services at the schools.

Data were collected by using unstructured group interviews and observations. Data were analyzed thematically. Findings indicated that the traditional male elders reported practices such as perceived positive aspects of initiation ceremonies including the Limpopo circumcision schools Acts, which stipulates that circumcision surgeons must be registered and tested before being certified to circumcise the initiates. Secondly, the Act further states that anyone who transgresses the law will face one-year jail sentence or R2 000 fine. Further-more the elders also reported the negative aspects such as: high initiation mortality caused by the lack of initiates’ competence, expertise, experience, skills and knowledge. Elders believe that local practitioners who have initiation experience to conduct initiation, have a better outcome compared to the ones who are from outside their catchment area, in as far as health promotion practices is concerned. Partnerships between the elderly initiation local men practitioners and external providers would thus result in less morbidity and mortality amongst the initiates.

Keywords: Initiation school; Circumcision; Traditional circumcision; Male circumcision; Male initiates; Health issues; Rituals and cultural beliefs

1. Introduction and problem statement

Cultural rites and rituals are of importance in every country in as far as traditional practices and health promotion are concerned.

This study intended to explore, describe and interpret traditional male initiates at initiation schools in Limpopo Province, South Africa. Studies have been conducted and shown that traditional male circumcision has been common in some communities for almost 5000 years and is today practiced by about one sixth of the world’s population as stated by Helman (2000). Furthermore, in spite of a number of circumcision-related complications and deaths there is still support for the practice of this type of initiation rituals as mentioned by Vincent (2008). From another point of view, the researcher is of the opinion that there should be respect to all different cultural beliefs and practices in the diverse societies and the country of South Africa. All these have a constitutional right to practice and cultures as stipulated in the (Constitution of South Africa, Act No 108, 1996). Some of the cultural beliefs and practices, such as traditional male circumcision need to be revisited and re-modernized because there is a serious concern over the increase of deaths of male initiates every year, just as does the growing number of unlawful traditional circumcisions and initiation schools.

As a researcher after reading various literatures on initiation schools, reports from the elderly initiated men and
listening to media, the researcher found it worth to conduct a research on initiation schools in South Africa with a reason of finding how this challenge of high death rate can be reduced. The reason why the researcher opted to research on initiation schools in Limpopo Province is that little research if not none has been conducted on male initiation schools, especially with special reference to the context of Limpopo Province in South Africa. Secondly, the researcher is from the Sekhukhune royal clan in Limpopo province and this prompted him/her to embark on this research study. Therefore, the researcher’s literature will be more on reports from the elderly old initiated men, literatures and newspapers. Initiation schools according to the researcher is the social, mental, physical, emotional, cultural and spiritual development leading to be formally recognized process through performing rituals of initiation. These rituals are different from one society to the other because of their different subcultures and ethnicities. For an example in Limpopo province, the area where the researcher went to consult with the elderly initiated men, initiation rituals are not disclosed to any uninitiated person. One man even said… “the consequences of disclosing what is happening in the mountain school is madness”. This is the belief held by the elderly initiated men in that particular area of Limpopo Province.

From the above statement, the researcher is of the opinion that there should be calls for medical professionals and the Government to intervene with an aim of enhancing health related and cultural issues. This can only succeed if the initiation schools are ready to change as we know that culture and society are dynamic, not static and always in the ongoing process of development. The evidence of showing that initiation schools are changing as the society does is that: the researcher has observed that these schools do not keep initiates for a long time as it used to be, for example in most cases it falls within the winter school holidays which is approximately three weeks as compared to a year. Initiates do no longer belong to an exclusive ethnic group instead is interethnic.

The concept of inter-ethnicity is in line with the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa Act No 35 of 1997 where the following values are clearly outlined as: “Human dignity, the achievement of equality, advancement of human rights and freedom…”, yet people time and again violate them. These values are good, but they might cause ethnic, moral conflicts as well as identity, cultural, language confusion and difficulties. For an example initiates might look down on those who have not been initiated forgetting that the notion of feeling more superior than others is a violation of human rights and more often than not leads to uncalled for confrontation.

It should however be noted that in spite of the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa of 1996, people still do things for their own benefits and that in most cases might lead to confrontations and corruptions. Some corruptions emerge because of greed for incentives in a form of money. For an example, it is reported in the City Press (25 July 2010) that during initiation school, an unlawful circumcision was conducted in Pondoland where nine hundred boys, some as young as twelve years were circumcised. Charges related to unlawful circumcision and the death of one of the initiates reported by his parents were struck out of the roll and the culprit released on a warning. The City Press (25 July 2010) further reported that nothing was said to him (initiated male) as to whether he should continue with his initiation school or not. This shows that unless the government intervenes and introduces the best programmes and guidelines for initiation schools, the unlawful circumcision and corruption will continue taking place and the teenage initiates will continue dying under adverse circumstances such as unhealthy living conditions and freezing cold winter seasons.

2. Understanding the meaning and importance of initiation schools from an african context

According to Van Rooyen, Potgieter and Mtezuka (2012), initiation school is defined as a type of school that was initially established as a secret rite, which in a symbolic sense serves as a teenager’s transit education or passport to adulthood. From the context of this study, the researcher is of the opinion that the concept “initiation school” refers to a type of school that is formed as a secret rite, where teenage boys are taught certain conducts and cultural beliefs, leading them to adulthood. Initiation school can thus be further explained as a concept and process widely performed in South Africa with its practice that marks the transition from one stage e.g. of birth to adulthood life of both boys and girls. In terms of African religion and culture, initiation has a legal, spiritual and psychological significance. According to Elliot (1989) initiation school is known as “traditional education”, “sex education”, “education for life”, “bush education”, “secret societies” or “indigenous education”. These concepts are used interchangeably by some of the researchers. In
this study "initiation school" has to do with the child's holistic growing-up and development in a particular norm prescribed by the particular tribe or Nguni tribe. It can be further added that the principle that lie at the core of initiation is respect for self, family and community. These are the systems that permeates each other in transmitting values, norms and skills of the society as stated in the proceeding section of theoretical framework.

Currently, in South Africa as stated by Van Rooyen et al (2006) many opinions are voiced against initiation, mainly because of a rising number of youngsters who lose their lives as a direct result of the unprofessional circumcisions that are conducted as well as preventing children /learners from attending formal school for some weeks during winter months. Hence the conduction of this study in order to find out how the male initiates are initiated in the initiation schools.

3. Clarification of concepts

3.1 Initiation school

According to Helman (2000), initiation school is a cultural educational institution where initiates are taught the values inherent in social responsibility, discipline and acceptable conduct as well as more about their culture. This means that initiation schools assist young boys to be responsible adults in their communities.

3.2 Circumcision

The term circumcision is used medically to refer to the surgical removal of the penile foreskin. But when used in the South African context, Gwata (2009), refers to circumcision as going to the mountain or going to the bush since traditionally initiation schools were situated in a secluded location far from the community, in an uncultivated area. This statement is in line with what the researcher is aware of, because in the area where she/he grew up such practices are observed and performed in the bush.

3.3 Traditional circumcision

Traditional circumcision is described by Stinson (2008), as a change in status and the creation of a new identity. It is a socially significant act which culminates in a boy’s integration into the community and grants him acceptance and respect from other community members.

3.4 Male circumcision

According to Silverman (2004), male circumcision involves the removal of the foreskin and is practiced in many cultures around the world for ritual, religious, medical and other purposes such as beliefs that circumcision ens boys for warfare or enhances masculine virility. From the researcher’s point of view circumcision also include resistance to hardship, adversity and manhood.

Rituals

Stinson (2008) defines rituals as a way in which members of a society communicate values and ways of living through psychological, social and symbolic interactions and teaching. In this paper and from the researcher’s perspectives, rituals are important because through them, social norms, skills and values as well as cultural knowledge are imparted to the initiates. Ritual circumcision is a highly valued practice, especially among black South African cultural groups as it is believed to develop boys into men as well as giving them a feeling of satisfaction and sense of belonging.

Theoretical framework

This paper is underpinned by the theoretical framework with its emphasis on a holistic and interrelated approach to the interrelationship and support of individuals and the society. The theoretical philosophies include the ecological systems by Bronfenbrenner’s model of human development (Donald, Lazarus & Lolwana, 2008).

The Bronfenbrenner’s theory

Bronfenbrenner’s systems are made up of Micro, Meso, Exo, Macro, and Chrono systems (Geldenhuys and Wevers, 2013; Donald, Lazarus and Lolwana, 2011). These systems will be briefly discussed below as:

- Microsystems represent an individual’s immediate context, which is characterized by direct interactional and mu-
tual dialogue processes as family relationships and close friends. It is an environment which is, in this paper closest to the male initiates. According to Cuddington, (2001), microsystems cover the relationships and interactions the male initiates have with their direct surroundings, in this context it will be family, school, community structures initiation schools and the elderly men.

-Mesosystem refers to and connects the relationships structures such as the home, school, neighborhood and peer group (Geldenhuys and Wevers, 2013). It is a set of Microsystems that continually interact with one another (Donald et al, 2011). Macro system consists of the greater cultural world, bordering an individual together with any underlying belief systems and includes features such as government policies, political ideology, cultural customs, historical events and the economic system (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The cultural norms and beliefs in this paper are based on the fact that boys should be initiated in order to be seen as men and be respected by the society. In other words, only those who are initiated are seen as superiors.

-Chronosystem includes the aspect of time as it relates to the initiates’ environment. This means that the more the culture of initiation is practiced in the societies the more the improvement can be realized and achieved through the collaboration with other relevant stakeholders such as parents, government and health department.

In this paper the theoretical framework applied is shaped by the all-encompassing theoretical framework or model of Bronfenbrenner (1979) which argues that families, communities and the social network present a successful ecological system which could be applied in the improvement of people’s life in South Africa. In this context, it is the improvement of the initiation schools’ conditions of male initiation. Bronfenbrenner (1986) says a person is a unique individual at the centre of the ecosystem theory which is known as the ecological system. Traditional male circumcision affects both individuals and societies at large and this therefore automatically affects all of us. The reason being that if there is a high death rate during initiation, the country’s population and economy will also be affected and suffer. The theory is influenced by bi-directional systems. What influences the individual (initiates) also influences the family, community and the country at large. According to Bronfenbrenner (1986) every person on earth is affected by the Ecological System Theory.

4. The context of the study

There are initiation customs that might have worked well in ancient times but when practiced today they become irrelevant or dangerous to the society at large. Based on this statement, traditional male circumcision or initiation today is a disaster, as more and more initiates are dying. For an example in 2010, winter initiation death toll in the Eastern Cape rose to 41. This shows that there is something wrong with the manner at which initiation is conducted. On this note there is a need to make sure that the health of the boy initiates is not compromised, since it appears that initiation schools are here to stay as evidenced by the statements below:

According to Van Rooyen et al (2006), across different communities in the country of South Africa, a total number of almost 10 000 were initiated in 2005. Subsequently in 2011, 325 initiation schools in Limpopo hosted 32000 initiates as reported in the Pretoria news (12 July 2010). In other years 55000 boys attended initiation schools annually in the same Province. The researcher argues that the number of male initiates increases yearly just as does the number of their deaths.

4.1 Challenges faced by initiation schools

There are many challenges facing South African initiation schools. As mentioned in the previous section, every year there is an increase in the intake of male initiates. The rationale behind an increase in the admission of male initiates is that, across South Africa, most of the initiates in the communities of (Pedi, Sotho, Zulu, Xhosa, Shangaan, Ndebele etc.) are initiated by their choice whilst some are pressurised by their peers as they don’t want to be called or labelled “boy” or being stigmatised as being uncircumcised males. Meintjies’ (1998) study confirmed that some boys are excluded at school from social groups because they have not been to the mountains. Based on this statement, it is evidence that the increase in male initiate in-take is continuous and this is a challenge. For example, it can cause high initiation mortality. High initiation mortality in this study is further aggravated by the lack of initiates’ competence, expertise, experience, skills and knowledge. The lack of such experiences prevents the initiates to know how to stop infection on the cut wounds because they are not formally trained. To make matters worse these inexperience initiates often-
tie the bandage too tight around the penis, preventing blood supply or circulation of blood as stated by Kepe (2010). This in most cases leads to delay in wound healing as there could be insufficient circulation of supply of blood.

Other challenges are encountered when most of the traditional initiation schools are built in the secluded isolated areas, far away from the communities and health centres such as clinics and hospitals. This might also lead to high death rates because in times of calamities such as veld fires, such isolated areas are hard to find thus complicating accessibility in the event of emergencies and entrance to initiation schools thus resulting to high initiate death rate.

The other point on challenges that causes a high initiate death rate to be looked at is an outcry of poor hygienic practices. Poor hygienic practices is explained by Van Rooyen et al (2006) as the process or tendencies of using one traditional spear to all male initiates during traditional circumcision procedures. A number of researchers (Funani, 1990, Kanta, 2004, Meintjies, 1998, Peltzer & Kanta, 2009, Stinson, 2006) concur with Van Rooyen et al (2006) when stating that the surgical instruments used to circumcise the initiates are often not sterilised between circumcisions and also when the traditional surgeon does not cut the skin of the penis neatly. This is even worsened by not using gloves or washing hands before performing traditional circumcision. These unhygienic methods which are mostly practised in the rural areas can increase the cut wound infection. In certain areas, there is the tendency of reusing bandages to different initiates, this also is dangerous as can cause bacteria to spread in the wounds from one initiate to the other.

4.2 Addressing challenges faced by traditional male initiates at initiation schools in Limpopo Province

Based on the above discussion on challenges faced by initiation schools, the researcher is of the opinion that an attempt to address these types of challenges can be implemented. For example, that initiation program be introduced and implemented where modern societal issues such as religion, culture, moral issues, heritage, ethics, finance, human rights, human trafficking, family planning, sex, relationships, values, careers, abuse and road safety are addressed, initiates be screened for health related issues and fitness before joining initiation, and also engage medical practitioners who have undergone initiation to perform the circumcision. This is supported by the Health Standards of Traditional Circumcision Act No. 6 (2001), which stipulates that:

- No person except a medical practitioner may perform any circumcision in the province without written permission of the medical officer designated for the area.

- No person other than the traditional nurse, medical practitioner, the medical officer, or any other person authorized by the medical officer, should within a traditional context, treat an initiate.

- Where a proper surgical instrument has been prescribed or supplied... the medical officer concerned must demonstrate to or train the traditional surgeon as to how the instrument should be used. To show the seriousness of the problems of initiation schools in the country, The Department of Cooperative Governance Traditional Affairs has passed a bill to fight illegal circumcision schools. The bill as stated in the Sowetan (9 December 2015) proposes that:
  - Operators or initiates should be over 21 years old with no criminal records.
  - Feed destitute initiates and offer free counselling to families of deceased initiates.
  - Offer ablution facilities and clean drinking water.

- Perceptions of Initiates and their Voices during the researcher’s observation period

  The following initiates reported the following during their welcome-home ceremony:

  1. I would not feel like a man if I did not go, but now I am proud that I went through the same process that my father and forefathers have gone through;
  2. Another one stated that even though he went to the initiation school out of his own free will, he would one day advise his own sons to be initiated
  3. One said enduring hardship made him what he is now.
  4. Another one spoke of upholding cultural rites and respect for others.

4.3 The Limpopo circumcision school’s acts

After all the challenges mentioned in the previous section, Limpopo province came out with their own Act called Limpopo circumcision school’s Acts. The Limpopo circumcision schools Acts, stipulates that circumcision surgeons must be registered and tested before being certified to circumcise the initiates. The Act was put in place after seeing that
some people charge almost R3000 per an initiate. Some of these people are graduates from initiation schools, who are unemployed and see an opportunity to make money. Thobejane, the head of the Congress of Traditional Leaders of South Africa (Contralesa) which is a Non-Governmental pressure group of traditional leaders of South Africa formed in 1987, stated in the Pretoria News (30 May 2014) that the organization with its partnership with Contralesa, the health department, the SA Medical Association, and Community Development Foundation for South Africa (Codefsa), a Non-Governmental Organization has launched its plan of dealing with initiations, with an aim of promoting safe traditional initiation. He further said that in order to intensify such measures, the organization would develop a database of professional medical doctors and traditional initiation nurses to monitor initiates and also mobilize traditional leaders, to take full control of initiations under the area of their jurisdiction. The researcher is of the opinion that through working with other recognized partners, an enhancement of better well-being of the initiates will be promoted. For example, prospective initiates will go to the camp after being medically screened.

The Act further states that anyone who transgresses the law will face one-year jail sentence or R2 000 fine. As a researcher I am of the opinion that the fine is too lenient. The suggestion is that, the fine should be equated or be in line with the legal fine carried in the court of Law to a person who has been found guilty of killing a person. On the other hand, City Press of the (18 July 2010) suggests that there should be the relationship between tradition and modernity. In other words, a frame-work be put in place where cultural heritage and belief system can be integrated to the South African modern health facilities. Meaning that medical doctors should be part of the process and perform the activity of removing the foreskins of the male initiates as stated in the preceding section.

4.4 Research question

Based on the above discussion, the research question can thus be formulated as:

How are traditional male initiates at initiation schools in Limpopo Province, South Africa initiation?

4.5 Research aim

The research aim of this study is to explore, interpret and describe traditional male elderly initiates at initiation schools in Limpopo Province, South Africa.

4.6 Research method

Leedy and Ormod (2005) view research as being a systematic process of collecting, analysing and interpreting data with an aim of understanding the phenomenon one is researching. In this study, the phenomenon researched on is exploring traditional male initiates at initiation schools in Limpopo Province, South Africa.

Little research if not none has not yet been conducted on initiation schools especially in Limpopo Province in South Africa where these practices of traditional initiations are used optimally. Hence the conduction of this study.

The research method used in this study is qualitative theory-based approach where literature, observations and narrative approach were used. These were seen relevant because they allow the researcher to gain more in-depth information from the elderly experienced initiated men. This narrative approach is also supported by Brandt (2008) when stating that it is the telling of stories as a defining aspect of human experience since it is through this process that individuals construct, interpret and make meaning of experience. This method is used in this study in order to assist the researcher to understand the in-depth problem on traditional male initiates in the Limpopo Province. Niang and Boiro (2007) add that narratives give voice to local people and to understand how they conceptualise traditional male circumcision within their own philosophical systems, social dynamics, gender realities and symbolic modes of learning and transmitting knowledge. Leedy and Ormod (2005), support the above statement by stating that qualitative method relies heavily on verbal data and subjective analysis.

4.7 Data collection

Data collection in this study is less structured yet more flexible since the participants are elderly men who attended non-formal education. Based on this statement, the use of qualitative data collection method where observation approach, literature based on government policies and information derived from interviewing a group of elderly experienced initiated men was done by the researcher as she/he is from the royal clan. Being from the royal clan was an advantage because the participants became more relaxed and free to express their views regarding traditional male initiation. These have assisted the researcher to obtain more in-depth information and understanding about traditional male
initiation in South Africa with special reference to Limpopo Province where these practices are also done. For an example through group-interviews a question such as “what type of content do you teach your male initiation at initiation schools? was asked. Anonymously the male elderly initiated participants responded by saying that “the consequences of disclosing what is happening in the mountain school is madness”. This is the belief held by the elderly initiated men in that particular area of Limpopo Province.

4.8 Recommendations

Based on the above discussion, the researcher therefore recommends that:
- All the unlawful initiation schools should be scrapped
- Circumcision school’s Act should be effectively implemented in all the Provinces.
- Health Department in South Africa should provide each initiation school with basic medical facilities.
- Medical doctors who have undergone traditional initiation should be involved in the initiation processes

5. Conclusion

From the researcher’s observation and literature as well as the voices of initiated elderly men, initiation schools are here to stay despite all these high increase in deaths amongst the initiates. This was emphasized by some elderly traditionalists during the researcher’s interaction with them. For an example they reported that initiation or circumcision is a cultural phenomenon at their villages. This means that there will still be many challenges in South African male circumcision unless if the country can learn to keep up with a changing society and also learn to adhere to the changes in rituals. Furthermore, South African Government should as stated in the recommendations above, put in place better medical facilities and professional doctors in order to reduce high death rate.

Ethical considerations

According to Walliman (2006), ethics deals with honesty and treating people with respect. Furthermore, ethics refers to how one behaves to people with whom one interacts. This means that as a researcher, one should: accept any termination from the study by the participants, there should be no coercion, clear information based on the study should be given to all the participants, their privacy should be respected and the participants should not be subjected to any harm, Lastly clear discussion on ethics and informed consent should also be done.

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References