

Stakeholders Initiative In Reducing Mortality Rates In Traditional Initiations Schools in South Africa: a reflection paper

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Abstract—This paper reflects the joint role of government, parents and the traditional custodians in reducing the high rates of mortality in the traditional initiation schools of South Africa. The main argument raised by this paper is that, traditional initiation schools are very important as they symbolize and signifies the traditional teachings and education employed when initiating young boys to manhood. Many authors recognize that accurate custom practices in initiation could reduce high number of deaths especially in the AmaXhosa clan. However, the solution towards problem in question should be applied across different clan where initiation schools are common in South Africa, and such include the involvement of government to support with legislative framework, traditional custodian to provide guidance and parents to provide necessary support where it is deemed essential for children to attend initiation schools.

Keywords—traditional initiation schools; mortality rates; government responsibilities; custodianship; male circumcision

I. BACKGROUND

Culture entails traits and characters that distinguish people from other human societies in the family of humanity. These traits entails societal norms and values that are ought to bring community cohesion [1], and because South Africa acknowledged and accepted the eminent role that culture plays in the lives of different structures of various societies, it developed what is known as the Bill of Rights, promulgated under The Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1998. The sworn statement of this legal paper amongst others is to preserve the right of all South African citizens, human dignity, and achieve human equality.

Section 15 (1) of the Constitution declares that everyone has the right to freedom of conscience, religion, thought, believe and opinion. Furthermore, section 31 (1) (a) states that every person belonging to a cultural, religious or linguistic community may not be denied the right to enjoy their culture, practice their religion and use their language. South Africa is referred to as a 'rainbow nation' because it comprises of various ethnic groups with diverse cultural values. However, in many African societies, circumcision, a ritualised practice that is widely practiced, and one could say as much as there is so much diversity amongst these societies, circumcision is one thing they have in common. Ntonzini [2] suggest that in South Africa male circumcision is usually carried out for cultural reasons amongst young boys, significantly as an initiation ritual and a rite of passage into manhood during June/July and November/December school holidays. The practice portrays bravery and

conquering the pain inherent in the ritual. Behrens [3], explains male circumcision using traditional male methods as an indispensable and sacred ancient cultural practice that is still deeply embedded in most structures of the African societies. One of the ancient practices that ethnic groups in various communities of South Africa still hold dear. It involves the removal of the penile without having to damage the actual organ. The procedure herein is mostly performed amongst adolescents or young males in these various ethnic groups in a non-clinical setting that has been set by a traditional provider/ leader with no formal medical training and the location is presumed to be sacred with no interaction with the outside world. Culturally women and uncircumcised men are forbidden knowledge of the practice and are prohibited from discussing it, particularly amongst the AmaXhosa people in the Eastern Cape, where they predominantly reside and the ritual is still widely practiced. Douglas and Hongoro [4], associates initiation schools as cultural educational institutions whereby thousands of young males enter to be culturally circumcised and be taught about societal norms, manhood values, traditional believe and cultural values. They further elaborate on the initiation process, explaining that the self-reported prevalence of the traditional male circumcision does not only solely involves the cutting of the foreskin, but initiates undergo a transition of becoming a man that the community will look up to. The ritual is further referred to as a rite tool to harnessing social status, providing an initiate with a cultural identity, autonomy and a sense of self-esteem, which is often linked with becoming a member of a distinct social group.

Bottom, Mavundla and Toth [5], further elaborated on explaining that traditional initiation schools in South Africa are sacred and they take part in very secretive locations that are in seclusion. Also they form according to Nqeketo [6], part of the Africans teachings which marks as a traditional educational whereby initiates are taught and prepared for the responsibilities of adulthood in the community, promoting community cohesion, reflecting more on the moral upholding of societal and cultural norms, values and behaviour. Cultural traits are traits that already exist as innate essentials, however they are liable to suffer from particular attitudes and actions, creating frustration for those who are willing to change and those who still resistant to change. Vast complications of TMC are often due to incompetence, ignorance that unfortunately turns out to be deadly, even more so when ignorance is chose to be ignored. According to Maseko [7], the general rule of culture is for an individual to discover their identity through their father's origin, where

customs, beliefs of their fathers hail from. But what is culture in the new contemporary South Africa, whereby mothers continue to lose their sons in the hands of their elders while in the process of cultural identity? Traditional Male Circumcision (TMC) has over the past years gave rise to controversy, with it being continuously reported in the media regarding the deaths of initiates has left me questioning whether male circumcision through traditional methods is still a prominent cultural practice that should still be continued in the new contemporary South Africa.

The dejecting fragment around this whole issue, TMC, is that according to Kapp and Froneman [8], the communities' perception concerning a death of an initiate shows no sign of despair. Furthermore, they regard the death of an initiate as the final decision taken upon by the ancestors, showing them a sign as who was never meant to be a 'real' man. What does it mean to be a 'real' man in the new South Africa? Does it mean having to subject yourself to what was once a sacred and respected practice to what is now a dangerous and life-threatening practice that is continuously being reported with serious complications and even death for the sake of cultural maintenance? Does it mean that you have to endure the pain and face death in order to receive respect and social status in the community? Is it not that under The Constitution, even young males belonging in a cultural and religious community have the right to freedom of their own beliefs and opinions concerning everything that takes place in their lives? Why should families and fellow peers within the community continue to perceive non-compliance of the cultural demands as a failure? As much as the practice has been advocated as a good structure for the moral development amongst young males, it has resulted in clearly what is not morally justifiable, resulting in complications leading to penile amputation, morbidity and mortality, but nonetheless it is still practiced for the support and maintenance of tradition for the preservation of customs.

II. KEY ARGUMENT

With all the death reports reported, why aren't the custodians taking responsibility and protect the circumcision custom? In my judgement, I argue that traditional male circumcision has lost its respect and credibility and that cultural values relating to circumcision in societies have changed, fabricating what was once an eminent practice into a dangerous and life-threatening ritual that has been displaced with the reality of the 21st century. Lack of joint efforts amongst the government, traditional custodians and parents is the biggest factor leading to these deaths and it continues to be a mammoth task for the government to stem. According to Thaele [9], traditional male circumcision has been faced with numerous challenges such as initiates being circumcised by an inexperienced traditional surgeon, with no medical background, complications with regards to genital mutilation, penile amputation and even death, these are unnecessary misfortunes resulting from an inadequate legislation implementation. Even so, communities continue to rely more on traditional ideologies to justify the cultural relevance of the practice even though it still remains a very sensitive issue causing morbidity and mortality amongst young males within our societies. However, it is clear that this practice is not to be prohibited due to its cultural significance, however it is also clear that it needs to be effectively regulated and managed for the assurance of

significant harm to participants is prevented and reduced, and cultural practices are protected.

Nevertheless, who is to be held responsible? The government, traditional advocates/ leaders or the parents? Kapp and Froneman [8] argued that the health crises in initiation schools is the government's responsibility, therefore in accordance to the constitution, the government is obligated to protect the health of initiates and that they should be more involved in taking this issue more seriously and ensure that initiation is practiced in line with South African laws. Is it solely the government's responsibility? Why can't there be a joint effort from the traditional custodians who according to Behrens [3] have been granted the authority by the society to perform traditional surgeries on young males as a show of respect for culture to ensure that complications and deaths amongst initiates are eliminated? As they are at the forefront to preparing initiates for the responsibility of adulthood. Should they not take conscience to what is right and what is wrong within their conduct and actions with regards to the school and the herein processes? With that being said, they also ought to understand that within the granted privilege, some of the customary aspects related to the practice need to be changed, such as having the integration of medical male circumcision with traditional male circumcision. Although this integration still lacks acceptability due to a societal induced fear of being stigmatized and peer pressure, this integration is a stepping-stone into preventing unnecessary significant harm towards participants.

However, this paper does not suggest the abolishment of the practice, since it is evident that despite the discouraging reports relating to the practice, many young South African men still believe in the relevance of it and continue to view it as a necessary and worthwhile practice. They still believe that the practice still occupies crucial function in relation to the development of a male, and that medical circumcision is considered the easy way out. As much as it is of traditional importance, it has somehow violated the rights of initiates. The rights of initiates, especially during the initiation process. Section (11) of The Constitution clearly states that everyone has the right to life, and in addition section (24) (a) clearly state that everyone has the right to an environment that is free of harm to their health and wellbeing, this practice has for years been violating these rights, and the community has failed to notice this. If the community is able to stand together and protest against basic services not being rendered in their communities, but have the ability to raise their voices about issues relating to access to housing, electricity, water and sanitation. Why the same efforts cannot be rendered for the rights of initiates, so that more implementable, proactive and feasible strategies are put in place in accordance to pushing to reduce the morbidity and mortality rates associated with the practice. On the other hand, is it that we are looking at the preview of the future of South African culture whereby the quality of life is degenerating all due to what is meant to be a fundamental to our understanding of what African culture is?

South Africa has a well formulated constitution for human rights, however, are we to lose confidence in the governments preparedness to tackle on human rights violation as their involvement and enforcement obligated by the constitution is not sufficient particularly involving the

prevention of mortality around TMC? It is of no use designing a legal book that all citizens have to abide with and it is only used to a certain stage where not all of its citizens benefit from it. It is high time the government enforces its powers where it has authority to strengthen their partnership with traditional advocates together with the parents for the interests of the health of initiates without further having to taint the culture and distorting it but to do so with having to maintain cultural relevance. Also, as the responsibility does not only fall upon the government, the society needs to acknowledge and accept that within the society, a series of perceptions and steps to achieving TMC has to change. Certain customs need to change, such as those resorting to resistance of change particularly the elderly people, who are still withdrawn to change their comfortable long-standing familiar cultural patterns.

Sibiya [10] suggested that historically circumcision has nothing to do with any perceived health benefits and that TMC main aspect was to serve for (a) personal noninstrumental reasons, (b) personal instrument reasons, and (c) community benefits but unfortunately with the recent media attention that the practice has received; TMC has become a health crises and honey for the media. The society ought to understand that traditional male circumcision has become a public health concern, hence the integration of medical male circumcision and traditional male circumcision is imperative, and that the incorporation of the traditional male circumcision with medical methods is practicable without having to disfigure the culture and does not compromise the health rights of participants. According to Wilcken, Keil and Dick [11], a decrease in the death of young males is due to the effectiveness of medical male circumcision, and because of this revelation the society and the traditional advocates' needs to push and move towards adopting voluntary medical male circumcision (VMMC). In addition, it needs to understand that the highly emphasized collaboration between the government and the traditional advocates is not focused on eliminating the practice and its authentic traits, yet it is to enhance the quality of the practice and maintain its relevance.

III. WAY FORWARD

We emphasized that culture entails traits and characters that distinguish an individual to the rest of the family of humans, and also that this paper does not suggest any abolishment of the practice as it holds a very significant value in most African societies. However, it is mentioned that the collaboration of the government and the traditional advocates is of most vital and imperative because it is clear that it is here to stay as many young men still believe and trust in it. However, as much as it holds significant value to culture, some governmental initiatives such as medical male circumcision, incorporation of medical practices during the initiation process and law regulating the practice as to reduce unnecessary and suffering of initiates [12]. It is clear that the

current systems put in place are not that effective and that they are lacking diligence and needs to be prioritized with every attempt to improve TMC. Although there have been efforts to raise awareness through the mass media, they have not unfortunately reduced complications and deaths associated with the practice and until the government, traditional custodians and the parents of these young males acknowledge the aetiology of all these deaths, then we are not going to make any progress.

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