

Continuity in the Traditional Initiation Practice of Boys and Girls in Contemporary Southern Africa Society

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ABSTRACT The traditional initiation of boys and girls in South Africa and Lesotho has made a major comeback following a change of attitude of the different religious and educational institutions. Many people have taken advantage of the situation but with differing agenda. The paper therefore discusses the practices in the face of modern technology and disease and makes a comparative analysis with past experience. It also discusses the research methodological problems in the study of such traditions that come with a changed face.

INTRODUCTION

Historically among Christian societies of Southern Africa, traditional cultural rites were discouraged and discarded by the missionaries. Rites of passage like initiation (*Lebollo*), ancestral worship and others were regarded as heathen and superstitious and therefore very bad (Thabane 2002). Gradually people lost the main purposes of performing some of these rituals. Those that lagged behind, who continued to perform such rituals were labelled heathens and backward (Thabane 2002) Institutions like the church and modern schools usurped the rich culture from the people and replaced it with western civilisation. The church excommunicated from services all parents who took their children to the 'bush school', as it is called, as well as those children who attended such schools. They were also not allowed to go back to the formal educational schools which they were attending before joining the initiation school if they were already attending. They had to undergo church rituals of repentance and cleansing before they could be allowed back. Most of them ended up marrying and migrating to South Africa to work in the mines (Thabane 2002)

In one incident in 1966, a woman recollected the time that she was excommunicated from the church because her nephew who was staying with her mother-in-law ran off to join the initiates. Neither the biological mother nor the grandmother was punished. The justification for the verdict was that she was taking care of the whole household therefore she was to blame, since she

performed all the activities related to the initiation. It was the matter of who hated you, who could report you to the church authorities for you to be punished, she recalled.

Long after independence, people's attitudes towards those traditional institutions have changed. People are no longer excommunicated from the church. They are allowed to return to school though there is still reluctance among teachers to allow them to go back to the same school where they were. In Lesotho, they need not run away to join the initiation school and later join labour migration stream to South African mines, like they used to, as they felt and believed that they were grown-ups who can then handle heavy duty jobs that could give them wages with which they could buy cattle for paying lobola.

Traditionally, initiation of boys and girls was considered in many African societies in Southern Africa as a rite, which signified maturity and responsibility to own family, community and nation. It was marked by separation, margin and aggregation (Turner 1967: 93). In the past only through this rite both boys and girls were placed in a process to qualify at the end to attain rights, opportunities, responsibilities and positions (statuses) in the families and communities. According to Christoph et al. (2000: 40) initiation has three phases of separation, transformation and re-assimilation. A person who has undergone initiation is expected to be a changed person who could positively contribute in community debates and decision-making.

The significance of the rite in many societies is that it was providing the basic informal

education to the initiates. Boys were provided with economic knowledge, skills in negotiations and in how to be good leaders in their societies. The work of art, music and oratory were also offered at the initiation schools. Girls on the other hand were taught about the roles of women in the families and communities. Matsela and Motlomelo (2002) maintained that initiates in Lesotho acquired or were expected to acquire from their training leadership skills, commitment and loyalty to their country, self-respect and self-discipline, which carry along law-abiding with it.

In addition to the education that the institution provided to the initiates there was also a circumcision practice for both boys and girls. Boys' circumcision is an operation of cutting the foreskin of the penis, while female circumcision is an operation of mutilating the female genitalia. However, due to secrecy, the extent to which female genital mutilation was done is not known and not well-documented. What the respondents confirmed was *labia minora* elongation, which they said was very important among the Basotho for good sexual performance. The initiates had to ensure that they elongated them during this period of initiation.

Since initiation was one of the foundation pillars of South Africa's African communities, it automatically became the target of the church, European schools and governments. Vigorously and relentlessly, European institutions attacked the institution from all directions. All who practiced were regarded and labelled as uncivilised and heathen (Thabane 2002: 239-252). The White government allowed it to be practised voluntarily. Families, communities and traditional leaders were not to force their children and members to attend. In case where the children were Christians, forcing them to attend could be punishable by the church and the state. The parents who were Christian were expected to teach their children that initiation and circumcision were pagan practices and therefore must be abhorred (Thabane 2002).

In order to succeed in the war, the church (missionary) and the government were united against initiation schools and other African cultural practices. All over the country, they established schools. African teachers who were strong adherents of Christian religion were then produced in great numbers to hold the sword against the African cultural practices. The outcome of the fighting was that African cultural practices became dormant and Western institu-

tions became the driving force for everything occurring in the lives of Africans. International institutions such as W.H.O (World Health Organization), UNESCO and others, also joined against women and children's initiation in as far as it included mutilation of the genitalia. In the rural areas of South Africa, however, individuals and communities continued to practice their cultures, hold initiation schools and practice circumcision despite the rebuke by Christians and Western schools.

The changing political environment in South Africa resulted in a reversal of attitudes towards African rites and traditions including initiation. African elites became more committed to African identity and civilisation, which they saw as the only way to attain freedom, democracy, prosperity and human dignity. People in the rural areas who have been holding on to their cultural practices became the resources.

Many African elites in the country changed their attitudes and thinking drastically. To them all the evil that existed in African cultural institutions and practices waned (disappeared). Many good cultural practices such as *Ubuntu* were realized and a need to promote them developed. Amazingly, many Christian church leaders stopped preaching about ancestor sacrifices, initiations and other African cultural practices.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK OF INITIATION AMONG THE BASOTHO

Among the Basotho, traditional initiation (*Lebollo*) has three meanings, which mark a change and a passage to maturity. The first meaning refers to the tapering-off of the umbilical cord from a newly born baby (*ngoana o bolotse*) that also signifies the end of menstruation for its mother. The umbilical cord is discarded by burying it. This signifies a bond a child has with the soil of its origin. This explains the anger people have should they be removed from their birthplace. Shaving the baby's head, smearing the floor with mud and slaughtering a sheep for thanksgiving and welcome of the baby into the family celebrate *Lebollo*. When the baby is shown a live sheep, Basotho would say, 'our child we welcome you into the family. This is your sheep, accept it'. The sheep would then be slaughtered and all those women who brought showering gifts and other services for giving birth would be

invited for merry-making. It is after this celebration that a baby would be given a name.

The second meaning of initiation refers to circumcision at the modern hospital when a boy child or a man goes for genital operation that removes the foreskin at the hospital. Among the Basotho people will always say '*o bolotse*', meaning that he has been circumcised. There are no ceremonial rituals to mark this type of procedure since it is not regarded as having anything sacred about it. However, those who have gone through it still feel that it should be treated secretly as though it is the same as the 'bush' school circumcision. One of the respondents gave an example of his son who was very particular about it and would feel very offended if his father could just enter his room while he was not properly dressed. Those who have attended the 'bush training' do not regard those circumcised at the hospital as true initiates. There are still animosities between the initiates and them.

The third meaning of *Lebollo* refers to a rite of passage into adulthood of both adolescent boys and girls. It is this type of *Lebollo* that presents challenges to the rural communities in Lesotho and South Africa. The process has gone through a metamorphosis, which is of interest for discussion in this paper. Due to the confidentiality and utmost secrecy of the process, the discussion will not be so much on what is happening during initiation, but what both the graduates from the traditional initiation schools and those who have never attended as well as the society at large, see as being the problems and prospects. The paper would discuss initiation in both Lesotho and South Africa indicating the traditional initiation practices though as already indicated, there are limitations that have been created by lack of documentation and secrecy (*koma*). The initiates cannot tell the secret but were willing to say what happened. This *Koma* remains a mystery to outsiders.

Male initiation is more popular than female one. Big celebrations are held at the end of the process at the initiates' respective homes. For women it is not such a big occasion except among the *Matebele* clan. With the coming of Western civilisation *Lebollo* got pushed aside as an educational institution. Its richness got sacrificed and substituted. However, currently the trend seems to have changed. More boys are again leaving school and joining *Lebollo* and then

returning to formal schooling. The question as to why this is happening is not clear, but some of the respondents thought that HIV/AIDS could be the reason. Men are afraid of contracting sexually transmitted diseases, and circumcision could be the answer. However, according to Matsela and Motlomelo (2002) school dropouts in Lesotho find *Lebollo* as the best option for whiling away time. The secrecy of the rite lures others so they would rather go and find out what is happening there without the real purpose of getting trained.

According to Christoph et al. (2000: 488), initiation as a term, originates from Latin *initiare*, to start, to introduce, and initiation, celebration of a secret religious service. It refers to 'a partly sacred, partly profane ceremony carried out in many traditional societies at the onset of puberty to carry adolescents into adulthood, which, in comparison with childhood, is considered to be a new and qualitatively different phase because it brings sexual and moral maturity as well as social responsibilities.

The leading older men or women make them undergo certain physical hardships (beatings, torture, food and sleep deprivation, tests of their resistance) to strengthen their physical and moral fortitude, and teach them about important cultural and religious issues such as social and sexual mores and religious traditions. As this is a marked change in their existence, the ritual rebirth lies at the core of the initiation.

Circumcision forms part of the training process. However this is hard to verify if one has not been initiated. It becomes difficult even for men to interview others, or women to interview other women if they have not been initiated. What can be said is just speculation based on the literature from other societies. Among the Basotho, *Lebollo* is a taboo that cannot be discussed in public by those who have not been initiated.

DATA COLLECTION PROCEDURES

There is no way that one could identify those who have been initiated after a long period of time. They could only be so known when they are still fresh from the initiation school. It is at this time that they expose themselves through abusive language and conspicuous attire. Then, they are not approachable. With time they get re-integrated into the society and realise that they

are still part of the larger community. For this paper, it became important to conduct snowball sampling in order to get a sizable sample of both male and female initiates to interview. Tutors and owners of the initiation schools were also targeted but it became difficult to do so as some of them were not willing to talk to us, because according to them they could not discuss such issues of importance with people who had no experience.

Both focus group discussions and interviews were used to gather information from the initiates and non-initiates at different locations in Lesotho. More information was gathered from the Internet and media regarding the situation in South Africa. Initiates from *Basotho* and *Matebele* (these are all Basotho who are differentiated by their clan origins) were interviewed without having to pressurise them for the secrets. That could have been unethical. Any question that they felt uncomfortable answering was left out. The stories that were told pertained to people whose names could not be mentioned in the paper for confidentiality reasons. The areas where the initiates were contacted will not be mentioned to concretise the confidentiality.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

Traditional Initiation Practices among the *Basotho* of Lesotho

Among the Basotho in Lesotho, traditional initiation of boys and girls differs in terms of location. Males go to the remotest places in the mountains or along riverbanks in South Africa, where there are no mountains. For females, their initiation huts (*mophato*) are located within the villages, though they cannot be ordinarily visited by anybody. Female initiation is different in terms of whether they are of the Matebele clan or Basotho (Moitse 1994). According to the interviews, Matebele stay indoors throughout the entire period, and would not visit homes. They learn handicrafts. When they come out they have plenty of traditional crafts that they have produced during that time. Basotho move around during the day and sometimes at night, where they could naughtily chow households' cooked food around the nearby villages. Since people already expect them to do so, they get less offended by their actions. What is interesting is that no one can get near where they are by way of counter attacking them, for fear that the initiates

could whip them if they are not initiated themselves. Initiation period extends from three to six months.

According to the interviews, the ancestors determine the duration of the training of initiates who have joined with the intention of becoming 'sangomas' (Nguni word for traditional healers). The 'sangoma'-to-be also known as *mocholoko* (apprentice), communicates to others what the ancestors have ordered and others follow. With Basotho, female initiation is purely voluntary, and has no impact if one has not participated. Among the *Matebele* where they are still living in their own villages, parents enforce female initiation and insist that their daughters and sons must marry only those who have attended the initiation. They despise sons-in-law who have not been initiated. For the daughter-in-law who has not gone through initiation, it has to be arranged soon after marriage.

Among the *Matebele* clan in Lesotho a girl had to go to the initiation school (*mophatong*) before marriage. This happened whether she had joined Christianity or not. One woman who had joined recalls her misery where her father who is of Matebele clan, forced her to join the initiates: She said, It was in 1967 when I met a handsome young Mosotho (not of Matebele clan). He was a Christian while myself I was not baptised. We decided that I should get baptised before we could marry. My parents were agreeable. I got engaged and 'lobola' of eighteen life cattle was paid. The date for the wedding was set. During this time a problem arose, as a new girls' initiation school was about to open in the nearby village. My father instructed that my younger sister and I should join. My sister was very happy. I totally refused since I was then a baptised Christian. I did not want to be excommunicated from the church. When the day came, my sister was jubilant. She even led the way. I became very stubborn and refused to go. My father was very angry with me. He put me on a leash and got onto his horse. He severely beat me as he was pulling me to go. I despised all the teaching since I could not accept it. I still hate the whole process and I am glad that none of my children ever got interested in joining.

It is no longer the boys or girls alone who go through initiation as a rite of passage. Even married men and women particularly those who want to become traditional doctors at the initiation schools participate in the *Lebollo* process. This would enable them qualify for entry and act as

go-between when there are problems between the initiates and the non-initiates. They act as advocates. However, this is a new phenomenon where initiation in Southern Africa is no longer considered solely as a rite of passage to adulthood, but also as an acquisition of occupational status as a *sangoma* (traditional healer). This is said to appease the ancestors.

The burdens which women initiates go through continue even during the initiation. Once in, they are not allowed to leave even if it means giving birth there. A case was narrated by one of the interviewees, who said,

“This is the case with a group of ten initiates in 2002 that we accidentally got in touch with. They had come to perform rituals at the cemetery at the grave belonging to a grandfather of one of them. A relative had organized transport to and fro. On their way back their transport had problems. They had to look for an alternative, which happened to be myself.

It was raining heavily and very cold. They were all soaked. It was my pleasure to be in direct contact with the initiates for the first time when they were still undergoing training. I was perplexed to see them in their traditional attire. They had animal hide skirts and no tops. They walked in the cold mud bare-footed with their heavy wet blankets. To my dismay they had a two-week old baby with them whom I was told that its mother gave birth at the initiation school. The mother was sick but could not be taken to the hospital to see a doctor.

As they were getting off the truck, they started to complain about the cold. I learned that this was not the first time they visited the graveyard in order to talk to their ancestors whom they had been shown in their dreams. They were going to sleep in the same wet blankets they were wearing, as they had no spare ones. I have no doubt that they fell sick the following day due to cold.”

During the focus group discussions with a group of male non-initiates, they confided that male initiation was based on the premise that women were tougher than men since they endure the unique experience of giving birth, which men would never had a chance to experience so that they could be at par with women. Men have to undergo a similar operation that could bring their pain and suffering closer to that of women to prove their bravery, courage and strength. This assertion seems it to be very new and requires more investigation since it could further explain

some of the reasons that influence people to continue to attend initiation schools. Nanda (1980:135) confirms the same findings by the psychoanalyst Bettelheim in 1962 who studied rites that involved circumcision. He maintained that such rites ‘are symbolic of the male envy of the female power of bearing children. The bloodletting associated with the rites is an attempt to imitate and thus participate in these life-creating powers at a symbolic level’.

Life Experiences and Expectations from the Practice for *Basotho* Initiates

Below is an account of the experiences that are related by one of the initiates who graduated in June 2002. She is a female in her early thirties, married with two children. She became a *sangoma* (traditional healer) in 1998. She got initiated the Basotho way (*Basotho* here is used as a category separate from *Matebele*). She was initiated with four other initiates. Only one of them, also married, had gone there voluntarily while the rest were *sangomas*. According to her, *Lebollo* is good and very important for those who want to train as *sangomas*. She will not encourage anybody including her own daughters to go through it. According to her, the experiences are too much and unnecessary. However she did encourage male initiation since according to her, it is healthy and protects males against sexually transmitted diseases. In her own words.

“There are differences in the way *Lebollo* (initiation) is undertaken by Basotho and *Matebele*. I was initiated the Sesotho way. My dead grandmothers revealed themselves to me. They told me that there were certain issues that they wanted me to know. They showed me a mophato where I could go and learn. We went there. The lady owner of the mophato told me that on January 5 2002 she would be incising the newcomers. I enrolled. We engaged in a preparatory phase (*ho qacha*) where we collected a lot of firewood. At this time we were called *mathisa* (uninitiated females either married or unmarried). We were not yet initiated.”

“On January 15 2002 a night vigil was held (*lelingoana*). An all night singing took place and no one was expected to fall asleep including our parents and paternal aunts since they are also considered to be our fathers. Very early in the morning we sneaked out to go to the gully (*lengpeng*). On March 15th 2002 we got initiated.

We went down to the gully where we were smeared with Pilo (black lotion). During this time we were called litsoejane (the newly initiated).

On April 15, we went back to the gully for another smearing. This time we were smeared with Phepa (white clay lotion). We became very white (rea hlabara). During this time we were called Bale. After the smearing we went back to the mophato to go for another night vigil called thojane though it differed with the clans. There were some of the clans that did not participate in this one. Upon arrival at home, we jumped the livestock enclosure (kraal), though this again differed according to one's clan. Others, whose clan did not do this, went in through the door.

On June 5, we graduated. On the eve of the graduation, we engaged in the biggest night vigil where we were wearing thethana made out of Tsikitlane or flannel cloth again depending on one's clan. There should be a moleta-thojane (like a disk jockey) depending on one's clan. Bahlakoana, Basia and Bakoena participated in the Thojane while Bafokeng and Matebele (who were initiated with Basotho) did not take part. We each paid lenaka (the horn for the incision and the medicine) Maloti 210.00. We also brought along a 300kg bag of granular maize, one bag of cabbage 2litres of cooking oil and 12.5kg of dried beans. These items could be paid in instalments. We ate a lot because we were given concoctions that whetted our appetites and made us feel hungry all the time. The supplies do not last and the owner of mophato has to supplement our feeding.

Our attire was basically a grey sleeping blanket which we wore all the time no matter what. During the first period it is worn without anything inside but nobody knows. We each brought it from our homes if our maternal uncles could not provide. The wearing of certain dress and the lotion that we put all over our bodies and faces marked certain phases. Smearing the faces with Pilo as mentioned earlier marked the first phase. We wore Setea (washed cowhide skirt) without tops. The grey blanket was still part of the attire. During this phase, we put on grass veils or masks to prevent people from realising us. We looked very horrible. One could not attempt to remove it or else she faced serious rebuke by the instructor. We never used modern body lotions or toothpastes, though we used to wash our bodies and smear them with this black mixture.

During thojane phase, we put on a cowhide skirt that covered only the rear. In front we wore

a short thethana made of tsikitlane. We used to buy thethana from the old ladies who brought them to us. During the graduation phase, on the departure date, we were smeared with red ochre all over our bodies. Our heads, depending on our clans were smeared with sekama.

The Sesotho training was more about using the grinding stone, smearing floors with mud and self-respect. We were also taught songs and koma. Most of the time was spent on koma. Of importance also was ensuring gratification of men once we were out. We had to prepare the blankets for men (elongation of labia minora so that they remain hanging, since they are said to increase stimulation and warmth during sex).

In cases where one has to give birth, the instructor and the owner of mophato become the midwives. The pregnant woman is not sent to the hospital. Married women participated in this event. Unmarried girls were not allowed to attend during childbirth despite that they already know about giving birth and about sexuality. This happened with one of the initiates who joined while already very pregnant. She gave birth just a month before we graduated.

I have no idea about this man called motanyane. We were told that we would get to see him when participating at Molaong (a stage that follows after about six months after graduation). We will spend six months before going at other people's gullies (where there are initiates). There used to be very terrible sounds, which we were told that they were made by motanyane. We were never allowed to open our eyes when this was happening until they had stopped. We therefore never really knew what motanyane was. During this cries, we would be beating drums till morning for fear that if we did not, he would take us. Every now and then, we would be told that he is complaining that we were not beating the drums to his satisfaction. We would then beat them even more.

On the 15th of every month, our parents had to bring food to mophatong that was feeding motanyane. Women of the gully (as they were called) would take the food and go to the gully. Food included bread, cold drink, jam and cooked chicken. The initiates were never given this food, but they would be looking down and not interacting. They would not speak to one another. During this time even old women go to the gully wearing lithethana and singing songs of the initiated. Motanyane cannot be seen or criticised.

Anyone who attempts to ask or criticise gets severely punished for asking too many questions. I was a victim of that.

I will not encourage anybody to go to the initiation school if her ancestors do not instruct her. Voluntarily, I don't see how anybody would like to join. I am not in favour of what was happening there. Apart from the strenuous work which we experienced and the sleepless nights, we also experienced witches who came to visit. There is a lot of witchcraft at mophatong. Witches have a tendency of attacking the owner of the initiation school and the initiates to determine her strength, valour and how secure she is against witchcraft. One night two others and I saw a cat coming in through a closed window. It walked passed us and went straight into the bag belonging to the instructor. It disappeared in that bag. In the meantime, the owner of the initiation school was having bad dreams. In the morning we told the instructor who totally ignored us. We later discovered through my sister who has visions that the cat belonged to the instructor who was testing the strength of the owner. This means that she was also a witch.

An initiate who dies at the initiation school gets buried in the wilderness. Nobody outside mophatong gets to see her. The remains are not brought home. The parents get to know about it at the time of graduation when they do not see her among the graduates. They are let to continue with the purchasing of a new blanket and the thethana that they bring to the graduation. It is then that they are told of the loss.

The Come-back and Promotion of Initiation Schools in South Africa

Among the Africans in South Africa a man who is not initiated and circumcised remain for the rest of his life a boy (*Nkwenkwe* – Xhosa; *Moshemane* – Sotho and Tswana). A woman remains a girl (*ngwanana* – Sotho; *ntombazana* – Xhosa). As a result of this position he/she cannot attain certain privileges in the families and communities of the initiated. Members of the communities including those who are younger than him/her do not expect and have no trust in him for specific tasks. Thus, both the African men and women in South Africa who still adhere to cultural practices go for initiation and circumcision to attain respect and dignity from their fellows.

The migration of rural people, especially farm workers from the farms in great numbers starting in the early 1970s to the homelands, and the establishment of homelands with self-governments played a significant role in the come back of the initiation institution. The homeland governments established departments of culture and education, which promoted cultural practices in schools and communities.

Both males and females who are not initiated in many African communities that practise initiation and circumcision in South Africa such as the *Sothos*, *Xhosas* and *Ndebeles* find it very difficult to obtain a marriage partner. When a male has selected a female not initiated, his family may refuse the marriage on that basis. This does happen also in the case of males not initiated. In the case where it takes place, the uninitiated partner must comply within a short period of time to make the marriage intact. Among the Xhosas, the practice is still very strong and there is strong resistance to its abolishment. Even top ranking officials feel strongly that the practice should only be regulated but not prevented.

Lastly the factor that promoted initiation institutions in many African communities of South Africa was the political changes. Africans in the country accepted that they are Africans and have unique cultural practices that distinguished them from other groups in the world. According to them, adherence to these cultural practices was seen as one of the elements that could help them prosper, attain human dignity and respect from other groups. They accepted the fact that their traditional institutions need to be developed and placed on the same level with Western ones. Schools and churches were therefore compelled to change their position and no more excommunicate children and their members who practiced traditional initiation and circumcision.

Social and Cultural Reasons for Continued Initiation and Circumcision Among the Basotho

Traditional initiation has advantages and disadvantages depending on the tutors or owners of the initiation schools. During this era of modernisation, its role as an institution that promotes bravery, courage and one's loyalty to his country is highly debatable. However for those who have not attained higher formal education, initiation schools could still serve the purpose as seen by the respondents. However,

with female circumcision arguments, which promote its continuity, could not be scientifically proven (Koso-Thomas 1997). If initiation could be separated from circumcision, as is the case in many societies that continue with female initiation, this traditional practice could still be condoned. The same goes for boys since traditionally, initiation schools performed very important roles in society as it prepared males and females for adult roles (Matsela, Motlomelo 2002).

The most prominent factor that many consider to have played a significant role in the sustenance of the institution is the belief in its control of promiscuity among women. Women's promiscuity is not acceptable in all African communities in South Africa and Lesotho. People see it as a disrespect of the woman's husband and this finally leads to family disintegration. The belief is that the female clitoris is the source of women's excitement that could be detrimental since women would readily accept sexual approaches by other men, or make uncontrollable sexual demands on their husbands. Husbands' failure to satisfy their lust could result in extra-marital relationships. Thus, female circumcision is beneficial to women as well as to society, because it protects them from their own sexuality and from the risk of becoming promiscuous and thereby bringing disgrace upon themselves, their families and the society. The excision (cutting out) of female organ on the other hand aims at converting the organ into the narrow orifice, the size of which will bring difficult friction and increased pleasure to the male during sexual intercourse. To maintain their marriages women have to provide for the men's sexual pleasure. This they then had to do by undergoing the operation (Koso-Thomas 1997: 8-9).

The other argument is that to both males and females circumcision promotes cleanliness in their genitalia (Van de Vliet 1974). For example if the organs are left intact the dirt that usually comes out of the organs themselves, packs under the skin. If the organs are not regularly washed, the dirt stinks badly and becomes infectious. Where one or both sexual partners still have the organs they can infect each other easily. To prevent infection it is therefore advisable to cut the organs. In case of males, the cutting of the foreskin is considered very significant in that its absence helps in generating high sexual excitement which enables them to have full control over the initiation and ending of sexual activities. Their

good sexual performance assists in the maintenance of sexual harmony in their families.

One of the reasons that have brought about widespread participation in the initiation schools lately in Lesotho has been the fear of HIV and AIDS pandemic which affects most young men and women. According to the interviewees, since this HIV epidemic is mostly sexually transmitted, the belief is that removal of the foreskin again will prevent the infection. This is however a myth since even after circumcision, protection during sexual intercourse is still very important. It is also felt that through initiation schools good moral behaviour can be inculcated where the formal educational institutions have failed. Because of HIV and AIDS and believes attached to the disease, many instructors have seen a business opportunity and open initiation schools that carry many young men who spend very short time but pay heavy fees.

CONCLUSION

The Southern African traditional initiation schools are of great significance in many Southern African communities in South Africa and Lesotho in that, first they provide the initiates with personality and character.

Secondly, they provide initiates with values of loyalty, good mores, self-respect and hard-work. Observations indicate that the traditional initiation practice for both boys and girls in Southern Africa is fast losing a lot of meaning for which it was introduced. Especially now that it has become voluntary and having been substituted in many areas by modern-western practices.

Due to ill practices of those who hold initiations, the institution has now become a channel for diseases and deaths, which include HIV and AIDS in those cases where the operation is not handled with extra care to the extent that there could be infection through contact with infected blood. Also, staying together in the small huts (*mephato*) has a potential for spreading communicable diseases like Tuberculosis.

RECOMMENDATIONS

More attention has to be focused on promoting good and healthy practices for those who still prefer traditional initiation for different reasons. In those societies that still see it as honourable; they should be assisted to prevent further hazards. Policy therefore must be drawn

and implemented that would safeguard the rights of both the initiates and the trainers.

Policy governing initiation could be developed and enforced. In this regard, because of the roles played by the institution, there is need to promote, protect and modify it in order to perform its functions properly all the time.

Given the prospects, traditional initiation, much as it has lost its purpose, it could still be encouraged to cater for the needs of the poor who want to reduce diseases infection.

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