

“He’s a father, he’s 22 but he’s still a boy”: Xhosa male initiation as vital
conjuncture in Khayelitsha, Cape Town.

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For young Xhosa-speaking men coming of age in Khayelitsha, the huge township that is home to many of the poor in Cape Town, South Africa, “traditional” Xhosa initiation rites remain central to their thinking and articulation of the transition from boyhood to manhood. For these young men, most of whom have ties to South Africa’s Eastern Cape province, these rituals represent the gateway to manhood. Their understanding—and expectations—of these “rites of passage” loosely conform to Van Gennep’s three-stage structure of “separation, liminality and reincorporation” (Van Gennep, 1966). A group of male initiates, most often between the ages of 15 and 25 years, stay in temporary structures “in the bush” for 3-6 weeks. Here they participate in complex rituals that have several components, with the ritual circumcision being perhaps most significant. The process is supervised by initiation attendants and other graduated initiates, who, having been through the process themselves, have access to knowledge about Xhosa initiation that is otherwise protected by powerful taboos. Initiates are taught about the responsibilities and privileges of manhood, or “how to be a man”. Many of the teachings are articulated in relation to the performance of “dominant” masculine sexuality, as well as the capacity to financially provide for women and families. Upon graduation, initiates are considered to be “men” and are encouraged to express this by engaging in multiple partnerships with women. Later they are expected to fulfill their new entitlement to “take a wife”. Thus, the ways in which the initiation process is engaged has a significant impact on both sexual practices and reproductive health.

Although this model of Xhosa initiation is still commonly drawn upon, negotiating various forms of social and economic marginalisation in Khayelitsha makes the paths to access the status and privileges associated with a trope of “Xhosa masculinity” uncertain. Khayelitsha is a township originally established during Apartheid as a “site and serviced” residence for black South Africans to be a cheap and geographically accessible source of labour for white-run businesses in central Cape Town (Spiegel & Mehlwana, 1997). Since its establishment in 1983, there has been significant in-migration from all over the country, but most notably from the rural Eastern Cape. Today Khayelitsha is said to have over a million residents, whose lives are characterized by a series of challenges. Access to basic services like water, sanitation and electricity, as well as adequate housing, remains uneven across the settlement. Unemployment is estimated to be close to 75%. Inadequacies in both infrastructure and human resources mean that access to education and health care is often insufficient, thus hindering young peoples’ ability to source opportunities that could lead to formal future employment. Social challenges, including early pregnancy and involvement in

the use or sale of drugs, like “tik” (methamphetamine), also prevent many young people from completing school or maintaining positions in paid employment.

It is in this context that the Xhosa initiation rituals have come to hold new meanings and define new trajectories for young men. While conventional conceptions of rituals of initiation to adulthood often conjure a seamless transition, in contemporary Khayelitsha the situation is more uncertain. Instead of marking a discreet shift in life stage from boyhood to adulthood, Xhosa initiation could more productively read as a “vital conjuncture” (Johnson-Hanks, 2002); a time of indeterminacy holding the potential for multiple futures for these young men. This paper explores Xhosa initiation as marking an ambivalent and contested departure point for young men’s attempts to access an individually and socially legitimate form of masculinity. It explores young men’s attempts and aspirations to develop, maintain and reinforce their status as “men” as they come of age in a context where managing the immediate social and economic challenges they face often makes this impossible. Thus, such attempts to access particular kinds of social status and masculine identity remain partial and uneven.

Though “ideal” performances of the kind of dominant masculinity tied to Xhosa initiation are seldom achieved, other avenues present themselves to these young men. The first avenue through which it might be possible for men to access such masculine identity is through the inclusion of Pentecostal Christianity into the rituals and subsequent expectations of graduates. With the upsurge of Pentecostal Christianity in southern Africa, several of the elements of the Xhosa initiation rituals have shifted. Initiation attendants identify as Christians themselves. Discipline and responsible “adult” behaviour is strongly encouraged, and as such, the use of alcohol, which is commonly a significant part of the “traditional” ritual process, is excluded. Young men’s reintegration into society post-initiation may also happen in the church rather than in the family home of the initiate man. Instead of being encouraged to explore sexually, graduates are expected to marry as soon after the ceremony as possible. As one young initiate put it: “If your flesh is burning, you must marry”. But negotiating the marriage process is too often an impossible task for Khayelitsha men, many of whom do not have enough money to pay *lobola* (Xhosa bride price). Even in situations when *lobola* may be saved up over a longer timeframe, marriage would still be delayed for these young men.

The second avenue by which to assert a particular dominant and desirable form of masculinity is through earning money by finding employment. For most young men, achieving complete financial independence is impossible, as jobs are scarce and the majority still live in their parents’ or grandparents homes. Some manage to secure part-time and relatively poorly paid employment. Nevertheless, the display of financial security remains important. This is achieved through wearing expensive brand name clothing. To wear expensive shoes is perhaps most important, with the Italian brand *Carvela* being most desirable, but costing between \$100 and \$200 per pair. Young men who dress well are called “isikhova”, which refers to their sharp attire but also to the fact that they are popular with young women. Driving a car is another important, yet often

unattainable, symbol of wealth in Khayelitsha. Sexual partnerships are often initiated on the basis that a young man looks like he is either financially stable, or has financial prospects. Both young men and young women speak of the importance of men being able to take on the dominant masculine role of being able to pay for luxuries during the courting process, including being able to buy women gifts, drinks at bars or meals from fast food chains or restaurants. Young women explain that they will not enter into relationships with men who do not have jobs. Furthermore, the type of employment, as well as the rate of pay for these jobs, also contributes to women's decision to engage in such relationships.

The third avenue is linked to having children, but more importantly, having the capacity to support them financially. For Xhosa men, having child is an important sign of their fertility and therefore their virility, which is positively associated with their masculinity. Despite the high prevalence of HIV in Khayelitsha, reluctance to use condoms remains persistently high, as they are associated with diminished sexual pleasure, particularly for young men. Seeking utmost sexual pleasure is positively associated with Xhosa masculinity, which may discourage them from using condoms. The use of other kinds of contraception is thought to be "the women's problem" and is seldom insisted upon. While living up to the expectation of being fertile may be easy, providing for ones' child is not often as straightforward. Providing for children is financially burdensome, which is highlighted by the persistent refrain that "just one packet of nappies is more than R200", an amount which people working casually would probably only make in two-to-three full days of work. Young men therefore attempt to support their children in ways that they are able to, but which are often seen by the mothers of their children and community members as insufficient. Unlike men who have been initiated, young men who have children when they are "still boys" do not have to carry the same burden of expectation to provide financially for children, although this would certainly be desirable.

Although the Xhosa initiation rituals set out a series of social expectations, as well as a potential opportunity to access a socially legitimate form of masculine identity, it is clear that going through the initiation process does not easily translate into enjoying these privileges, or managing these responsibilities. Importantly, Xhosa male initiation as vital conjuncture opens a series of avenues for young Khayelitsha men to negotiate their role and sexualities in relation to young women, and in their communities. The choice and number of sexual partners, as well as decisions about the contraception- which have important implications in terms of sexual health risk- are in part shaped by initiates' attempts to make sense of their identities "as men". Graduates must also consider whether to have children, how to care to them, as well as ways to achieve socially legitimate family structures. Exploring Xhosa initiation as a moment of vital conjecture highlights this transition from boyhood to manhood as a contested and uncertain process that opens multiple futures for young Khayelitsha men, which have important implications for sexual practice, reproductive health as well as social reproduction.

References

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