



■ CULTURE

Do more to eradicate illegal initiation schools

Initiation that should be a snip often death sentence

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FOR how long will young boys still have to die during initiation? Large numbers of them will never be granted the opportunity to become men, because this practice has taken their lives.

The deaths of these initiates have become a societal issue that needs to be addressed with the utmost urgency.

It may not be far-fetched to argue that some of these deaths are akin to murder because young initiates die from neglect, dehydration, assault and infection. Certain initiation practices are shocking.

As far as we know, 41 young boys died last year at initiation schools. In June, the Deputy Minister of Co-operative Governance and Traditional Affairs Obed Bapela stated that since 2006 "at least 800 teens and men have had to undergo penile amputations after suffering complications related to traditional initiation". And we know how expensive penis transplants are. It will be unaffordable for government to assist in this regard.

From 2006-2018, 714 boys died from botched circumcisions in just the Eastern Cape. Even more shocking is that since 1994, more than 1 750 initiates (of which we know) died during initiation in SA.

We are also aware of suicides among those whose penises have been amputated. Especially when they grow up, they experience different challenges and pressures because of their lost manhood.

I understand that this rite of passage marks the entrance of a teen/young man into a specific group or society; that it could mean that such a person is admitted to adulthood in this group or community, and is being transformed through education, mentoring and training to play a new role in society; and that it is a religious experience.

I have therefore an understanding for the fact that government supports this rite, and I really acknowledge the importance of initiation for many members of society because it is supposed to restore dignity and pride to them.

Must we not be more upset about the fact that boys and teens could be killed by a traditional practice that was meant to build and mould them as responsible young men?

Our Constitution does make provision for cultural groups to practice their traditions, but also forbids cruel, inhumane and degrading behaviour.

Cultural practices can only have value as far as it promotes human well-being, argues academic Luvuyo Ntombana.

Power and material interests, often served by culture, may never be more important than human well-being. Furthermore, initiation and circumcision should never be allowed to create a patriarchal



ABAKHWETHA, the Xhosa word for initiates, with white clay covering their faces as a symbol of purity, wear sheepskins to protect them from the cold. | AP African News Agency (ANA)



ABOUT eight young female initiates were rescued from an illegal initiation school near Sebokeng, the illegal initiation school was then destroyed. | ITUMELENG ENGLISH African News Agency (ANA)

hierarchy of authority – not between men, nor between men and women.

We know that government and other try to make initiation schools safer, but still deaths and violations continue, as we have seen last year.

It seems, however, that government's efforts regarding the monitoring, supervision and regulation of initiation aren't leading to fewer deaths and amputations.

We have heard that many parents are opposed to the fact that their children are treated during initiation by a medically trained nurse/doctor from outside or to be taken to hospital.

The latter is stigmatised because by going to hospital a boy doesn't complete his course to become a

man. For this reason, many initiates are taken to hospital as a very last resort. It is considered a compromise.

In many rural areas "young people would rather die as men, than live as boys", says Ntombana.

King Faku (1815-1867), the ruler of the Mpondo kingdom, abolished circumcision in 1820 and Shaka Zulu did the same during his reign. But circumcision again became popular in the 1980s when local authorities promoted new forms of masculinity.

In some parts of the country initiation schools expanded rapidly over the past few years.

Malicious crooks exploited the situation financially and sponged on this tradition. In the past, adult culprits in these schools

were sometimes arrested just to be released again the next day. So they literally got away with murder.

Therefore, much more needs to be done to eradicate illegal initiation schools where (circumcision) wounds are often treated in unsanitary ways. I really hope the new Bill, when signed into law, will (further) help to clamp down on these illegal schools.

Furthermore, awareness programmes in schools about the dangers during initiation must be promoted more effectively.

Parents should be encouraged to pay attention to the necessary regulations regarding traditional initiations, and to take, in an accountable way, centre stage in their children's rite to manhood.

Traditional nurses and doctors must be trained properly to ensure they have the required skills.

Medical assistance from outside the initiation school should be accepted, or initiates should be allowed to be taken to hospitals in time if need be.

Initiation schools must be centralised more because then it can be monitored more easily and better.

Across South Africa better strategies by all relevant stakeholders should be put in place so that these deaths, often under very primitive conditions, can be reduced and hopefully prevented.

What makes this difficult is the fact that initiation is a rite that is veiled in secrecy.

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