

An Analysis of HOKO as Indigenous Knowledge Systems

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Abstract

African cultural heritage continues to attract interest in the contemporary discourses. The study observes that the colonial quest was superficial because it was based on human prejudice. Through the application of phenomenological method, desktop research and interviews, the study investigates on *hoko* (the rite of male circumcision) among Shangani people as indigenous knowledge systems. The ritual forms are one of the key moments in the rhythmic life of people and constitute a vibrant mark of continuity in African indigenous cultural identity.

Keywords: Analysis, HOKO, Indigenous Knowledge.

Introduction

The Cultural Place of The Shangani Rite of Circumcision

The focus of the present research is on the rite of circumcision known among the Shangani as *hoko*. In terms of a working definition, Maposa (2012) states that, a rite is a traditional sacrament or formality that is done on *tikhomba* (males who are prepared for circumcision). A rite is performed in socio-religious setting and could be used interchangeably with the term ritual. Circumcision is the surgical removal of the foreskin (prepuce) from the penis (en.wikipedia.org/wiki/circumcision). The practice has been widely performed on boys and young men in Africa and other parts of the world. Maposa (2011) states, that it is practiced in many communities, for example, Rwanda, South Africa, Mozambique, and Zimbabwe. The phenomenon has been practiced primarily for religious and cultural reasons as a rite of passage to mark transition to adulthood (Male Circumcision under Local Anaesthesia Version 2.5C, 2008.vii).

Early depictions of this phenomenon have been found in cave paintings and Ancient Egyptian tombs. Biblically, circumcision is considered a commandment from God. God commanded Abraham to use circumcision as a sign of his covenant. God repeated the percept to Moses and ordered that all who intended to participate of paschal sacrifice should receive circumcision and the rite should be performed on children on the eighth day after birth.

In Zimbabwe, male circumcision has been and is undertaken for religious and cultural reasons among Shangani of Chiredzi and Mberengwa, Tonga of Binga, Venda of Beitbridge, Chewa, and Muslims who constitute approximately 1% of population (concentrated in Harare). Shangani people of Chiredzi, however, constitute the biggest fraction of people who practice it. They actually claim in their language, *"Hoko i tumbuluko waXichangana"* (circumcision is a Shangani traditional rite).

A number of meanings have been proposed to define culture spanning philosophy; humanities; and social sciences. According to the Oxford Dictionary, culture refers to "customs and civilizations of a particular time or people." The Merriam Webster Dictionary Online states that culture "is the integrated pattern of human knowledge, belief, and behaviour that depends upon the capacity for learning and transmitting knowledge to succeeding generations." Echoing to the same perspectives Li and Karakowsky maintain that, culture refers to the cumulative deposit of knowledge, experience, beliefs, values, attitudes, meanings, hierarchies, religious notions of time, roles, spatial relations concepts of the universe and material objects, and possessions acquired by a group of people in the course of generations through individual or group striving. All these are good insights about culture and they hint that culture is the sum up of humanity.

African culture is incredibly diverse but contextually relevant. Maposa (2011) substantiates that the colonial quest was to exterminate African Traditions because they were perceived as 'primitive'. However, this colonial quest was superficial because it was based, not on objective reality but rather on human prejudice. Maposa (2011) further posits that, despite the hard socio-economic challenges in Africa, largely because of the impact of globalization, the traditions endure on because they embody the liveliness of human existentiality.

Writing in the context of slavery, Wilds (2012:01) notes that African cultural continuity is the ability of Africans to remember their African past and use it for motivation by extending their culture from their native land to the new world. It was their African culture that was able to sustain them during the holocaust of the European slave trade and then the colonial plantation systems (assartashakur.org).

Mukusha (2011:10) also notes that African epistemic knowledge is contained in its invisible and viable culture just like pre-Socratic philosophers' knowledge, which is embedded in Greek heritage, with however, a number of epistemic traits borrowed from Africa-the historically renowned source of all civilizations. Similarly, other author insists, there are many "cultural values and practices of traditional Africa that can be considered a positive feature of the culture and can be accommodated in the scheme of African modernity even if they must undergo some refinement to become fully harmonious with the spirit of modern culture and function satisfactory within that culture.

According to Mahoso (2012:D12), nuggets of the African cultural system are daily quarried selectively and exploited by Euro trained practitioners the same way that *dove*, *marimba*, *derriere*, and *never*, are also picked for use in the fight against HIV and AIDS from an indigenous African diet system. The European trained practitioners will not stop defaming the African society and culture from which they have taken *dovi*, *macimbi*, *derere*, *nyevhe*, and *sadza rezviyo*. They will just tell their patient to go back to the diet of his own ancestors but shun or ignore the living philosophy, the science, and the culture, which created that diet and the practices around it. For Mahoso (2012:D12), this is because recognizing the whole relational nexus which led to discovery and perfection of this indigenous diet would lead to abandonment of the Eurocentric and racist claim that , 'African Traditional Culture is responsible for the spread of HIV and AIDS. In the same manner we seek to unveil that African culture is a repository of human traditions with long and tested solutions for living in a meaningful way. It is the core of humanity and holds some of the secrets to life.

According to Maposa (2011), the concept of identity is complex and presupposes that every ethno-linguistic group is unique. In the context of this study, uniqueness implies that every culture has its own lens of looking at things in the phenomenal world. For this reason, it is prudent to briefly highlight two competing perspectives on the issue of identity.

The western perspective is represented by the old colonial school of thought that perceived African traditional education and categories of heritage as 'primitive'. The white writers of the old colonial school of thought claimed that the rite of circumcision in particular was barbaric. For instance it is said, that circumcision must be abandoned because it is cruel, deleterious on health and difficult to mobilise especially, for example, in times of war and social upheaval. It must be mentioned that white missionaries and travellers, for instance, took traditional categories of life like *mikwembo* (ancestors), *mandlozi* (esoteric type of spirits), praying to deities and ritual worship as 'fetishist' and rejected them.

The colonial perspective was inspired by the centre-periphery theory. Through this theory, missionaries assumed what was good for Westerners was to carry universal benevolence. For instance, western culture was superimposed upon Africa during the colonial rule because it was regarded as good for Africans. The westerners perceived traditional forms of education as having no utility value. In addition it is stated that missionaries in Africa saw themselves to be in a battle with Satan. Thus, the destruction of African traditions was perceived to symbolise the destruction of the devil and the coming to light of the victory of Christ. This prejudicial attitude perhaps answers why the white missionaries were so active in providing the western forms of education. Its thrust was to down play the vitality of traditional education. Nevertheless, for much of the colonial period, western education was criticised for being superficial because it was too theoretical in nature. In the wake of certain pedagogical dissonances in the western philosophies, when applied on local education systems in post-colonial Africa, many curriculum planners in Africa are reverting to inform contemporary education with the philosophies of African traditional education.

A ritual is a cultural or religious ceremony that celebrates or commemorates specific events that have religious significance and are vital to maintaining a close-knit community (Klarie 2012:01). Maposa (2011), states that, in terms of a working definition, a rite is at a traditional

sacrament or formality. It is performed in a socio-religious setting and could be used interchangeably with the term, ritual.

“A rite is a fundamental act (or set of rituals) performed according to prescribed social rules and customs. There are five major African initiation rites to human growth and development. The five rites are, *birth, adulthood, marriage, eldership and ancestorship*. Each of these rites is a key component that is a part of traditional African cultures. Some societies have more elaborate and extensive ceremonies than others do, but these five themes are the threads that link families and villages in traditional Africa and provide the necessary structure for individual growth and development.

The five rites represent an integrated initiation system that has given indigenous African cultures the stability and longevity to provide a model of consistency and inter-generational unity. They represent a complete set of devices that prevent the inherent conflicts between various age groups or the systematic ill treatment of women, children, or elders. These problems are commonplace in western cultures, but they are virtually unknown in indigenous African cultures. These African cultures were not “perfect” as all human societies have problems, but they do provide a viable example in the modern world of how to solve social conflicts and contradictions and give individuals the societal support to discover and fulfil their life missions and unique contributions.

Ampim (2012:01) also explains that the *rite of Adulthood* is the second major initiation rite and it is nowadays the most popular among the set of rites. Most people today assume that “rites of passage” only refers to initiation into adulthood, and they are often not aware that adulthood rites are only one set of rites within a larger system of rites. Adulthood rites are usually done at the onset puberty age (around 12-13 years of age in many cultures) and they are to ensure the shaping of productive and community-oriented responsible adults. There is nothing automatic about youth being productive members of society, nor is there anything particularly difficult about transitioning from a child to an adult. This transition to adulthood is exceedingly difficult in Western societies because there are no systems of adulthood rites to systematically guide and direct the young person through this important stage in his or her life cycle.

In Western culture, adulthood is seen as a status achieved at the age of 18 or 21, or simply when the person graduates from high school. Unfortunately, in most cases there is no fundamental guidance or transformation from a child to an adult that is expected. This “leave it for chance” approach to adulthood development is the root of most teenage and youth “adult” confusion, chaos, and uncertainty. When the youth reaches a certain age, somehow they are expected to magically transform into an “adult,” even though they often receive very little guidance.

On the other hand, African societies systematically initiate boys and girls. They often take the young initiates out of the community, and away from the concerns of everyday life, to teach them all the ways of adulthood: including the rules and taboos of the society; moral instruction and social responsibility; and further clarification of his/her mission or calling in life.

A few authors initially regarded rituals as mere compensation and redressing mechanisms of tensions produced in secular order. In this regard, Turner underestimated the cultural traditional practices of Africans. He was taking it from a colonial theoretical perspective towards Africans. However, later on Turner was assigned to carry out a social anthropological study of the Ndembu people, residing along Zambezi and admitted that rituals have a function to fulfil. He saw that rituals (including *hoko*) act as social glue holding the society together. Although Turner admitted the importance of rituals; he failed to encourage people to adopt this fundamental practice, hence this research seeks to fill in the gap that Turner left.

Thorpe (1991:120-121) is also convinced that rituals in African societies are a further proof of their community orientation. The ritual of initiation particularly provides a helpful means of transition from one status in the community to another. According to him, psychology has recognized the need of rituals in the lives of all people. Indeed it is so pressing that people are constantly inventing new ways to “ritualize” their lives. By objectifying their inner fears and perplexities, people are enabled to deal with them in a more meaningful and constructive way. In relatively recent times, this approach has been utilized in Western cultures as well as by psychiatrists working with people in therapy groups.

Hoko is one of the fundamental rites of passage in Shangani culture. It is a practice that involves cutting off of a boy child’s foreskin of the penis as a mark of transition from childhood into manhood. The rite is performed in a far away *enhoveni* (the forest area), which lies about ten kilometres from the rest of the community. The setting is an ideal place of seclusion, and the forest is regarded as sacred and embodying the religious consciousness of the people and that the ritual is very significant, both to individuals and to the community. Thomas Chauke, an elder aged 73, of Maluleke village explained, *madzenga* (the boys at the forest) and their *vadzabi* (accompanying elders) erect some temporary huts to sojourn. Whereas in the past, the rite among the Shangani was done between May and July during winter, today it is being conducted between August and early September during autumn. The shift of season for the rite, according to Maposa (2011), has been influenced by the need for food security, that is, when there are varieties of food availed to the initiates. As a matter of fact, the circumcised boys require a lot of food to eat because the operation is associated with the loss of bountiful blood. This loss needs to be compensated through the provision of enough food. Due to climate change, the Shangani communities largely complete harvesting grains after the month of June. In addition, the August-September period coincides with the time when the would-be initiates (boys) are on vacation holidays in the school system in Zimbabwe. Therefore, the change in the cycle of the rite of circumcision is dictated by circumstances of necessity rather than Shangani culture.

Informants also revealed that, the rite of circumcision lasts from three weeks to six weeks, where the boys ‘undergo the traditional knife’ in the forest. The forest provides the boys with a variety of experiences and they have to experience physical, educational, emotional, psychological, moral and spiritual metamorphosis in order to attain adulthood. The boys proudly proclaim, ‘*hiya hokweni*’, that is, ‘we are going to be circumcised to become men’.

During the process, the foreskin of the penis is cut off by using a sharp but unsterilized traditional instrument or knife. The operation or the traditional surgery is painfully (rather cruelly) done but the initiates are not expected to shed tears at all because the operation is

perceived to be facilitating the initiates make *ntwanano* (a mystical union) with their *Muvumbi*, that is, Creator (also known as *Xikwembu* or God). Although some boys are reported to have died as victims of a careless surgery 'under the traditional knife', it must be pointed out that no one is expected to *ku baleka* (run away). Stories of how cowards ran away in the past and how the inalienable Shangani 'law' eventually caught up with the delinquents have acted as deterrents to this day. As has been highlighted before, the physical operation is associated with profuse loss of blood around the penis and this is what differentiates an initiated man from an uninitiated one. The painful loss of blood is a condition for passing through the threshold to the privileges and responsibilities of courageous adulthood. As much as the informants had to acclaim, the agonizing loss of blood though a 'guarded secret', ultimately manifests itself as the cultural insignia of masculine identity in the Shangani society.

Lastly, the boys emerge from seclusion and return home with a triumph list spirit. The tangible sign of triumphalism is seen through the 'graduated' boys who would be in white clad. The initiated boys return to their homes clad in white shorts, white T/shirts, barefooted and with a bare hair-cut. The boys are also given *thumba*, that is, a wooden stick. It is a distinctive mark for the initiated men. The *thumba* is meant for masculine identity in Shangani culture. When the initiated boys approach women, the women are expected to kneel down as a sign of respect. This triumphalist spirit symbolises happiness and a fresh lease of life. The initiates themselves, interviewed for the study, agreed that after the ordeal, they returned home as *tikhomba*, that is, as *different people, full people and responsible people*. Thus, they deserve respect.

The interviewees for this research revealed that the initiates lost their names and received new names that signified their importance in the society. Some of the most popular new names which carry notions of identity within the Shangani culture include, for instance: *Hanyani* (one who lives longer), *Hatlani* (one who gets prematurely initiated), *Xithlavancoma* (one who gets initiated first), *Musengi* (one who judges) and *Chavani* (one who is forced to be circumcised). The general perception, however, is that these new names continue to shape the personality of their bearers. Hence, this is how the new names constitute a social badge for human identity within the Shangani society in Zimbabwe. The respective families and villages welcome the new names by way of a social celebration and through a socio-religious ceremony known as *ku yimba* (joyous occasion), where *bwala* (traditional brewed beer) is drunk and convoyed with the traditional ecstatic songs and dances done to evoke the deities to partake in this euphoric cultural phenomenon.

These findings evidently show that the *hoko* ritual is significant both to the individual and the community. The boys are introduced to the realm of the religious sphere of existentiality. Moreover, this is one particular pointer that the rite constitutes a vibrant mark of continuity in African Traditional cultural identity and pride.

Conclusion

Hoko like any other traditional ritual is a fundamental act vital both to individuals and the community development and assistance. *Hoko* helps to structure and give meaning to the lives of people that practice it. IT has the protective effect of reducing sexually transmitted infections including HIV. Eighty-five percent of informants indicated a positive perception

towards *hoko* in light of HIV and AIDS mitigation in Zimbabwe. Only fifteen percent of the informants had a negative perception due to lack of knowledge about its benefits. The study concluded that the majority of informants that had knowledge on benefits of *hoko* cherished and appreciated the African cultural practice.

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