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CIRCUMCISION AND CELEBRATORY ORALITY AMONG SOME BLACK SOUTH AFRICAN CULTURAL GROUPS

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Synopsis:

There is no adequate research on African poetic self-praise learnt at initiation. I intend to fill this gap by probing how this aspect of folklore survives beyond the arcane circumcision period. I confine myself to the traditional role of self-praise during initiation completion celebrations. I focus in my research of such a celebratory practice on the Northern Ndebele cultural group concentrated in the Vaaltyn-Moshate area of the town of Mokopane, in the Limpopo Province of South Africa.

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Abstract

My premise in this study affirms views like those of Abraham (2015) that the African personality pervading all African cultures has selectively preserved its traditional identity even as it dealt with hybrity that has been a natural outcome of encounters with different cultural clusters. Krige and Krige (1943) and Nkadimeng (1973) describe broad cultural benefits of circumcision as practised among the BaloBedu of Rain Queen Modjadji and the BaPedi respectively, both of the Limpopo Province of South Africa, while Nyembezi et. al. (2014) dwell on the same among the AmaXhosa of the Eastern Cape Province of South Africa. The writers mentioned above variously hint at and describe the content and benefits of African lore encoded in oral formulae taught in circumcision schools. Morton (2011) stretches the research by going further to emphasize self-praise compositions as prominent among the lessons learnt during traditional circumcision, analyzing examples from southern African countries. However, he does this without adequately analyzing the content of self-praises and their use beyond celebrations that mark completion of circumcision. I intend to fill this gap by probing how self-praises learnt during the arcane initiation period survive beyond returnee festivities, as well as scrutinize the content of such self-praises. I focused in my research on the Northern Ndebele cultural group concentrated in the Vaaltyn-Moshate area of the town of Mokopane, in the Limpopo Province of South Africa.

Key words: African personality, male circumcision, Northern Ndebele, self-praise.

[1] Mr Lucas Makgape Molepo, a colleague in the Department of English Studies at the University of South Africa, helped me with the technology to capture the images of the respondents.

Open Rubric

Introduction

I intend to deepen and characterize in a more refined manner the African cultural self-praise aspect as one of the many facets of the African personality or African mind holding together African cultures. Abraham (2015:32) defines the African personality as "that complex of ideas and attitudes which is both identical and significant in otherwise different African cultures." I associate the African value of traditional initiation tied to circumcision with the underlying cultural attitude that permeates African cultural practices on the whole continent, despite their having what may be unidentical cultural practices on the surface. This is why I interchangeably refer to such an underlying consciousness from Abraham's perspective as African personality and as the African mind. Explaining the concept of the African mind, Asante (1987:65) significantly remarks that, "When we speak of Africans, we are usually talking about a multitude of attitudes, peoples, and cosmologies; and in this circumstance, to speak of an African mind is to speak cautiously. Nevertheless, we speak broadly of traditional African society – perhaps, even African culture." As part of the African personality imbuing cultural practices of traditional circumcision across the continent, self-praise studied in depth in any specific cultural group is bound to have an impact on nuanced characterizations of African culture – in the sense of an African personality or an African mind.

It is significant that this part of traditional initiation that has existed for centuries in the midst of cultural encounters with other peoples survives to this day as part of the identity of African cultural groups. This aspect of African cultures has historically not been a casualty in what Abraham (2015:32) describes as the process of finding out "what we shall not be too grieved to discard from our own cultures" while dialectically confronting cultural contact with other social groups from the past to the present. That cultural identity is among the chief motives for the continued practice of traditional circumcision among black Africans is borne out by writers such as Greely et. al. (2013), in their highlighting of cultural initiation as the reason for traditional male circumcision enjoying widespread support among black South African tribes.

Evidence of culturally motivated male circumcision practices beyond South Africa can be found in Bayley et. al. (2017), Chinkhumba et. al. (2014), Maffioli (2017), McAllister et. al. (2008), Morton (2011), Sgaier et. al. (2017) and Vincent (2008). They give accounts of the existence of circumcision-anchored cultural initiation in African states spanning central Africa, east Africa, north Africa, southern Africa and west Africa. Although I chose the Northern Ndebele of a

South African place called Vaaltyn Moshate in the Mokopane town of the Limpopo Province of South Africa as the site of my research, the findings have an impact on knowledge regarding the practice of traditional circumcision on the entire African continent, of which the teaching of self-praise in an integral part.

In order to try and triangulate what the initiates performed for me, I selected a few from each of the three neighbouring traditional initiation schools, referred to as Makgolo, Mashishi and Mokgaetši (referred to as Rafapa during interviews with the initiates, which is her surname). All the three schools cater centrally for the tribal residence of Vaaltyn-Moshate. The initiates' completion of traditional circumcision spanned a period of 20 years (from 1999 to 2017). I sought to avoid interviewing initiates who all completed in the same year, so that I would be able to trace enduring structural and content patterns in this practice. My sampling approach and research methods fall within the research methodology defined by Burden (2000, 291–292) as oral history. I found this technique pertinent to my kind of research, because of its view of "information provided by ordinary people, which is often of a practical nature and highly localised, as crucial to a complete understanding of a cultural past" (Burden 2000, 291–292). My study demonstrates the continuation of a cultural past surviving the environmental contingencies of the present, and relies on orature.

Self-praises recalled by initiation returnees beyond circumcision celebrations

I intentionally interviewed eight initiates at least a year after completion of their traditional circumcision. All the informants concurred that the showcasing of self-praises they were taught by the elders during initiation during celebrations marking their return from the mountain was the initial performance of such in public. My interest, however, was more on how such praises are retained both in the minds of the initiates and throughout their youthful and adult interaction with society, for use where cultural practice dictates.

Below I transcribe what the sample of initiates performed as I recorded them on video. Each informant introduces himself by name and states where and when he attended initiation, before singing the self-praise.

1. **Samuel Manyama completed traditional initiation in 1999.**

Ke nna Samuel wa ga Manyama. (I am Samuel of the Manyama clan.)

Ke rupile ga Makgolo ka ’99. (I was circumcised at Makgolo’s in ’99.)

Ke nna Lesibana mantsakantsaka, (My manhood name is Lesibana of a myriad accolades,)

Matseni matsena ka kgapeng, (Borer that pierces the calabash,)

Se re o tsena ka kgapeng (As you enter the calabash)

Wa nanasela; (Take care not to tiptoe;)

Pheta di mo robile dinoka, (One whose loins caved under bands of beads,)

Ga dia mo roba, (Lo they did not break him,)

Di a mo tshwanela; (They make him smart;)

Mogokolodi moswana moswana, (The dark, dark millipede,)

O rile tompa tompa (Fell and rose)

O lebile šakeng la tate, (Meandering to my father's kraal,)

Ka tšea patla ka o ripa hlogo, (I clutched a stick and broke its head,)

Ka re šaka la tate ke šaka la banna, (Swearing that my father's kraal is arena for men,)

Ga go ralokele dibatana, (It is where tiny deer dare not tread,)

Go ralokela bopitsi le bokgokong – (It is where zebras and larger game gambol–)

Pitsi matšhaba a se na hlogo, (Zebra that escapes with no head,)

Wa re o tšhaba wa phurolla mongetse; (Zebra unfurler of mane while bolting;)

Ponto ye tala mphiri, (Mysterious pound of copper,)

Mme e paletše Maisemane go e tšhentšha, (That beat the Englishman to unriddle,)

Ka e tšhentšha nna Lesiba, (I resolved its mystery, I Lesiba,)

Hla! hla! ko ga Rapitsi; (Briskly at Mr Horserider's;)

Ke feditše ke nna Lesibana. (I pause, I Lesibana.)

2. Malesela Paballo Quinton Rafapa completed traditional initiation in 2009.

Ke nna Rafapa Malesela Paballo Quinton. (I am Rafapa Malesela Quinton.)

Ke rupile ka 2009. (I was circumcised in 2009.)

Lebitšo la ka la koma ke Malesela. (My manhood name is Malesela.)

Le retiwa ka mokgwa wo: (This is how I am praised:)

Ke nna Malesela mphaswa, (I am Malesela worthy of appeasing,)

Ngwana mmetha ka patla ya tšhipi, (Child who strikes with iron rod,)

Mogokolodi moswana moswana, (The dark, dark millipede,)

O rile tompa tompa (Fell and rose)

O lebile šakeng la tate, (Meandering to my father's kraal,)

Ka tšea patla ka o ripa hlogo, (I clutched a stick and broke its head,)

Ka re šaka la tate ke šaka la banna, (Swearing that my father's kraal is arena for men,)

Ga go ralokele dibatana, (It is where tiny deer dare not tread,)

Go ralokela bopitsi le bokgokong – (It is where zebras and larger game gambol–)

Pitsi matšhaba a se na hlogo, (Zebra that escapes with no head,)

Wa re o tšhaba wa phurolla mongetse; (Zebra unfurler of mane while bolting;)

Ponto ye tala mphiri, (Mysterious pound of copper,)

Mme e paletše Maisemane go e tšhentšha, (That beat the Englishman to unriddle,)

Ka e tšhentšha nna Lesiba, (I resolved its mystery, I Lesiba,)

Hla! hla! ko ga Rapitsi; (Briskly at Mr Horserider's;)

Ke feditše nna Malesela. (I pause, I Malesela.)

3. **Egnecious Khutšo Rafapa completed traditional initiation in 2011.**

Nna ke nna Rafapa Egnecious Khutšo. (I am Rafapa Egnecious Khutšo.)

Ke wetše molotong wa ga Rafapa ka ngwaga wa 2011. (I was initiated at Rafapa's initiation school in 2011.)

Leina le ke le tšeereng ko molotong: (The manhood name I earned at the school:)

Ke nna Madimetja mantsakantsaka, (I am Madimetja of a myriad accolades,)

Matseni matsena ka kgapeng, (Borer that pierces the calabash,)

Ke mohlang go lla tinting phalafala, (Times when kudu horn blew pleasant,)

Rena naka tša banna, (Which was us reed whistles of men,)

Ka se tšwe kotsi, (Without courting harm,)

Ka tšea lerumo ka hlaba pele ga barena, (I clutched a spear and stuck in front of rulers,)

Ka re barena le reng le sa nthete, (And queried why they did not praise me,)

Ba re o tla retwa ke mang, (They said who can praise you,)

O sa retwe ke dikgaetšedi tša gago tše pedi – (If your two sisters do not extol you –)

Di go reta di re iu! iu! (If they do not drench you in ululations,)

Ngwana' mma o tšo thopa nto ye botse bonneng, (Declaring our mother's child has plundered a thing of beauty from men,)

Tha! tha! ko ga Rapitsi; (Briskly at Mr Horserider's);

Ke feditše nna Madimetja. (I pause, I Madimetja.)

4. **Desmond Mushi completed traditional initiation in 2012.**

Ke nna Des. (I am Des.)

Ke wetše ga Rafapa ka 2012. (I was initiated at Rafapa's in 2012.)

Lebitšo la ka ke nna Malesela: (My name is Malesela:)

Ke nna Malesela mantsakantsaka, (I am Malesela of a myriad accolades,)

Matseni matsena ka kgapeng, (Borer that pierces the calabash,)

Se re o tsena ka kgapeng (As you enter the calabash)

Wa nanasela; (Take care not to tiptoe;)

Dimpša tša Pentshi di a loma, (Pentshi's dogs do bite,)

Di lomile Tsebiši monwana, (They bit Tsebiši's finger,)

Tša mo loma di mo khupile fela; (Mouthing him with shut snouts;)

Mogokolodi moswana moswana, (The dark, dark millipede,)

O rile tompa tompa (Fell and rose)

O lebile šakeng la tate, (Meandering to my father's kraal,)

Ka tšea patla ka o ripa hlogo, (I clutched a stick and broke its head,)

Ka re šaka la tate ke šaka la banna, (Swearing that my father's kraal is arena for men,)

Ga go ralokele dibatana, (It is where tiny deer dare not tread,)

Go ralokela bopitsi le bokgokong – (It is where zebras and larger game gambol–)

Pitsi matšhaba a se na hlogo, (Zebra that escapes with no head,)

Wa re o tšhaba wa phurolla mongetse; (Zebra unfurler of mane while bolting;)

Ponto ye tala mphiri, (Mysterious pound of copper,)

Mme e paletše Maisemane go e tšhentšha, (That beat the Englishman to unriddle,)

Ka e tšhentšha nna Lesiba, (I resolved its mystery, I Lesiba,)

Tha! tha! ko ga Rapitsi; (Briskly at Mr Horserider's;)

Ke feditše, (I pause,)

Ke nna Malesela. (I am Malesela.)

5. **Solly Zorro Legong completed traditional initiation in 2017.**

Nnna ke nna Legong Solly Zorro. (I am Legong Sello Zorro.)

Ke wetse molotong wa ga Rafapa ka 2017. (I was initiated at the school of the Rafapa clan in 2017.)

Ka leina le ke le tšeereng ko molotong wa ga Rafapa: (As for the name I acquired at the initiation school:)

Ke nna Lesiba mantsakantsaka, (I am Lesiba of a myriad accolades,)

Matseni matsena ka kgapeng, (Borer that pierces the calabash,)

Se re o tsena ka kgapeng (As you enter the calabash)

Wa nanasela; (Take care not to tiptoe;)

Dimpša tša Pentshi di a loma, (Pentshi's dogs do bite,)

Di lomile Tsebiši monwana, (They bit Tsebiši's finger,)

Ga dia mo loma di mo kgomile fela; (They did not bite but just touched him;)

Mogokolodi moswana moswana, (The dark, dark millipede,)

O rile tompa tompa (Fell and rose)

O lebile šakeng la tate, (Meandering to my father's kraal,)

Ka tšea patla ka o ripa hlogo, (I clutched a stick and broke its head,)

Ka re šaka la tate ke šaka la banna, (Swearing that my father's kraal is arena for men,)

Ga go ralokele dibatana, (It is where tiny deer dare not tread,)

Go ralokela bopitsi le bokgokong – (It is where zebras and larger game gambol–)

Pitsi matšhaba a se na hlogo, (Zebra that escapes with no head,)

A re k'a tšhaba a phurolla moetse; (Who unfurls the mane as he runs;)

Ponto ye tala mphiri, (Mysterious pound of copper,)

Mme e paletše Maisemane go e tšhentšha, (That beat the Englishman to unriddle,)

Ka e tšhentšha nna Lesiba, (I resolved its mystery, I Lesiba,)

Tha! tha! ko ga Rapitsi; (Briskly at Mr Horserider's;)

6. Mahlatse Tolo completed traditional initiation in 2017.

Ke nna Mahlatse Tolo. (I am Mahlatse Tolo.)

Ke rupile ko ga Rafapa ka 2017. (I was circumcised at the Rafapas in 2017.)

Ke nna Matsobane mantsakantsaka, (I am Matsobane of a myriad accolades,)

Ke netše ke pula ke le molotong, (I was drenched in rain at mountain school,)

Ka šia go tetemela, (And averted a shiver,)

Ka re ge e le bonna bjona ke bo thopile; (By proclaiming manhood I plundered;)

Mogokolodi moswana moswana, (The dark, dark millipede,)

O rile tompa tompa (Fell and rose)

O lebile šakeng la tate, (Meandering to my father's kraal,)

Ka tšea patla ka o ripa hlogo, (I clutched a stick and broke its head,)

Ka re šaka la tate ke šaka la banna, (Swearing that my father's kraal is arena for men,)

Ga go ralokele dibatana, (It is where tiny deer dare not tread,)

Go ralokela bopitsi le bokgokong – (It is where zebras and larger game gambol–)

Pitsi matšhaba a se na hlogo, (Zebra that escapes with no head,)

Wa re o tšhaba wa phurolla mongetse; (Zebra unfurler of mane while bolting;)

Ponto ye tala mphiri, (Mysterious pound of copper,)

Mme e paletše Maisemane go e tšhentšha, (That beat the Englishman to unriddle,)

Tha! tha! ko ga Rapitsi; (Briskly at Mr Horserider's;)

Ke feditše nna Matsobane. (I pause, I Matsobane.)

7. Shimane Kutumela completed traditional initiation in 2017.

Ke nna Kutumela Shimane. (I am Kutumela Shimane.)

Ke rupile ka 2017 ka ga Rafapa. (I was circumcised in 2017 at the Rafapas.)

Ke nna Lesiba mantsakatsaka, (I am Lesiba of a myriad accolades,)

Ke tsene matsena ka kgapaneng, (I have bored I borer of the calabash,)

Se re o tsena ka kgapeng (As you enter the calabash)

Wa nanasela; (Take care not to tiptoe;)

Dimpša tša Pentshi di a loma, (Pentshi's dogs do bite,)

Di lomile Tsebiši monwana, (They bit Tsebiši's finger,)

Ga dia mo loma di mo khupile fela; (They did not bite but just mouthed him;)

Mogokolodi moswana moswana, (The dark, dark millipede,)

O rile tompa tompa (Fell and rose)

O lebile šakeng la tate, (Meandering to my father's kraal,)

Ka tšea patla ka o ripa hlogo, (I clutched a stick and broke its head,)

Ka re šaka la tate ke šaka la banna, (Swearing that my father's kraal is arena for men,)

Ga go ralokele dibatana, (It is where tiny deer dare not tread,)

Go ralokela bopitsi le bokgokong – (It is where zebras and larger game gambol–)

Pitsi matšhaba a se na hlogo, (Zebra that escapes with no head,)

A re k'a tšhaba a phurolla moetse; (Who unfurls the mane as he runs;)

Ponto ye tala mphiri, (Mysterious pound of copper,)

Mme e paletše Maisemane go e tšhentšha, (That beat the Englishman to unriddle,)

Tha! tha ka e tšhentšha nna Lesiba. (Briskly I resolved its mystery, I Lesiba.)

8. Matsobane completed traditional initiation in 1999.

Ke nna Matsobane. (I am Matsobane.)

Ke rupile ga Mashishi 1999. (I was circumcised at Mashishi's in 1999.)

Ke nna Matsobane mantsakantsaka, (I am Matsobane of a myriad accolades,)

Matseni matsena ka kgapeng, (Borer that pierces the calabash,)

Se re o tsena ka kgapeng (As you enter the calabash)

Wa nanasela; (Take care not to tiptoe;)

Mogokolodi moswana moswana, (The dark, dark millipede,)

O rile tompa tompa (Fell and rose)

O lebile šakeng la tate, (Meandering to my father's kraal,)

Ka tšea patla ka o ripa hlogo, (I clutched a stick and broke its head,)

Ka re šaka la tate ke šaka la banna, (Swearing that my father's kraal is arena for men,)

Ga go ralokele dibatana, (It is where tiny deer dare not tread,)

Go ralokela bopitsi le bokgokong – (It is where zebras and larger game gambol–)

Pitsi matšhaba a se na hlogo, (Zebra that escapes with no head,)

A re k'a tšhaba a phurolla moetse; (Who unfurls the mane as he runs;)

Ponto ye tala mphiri, (Mysterious pound of copper,)

Mme e paletše Maisemane go e tšhentšha, (That beat the Englishman to unriddle,)

Banna ntlhapišeng ka lebese, (Bathe me in milk you men,)

Tata ke tšhaba go nkga bošoboro, (I fear the reek of the uncircumcised,)

Bošoboro bo sa boelwe, (World of no return of the uncircumcised,)

Tha! tha ko ga Rapitsi; (Briskly at Mr Horserider's;)

Ke feditše nna Matsobane. (I pause, I Matsobane.)

The most striking features of the self-praises the eight respondents were taught at traditional circumcision are the self-laudatory formulae that follow immediately after they have introduced their newly-acquired manhood names during returnee celebrations (when these are performed publicly for the first time); and long refrains of three and eight lines. In each case the shorter refrain occurs before the longer one.

The earlier set of lines constituting a distinctive motif tying together all the self-praises contains the lines below.

Matseni matsena ka kgapeng, (Borer that pierces the calabash,)

Se re o tsena ka kgapeng (As you enter the calabash)

Wa nanasela, (Take care not to tiptoe;)

Part of what the initiates learn during traditional circumcision is a sex education that orientates them how to engage with the opposite sex in ways that are communally embraced as ethical and moral (see Krige and Krige 1943). The sustained metaphor of a borer worm signifying an erect yet supple penis is juxtaposed with the image of a somewhat spherical and sucking object, referring to the vagina. In most African cultures the calabash invariably has a small opening through which a liquid may enter or leave, creating some kind of compressed, warm air inside allowing for pressured flow as the liquid is poured in or out. Such imagery in the lines metonymically reveals the African outlook that cherishes fertility and procreation. The enjambment and message of the closing line exhorting the persona not to be hesitant upon entering the calabash point to the moral for the initiates to be diligent and assertive during coitus, as future heads of families.

The next refrain, usually interjected with other self-praise lines that permit original imaginativeness of the individual initiate, reinforces the lessons of bravery both in the sexual act and in safeguarding preservation of the genes of the clan one belongs to:

Mogokolodi moswana moswana, (The dark, dark millipede,)

O rile tompa tompa (Fell and rose)

O lebile šakeng la tate, (Meandering to my father's kraal,)

Ka tšea patla ka o ripa hlogo, (I clutched a stick and broke its head,)

Ka re šaka la tate ke šaka la banna, (Swearing that my father's kraal is arena for men,)

Ga go ralokele dibatana, (It is where tiny deer dare not tread,)

Go ralokela bopitsi le bokgokong – (It is where zebras and larger game gambol–)

Pitsi matšhaba a se na hlogo, (Zebra that escapes with no head,)

Wa re o tšhaba wa phurolla mongetse; (Zebra unfurler of mane while bolting;)

Ponto ye tala Mokerong, (Raw pound in Mokopane place,)

Mme e paletše Maisemane go e tšhentšha, (That beat the Englishman to unriddle,)

Ka e tšhentšha nna … (I resolved its mystery, I …)

The persona relates that upon perceiving an extraneous penis (denoted by the metaphor of the "dark, dark millipede") threatening to enter the female part of his partner, he heeded the teachings of the circumcision school and crushed its head with a traditional weapon.

The lines that follow then rationalize the persona's combative reaction to such invasion. Remarkably, the motive is a noble one to ensure that only the valorous members of his own clan may have sex in his homestead. The consanguine gallantry which the persona proudly seeks to defend and protect is expressed by means of images of conquering might contained in the phrase "where zebras and larger game gambol." The persona contrasts his formidable genes with the lowly ones of the intruder clan, whom he likens to "tiny deer." The persona's clan is of such high stock that even in an apparently lost battle in days of war they defy death by continuing to live beyond merciless decapitation by the enemy, and even tease the enemy through the prank of aesthetically unfurling the mane as they gallop off (lines 9 and 10). The metaphor of the mane here symbolizes a consciousness of victorious valiance at war even in the face of carnal defeat. Such a justification of the persona's action to crush the lecherous penis wriggling to violate his partner evokes sympathy in the audience, partly because preservation of good genes is likely to be a generally acceptable phenomenon.

The closing three lines simply extol the practice of traditional initiation per se, hence allusions to arcane wisdom equipping the persona with the skill to resolve what the un-initiated could fail to handle. References to the derided Englishman of the previously whites-only residential town of Mokopane who appears baffled by the dexterity and wit of the circumcised black man sardonically serve the purpose of associating failure in resolving some demotic challenges with those who have not attended traditional initiation.

The artistic supremacy of the lines repeated across all the initiates affirm the communal outlooks of African peoples, as opposed to an individualism often attributed to western society. The lines of each self-praise falling outside the refrain do accommodate a kind of individualism that highlights the distinctive qualities of an individual initiate, yet constrained within deference given to communally sanctioned values. It is this superior status of the repeated lines Asante (1987:179) comments on, in his enunciation that "it is facility in African culture that must be taken into consideration when making an analysis. Words in this type of context do not become

clichés because they are constantly re-energized and re-interpreted." It is the sustained values in overarching Africanist consciousness that serve as a reinvigorating whetstone for the repeated formulae of the self-praises that they underlie.

The retunee iniates start their self-praises by adding either the formula *mantsakantsaka* (of a myriad accolades) or *mphaswa* (worthy of appeasing) soon after their manhood names. This is harmonious with a kind of African individualism that allows distinctive acts of virtue to distinguish the self-praiser. We need to remember that in African communities some of the boys may later earn the appelatives of sage, war veteran, seer, etc., depending on how they stood out in great deeds throughout their lives. I is thus understandable how the initiates open their self-praises by hoisting high the ambition of eventually being monumentalized as icons by the community.

It is in the same spirit that the respondent named Samuel Manyama augments the formulaic refrains with his original lines *Pheta di mo robile dinoka*, (One whose loins caved under bands of beads,)/ *Ga dia mo roba*, (Lo they did not break him,)/ *Di a mo tshwanela*; (They make him smart;). This is a forward looking dream in which the respondent envisions himself rewarded y` a traditional leader with accolades for worthy achievements in front of everyone. In the same vein, Mahlatse Tolo deviates from the repeated lines briefly with his individual composition *Ke netše ke pula ke le molotong*, (I was drenched in rain at mountain school,)/ *Ka šia go tetemela*, (And averted a shiver,)/ *Ka re ge e le bonna bjona ke bo thopile*; (By proclaiming manhood I plundered;). It is regarded as manly to show hardihood at times of discomfort, with one's mind fixed on eventual gain, hence this respondent's recollection of how the harsh weather during initiation did not deter him. Matsobane similarly includes his own words *Banna ntlhapišeng ka lebese*, (Bathe me in milk you men,)/ *Tata ke tšhaba go nkga bošoboro*, (I fear the reek of the uncircumcised,)/ *Bošoboro bo sa boelwe*, (World of no return of the uncircumcised,). This puts on display his disposition of deriving sustenance during the many challenges at the circumcision school from the social prestige one enjoys upon return.

One observes a similar freedom with imaginative lyricism in the case of the respondent Rafapa Malesela Paballo Quinton. He precedes the opening line of the refrain with his own words *Ngwana mmetha ka patla ya tšhipi*, (Child who strikes with iron rod,). In this way, the respondent asserts his individual heroism by proclaiming that his kind of sexual intercourse is so admirably fierce that it could be likened to as robust a labour as striking an object with an iron rod.

For the reason that the men and women among the audience already know the formulaic lines recurring in all initiates' self-praises, there appears to be liberty to clip such lines. Apart from the two refrains I have already mentioned, there is this one: Dimpša tša Pentshi di a loma, (Pentshi's dogs do bite,)/ Di lomile Tsebiši monwana, (They bit Tsebiši's finger,) Tša mo loma di mo khupile fela; (They mouthed him with shut snouts;). It appears only in the self-praises of three out of the eight initiates in my sample, soon after the topmost one, and is an extension of it. Pentshi being a common women's name, the metaphorical reference to sexually transmitted diseases as the biting dogs of Pentshi effectively highlights another battle men face through sexual activity, apart from menacing men that threaten to invade from outside the relationship. The image of "shut snouts" that mouth the penis (symbolized in the refrain by the word "finger") excludes the possibility that pain from sexually transmitted diseases comes from physical injury that repeated literal biting could inflict. Instead, the victim experiences pain by merely entering the 'mouth' of the vagina, as is the case with the contraction of sexually transmitted diseases, including those that are HIV/AIDS related. I concluded that all initiates are aware of these lines although they sometimes elide them in recitations of their praise names, because even initiates from the same circumcision school alternate in the inclusion and exclusion.

Minimal variations of some segments of the formulae are accommodated. This should explain why Shimane Kutumela says *Ke tsene matsena ka kgapaneng*, (I have bored I borer of the calabash,), in lieu of the more conventional *Matseni matsena ka kgapeng*, (Borer that pierces the calabash,). The governing principle seems to be retention of meaningful rhythm, and preservation of the basic meaning, which in this case emphasizes that it is the initiate who is the agentive actor in this drama of entering the female sexual organ. The respondent Shimane Kutumela's deftness with this formula attests once more to what Asante (1987:179) asserts in his observation that "Words in this type of context do not become clichés because they are constantly re-energized and re-interpreted."

More liberal clipping of the refrain is evident in the self-praise of Rafapa Egnecious Khutšo. After merely hinting at the well-known refrain by mentioning only its opening line *Matseni matsena ka kgapeng*, (Borer that pierces the calabash,), this respondent proceeds headlong into portraying a scenario where he is a brave protagonist. The line *Ke mohlang go lla tinting phalafala*, (Times when kudu horn blew pleasant,) interestingly continues with the theme of shrewd sexual prowess learnt during circumcision where the elders revealed intricacies of adult married life to the novices. Like the "millipede" and "finger", the "kudu horn" symbolizes the penis.

Association of the playing of the kudu horn with pleasantness points to lessons learnt during initiation about enjoyment of erotic love. The self-praiser follows such descriptions of enjoyable sexual intercourse with the self-affirming line *Rena naka tša banna*, (Which was us reed whistles of men,) in which he reveals that an entire group of initiates engaged in this praiseworthy act, through the use of "us" rather than "me." Reed whistles are wind instruments used traditionally in a stag dance called *dinaka* led usually by fully grown men (see Mapaya 2013; Rafapa 2018:36). The possessive phrase "of men" signals the boys' submission to the authority of elders. The latter, according to traditional African mythology within whose frame the initiates must conduct themselves, instruct the former about culturally acceptable attitudes towards sexual intercourse and other proper conduct – that, like the *dinaka* dance, have to be in tune with the spirituality of their forebears.

Ingeniously, after conjuring up a context of community within which individual achievement has to be executed, the respondent foregrounds culturally sanctioned individuality by the use of the first person "I" in clarifying that the heroic coitus he was about to describe was safe. In a manner effectively valorizing the teachings of the elders learnt during circumcision, the persona announces that the sexual intercourse courted no harzard: *Ka se tšwe kotsi*, (Without courting harm,). The persona then proceeds to relate how he wielded his private part as expected, by epically sticking it inside his sexual partner: *Ka tšea lerumo ka hlaba pele ga barena*, (I clutched a spear and stuck in front of rulers,). Metaphorical references to the penis as a spear imply that enjoying the sexual act with the noble purpose of entertainment that is combined with the duty to increase one's clan is as good a battle as fighting a war for preservation of one's entire tribe or nation. Hence the multivalence of the word "rulers" in referring to the elderly men, invoking even the image of a traditional ruler leading an entire regiment or tribe into self-preserving military action. One cannot help at this point but remember the words of Morton (2011), detailing how circumcision classes later graduate into warrior regiments that go to battle to shield an entire people. Praise poems accompany any kind of heroic engagement, including during the extolling of magnificent combative maneuvers during battle – where traditionally spears were used.

Conclusion

Similarities in the self-praises of initiates from the three circumcision schools in the Vaaltyn-Moshate area provide a credible characterization of what this cultural practice entails.

Imaginative lyrical lines composed by individual initiates are permitted to mingle with refrains that cut across all self-praises. However, such idiosyncratic compositions invariably fit into the themes of laudable sexuality and other culturally virtuous conduct inclined towards heroic gallantry. These are the same themes contained in the refrains. True to the nature of primarily oral transmission, in the self-praises minimal modifications of some phrases of the refrains do occur in the case of some individual renditions. The original sense and rhythm are always preserved during such skilfull re-energizations of the performances.

Traditional circumcision, of which self-praise is a part, remains practised in different African cultural groups on the African continent. This bears testimony to a resilience of this aspect of the African personality or African mind. Even more importantly as my study has demonstrated, self-praise that is part of African culture survives beyond its debut performance during celebrations that mark the successful return from the mountain. That is why even decades after traditional circumcision the returnees continued to praise themselves when the occasion called upon it. The cultural values embedded in this practice include the regulation of conduct in marriage and procreation – as some content show.

Self-praises acquired during the circumcision rite of passage have the potential to serve as a hotbed for performative expansion and evolution to include the honouring of an individual in the various stages of his life. Examples are graduation at modern institutions of education, traditional celebrations of marriage, and a funeral at the time of the initiate's passing. At a graduation ceremony I attended at Rhodes University in South Africa on 3 April 2018, I vividly recall how the décorum had to be modified just before the Chancellor could cap one graduate. He had to be given time to prance about, reciting his self-praise in the indigenous language of isiXhosa. In the same occasion, applause was unusually longer and louder for one graduate who was clad in traditional skins so akin to the apparel of initiates in the past during celebrations marking the completion of circumcision. The lady was not dressed in conventional western clothes as she crossed the stage wearing her gown. As she walked on the stage past the academics towards the Chancellor, some members of the audience punctuated their applause with the graduate's traditional self-praise. Apart from later life examples of self-praises beyond the end of circumcision, it is a well-known practice in parts of South Africa where I live during funerals to include in the proceedings an elderly person who will lead
the coffin out of the homestead, chanting the self-praise of the deceased and that of his/ her clan.

Such a creative resilience of the traditional practice of self-praising attests to its timeless embeddedness in the African mind or African personality worthy of recognition and embracement.

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