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‘Lifting the Cloak on Manhood’ Coverage of Xhosa Male Circumcision in the South African Press

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Introduction

In South Africa’s liberal and non-racial society, black Africans need to decide whether black traditional customs, such as circumcision – and cultural practices as a whole – remain a critical hallmark to being African.

Sicelo Fayo, *The Herald*, 12 January 2005

Periods of change such as the post-apartheid dispensation in South Africa offer the possibility of marginalized discourses to gain influence (Epstein 1998). For Epstein (1998), the formation of new versions of masculinity is a key part of reshaping post-apartheid South Africa. However, as the above quotation illustrates, the initiation rite performed by some black ethnic groups is not only evidence of how marginalized masculinities in South Africa have been and are being (re)constituted. Aspects of Black African masculinities have emerged as a site where the anxieties, insecurities and uncertainties about the post-apartheid socio-political transformation in South Africa are projected, negotiated and defended.¹ As a source of information for many people, media coverage of this ritual serves as a useful site where particular cultural definition of masculinity (Craig 1992) in contemporary South Africa can be understood and analysed.

As part of the 2004 National Arts Festival (NAF) in Grahamstown, South Africa, an exhibition called ‘Initiation as a Rite of Passage’ by artists Thembinkosi Goniwe and Churchill Madikida used photographs, video and songs to explore the subject of male circumcision and initiation ceremonies. The exhibition displayed photographs of young initiates wrapped in white blankets, with their faces painted

in white clay and standing next to an initiation hut. A more graphic illustration at the exhibition included a portrait of a naked man with blood around his genitalia. Other aspects of the exhibition included outfits worn by initiates during and after the ceremony, objects used during initiation ceremonies, and artefacts from different parts of Africa where male initiation is practised.

This public display of a rite of passage often shrouded in secrecy became a source of controversy during the festival, provoking media coverage and intense public debate about the initiation ritual for young Xhosa boys. For some, public display of the practice broke a taboo on the secrecy of the ritual, which is not supposed to be seen by women and children. Xhosa traditional leaders felt the exhibition undermined the secrecy and symbolic meaning of the rite, while some parents thought it could potentially scare children from undergoing the rite. Interestingly, Thembinkosi Goniwe has recently defended his work as a critical reflection of media intrusion into the private and sacred aspects of the ritual, which has turned these into both a spectacle and a consumable (Goniwe 2005).

In addition to the comments pages of the guest book accompanying the exhibition, varied opinions about the exhibition were expressed in the local, provincial and national media. Subsequent media coverage of initiation – what columnist Jimmy Matyu describes as ‘a sensitive “annual debate” on circumcision’ – has variously reported on deaths in initiation schools, forced and botched circumcisions, and efforts to regulate the practice. Both the debate over the NAF exhibition and subsequent coverage are indicative of an ongoing public debate about the practice of initiation by some of South Africa’s ethnic groups. The discursive representation of this ritual in the South African media offers an interesting opportunity to explore the constitution and reinterpretations of masculinity within popular discourse.

As significant sources of information and knowledge, newspapers are epistemological sites where, among other things, insights on gender, gender identities and gender relations can be garnered (Taylor and Sunderland 2003). Scholarship on masculinity and the media has documented how men are represented in sports (Sabo and Jansen 1992; Trujillo, 1991), advertising (Barthel 1992; Strate 1992), crime (Consalvo 2003) and lifestyle magazines.² While these studies provide valuable insight and contribute to theoretical discussion on the links between media representation and cultural meanings of masculinity, they largely focus on masculinity in America and Europe, with little systematic attention paid to representations of black African masculinity in the media.

Based on coverage in two regional daily publications, this study outlines the media story of Xhosa initiation ceremonies so far. Within that analysis, it discusses the representation of masculinity that emanates from this mediated gaze on the black African male body. This study argues that the public discourse on initiation is one arena where the complexities of change and transformation in post-

apartheid South Africa are played out. Analysing the representation of men in various media texts and genres is not only important in understanding how masculinity is defined in the media but is significant in developing theoretical insights about 'the relationship between these sites and gender, the gender order, the cultural differences, identity and identification, the subject, experience, and reality in late capitalism' (Hanke 1998: 183). Regrettably, this sphere of analysis has not received consistent attention in African scholarship, given the social sciences' bias for data obtained from first-hand observation. This notwithstanding, it should be emphasized that the ways in which masculinities are conceptualized, articulated and debated in the media have crucial implications for the ongoing struggles for gender equality in South Africa. An analysis of media coverage of initiation ceremonies, therefore, offers insights into the patterns of contemporary projections of aspects of black African masculinity and the modes in which these masculinities express themselves.

The study is divided into three sections. First, a brief overview of the circumcision ritual – *ulwaluko* – is provided in order to locate its significance within Xhosa culture. The analysis draws on insights from cultural theory and masculinity studies that have used the concept of 'the gaze' to articulate modes of power and regulation in discourse and social relations. Of importance is the view of the body as a site where meanings of being masculine are constantly being ascribed, contested and validated (Ervo and Johansson 2003; Flannigan-Saint-Aubin 1994; Siedler 2003; Tuana *et al.* 2002). Specifically in the case of South Africa, where initiation ceremonies are culturally specific to certain black ethnic groups, press reporting is implicitly a gaze on black African masculinity.

Circumcision and Initiation

For the past two decades, female genital cutting has come under intense scrutiny from feminist scholarship, international media and gender activism. The discourse often dominated by 'anti-female genital mutilation' (FGM)³ perspectives is itself fraught with tensions between those who condemn the practice as barbaric and oppressive to women and those who assume a cultural relativist position that calls for an appreciation of the cultural relevance and specificity of the practice (for more on this debate, see *Feminist Theory* (2004), Vol. 5, No. 3). Male circumcision and discourses surrounding it have received far less attention. This relative inattention is perhaps indicative of a culturally sanctioned secrecy and normality surrounding the ritual in many societies where it is practised. This secrecy notwithstanding, anthropological studies and literary texts have documented the processes and meanings of the rite in different cultures.

Traditional circumcision (*ulwaluko*) is widely practised among the Xhosa who occupy the Eastern Cape Province of South Africa. For the Xhosas and many other ethnic groups that practise it, the initiation rite is an essential component of

the transition to adulthood. It entails groups of male children between the ages of 15 and 25 undergoing a period of seclusion 'in the bush' together (Meintjes 1998).⁴ The initiation season in the Eastern Cape variously takes place in June/July and November/December, each year. Meintjes (1998: 7) notes that initiation 'was traditionally regarded as an educational institution where initiates were taught about courtship, negotiating marriage and social responsibilities and conduct'. Circumcision entails the surgical removal of the foreskin of the penis. In Jewish and Muslim societies, this usually takes place a day or seven days after the birth of the male child. However, for the Xhosa and many other African societies, circumcision is part of a series of rituals that make up the rite of passage for adolescent boys. While the removal of the prepuce is the central part of this rite, initiation refers to the series of rituals that precede and follow this.⁵ These rituals include the seclusion period and the coming-out ceremony to mark the return of the initiates.⁶ Meintjes (1998) notes that during the seclusion period, initiates' diet and fluid intake are restricted for the first eight days. Initiates are not allowed to drink water, and only hard food is consumed (Ngxamngxa 1971). Other restrictions imposed on initiates during seclusion include not quarrelling or speaking ill of others (Schweiger 1914, cited in Ngxamngxa 1971) and not contacting married women (Meintjes 1998). The cutting of the prepuce (done without anaesthetic), followed by the period of seclusion, is viewed as demonstrating bravery and instilling endurance and discipline in initiates. The bulk of the seclusion period is used to teach initiates how to be proper men in accordance with societal and cultural expectations. On leaving the bush, the hut where the initiates lived during the initiation, clothing worn during the initiation period and other artefacts used during the rite are all burnt. This is a symbolic act to signal the parting with the past. Huge feasts are organized to welcome the initiates when they leave the initiation school. The presentation of gifts to the *amakwala* (new men or recently circumcised men) and advice from older men is part of the coming-out ceremony. 'In the admonitions the initiates' new status as men is stressed, the duties which they have to assume and behaviour expected of them towards wives, in-laws, and the tribal authorities' (Ngxamngxa 1971: 191).

Collectively, the above three rituals render initiation a rite of passage from boyhood into adulthood (Ngxamngxa 1971). Young boys acquire a new status in society after initiation. This includes the right to attend and speak at male gatherings in the communities, to inherit property and to marry. In spending weeks of seclusion together and enduring the pain of circumcision, the initiation ritual is also viewed as creating a lasting bond between cohorts of young men. Initiates are precluded from discussing the intricacies of this rite with non-initiates.

The centrality of this rite of passage is also reflected in other societies where it is practised. Among the Gisu of Uganda, male circumcision during initiation (*imbalu*) is a ritual that enables boys to both prove their manhood and validate it

on behalf of the entire community (Heald, n.d.). Heald (n.d.: 48) suggests that among the Gisu, circumcision is also a rite of emancipation as a circumcised man 'has the right to inherit a portion of his father's land and he should also be provided with the cattle he needs to marry'. In other cultures, circumcision is not only a rite of passage through which adolescent boys acquire a new social status, but it is a source of entitlement for their fathers. For the Luhya of Western Kenya, where bullfighting is a prominent ritual and pastime, only families with male children can own a bull. More importantly, it is the circumcision of the first son that grants the father a special title as well as the right to own a bull and subsequently participate in village bullfights (Egara Kabaji, personal communication, 20 June 2005).

The significance of this rite of passage is equally reflected in African literary texts. Both Camara Laye's reminiscing on his childhood in Guinea in *The African Child* and Ngugi wa Thiong'o's main character in *The River Between* provide an insight into circumcision and its significance to the individual and the community. In the latter, Ngugi wa Thiong'o articulates the centrality of the ritual in the lives of young boys, through the following description of his central character as he is about to undergo the ritual:

His penis had shrunk in size and as Waiyaki looked at it, he wondered if it really belonged to him. Waiyaki was not alone. All along the banks the other initiates sat, waiting for the 'surgeon'. All his life Waiyaki had waited for this day, for this very opportunity to reveal his courage like a man. This has been the secret ambition of his youth (wa Thiong'o 1965: 45).

In Camara Laye's Guinea, initiation is viewed as a rebirth where childhood innocence is abandoned in favour of being man. After undergoing initiation, a boy's father gives him a hut of his own. He stops sharing a hut with his mother.

Evidently, in societies where it is practised, adult male circumcision is inextricably linked to notions of manhood and masculine identity. The ritual serves as an enactment and validation of manhood.⁷ It renders the male body a defining component of male subjectivity that reaffirms, endorses and celebrates a man's identity within that particular society. Such is the centrality of this aspect of social identity that those who avoid the ritual through personal choice risk stigmatisation and even forced circumcision,⁸ while some will go to extreme attempts to attain manhood particularly when other factors (such as health or age limits) have prevented them from 'going to the bush'.⁹ The penis being its principal focus, circumcision is an important arena where particular cultural meanings of masculinity come to be articulated and epitomized. Saco (1992: 24) describes 'masculinity as signs, where masculinity is regarded as one of the subjectivities that make up social identities'. For the Xhosa man, the circumcised penis is integral to his masculine identity. It is a cultural asset that grants him status among men and the community in general. Men who do not undergo the initiation ceremony are called '*inkwenkwe*' (a derogatory term meaning boy).

Talking Men, Talking Bodies

Critical studies of men, particularly those grounded in social constructionist theories of the body, offer a useful theoretical starting point for the current analysis. Scholars have suggested that the body is at the centre of the discourse on masculinity (Flannigan-Saint-Aubin 1994; MacMullan 2002). In fact Connell (1995: 52–3), in discussing the bodily presence in accounts of gender, suggests that ‘the physical sense of maleness and femaleness is central to the cultural interpretation of gender. The body is unavoidable in the understanding of and construction of masculinity. Masculine gender is (among other things) a certain feel to the skin, certain muscular shapes, tensions, certain postures and ways of moving, certain possibilities in sex.’ This bodily presence, Connell argues, is what is integral to individual and collective histories, social processes and ‘a possible object of politics’ (Connell 1995: 56). Male bodies together with culture-specific practices are substantively under scrutiny in the public discourse of circumcision and initiation rituals. This is because newspapers, like magazines, ‘have the potential both to maintain and to affect cultural values and norms in society’ (Taylor and Sunderland 2003: 169). For instance, *Men’s Health* magazine explicitly focuses on male bodies, endlessly scrutinizing, problematizing, shaping and celebrating them; while specialist muscle-building magazines validate and celebrate the hard body as a male body (Johansson 2003).

However, in *The Men and the Boys*, Connell (2000) suggests that masculinity is not inherent in the male body but is a social definition referring to the characteristics of male bodies. ‘If the body complies with the social definition it is easier for the meanings to take hold; and sometimes the body cures the social definition’ (Connell 2000: 76). The circumcised penis is integral to the cultural definition of the male body in Xhosa culture. It is one way of ensuring that the male body complies with the cultural ideal of Xhosa manhood.

Studies on male bodies usefully provide a framework for understanding men’s relationships with their own and other men’s bodies, sexualities and masculine abilities (Ervo and Johansson 2003). Scholarship in this area has variously examined the relationship between gendered bodies and gendered power (Whitehead 2002) and theorized on the relationship between men’s minds and their bodies (Siedler 2003). While a growing corpus of research within cultural and masculinity studies has concerned itself with the body and embodiment, lacking in the literature is scholarship on circumcised male bodies. Perhaps there is in this absence an implied assumption of what the penis looks like; and that such a penis is natural and possibly universal. But as Njambi (2004: 283) has argued, ‘bodies do not exist in a vacuum; they are made and negotiated through everyday rituals and performances that can be simultaneously acceptable and problematic’. This cultural construction of the body deconstructs its biological given, rendering the body a site where meaning is constantly constituted, contested and configured. Media representation

of male initiation is one sphere where the cultural definition of the body in post-apartheid South Africa is debated. Although this study examines this discursive representation in the media, it equally acknowledges, as Hearn and Melechi, (1992: 217) have argued, that 'processes of representation and signification are not limited to the formal media and institutional forms of communication; they exist in all forms and instances of social practice'.

Gazing at Black African Men

The circumcision debate in the South African media offers an opportunity to explore how popular media gaze on initiation represents black African masculinity within popular discourse. The power and meaning of looking is embedded in many cultures and is evidenced in everyday speech and/or behaviours. In the English language the expression, 'if looks could kill' is used to describe circumstances when outrage and anger are articulated through a particular visual and facial expression. Critical theorist Dani Cavallaro defines the concept of gaze as 'the sense of sight and the dynamics of looking in the genesis of social identities... It is primarily about the consequences of how we use the sense of sight' (Cavallaro 2001: 140). As a way of looking, the gaze is distinct. For instance, dictionary definitions of words that variously refer to a form of looking include: glance, glimpse, observe, peek, peruse, observe and voyeurism. Cavallaro also makes a distinction between different modes of looking: 'seeing registers sensation of light, shapes and colours, whilst observing entails looking carefully in order to obtain detail' (p.131).

The gaze is therefore more than a look. It is ideologically looking and looking culturally to make and or ascribe meaning. Ideologically speaking, meaning is ascribed through particular perspectives that can be coloured by race, gender, class, sexuality or a combination of these. Consequently, 'when we gaze at something, we are not simply "looking"'. The gaze probes and masters. It penetrates and objectifies the body' (Cavallaro 2001: 131). The objectification inherent in the process of gazing renders the gaze biased and powerful.

Feminist-influenced scholarship has extensively applied the concept of the gaze to show how women and men's bodies have been objectified. Whitehead (2002: 195) expands on this by employing the concept of 'panoptic gaze' in discussing the scrutiny of the male body. For Whitehead, such a gaze comes with a set of moral, social and cultural codes or assumptions that ascribe values on the body and different values to different bodies. The media is a cultural space where the gaze operates. Through journalistic processes and routines that determine news, particular discourses and sources become privileged over others. This offers an opportunity to legitimate the gaze. In a post-apartheid multiracial South Africa, the discourse of initiation takes an additional racialized dimension given that it is mainly practised by black African ethnic groups such as the Xhosa, Pedi, Sotho

and Venda. Consequently, the discourse on male circumcision is usually a gaze at black African masculinity and traditional customs.

Whitehead (2002) suggests the gaze is not simply directed at its subject, but the subject of the gaze comes to regulate his or her own body in the knowledge and presence of the authoritative gaze. Such regulation in South Africa is evidenced not only in the rejection of the initiation ritual by some Xhosa men but also by specific government legislation aimed at ensuring safety and preventing deaths during initiation ceremonies (for instance, the Traditional Circumcision Act, the Traditional Circumcision Schools Act, and the Application of Health Standards for Traditional Circumcision Act, enacted by the Eastern Cape provincial legislature).

Both Cavallaro (2001) and Whitehead (2002) cite Foucault's understanding of the gaze, which linked the dynamics of gazing to the operations of power. This power is defined and legitimated by privileging particular perspectives over others. By implication, those without access to the media, whether as sources or readers, lack the power to define and shape discourses. The public discourse on initiation is one sphere where the complexities and nuances of change and transformation in post-apartheid South Africa are played out. In fact, Morrell (2005: xi) has recently suggested that 'in a society so rapidly changing and with established power relations being challenged (in gender and race terms, if not exactly in social class terms) it is to be expected that constructions of masculinity will change as well'. Media representation of circumcision and initiation rites in South Africa is one area where contemporary constructions of masculinity can be garnered.

What perspectives are played out in media discourse on circumcision? What are the characteristics of men embodied in representation of initiation ceremonies and circumcision? The next section answers these questions by examining initiation-related news stories, editorials, comments and letters to the editor appearing in *The Herald* and *The Daily Dispatch*. Both papers are regional broadsheet dailies published in the Eastern Cape Province, with circulations of over 30,000.¹⁰ To reflect coverage of both initiation seasons in the province, stories appearing between July 2004 and February 2005 were analysed. The aim was to identify the nature of coverage from the province rather than ascertain the differences in coverage between both papers. Where necessary, coverage in other local and regional newspapers is referred to.

The analysis employed discourse analytic techniques to explore the discursive representation of black African masculinity that emanates from the mediated gaze on initiation in the Eastern Cape Province. Discourse analysis provides an approach to analysing text by seeking out the relationship between language use and the social structure, particularly power relations. The emphasis in discourse analysis is 'looking for patterns in the texts, for both consistency and differences in the content and forms of accounts, for shared features, and for the function and consequences of accounts' (Potter and Wetherell 1987: 161). A significant

feature of qualitative research of this nature is the emphasis on interpretation – the analysis of implied meanings in texts. As an analytical framework, discourse analysis relies on linguistic categories within texts in order to permit the researcher to source the construction of power relations within texts and to see what ideologies are dominant in such texts. It is therefore a useful tool for exposing patterns of unequal power relations embedded in media text (Taylor and Sunderland 2003: 172). Specifically, the following discourse structures identified by van Dijk (1988, 2001) were employed: semantic macro-structures (topics), implicit and indirect meanings, and the analysis of context. Such an interpretive framework usefully grounds an understanding of the relationship between language use and social structure, particularly power relations.

Secrets, Tradition and the Making of Real Men

A continuing thematic focus in press reports is of initiate deaths during different circumcision seasons, and the hospitalization of many other initiates following complications from circumcision wounds. The recurrent deaths of initiates only serve to bring the rite of passage under scrutiny. Examples of headlines include: 'Initiate dies of blood poisoning' (*Daily Dispatch*, 8 July 2004); '50 initiates in EC hospitals' (*Daily Dispatch*, 16 July 2004); 'Circumcision school deaths under spotlight' (*The Herald*, 12 July 2004); 'Botched circumcisions cut deep into budget' (*The Herald*, 29 September 2004); 'Seriously ill initiates end up in hospital' (*Daily Dispatch*, 9 December 2004); and 'Campaign to safeguard Xhosa initiates' (*The Herald*, 28 January 2005).

Although these headlines capture the context within which much of the debate about circumcision occurs, they simultaneously serve two purposes. On one hand, the headlines indirectly threaten the centrality of this practice to Xhosa culture by foregrounding the attendant risks that come with the ritual. On the other hand, the headlines (almost recurrent in each circumcision season) indicate the extent to which this cultural practice is essential to Xhosa masculine identity and how cultural ideals are scripted on bodies (MacMullan 2002). The following editorial in *The Herald* reflects how these two discursive positions operate:

Certainly a certain amount of water deprivation has always been part of the initiation process. But this must be carefully monitored to ensure the health of the youngsters, whatever else they might have to go through in the arcane but essential progress from boyhood to manhood. But parents and indeed the wider community are entitled to guarantees that the youngsters will be given proper care during this time [...] We want our youngsters to grow up to be real men in every sense of the word. (*The Herald*, 8 December 2004)

The observations on 'water deprivation' and 'whatever else they might have to go through' at once admit to the health risks of the initiation rite. However, the editorial simultaneously underscores the centrality of the ritual by historicizing it as 'the arcane but essential progress from boyhood to manhood' and emphasizing the importance of young boys growing up to be 'real men in every sense of the word'. This mythologizing informs much of the defence of the practice by traditional leaders and some sections of the press.

The Herald's columnist Jimmy Matyu described initiation as 'an ancient ritual from time immemorial' (24 February 2005). In his regular column, Matyu defended the practice by ridiculing the cultural stigma that comes with being uncircumcised or being circumcised in a hospital.

The stigma that comes with being circumcised by means other than initiation in the bush is also reflected in the position of traditional leaders. After the death of an initiate from blood poisoning, Andile Siko, secretary of the Buffalo City Traditional Circumcision Association (BCTCA), told the *Daily Dispatch*: 'taking the initiate to hospital was not the solution because he might be ostracised' (*Daily Dispatch*, 8 July 2004). Similarly, following reports indicating an increase in hospital circumcisions, the chairperson of the Eastern Cape House of Traditional Leaders, Chief Ngangomhlaba Matanzima, likewise discouraged this trend, arguing that hospital circumcisions did not make men of boys: 'People have different ways of taking this, but we need to look into what is tradition and what is not. When someone performs the operation outside the initiation school system they cannot claim to be men' (*Daily Dispatch*, 10 July 2004). From this discursive position, the need to be men in the eyes of society is emphasized and reinforced by the threat of stigma and ostracization. State regulation of the practice through instituting age limits and 'rescuing' ill initiates by taking them to the hospital is seen by some traditionalists as sanitizing the ritual. The result of such a discourse is the perpetuation and sustenance of an idealized manhood. Regardless of a man's age, an uncircumcised Xhosa man is still considered a boy.¹¹ Real men (*amadoda*) are those who can stand the pain of having their prepuce removed without anaesthesia, and who shun the sanitized environment offered by modern medical facilities. The overt pain of circumcision in the bush is perceived as both a reflection and embodiment of male power and bravery. This heroic ideal is worth striving for to the extent that many die in the process, and any attempt to intervene to stop pain and disease is castigated ('"Nurse" slain for taking ill initiate to hospital', *The Herald*, 1 May 2005). In some instances, where boys have undergone the culturally sanctioned initiation in the bush, being referred to hospitals following complications arising is perceived as adulteration and a sign of weakness – not being man enough.¹² Those who die in the process pay the ultimate price for trying to be men in the eyes of society.¹³ Some undertake self-mutilation as a means of attaining this culturally idealized manhood,¹⁴ while others discovered to have avoided going

to the bush are circumcised against their will ('Man, 48, forcibly circumcised', *Daily Dispatch*, 11 November 2004). Still others, for whom the cultural image remains elusive, try to buy themselves into it:

Let us not forget some of those who went to hospitals to avoid the pain to manhood are customarily ostracised in our society and not treated as 'amadoda' (men). I have seen these people, buying with a bottle of brandy this manhood qualification or the right to call their peers from the bush by names. A humiliating experience. I and other elders have in the past had the task of intervening in an almost volatile situation where a man who was circumcised in a hospital, found himself facing an angry group of initiates who wanted to harm him or repeat the operation on him (Jimmy Matyu, *The Herald*, 2 February 2005).

This traditionalist position, which seeks to conserve the practice, thrives by drawing on and deploying a specific cultural and historical repertoire of what it means to be a man in Xhosa society. Yet, the recurrent deaths of initiates during the circumcision season demonstrate that not all men are capable of attaining this ideal even though there is the constant struggle to experience and subsequently be included in the ideal, if not benefit from its privileges. The circumcision ritual and its discursive representation in the media serve to foreground and reinforce the cultural significance of the penis (Izugbara 2005). The result is the establishment and perpetuation of hierarchies of men and manhood whereby the bush-circumcised man is privileged over others (uninitiated and hospital-circumcised men). Nevertheless, the following letters to the editor demonstrate that these hierarchies of manhood remain contested.

It is a myth that the initiates undergo extensive manhood training which is supposedly missed by those circumcised in a modern manner. Most of us acquire our manhood skills from our fathers and uncles. It is naive and too opinionated to hold the view that a bush circumcised man is better nurtured and therefore more of an essential asset to society than a modern circumcised man. It is misleading the youth, imprisoning their minds and indeed it is a stone age concept (Dr Z.M. Nazo, *Daily Dispatch*, 28 October 2004).

After all it is not the physical operation that makes individuals better men.

Real men are moulded and prepared at home in a family environment before their passage in the bush (Mzi Mahola, *The Herald*, 18 January 2005).

Another aspect of media discourse is the 'unwanted' exposure that comes with the mediated gaze into a sacred and secret rite.

During the controversy over the exhibition at the National Arts Festival in Grahamstown in July 2004, the Xhosa House of Traditional Leaders described the exhibition as 'degrading black humanity and exposing secret practices to women

and children'. A spokesperson of the traditional leaders described it as 'a clear manifestation of complete ignorance and a lack of understanding of the fundamental rituals that underpin this important custom' (*Daily Dispatch*, 8 July 2004). A reader writing to the local Grahamstown newspaper described the exhibition as a case of voyeurism. People were making a public spectacle out of a practice which should stay out of public gaze: '... I consider the idea voyeuristic. I think it is bad enough that youths at these camps are allowed to stand viewing cars passing, while they are still wearing the special clothes and are obviously still in camp. I feel it will be better if they stayed mysteriously out of sight' (*Grocott's Mail*, letters, 13 July 2004). However, in an article headlined 'Lifting the cloak on manhood', which reviewed the exhibition, the daily festival newspaper *Cue* quoted the Anglican Archbishop of Grahamstown, Thabo Makgoba: 'Initiation is not a cult. The secrecy is just because we have not learned to communicate issues of sexuality and manhood. But we need to open up about these things' (*Cue*, 4 July 2004).

Both positions reflect the socially sanctioned secrecy about the ritual and the contestations over the nature and consequences of secrecy about cultural practices. For the archbishop, the secrecy is only evidence of historical silences around sexuality, whereas for many advocates of the practice, the secrecy of the ritual is integral to maintaining its mysticism. Similar observations on the secrecy surrounding initiation are also evident in literary texts. In Camara Laye's *The African Child*, where the author describes his experience of growing up in his native Guinea, he details his experience of the initiation he undergoes in Kouroussa – a ritual about which he expresses a degree of ambivalence. Whereas description of the ritual exposes readers to some of the details of the rite of passage, the author is careful to emphasize the secrecy surrounding the practice: 'And we had to tell nothing of what we learned to women or to the uninitiated; neither had we to reveal any of the secret of circumcision. That was the custom' (p. 108). He explains that while the visible part of the ceremony was familiar to the uninitiated, '... the important, the essential part of the ceremony remained a secret'. Hence prospective initiates 'only had a vague notion of how it was carried out', and that the operation was painful (Camara 1979: 93). Nevertheless, he later admits that 'the teaching we received in the bush, far from all prying eyes, had nothing very mysterious about it; nothing, I think, that was not fit for ears other than our own' (p.107). Camara Laye's views epitomize the paradox of emphasizing the secrecy surrounding initiation in literary texts and other media that are themselves available to a diverse audience composed of both men and women, the initiated and the uninitiated.

As the *Cue* headline indicated, the exhibition had lifted the lead on a particular feature of manhood in South Africa. It had made visible that which was both sacred and secret. However, for those who advocate 'opening up' about such rites, there is no place for secrecy in contemporary South Africa. In a discussion of the social, political and cultural production of secrecy around child rape in

South Africa, Posel (2005) succinctly outlines four structures of secrecy and how these operate. These are useful in understanding the secrecy/visibility dualism in the public discourse on initiation. She suggests the following modalities of secrecy. Firstly, through a combination of denial, self-deception and a retreat from full knowledge by those who make up and keep the secret, secrecy becomes a combination of knowing and refusing to know. In this respect, secrecy is a mode of knowledge. Secondly, by immersing in and thriving on various political, social and cultural repertoires of disclosure and non-disclosure, secrecy is also a mode of speech. Thirdly, secrecy can also serve as a site of shame and stigma. Here, the modality of secrecy operates through perceptions of shame and stigma that inform the need to avoid exposure. In this case, keeping things hidden becomes a means of forestalling public censure. Lastly, secrecy structures itself as a site of power. This is rooted in power relations and the configuration of interests and norms shaping them (Posel 2005: 41–2).

These modalities of secrecy are simultaneously evident in the debate about male circumcision during Xhosa male initiation ceremonies. On the one hand, are those who want to illustrate what has been in existence but remained invisible to majority of the public. On the other, others maintain and defend the secrecy of the practice as a means of ensuring its sacredness. In the latter position, public visibility through exhibitions and in subsequent media reporting provokes anxiety about the consequences of such exposure to initiates, the ritual itself and consequently on masculine identity. For with such exposure (to women and Others), not only come (uncomfortable) knowledge and awareness of the potential dangers of circumcision during initiation, but a challenge both to the centrality of initiation in the construction of masculine identity within Xhosa culture and to the authority of traditional leaders (most of whom defend the practice). As one member of Xhosa royalty indicated during the controversy surrounding the NAF exhibition: 'children who have not gone for initiation will be scared to go when they see this' (*The Herald*, 8 July 2004). Thembinkosi Goniwe suggests that the anxiety of conservative Xhosa men over the public scrutiny accompanying media coverage also reflects the 'continuing resistance and struggle of Xhosa men against forces reminiscent of colonialism, missionaries, apartheid and modernity' (Goniwe 2005: 82).

A counterview, which runs concurrently with the traditionalists' position, is that which advocates regulation of the practice. This position is explored in the next section.

Regulation and Modernization

The Eastern Cape provincial government's attempts to stem the deaths of initiates has so far included passing legislation to regulate the practice (including setting age limits and licensing traditional surgeons), inspecting initiation schools and

taking ill initiates to hospitals, and closing down illegal initiation schools. However, government regulation has sometimes been met with resistance owing to the stigma associated with hospital circumcisions. In July 2004, government officials were stoned in Luthuthu village in the course of inspecting initiation schools.¹⁵

The counterview to that which advocates the retention of the practice is most evident in reports of initiate deaths and botched circumcisions that have resulted in mutilations. Proponents of this position include the government, some medical professionals and journalists, as well as families whose children have died from complications arising from circumcision. The recurrence of more deaths, sometimes hidden by the fear of stigma, has only served to heighten state intervention. But the modernization discourse is itself fraught with colonialist undertones. Government actions are frequently reported in language reminiscent of crime and deviance, with initiates and traditional surgeons assuming the problematic position of criminals, and initiation discursively positioned as a crime or deviance. In press reports, government intervention in initiation schools is described as a 'crackdown' or 'raid'. For example: 'police are cracking down on illegal traditional surgeons following a series of unlawful circumcision rites in the past few days. More arrests are expected as police intensify their raids' (*The Herald*, 6 July 2004). The subtext of deviant men, criminals and breaking the law operates within a broader discursive characterization of initiation as a deviant practice that is evident in much of the modernist position.

Following the death of two initiates during the winter initiation season, the Eastern Cape's provincial spokesperson for health described the deaths as resulting from barbarism: 'We strongly encourage the community to assist the department of health to put an end to this barbaric behaviour which causes unnecessary deaths' (*The Herald*, 12 July 2004).

Characterizing initiation as barbaric implicitly casts black masculinity as 'savage, deviant, dangerous and barbaric' (Gqola 2005: 83). It draws on and reflects powerful colonialist discourse of African customs as primitive. A primitive and Stone Age practice has no place in modern society. In an opinion column, *The Herald's* assistant editor questions the utility of the practice in contemporary South Africa by foregrounding a racial discourse:

A resolution of the matter lies not in the outcome of the current debate on whether the African custom of circumcision should be retained or abandoned.

Rather, it is to be found in a resolution as to whether black Africans in South Africa wish to continue defining themselves in the context of 'blackness'. Clanship, a historic form of collectivism that was a cornerstone for the development of the traditional African black family in South Africa until the mid-60s – and through which African customs, including

circumcision of boys, was properly undertaken and managed – is no longer a viable proposition in 2005 onwards. [...] That resolution, however, needs to recognise and accept that contrary to what conservatives would have us do, black teenage boys' circumcision as a symbol of transition to manhood no longer has any rational African significance in the absence of its inherent components, such as collective/clanship management (Sicelo Fayo, *Herald* Senior Assistant Editor, 12 January 2005).

Fayo's views reflect a major theme underpinning much of the debate about the regulation of the rite of passage. As a practice undertaken by black African ethnic groups, the debate in the media epitomizes the contestations over identities, social positions, power and belonging in post-apartheid South Africa.

The following quotation from a member of the National Arts Festival Committee concerning the 'Initiation as a Rite of Passage' exhibition draws attention to the Westernization aspects of the debate:

We're looking at our heritage. A lot of these exhibitions are part of South Africa coming to understand its roots, to understand that everything we've got here has got to be protected because we're being invaded by cultures from elsewhere. But it has also brought into the public domain questions such as 'Shall I go through with this as a Westernised person living in Soweto or must I make my child go through this?' And that's a debate which must be answered by people within that group and culture (Andrew Vester, in *Grocott's Mail*, 9 July 2004).

Vester's position, while calling for a critical examination of the place of circumcision within contemporary South African society and its protection from 'invasion' by other cultures, also epitomizes the nature, power and operation of the Westernized white and colonial gaze that probes the non-Westernized 'group and culture'.

Whitehead (2002) has equally reflected on the politicization of black male bodies in America. His argument that such a politicization emerges from the black male body being contested and being stereotyped as racially and sexually symbolic of both power and resistance is valid in understanding aspects of this debate in South Africa. Both Fayo and Vester draw on a particular discursive repertoire where Western is modern and non-Western is 'Other' – primitive and barbaric. The subtext here is that the position of circumcision in modern and Westernized Soweto (used as a metaphor for Black South Africa) is questionable. Modern and Westernized people do not undergo such a rite. And Westernized black people should be modern. From this discursive position, the hegemony of white masculinity evident under apartheid is articulated, reaffirmed and naturalized by constructing black African masculinity as deviant and barbaric. By bringing attention to black African men and problematizing the specific cultural practices

that shape some black male bodies, hegemonic masculinity is reinforced as the dominant masculinity.

Interestingly, what remains missing in much of the media reporting is the voice of the initiate. It is rendered invisible by the journalistic routines of news gathering and editing, which result in the privileging of authoritative (elite) voices over others, and the culturally sanctioned secrecy and discretion expected of initiates. Their presence is only acknowledged through their being subjects of the discourse and photographs often accompanying press coverage. A consequence of this symbolic invisibility is the privileging of competing voices that claim to speak (authoritatively and culturally) for the black male initiate (and prospective initiates) even when these voices contradict and oppose each other. The dominance of men (politicians, traditional leaders, doctors and newspaper columnists) as news sources and opinion formers in the discursive representation of the initiation in the media also speaks to the gendered nature of the debate: only men have the authority to speak about men's practices. Gqola (2005) points out that this particular bias is a dangerous way of policing culture. It is particularly problematic when evidently men's practices and performances of manhood have consequences on both men and women as a community.

Conclusion

As in literary texts, one sphere where the uninitiated come to learn about this rite of passage is the media, particularly in visual and print media. In focusing on the discursive representation of male initiation rites in the Eastern Cape's regional media, this study has outlined how male circumcision as an aspect of certain African masculine identities is socially constructed in popular discourse. It has demonstrated how the circumcision debate serves as a metaphor for gazing at black African masculinity in the current social transformation in post-apartheid South Africa. Coverage brings into focus and sometimes into conflict issues of male identity, race, ethnicity, traditional institutions (chiefs, traditional surgeons) and state institutions (hospitals, the law). Consequently, press reporting is characterized by dualisms such as tradition/modernity, secrecy/visibility civilized/primitive, African/others (white European).¹⁶ These dualisms reflect the operation of multiplicity of gazes. At the same time, they construct and reinforce a meta-narrative of black African men as strong, brave and capable of standing pain (cutting of the prepuce without anaesthetic). Whitehead (2002: 197) suggests 'the power of the gaze lies in its multiplicity, for it is through these multiple gazes that the paradoxes of embodied masculinity become apparent, as much for those who gaze as for those who are gazed upon'. The multiple gazes on the black African male body evidenced here celebrate and valorize (masculine bravado) at the same time as they challenge, stereotype and denigrate (African barbarism and primitivism). It assumes this position through the centrality of the circumcised

black penis in the cultural definition of a particular African masculinity. The ontological importance given to initiation is such that many die in the process of attaining the cultural ideal of manhood. The black male body therefore becomes a site on which fears, insecurities and uncertainties about current socio-political transformation are projected, negotiated and defended. The result is that black African male body is not only a site of enculturation, but also a site of contestation over culture and over masculine embodiment in post-apartheid South Africa.

While public visibility of such a sacred and secret rite through exhibitions and in subsequent media reporting provokes anxiety about the consequences of such exposure, the media gaze simultaneously reconstitutes the phallus as the essence of masculinity. Particularly, it emphasizes and reinforces the central position of the circumcised penis in the construction of masculine identity of particular black African cultures. The circumcised penis emerges as the significant factor in distinguishing between masculinities in contemporary South Africa and hierarchies within black masculinities.

Given the limitations of the current sample size (urban-based, English broadsheets), the analysis is by no means a reflection of coverage in the broader South African media. An examination of non-English language media would further illuminate the issues discussed here, by pointing to differences or similarities in perspectives and voices.

Besides the circumcision of young boys, virginity testing – a custom practised by the Zulus – has been another area of contestation and public debate, as in the case of SABC2's programme *The Big Question*, 30 July 2005. In addition, in a Sunday Times article, Zulu king, Goodwill Zwelithini, reportedly described the passing of the Children's Bill, which set the age limit for virginity tests at 18, as an infringement on culture ('Uproar as state moves to ban virginity testing', *Sunday Times*, 10 July 2005).

Notes

1. See *Masculinity and Men's Lifestyle Magazines*, ed. Bethan Benwell (2003).
2. Given the controversy that surrounds this topic, the word 'mutilation' is frequently used by those who approach the subject from a position of advocacy. Scholars, who caution for an unbiased position, label the practice as Female Genital Cutting (FGC).
3. According to current government regulation, the acceptable age for circumcision is 18. Parental consent is required for the circumcision of boys under 18.
4. Despite this distinction, the literal translation of the Xhosa word *ulwaluko* is 'circumcision'. Consequently, media coverage and political discourse utilize the word circumcision to refer to the entire ritual.
5. Authors cited by Ngxamngxa vary in their estimates of the seclusion period from three to six months among the Xhosa, to three or four months among the Fingo, and three to twelve months for the Thembu respectively.

6. Cross-cultural similarities in the significance of this rite have also been identified in Papua New Guinea. See Gilbert Herdt, *Rituals of Manhood* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982); and David Gilmore, *Manhood in the Making: Cultural Concepts of Masculinity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990).
7. 'Man, 48 forcibly circumcised' (*Daily Dispatch*, 11 November 2004).
8. 'Boy, 15, does own "ritual"' (*Daily Dispatch*, 10 July 2005).
9. Figures are based on Audit Bureau of Circulation (ABC) statistics available in June 2005. *The Herald* is published in Port Elizabeth and *The Daily Dispatch* is published in East London.
10. When 58-year-old pensioner Velile Ngxingo was released from jail in May 2005, his priority upon being released was to 'become a man': 'I am tired of being a boy! I have been left behind by young boys who have been circumcised' ('Paroled pensioner circumcised at last after a lifetime in prison', *The Herald*, 2 June 2005)
11. In January 2005, 19-year-old Dontsa Lwane, committed suicide after receiving medical attention at a hospital for complications arising from his circumcision in the bush ('Brothers in double tragedy after initiation', *Daily Dispatch*, 10 January 2005).
12. The death of many initiates is no deterrent for advocates of the practice or prospective participants. Camara Laye expresses a similar view in *The African Child*: 'I knew perfectly well that I was going to be hurt, but I wanted to be a man and it seemed to me that nothing could be too painful if by enduring it, I was to come to a man's state. My companions felt the same; like myself, they were prepared to pay for it with their blood' (p.94).
13. Twenty-seven initiates in Qumbu in the Transkei reportedly circumcised themselves using razor blades in 2004 ('3 more initiates die, mob stones officials', *Daily Dispatch*, 13 July 2004).
14. '3 more initiates die, mob stones officials' (*Daily Dispatch*, 13 July 2004).
15. Njambi (2004: 283) identifies similar dichotomies in public discourse on the female genitals, e.g. 'science/superstition; medical knowledge/tradition; healthy bodies/unhealthy bodies; normal sexuality/abnormal sexuality; civilized/barbaric; modernity/backwardness; expert/non-expert; educated/ignorant'.

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