

Circumcision: A sharp twist of the knife and all is lost

Chris Mann (<https://web.archive.org/web/20160804004252/http://mg.co.za/author/chris-mann>) 12 Jul 2013 00:00

 Abakhwetha (initiates) from the Jara village near Cofimvaba in the Eastern Cape during their rite of passage. (Oupa Nkosi, M&G)
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This week's reports had 30 dead in the Eastern Cape so far this year. The province's Health Department figures for 2001-5 show an average of 63 deaths and mutilations per year. Fatalities in other provinces should be added, for example the 29 deaths in Mpumalanga last month.

The cause of death is usually septicaemia. Yet those who get to hospital and survive face the lifelong mockery of male peers and the revulsion of women at their physical disfigurement. The reason for their hospitalisation, in the absence of an understanding of germs, is seen as cowardice. In their future lies perpetual social disgrace.

Thando Mggqolozana's debut novel, *When a Man is Not a Man*, reveals the dark as well as the human side of initiation. The narrator describes waking up in hospital: "A short, fat nurse came into our ward and stood there looking at us ... She greeted us in a scornful voice and we responded with reluctance – we being the two patients opposite me and myself ...

"The short nurse broke into a mocking song ... The song she sang was the same 'Somagwaza' that is meant to be sung during the different phases of the circumcision ceremony. The verse she chose was particularly significant, for it is the one that reports to the mythical Somagwaza that the cowards among them have chickened out ... impressing on us our invalidity – the manhood rejects that we had become by fleeing to the hospital and the sub-human status that we were about to assume in society as a result.

"Her reaction might seem extreme, but it was typical of the mockery and censure that we could expect to encounter outside."

Denounced

After the launch of Mggqolozana's book at the Grahamstown festival a few years ago, a number of older men in the audience denounced the young author for discussing such matters in public. A few women defended him, saying he spoke the truth.

Rituals of entrance into manhood are found in all human societies, in boot camps, boarding schools and university residences, as well as in small-scale village cultures. What differentiates the village ritual in South Africa is the extreme mental and physical endurance required of the initiates.

The implications are complex and contentious. Scholars of small-scale rural culture might argue that the close bonding of male peers contributed significantly to the amaMpondo uprisings in the 1950s as well as the formation of hardline unionist resistance to capital, as seen on the mines today.

Young unemployed black males, poorly educated at state schools and under-parented in fatherless households, without the prospect of a decent job or of ever earning enough to pay lobolo or for a home, might cherish initiation as their only source of significant social validation.

Feminists might argue that such rituals bestow on initiates a lifelong sense of superiority and entitlement with regard to women.

Nelson Mandela relates, for example, that initiates in his area expected sexual goodwill from girls after their ordeal. Feminists argue, too, that lingering male entitlement is a major cause of the rape epidemic, as well as ineffective families where males feel little or no obligation to assist in parenting.

Home-enhanced education

Initiation into responsible manhood within a large-scale economy requires more than one brief, small-scale society ritual in adolescence.

It needs years and years of home-enhanced education, love and careful discipline by male and female parents alike, within a caring family where intergenerational skills development and learning takes place.

The media cannot give up on this issue. Learning how to broaden and sustain healthy small-scale village values, such as a sense of belonging and intimate interpersonal relationships, cannot be abandoned under the pressure of modernity. The large-scale, impersonal culture of the city is no salvation. Monetarist values and targeted marketing hollows out the ethical and spiritual identity of young people, making them into units of consumption and production.

Small-scale society initiation practices will not disappear. Their reform requires continual health education and support from political and clan leaders. Such reforms also depend on parents, health department officials and police summoning up the courage to break with rural conformity and to charge reactionary initiation practitioners with culpable homicide when youngsters are killed or maimed.

That this is now being done is helpful in the case of the recent Eastern Cape victims, but it is one small step.

Until such a wider response is undertaken, each year, as the latest group of initiates heroically braves the pain, hunger and thirst of their ordeal, the stench of septicaemia will once again blow across the country. It is the stench of a rite of passage urgently in need of reform.

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