



SHORT REPORT



## Gay Xhosa men's experiences of *ulwaluko* (traditional male initiation)

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### ABSTRACT

This paper explores the lives of gay men undergoing traditional initiation in the Eastern Cape. Nine participants aged between 18 and 26 reported their reasons for becoming traditionally circumcised, which included personal validation of cultural manhood, the desire to conform to societal norms and expectations, and pressure from family members to 'convert' them to heterosexuality. While homosexuality remains a target for vilification and abuse both in Southern Africa and across the African continent, practices such as *ulwaluko* (traditional male initiation) must surely be among the most threatening to a young gay Xhosa man's self-esteem.

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## Introduction

Among amaXhosa, the transition to manhood for boys is marked by a ritual called *ulwaluko*, also known as traditional male initiation. The act of circumcision is only one of several activities included in the process of initiation. Boys generally undergo this ritual between the ages of 16 and 26 (Mavundla et al. 2010). The amaXhosa have been practising the ritual as a rite of passage from boyhood to manhood for centuries.

There are various components of the ritual of *ulwaluko*. Firstly, the pain that an initiate experiences during the transition is believed to play a vital role in validating his cultural manhood (Mgqolozana 2009). Secondly, Bongela (2001) explains that any *umkhwetha* (initiate going through *ulwaluko*) is expected to pay due respect to this transitional stage and not to question its demands and suffering. Thirdly, *ulwaluko* is regarded as a sacred cultural practice whereby boys are formally introduced to their ancestors. Fourthly, the ritual is considered important in the development of an individual's growth and construction of social identity. Fifthly, according to Mavundla et al. (2009, 400) the circumcision is to be conducted by a recognized traditional surgeon or *ingcibi*. Although amaXhosa men revere the custom and would like to believe that a 'well respected, upstanding member of the community' should perform the act, this is not always the case (Sidimba 2011, 14). The integrity of the custom is also sometimes compromised by negligent traditional attendants. This has led to a rise in the number of casualties among those participating in the rite (Vincent 2008). In South Africa, the state has responded by putting in place a variety of mechanisms to regulate

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the practice, most recently in the form of the The Children's Act 38 of 2005, which gives male children the right to refuse traditional male initiation and makes those who circumcise a child against his will guilty of an offence punishable by imprisonment (Republic of South Africa 2005). Section 12(9) of the act provides that boys older than 16 may be circumcised only if the child has consented to the circumcision in the manner prescribed in the regulations promulgated under the act and after the child has undergone proper counselling. Thus, taking into account the child's age, maturity and stage of development, every boy has the right to refuse circumcision.

### ***Stages in the ulwaluko initiation ritual***

The Xhosa male initiation ritual consists of various stages such as pre-initiation preparation, the circumcision operation itself, seclusion in the initiation cultural setting and reintegration into society. During the circumcision operation, at the moment of the incision, initiates are not allowed to cry or show signs of pain as this would be considered shameful and would be seen as an indication of weakness (Mandela 1994). Even though an initiate may experience excruciating pain, he must ignore it and unequivocally declare his manhood. The endurance of pain is considered to be a sign of bravery. If a man cries, he is seen as inferior, a sign associated with femininity or regression to childhood. As a way to prepare him for the difficulties that lie ahead, an initiate is encouraged to be 'strong'. During their seclusion, initiates are also taught the *isihlonipho sabakhwetha*, (the language of respect of the initiates), otherwise known as *isikhwetha* (the language of initiates), which involves the conscious avoidance of words relating in any way to the custom rites of the Xhosa initiation (Finlayson 1998). This vocabulary is used not only to prove that one has undergone the ritual but is also used to defend one's manhood when it is challenged by others at initiation school and elsewhere (Mgqolozana 2009). This special language is taught to the initiate by an *ikhankatha*, who is the guardian and instructor of the initiate throughout his seclusion for the initiation rite.<sup>1</sup>

Following the liminal phase and the end of seclusion, the initiate is reintegrated into the community having acquired a new status of manhood. He is now expected to reason and behave like a man while also spending time with other men developing his dignity, gracefulness and self-control. In the *ulwaluko* rite of passage, initiates' heterosexual orientation is taken for granted. It is assumed that those participating are heterosexual and are expected thereafter to display traditional 'masculine' behaviours such as marrying and fathering. However, current legislation in South Africa also allows gay/homosexual men to marry (Republic of South Africa 2006) and father children, although there is resistance to this from within adoption agencies, and lesbians are preferred when it comes to adopting (Brodzinsky and Pertman 2011). Surrogacy is another option that gay men can opt for with respect to parenthood.

Those who decide to participate in *ulwaluko* but who do not conform to cultural expectations of masculinity risk being ridiculed or marginalised (Henderson and Shefer 2008). As a result of their non-conformity to heteropatriarchal notions of masculinity, gay initiates may, therefore, face added challenges at initiation school in order for them to gain acceptance, as their sexual orientation may be viewed as compromising the sacredness of the practice (Henderson and Shefer 2008; Mavundla et al. 2010). The ritual carries with it the implicit assumption that gay initiates have decided to 'convert' to heterosexuality, thus their participation should be in line with the prescriptions it offers. If they engage in the ritual

while fully intending to retain their homosexual identity, they are considered as having transgressed the expected rules of *ulwaluko*.

## **Homosexual transgression of hegemonic masculinity in the context of *ulwaluko***

There is a paucity of studies focusing on homosexuality in relation to traditional male initiation. South Africa although progressive in its legislation against discrimination on the basis of homosexuality remains a homophobic, heterosexist society where, across cultures, homosexuality is pathologised, and where cultural discourses such as the notion that “homosexuality is not African” continue to play themselves out’ (Henderson and Shefer 2008, 4; see also Chard et al. 2015). South Africa has set up a range of legal and constitutional mechanisms to promote lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex rights, from constitutional protection against discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation, to the acceptance of gay marriage in 2005 in the Constitutional Court and the subsequent Civil Unions Act (Republic of South Africa 2006).

Gay and other homosexual men transgress certain aspects of hegemonic masculinity, but are still required to negotiate their identities in relation to dominant ideas of what it means to be a man within a particular cultural context. Connell (1995, 2001), for example, argues that homosexuality is traditionally viewed as a negation of masculinity, with homosexuality in men being conflated with women and femininity. This is also true in the context of *ulwaluko*, where gay men challenge some aspects of the ritual that they do not identify with, or where they purposefully participate in the ritual to disprove normative notions of masculinity.

Power is central to the construction of masculinity, and men’s theorists such as Connell (2005) and Hearn (2004) maintain that there is a hierarchy within masculinity whereby certain forms of masculinity (hegemonic masculinities) are considered more honourable and dominant than others. In many societies, gay men are marginalised and subordinated in many social and institutional contexts, as in hegemonic settings such as *ulwaluko*, for example. Homosexual men have little power within these heteropatriarchal contexts, and this may facilitate their ‘consent’ to vestiges of domination and oppression within their own community settings.

## **Methods**

This study employed a qualitative research paradigm to focus on a relatively small sample of men. Participants were recruited from a university lesbian and gay organisation. Membership of the organisation is also open to those outside of the university. Recruitment began when the primary researcher (an isiXhosa heterosexual woman) approached a number of isiXhosa gay male members of this organisation asking whether they would be willing to participate in this study. Only three people responded to the invitation initially so the researcher asked each of them to recommend others in order to gain a greater number of participation for the study. This approach led to a total of nine traditionally-initiated isiXhosa-speaking gay men aged between 18 and 26 years coming forward to participate in individual interviews. Participants were chosen on the basis of their openness about their sexuality and traditional manhood status. They had a minimum of grade 12 formal education.

Six of the nine participants reported that they had been openly gay to their families and communities even before undergoing *ulwaluko*. The other three reported that their families were suspicious about their sexual orientation but had not directly confronted them.

Nine individual interviews and a group interview were used to collect data as part of this study. Of the nine participants who participated in individual interviews, three also participated in a group interview. Semi-structured open-ended questions were used in both the one-to-one and group interviews, which were recorded and transcribed verbatim. Questions primarily focused on eliciting in-depth information about the experiences gained at initiation school. Interview questions were mainly the same for both the group interview and the individual interviews and included the following: How did you experience being an initiate? How did you view *ulwaluko*? What do you think is the main aim of this ritual? Did you feel you had a choice regarding the decision to go for circumcision? Do you see any contradiction between your sexuality and your culture in terms of *ulwaluko*?

In order to ensure that responses were trustworthy, the first author/primary researcher spent time beforehand establishing rapport with participants to gain their trust. Each participant was interviewed for about one hour. The group interview, which was conducted a week before the individual interviews, lasted for about two hours. Interviews were conducted in English and isiXhosa, the home language of the participants. Transcriptions of interviews were translated into English and then back-translated into isiXhosa by two researchers.

### **Data analysis**

Data analysis involved reading through the data repeatedly, segmenting themes and interpreting the accounts of these themes. Three researchers (the primary researcher and first author, a senior researcher and second author and a research assistant<sup>2</sup>) were involved in this process. Once the three researchers had identified recurrent themes through reading the data repeatedly, the primary researcher used labels to name the themes (Terre Blanche, Durrheim, and Painter 2012). Interpretation of these themes then followed.

### **Ethical considerations**

Prior to participating in this study, participants read and signed a consent form as an indication that they agreed to participate in this study. Participants were assured of anonymity and confidentiality. In the event that any participant might need support after the interview, details of a counselling service were provided. Ethics approval for this study was obtained from the University of Fort Hare Research Ethics Committee.

### **Findings**

Seven main themes emerged from the data collected. These were experiences of *ulwaluko*, downplaying *ulwaluko*, rejection of *isikhwetha* vocabulary, *ulwaluko* perceived as a means to convert gay men, *ulwaluko* used to disprove socially constructed notions of manhood and, lastly, homosexual acts at initiation.

### **Experiences of ulwaluko**

Five of the nine participants stated that they had had negative experiences at initiation school, mainly due to their feelings of not belonging and to feelings of inadequacy. Themba,<sup>3</sup> a 19-year-old openly homosexual man, explained as follows:

My interaction with the other initiates was good but sometimes I felt desperately lonely and there was no one to understand how I feel but I was trying to be the best that I can be there. But I was pretending which was so very hard .... So to me being there was not useful ... I did isolate myself because hanging around with other initiates was like I'm in a strange world because I didn't know what to say or what not to say. The worst part is that I didn't even fit in their conversations and what I did the most was to pretend and say something just to have a say. Just to fit in there. The other initiates treated me differently and teased me a lot of the time except for the teachers. ... When I was an *ikrwala* [graduate initiate] I used to wish that that time would pass already so that I can be normal again. I used to sit at home and I did not go participate in the socialisation of other newly initiated men.

Themba had been open about his sexual orientation before undergoing the ritual. He was one of the more reserved participants among the nine interviewed and also appeared to be the most negatively affected by the ritual, seeking counselling support after participating in the study.

As a result of feeling lonely, Themba decided not to participate in some of the activities undertaken as part of the ritual, such as taking part in the cultural meetings, as he felt no one would understand him. Themba felt he conducted himself in a way that was not a true reflection of himself. As he could not relate to other initiates, he had to adjust by pretending to fit in. This is a survival strategy employed by many who find themselves in disempowered positions (Henderson and Shefer 2008).

Themba's negative experience was the result of heterosexual initiates' attempts to tease him due to his sexual orientation, and while his decision to isolate himself by not engaging in the cultural meetings could be construed as a strength, he felt hurt by the experience. By not conforming to heterosexual norms, Themba had transgressed the sacredness of the ritual. He experienced a sense of isolation and felt marginalised. This negative experience, however, did not change his gay identity as he believed the ritual would not change him.

### **Downplaying homosexuality**

Other participants chose to adjust by downplaying their homosexuality. Senzo, who was 18 years old and whose sexuality was known about by some of his family members before undergoing the ritual, described his experience as follows:

They treated me okay because I'm a people's person, I generally like people. And I get along well with them so there were no problems, but there were a few of them that put a lot of pressure on me, but since I'm a people's person and I like being with people, and I don't try to convert straight people into being gay and I never proposed love to anyone and didn't care about those things, I did not experience any problems

Senzo felt that due to his personality he did not experience any 'problems' with other initiates. He reasoned that since he did not threaten any initiate's manhood or sexuality by expressing his own, he did not experience any difficulties. In this situation, Senzo had used the strategy of 'playing it safe' in order to 'protect' himself. Since he was in the minority, he chose to adapt to the dominant group's norms and act like them in order for him not to

experience marginalisation. His survival strategy was to 'act like a man' in order to be integrated into the group. Had he been feminine-acting, he would have been rejected for not displaying sufficiently masculine traits as expected by heteronormativity.

### **Rejection of *isikhwetha* vocabulary**

The vocabulary taught at initiation school is one of the key aspects of the ritual (Mavundla et al. 2009; Mqolozana 2009). According to Finlayson (1998), it is traditionally believed that should the initiate fail to respect this custom by not using the *isikhwetha* vocabulary, his circumcision wound will not heal or some misfortune might befall him, such as the inability to father children. Although there are other important rituals within *ulwaluko*, learning the *isikhwetha* vocabulary is significant as it is an important part in the cultural socialisation of initiates. Using this vocabulary is not only a way of defending manhood but also as a means of acquiring social identity and belonging. It is expected that an initiate should graduate from his initiation having acquired competence in *isikhwetha* vocabulary as he is expected to use it when communicating with other initiated men at initiation school as well as outside the school. In spite of the importance of gaining competence in this vocabulary, there were participants who reported that they left their initiation not having learnt it. Neo, a 26-year-old community worker, explained:

And there was also that cultural initiation language that was said and I think I tried to learn it for two days and I was like hell no I am not gonna do this again. I am not gonna prove my manhood to anyone. I don't have to do it. When they did all that I used to sleep ... even now I don't know the language and even if my brother was to ask me I would tell him I don't know. ... When I was an *ikrwala* no one stopped me to talk about my manhood even when I was at highway, no one came to my house and no one stopped me for that thing.

Neo decided that the *isikhwetha* vocabulary would not be of benefit him. He felt no special compunction to learn the vocabulary as he felt that he had already proven his manhood by participating in other components of *ulwaluko*. He was not willing to 'sell out' his identity and rejected the vocabulary that would later prove his manhood post-initiation (Mqolozana 2009). Similar findings regarding this came from Siphon, a 21-year-old, final-year university student and member of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex social movement at his university, and Thabo, a 19-year-old first-year student and member in the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex movement at his university:

When they were doing that cultural initiation language thing I used to seat in my hut 'coz I didn't know what I had to learn that for when I knew I will not use it outside. (Siphon)

I just had no interest in their manhood talk. When they did all that I used to just sleep. (Thabo)

All nine participants reportedly had no intention of participating in the *isikrwala* (post-initiation stage) of the ritual, which is where the initiation vocabulary proves significant. Neo said he had never been stopped by other *amakrwala* (traditionally initiated men) to prove his manhood by conversing in *isikhwetha* after his initiation. Themba too reported that he had never been visited by other *amakrwala* after he had been reintegrated into his community. Their, and other initiates' reluctance to acquire the relevant vocabulary may therefore perhaps be viewed as form of resistance to hegemonic masculinity.

### ***Ulwaluko as means to convert gay men***

Some participants reported that there was an expectation in their families and communities that when they came back from their initiation they would return with a changed sexual orientation. For example, one participant reported that his family wished that he would come back as ‘a proper man’. This wish derived from the notion that the initiation would be so powerful as to root out any thoughts, feelings and behaviours of homosexuality that initiates presented with. In the group discussion, it emerged that families hoped that depictions of manhood at the school would be so appealing to initiates that they would reject earlier notions and beliefs they had regarding homosexuality and thus ‘choose’ to be heterosexual:

*Thabo:* My grandfather made sure that I had harsh, harsh treatment; he insisted that I had no privileges you know ...

*Themba:* So your grandfather’s wishes were for you to be hard, more of a man?

*Thabo:* ... I was not really social because there are only boys there and what could I possibly say with boys? Nothing! Especially straight boys, you know, there is no conversation so I would just stay in my hut. So he always used to be like I should go find wood and hunt in the middle of the night and stuff.

In the communities informants came from, homosexuality is construed in opposition to dominant masculinity. In the above extract, Themba points out that the motivation behind the grandfather’s insistence was that the ritual would help turn him into a ‘proper man’. Siphos reported a similar view:

They want to change you so that you’re a man. That is their aim, for you to change and become a man so that you can gain independence and all that. I don’t think there was anything else. I think in our case they wanted to change us from being yourself as a boy you were gay you’re gonna sleep around and all that; they wanted to change us so that we could be different now. They wanted us to be straight men.

Here, Siphos highlights the positioning of ‘them’ and ‘us’. The ‘them’ he refers to are those belonging to the hegemonic group that carries power and taken-for-granted knowledge regarding manhood. Similar findings emerged in the account of Themba, a 21-year-old third-year university student and member of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex social movement at his university:

I’m gay so I see no point of doing it because I know I’m not going to change who I am because of circumcision. They thought that being circumcised would change me .... From the community ... they did know that I was gay and to them the whole point of going to circumcision ... was for me to change my perspective and to act like a man and stop acting like a woman.

Overall, six of the nine participants reported that their families and communities hoped that after coming back from *ulwaluko*, they would have been converted from ‘homosexual boys’ to ‘heterosexual men’.

### ***Ulwaluko used to disprove socially constructed notions of manhood***

Some participants reported that they saw *ulwaluko* as an avenue to prove that they were not inferior to other men. The following passage taken from the group interview illustrates this:



Indirectly there was pressure from my father but he couldn't say I should go because I had already made it known that I was willing to go ... he hoped that I would fail because I'm sure he thought to himself that I'm not man enough, that I am weak, that I was a *stabane* [homosexual] whatever, whatever. And I always used to think, you know what, fine, that is even more motivation to do it. Even if they would say I go tomorrow, I would go just to get it over and done with and show them that I'm not a little bitch. (Thabo)

Another participant, Thomas (18 years old and currently unemployed) expressed a similar view: 'I wanted to show them that I was not scared to do it, I wanted to show that I could also do it.'

In the above extracts, participants view *ulwaluko* as an opportunity to disprove wrong notions that homosexual men cannot withstand the pressures of the initiation rite. They view *ulwaluko* as an opportunity to undermine notions of superiority held by the heterosexual men against them. To these informants, participating in the ritual helped 'equalise' them with heterosexual men. There was also a sense of obligation to prove that they could successfully undergo the ritual just as heterosexual men do.

### **Homosexual practices during initiation**

Two participants reported that they conducted themselves throughout the initiation process in the same way they would have done outside it. For example, Thabo continued to openly receive visits from his boyfriend while there. He said:

... even so I had a boyfriend there. My boyfriend used to come to me and visit quite often actually, probably three times a week so he'd come and I could see that they saw that ... 'no, something is happening here' ... I was me, I was doing me. So they respected that because I was doing everything they were doing and that I have a boyfriend. I stayed with my boyfriend the whole time until I went out and became normal again.

Normatively, it might not be expected that such an event would occur at initiation school, since bringing a boyfriend to initiation school might be perceived as bringing disgrace both to the family and the practice itself. Even if he did not have sexual relations with his boyfriend, the fact of bringing a male sexual partner to such a setting could easily be seen as a form of resistance that undermines the cultural values associated with *ulwaluko*. But Thabo knew that the ritual would not convert him and employed stronger strategies to prove that he could gain respect from the other initiates (by doing all that was done by others) while he simultaneously lived his life as he would outside of initiation. The fact that he was respected by the other initiates because he remained true to himself is encouraging.

## **Discussion**

Participants' accounts reveal how a cultural milieu such as the *ulwaluko* ritual is experienced by individuals who are marginalised by their culture (Mavundla et al. 2010). From boyhood to adulthood, men are expected to fulfil cultural notions of manhood. This study illustrated the complexity and non-conformity of homosexual men undergoing *ulwaluko* regarding dominant societal notions and standards of manhood.

In the context of *ulwaluko*, gay initiates can be considered as vulnerable men who take up the subjugated position of masculinity. These men are vulnerable not only to their heterosexual counterparts but also to the custodians involved in the ritual. Some participants said that they attended the initiation school because their families expected them to (hoping



that the initiation would 'cure' them of homosexuality), while others said that they wanted to go to prove their manhood, although not in the heterosexual sense. This suggested that participants did not all think initiation was just about conformity, but also about proving their physical and emotional strength, irrespective of sexual orientation.

Participants in this study resisted attempts by the ritual to change their sexual identities regardless of any feelings of marginalisation. For most gay initiates to be fully accepted, they either had to pretend or had to deny who they were by adopting roles such as being nice in order to fit in. While some simply withdrew from aspects of the ritual, others were more overtly resistant by refusing to learn *isikhwetha* or by (in one instance) having their boyfriend visit. Through such practices, participants showed how they resisted attempts at 'conversion' and pressure from their families, displaying through successful *ulwaluko* that they were not inferior to the hegemonic group.

## Notes

1. Throughout the Eastern Cape Province of South Africa, it is imperative for initiates to use this prescribed vocabulary, which aims to respect certain words for their own use as part of initiation language and training. The special vocabulary is used by initiated men to keep sacred the rituals with which it is associated.
2. The two authors of this paper would like to acknowledge and thank Ali A Abdullahi for his contribution as a research assistant during data analysis associated with this study.
3. All the names used in this paper are pseudonyms to protect confidentiality.

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