

'Brought into Manhood': Christianity and Male Initiation in South Africa in the Early 20th Century

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Introduction

In 1922, Umboneli Wezinto (Brilliant Observer) wrote a letter in isiXhosa to the black South African newspaper, *Umteteli wa Bantu*. In it, he described circumcision as part of the 'The National Custom', 'this matter was set up by God. Circumcision is a sacrament that God gave to mankind'.¹ Twenty years later, lay workers and preachers at St Cuthbert's, an Anglican mission in the Transkei, put forward a different position as they debated Xhosa male initiation practices during one of their quarterly meetings. 'Christians should work for the uplift of their people and for the abandonment of the custom'.²

These two vignettes show some of the contradictions inherent in African thinking and practice concerning tradition in South Africa in the first half of the 20th century. Between the mid 19th and early 20th centuries, contests over initiation evolved from complete missionary condemnation to substantial accommodation within mainstream Christianity. This change was the result of African Christians engaging their missionary counterparts in a series of debates that continually reiterated the importance of initiation. This process was a delicate one, since it also brought African Christians into conflict with their traditional communities.

In this article, I show, through an examination of initiation in a wide range of mission and printed sources, the innovation that African Christians brought to the consideration of custom. Some of this centred on relocating both the practice and the discussion of custom from the secrecy that cloaked its traditional practice to more public spaces. With regard to practice, African Christians went to great lengths either to continue initiation outside the Church or to Christianise it. In published and textual spaces, especially newspapers, they defied customary prohibitions on discussing circumcision, using a range of arguments based on Christian precedent and the Bible both to defend and to denounce it. While men from across South Africa participated in the newspaper discussions, Xhosa men were the most ardent defenders of the practice, emphasising its role in the constitution of Xhosa masculinity.

My approach here follows work on other parts of Africa, including that of Derek Peterson and Birgit Meyer, who have emphasised the hybridity and fluidity present not only in independent or Pentecostal churches but also in the mainstream churches.³ Anne Marie Stoner-Eby (following Terence Ranger) has examined the way in which black Anglicans brought about the 'Christianisation' of initiation in Tanganyika in the first half of the 20th century.⁴ The literature on Christianity and colonialism in South Africa has rarely exposed the creative ways in which mainstream African Christians both challenged and adapted

1 U. Wezinto, 'Isiko Lesizwe', *Umteteli wa Bantu* (hereafter *Umteteli*), 25 March 1922, p. 7.

2 University of the Witwatersrand (hereafter Wits), Johannesburg, Department of Historical Papers, Church of the Province of South Africa (CPSA) AB799, St Cuthbert's Mission, Bb, Workers' Quarterly Meeting, 13 December 1941.

3 B. Meyer, 'Christianity in Africa: From African Independent to Pentecostal-Charismatic Churches', *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 33 (2004), pp. 447-74; D.R. Peterson, *Creative Writing: Translation, Bookkeeping, and the Work of Imagination in Colonial Kenya* (Portsmouth, Heinemann, 2004).

4 A.M. Stoner-Eby, 'African Clergy, Bishop Lucas and the Christianizing of Local Initiation Rites: Revisiting 'The Masasi Case'', *Journal of Religion in Africa*, 38, 2 (2008), pp. 171-208; T.O. Ranger, 'Missionary Adaptation of African Religious Institutions: "The Masasi Case"', in T. Ranger and I. Kimambo (eds), *The Historical Study of African Religion: With Special Reference to East and Central Africa* (London, Heinemann, 1972).

traditional practices routinely condemned by white missionaries. An underlying assumption in the South African literature is that mainstream Christians were concurrent adopters of Christianity and modernity, by comparison with their independent and Zionist brethren. While the latter are routinely described as being fluid in relation to customary practice, aspirations towards political and cultural modernity are assumed to have led mainstream Christians to abandon custom. Yet this was not the case, pointing to the need for more in-depth and nuanced studies of 20th-century African Christianity.

While colonial contests over bridewealth, polygamy and female initiation have been the subject of much excellent research, male initiation has seldom been viewed as contentious. Discussions of female initiation tend towards viewing genital cutting as a site of anti-colonial politics or in relation to women's rights.⁵ Discussions of male initiation have focused on its role during periods of conflict or heightened social change, connecting it also to the production of age-grades and the renewal of intra-African structures of authority.⁶ Male circumcision in South Africa, however, was the subject of intense dispute, and from an earlier date than similar contests, whether around male or female initiation, in the rest of British colonial Africa.

Through a discussion of the nature of circumcision in the Eastern Cape after the arrival of European missionaries, this article examines its centrality as a rite conferring masculinity for Xhosa men.⁷ It then looks at the development of a debate around initiation within both Christian public space and, more crucially, the black newspapers and other publications of the early 20th century.

The subject of initiation is important because it shows that practices like circumcision have always been fluid and subject to challenge. In South Africa's current system of traditional governance, circumcision and initiation are sites of considerable dispute, and public debate is inevitably accompanied by questions about who has the right to speak for African custom. One set of contests relates to Xhosa defences of masculinity, as is evident in the fracas surrounding the forced circumcision of ANC politician Fikile Mbalula in 2008.⁸ Current contests also centre on the validity of surgical circumcision, which is widely touted to reduce the incidence of HIV/AIDS, while Xhosa traditionalists maintain that circumcision clinics funded with donor aid are a corruption of tradition. The grip of tradition is also such that the Mpondo Queen Regent has recently called for the re-introduction of traditional male circumcision and initiation (TMCI).⁹

The Meaning of Initiation in the Eastern Cape

5 For instance, L. Thomas, "Ngaitana (I Will Circumcise Myself)": The Gender and Generational Politics of the 1956 Ban on Clitoridectomy in Meru, Kenya', *Gender and History*, 8 (1996), pp. 338–63; C.J. Walley, 'Searching for "Voices": Feminism, Anthropology, and the Global Debate over Female Genital Operations', *Cultural Anthropology*, 12, 3 (1997), pp. 405–38.

6 C. Ambler, 'The Renovation of Custom in Colonial Kenya: The 1932 Generation Succession Ceremonies in Embu', *Journal of African History*, 30, 1 (1989), pp. 139–56; J. Vansina, *Paths in the Rainforests toward a History of Political Tradition in Equatorial Africa* (Madison, University of Wisconsin Press, 1990); J. Lonsdale, 'Mau Maus of the Mind: Making Mau Mau and Remaking Kenya', *Journal of African History*, 31, 3 (1990), pp. 393–421; B. Berman and J. Lonsdale, *Unhappy Valley: Conflict in Kenya and Africa* (London, Ohio University Press, 1992); Jan Jacob de Wolf, 'Circumcision and Initiation in Western Kenya and Eastern Uganda: Historical Reconstructions and Ethnographic Evidence', *Anthropos*, 78, 3/4 (1983): pp. 369–410.

7 The Xhosa term is *ulwaluko*, translated as 'circumcision'. For this reason, many older sources refer to it as circumcision, rather than the more ethnographic 'initiation'.

8 Zenoyisa Madikwa, 'mBaLULA Goes to the Mountain', *Sowetan LIVE*, 9 September 2008, available at <http://www.sowetanlive.co.za/sowetan/archive/2008/09/09/mbalula-goes-to-the-mountain>, retrieved 11 February 2016.

9 M. Malan, 'Medical Back-Up in Pondo Initiation', *Mail & Guardian*, 27 September 2013, available at <http://bhekisisa.org/article/2013-09-28-00-medical-back-up-in-pondo-initiation>, retrieved 6 February 2017.

There is a long association between Christianity and mission work in the Eastern Cape, South Africa (formerly known as the Transkei and Ciskei). Most African Christians trace their belief to the entry of protestant evangelical Christianity in the early 19th century, when initial evangelisation was undertaken by white missionaries, Khoikhoi, and other black converts.

During the 19th century, especially after the 1860s and largely as a result of the social destruction caused by the Cattle Killing, Christianity made significant inroads within Xhosa-speaking communities.¹⁰ Its adoption followed colonial penetration, spreading from the west to the east. Initially, all African Christians were members of the mainstream, or historic mission or mainstream, churches, a situation that shifted at the end of the 19th century, as African Christians founded their own independent churches.¹¹ However, those cleaving to Anglicanism, Presbyterianism and Methodism constituted the majority of Christians until well into the mid 20th century.

Traditional initiation (now known as TMCI) has been practised among Xhosa-speakers since at least the 18th century, and probably earlier.¹² The earliest descriptions date from this point, though most information on its earlier practice derives from early 20th-century ethnographic writing (much of written by missionary ethnographers).¹³ Some of the earliest African testimony on initiation is to be found in the 1883 *Commission on Native Law and Custom*, which collected its content on an investigatory circuit through the Ciskei and Transkei.¹⁴ Probably the earliest African-authored and widely available account of circumcision is Tiyo Burnside Soga's *Intlalo ka Xosa*, discussed below.

Currently the rite is common to most Xhosa-speakers, including the Xhosa, the Thembu, the Mfengu and the Mpondomise.¹⁵ Other south-eastern Bantu speakers, including

10 These included the Mfengu, the Xhosa, the Thembu, the Bhaca, the Mpondomise and the Mpondo.

11 On the independent churches, see J. Campbell, *Songs of Zion: The African Methodist Episcopal Church in the United States and South Africa* (Oxford and New York, Oxford University Press, 1995), pp. 103–25; H. Pretorius and L. Jafta, “‘A Branch Springs Out’: African Initiated Churches”, in R. Elphick and R. Davenport (eds), *Christianity in South Africa: A Political, Social and Cultural History* (Cape Town, David Philip, 1997), pp. 211–26.

12 J.H. Soga, *The Ama-Xosa: Life and Customs* (Lovedale, Lovedale Press, 1932), p. 169. J.B. Peires, *The House of Phalo* (Johannesburg, Ravan, 1981) p. 199 n 31. Initiation rites existed for both girls and boys, although the female initiation rite, the *intonjane*, was seldom practised by the early 20th century. B.A. Pauw, *Christianity and Xhosa Tradition: Belief and Ritual among Xhosa-Speaking Christians* (Cape Town, Oxford University Press, 1975), pp. 98, 172; M. Wilson, S. Kaplan and T. Maki, *Keiskammahoek Rural Survey: Social Structure* (Pietermaritzburg, Shuter and Shooter, 1952), p. 111.

13 For a fascinating and comprehensive discussion of current debates, including a review of the historiography, see H. Deacon and K. Thomson, ‘The Social Penis: Traditional Male Circumcision and Initiation in Southern Africa, 1800–2000: A Literature Review’, unpublished paper (Cape Town, Centre for Social Science Research, 2012), available at <http://www.cssr.uct.ac.za/publications/working-paper/2012/social-penis-traditional-male-circumcision-and>, retrieved 20 September 2012. For historical circumcision among isiXhosa speakers, see also F. Brownlee, ‘The Circumcision Ceremony in Fingoland, Transkeian Territories, South Africa’, *Man*, 31 (1931), pp. 251–4; P.W. Laidler, ‘Bantu Ritual Circumcision’, *Man*, 6–7 (1922), pp. 13–14; B.J.F. Laubscher, *Sex, Custom and Psychopathology: A Study of South African Pagan Natives* (London, George Routledge and Sons, 1937); Pauw, *Christianity and Xhosa Tradition*; J.H. Soga, *The Ama-Xosa*; Wilson, Kaplan, and Maki, *Keiskammahoek*.

14 More is becoming available of 19th-century vernacular sources, including some of the early histories published in the newspaper *Isigidimi Sama Xosa*, but so far there is little discussion of circumcision in these. For example, H. Bradford and M. Qotole, ‘Ingxoxo Enkulu ngoNongqawuse (a Great Debate about Nongqawuse’s Era)’, *Kronos*, 34 (2008), pp. 66–105.

15 On the difficulties of using ethnic categories in discussing the history of the Eastern Cape, see A. Mager, *Gender and the Making of the Ciskei Xhosa, 1945–1959* (Cape Town, University Press, 1995), pp. 19–22; J. Peires, ‘Ethnicity and Pseudo-Ethnicity in the Ciskei’, in L. Vail (ed.), *The Creation of Tribalism in Southern Africa* (London, James Currey, 1987).

the Mpondo, the Bhaca and the Zulu, have not circumcised since some time in the early 19th century.¹⁶

In the 19th century, initiation rituals for boys were different among the various chiefdoms, although much of this difference was owing to issues such as the timing of a chief-in-waiting's coming of age.¹⁷ Before the advent of migrant labour and mission schooling, which disrupted the annual temporality of initiation cycles, the complexity and extent of an initiation ceremony was determined by the number of boys circumcised with a chief, a process that could last as long as a year. These factors accounted for variation in practice, most of it relatively minor.¹⁸

In what follows, I have worked closely with the 1883 Commission accounts, as well as *Intlalo xa Xosa*. T.B. Soga was a minister in the Bantu Presbyterian Church (BPC), cousin to John Henderson Soga, also a noted Xhosa ethnologist and historian, and nephew of the pioneer African minister Tiyo Soga. T.B. Soga spent the two decades spanning the beginning of the 20th century compiling a manuscript on Xhosa customs and practices, based on material collected from older Xhosa men.¹⁹ He considered himself part of the Xhosa proper, an ethnic chauvinism derived from the perceived lesser status of former Xhosa client groups such as the Mfengu, and from the dominance of the amaXhosa dialect over other Xhosa dialects.²⁰ Soga wrote his manuscript as part of his on-going effort to stave off the loss of customary knowledge. In it, he noted that '[b]oys were circumcised as a rule, and it was stated that "today they were brought into manhood". This was one of the natural customs to the Xosas so much that it would be difficult for anyone to trace it'. A boy's father and his senior male relatives decided when he was ready for circumcision – usually between 15 and 21 years old – often waiting so that a group of boys could be initiated together. After the sacrifice of a beast for the *abakweta* (initiates), the boys would undergo ritual cleansing before their foreskins were excised by a ritual surgeon. In the words of Soga, '[t]his was the origin & the cause of circumcision custom. [T]o circumcise is to cut the fore-skin with an assegai & the wound was tied & untied with a herb; until it was healed up'.²¹ While their wounds healed, they remained apart from their families in specially built huts, subject to food and language restrictions, among others. In seclusion they were attended by a guardian (*ikankatha*), who made sure that the boys observed proper custom and learnt the knowledge and behaviour expected of them as men. This instruction, and ritual dancing at local homesteads, occupied the *abakweta*'s time in seclusion, which could last anything between one and three months (in the 19th century, up to a year). The end of initiation was marked by

16 W. Beinart, *The Political Economy of Pondoland* (Johannesburg, Ravan, 1982); W.D. Hammond-Tooke, *Bhaca Society: The People of the Transkeian Uplands, South Africa* (Cape Town, London and New York, Oxford University Press, 1962), pp. 80–82.

17 N. Erlank, 'Gendering Commonality: African Men and the 1883 Commission on Native Law and Custom', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 29, 4 (2003), pp. 937–53; J. Lewis, 'An Economic History of the Ciskei, 1848–1900' (PhD thesis, University of Cape Town, 1984).

18 For some account of these differences as emanating from a modern vs a conservative background, see Wilson, *Keiskammahoek*, Appendix B.

19 Cory Ms16369b: 'Translation of "Intlalo xa Xosa" 1917', by T.B. Soga, trans. C.S. Papu (hereafter T.B. Soga, *Intlalo*, and page number), available at <https://www.ru.ac.za/corylibrary/online/primarysources/intlalokaxhosa/english-language>, retrieved 7 June 2010.

20 For the Mfengu, see T.J. Stapleton, 'The Expansion of Pseudo-Ethnicity in the Eastern Cape: Reconsidering the Fingo "Exodus" of 1865', *International Journal of African Historical Studies*, 29 (1996), pp. 233–50. For the late 19th- and early 20th-century Mfengu–Xhosa tensions, see W.G. Mills, "'The Rift Within the Lute": Conflict and Factionalism in the "School" Community in the Cape Colony, 1890–1915', *Institute for Commonwealth Studies Collected Seminar Papers*, 15 (1990), pp. 29–39.

21 T.B. Soga, *Intlalo*, pp. 79–81.

feasting and festivities for the newly made young man, usually at the homestead of one of the senior-ranked fathers.²²

Here it is important to note three more aspects of initiation: its relationship to sexual practice, the secrecy surrounding it, and its relationship to pain. Inherent in all of these is a central tension between senior men, who controlled the practice, and initiates.

In 2002, Peter Delius and Clive Glaser discussed the importance of initiation and other practices to sexual socialisation in South African society.²³ In the Eastern Cape, circumcision rituals were closely linked to the induction of young men into adult sexual behaviour. During the 19th century, guardians were responsible for instructing their charges in the art of warfare, the duties of men to their chiefs, and proper sexual conduct. Initiates were instructed in how and with whom to have sex, in order to avoid immoral sexual behaviour, which was loosely understood as having penetrative sex with unmarried women, an error compounded if the woman became pregnant.²⁴ Xhosa moral codes preferred young women to be virgins (though not sexually inexperienced) at marriage, but practices such as *ukumetsha* (non-penetrative or thigh sex) were encouraged for boys and girls in similar age-groups. After circumcision, the newly initiated looked down upon *metsha* relationships as childish, while senior men did not necessarily think *abakweta* mature enough for fully penetrative relationships.

Initiates, therefore, existed in a space of sexual liminality, and, to exit this status, they needed to engage in penetrative sex, preferably with widows or previously married older women. However, initiates often had sex with their *metsha* partners, or forced young women to have sex with them. Xhosa opinion on this was divided: some tolerated this last instance as irresponsible, boyish behaviour, while others found these sexual encounters morally reprehensible. Here, Christian sexual morality only reinforced a previously existing view. By the 1930s, instruction given during initiation concerning proper sexual conduct had virtually disappeared.²⁵ In the newspaper dialogue discussed below, some of the anxieties around manhood relate to young men growing up without a proper sense of sexual responsibility.

The second element of circumcision important for this article was the way in which senior men controlled knowledge of initiation by surrounding it with secrecy. J.H. Soga referred to this as ‘the mysteries of manhood’.²⁶ What happened during initiation was something that only senior, initiated men were supposed to discuss, and in private among themselves. Women were excluded from any knowledge of initiation, and wider discussions of initiation were considered transgressive of the proper custom.

The third element of circumcision, mentioned above, connects initiation’s painful passage to an inclusive Xhosa manhood. By 1920, tribal enemies no longer carried *assegais*, and newspaper discussions on the content of manhood reveal just how contested it was, but the function of initiation as a route to manhood was still present.²⁷

22 See also Brownlee, ‘The Circumcision Ceremony’; Laidler, ‘Bantu Ritual Circumcision’.

23 P. Delius and C. Glaser, ‘Sexual Socialisation in South Africa: A Historical Perspective’, *African Studies*, 61, 1 (2002), pp. 27–54. Also, on attitudes to and shifts in African sexuality, see C. Burns, ‘Sex Lessons from the Post?’ *Agenda*, 12, 29 (1996), pp. 79–91; N. Erlank, ‘“Plain Clean Facts” and Initiation Schools: Christianity, Africans and “Sex Education” in South Africa, c.1910–1940’, *Agenda*, 18, 62 (2004), pp. 76–83.

24 T.B. Soga, *Intlalo*, p. 79. Before the 1950s, the Xhosa masculine ideal centred on the figure of a warrior, with initiation instruction reflecting this. Mager, *Gender and the Making*, pp. 128–33.

25 P.A. McAllister and D. Deliwe, *Youth in Rural Transkei: The Demise of ‘Traditional’ Youth Associations and the Development of New Forms of Association and Activity, 1975–1993* (Grahamstown, Institute of Social and Economic Research, Rhodes University, 1994).

26 J.H. Soga, *AmaXosa*, p. 253.

27 For a discussion of shifts in Xhosa masculinity in the 19th century, see H. Bradford, ‘Not the Nongqawuse Story: An Anti-Heroine in Historical Perspective’, in N. Gasa (ed.), *Women in South African History* (Pretoria, HSRC, 2007).

Senior manhood – the masculine culmination of initiation – required a man to be in touch with the spirits of the ancestors and to engage in debate and discussion in almost exclusively homosocial contexts.²⁸ Initiation set Xhosa men on a path to gaining what John Lonsdale calls moral authority, a sense of ethnically rooted and lineage-linked social responsibility.²⁹ Lonsdale discusses ethnicity as a common moral debate, and the same impulse is at work in the way in which initiation inducted Xhosa boys into a community of Xhosa men.

Other black nations do not circumcise at all, and they are disregarded by the Xhosa, taken to be unreliable and incomplete persons. When a person comes back from initiation he comes back prepared to abandon a careless life and intends to live a new life as a responsible member of society.³⁰

Eschewing initiation meant, then, a metaphorical abandoning of one's natal community and any access to resources linked to it. As a result, contestation between black men, including Christians, arose in relation to whether or not it had been performed properly.

Although few men in the early 20th century needed the art of the spear, replacing *assegai* with pen, the toleration of pain remained central to the proper practice of circumcision.³¹ In the 1920s, James Calata, a black Anglican, was of the view that, '[a] man must tolerate pains'.³² This sentiment was repeated to the 1952 *Keiskammahoek Social Survey*. A boy circumcised with anaesthetic in hospital 'does not feel the pain and thus does not become a man in the true way ... *Alilo siko elo* – "that is not the custom"'.³³ Such men were considered cowards. Louise Vincent's research shows how this connection is still relevant, revealing 21st-century connections between initiation and discourses around masculinity and power.³⁴ 'If you are not circumcised through custom in the mountain, you are not regarded as a man. You are a social outcast'.³⁵

For senior men, a circumcision that had occurred without pain was not a proper circumcision. The *Keiskammahoek* volume reported on the dialogue at coming-out ceremonies, where older men volubly debated fidelity to tradition. 'What sort of custom is this? You people are like children, you do not know the customs'.³⁶ As softer forms of masculinity arose among a modern, educated and Christian African society in the early 20th century, senior men became increasingly vehement about the need to endure.³⁷ In Tanzania, Stoner-Eby's analysis shows how African clergy cemented their status as 'big men in their

28 J.H. Soga, *AmaXosa*, p. 248. Also, Pauw, *The Second Generation*, p. 89.

29 Lonsdale, *Unhappy Valley*, p. 317.

30 Pauw, *The Second Generation*, pp. 89–90; collected from an informant in the 1950s.

31 And not only among the Xhosa. The association of pain and initiation is well documented. See, for example, A. Morinis, 'The Ritual Experience: Pain and the Transformation of Consciousness in Ordeals of Initiation', *Ethos*, 13, 2 (1985), pp. 150–74.

32 University of Cape Town, African Studies Library, Lestrade Collection, BC 255 A3.229. The manuscript has no page numbers. Grateful thanks to Jochen Arndt for bringing this to my attention. The text is in English, copied and possibly translated by the eminent linguist Lestrade on his visit to the Eastern Cape some time in the 1920s. The published piece is available as James Calata, 'Ukudlelana Kobu-Kristu Namasiko Olwaluko Lwabantu abaNtsundu', in S.J. Wallis (ed.), *Inkolo Namasiko A-Bantu* (London, SPCK, 1930), pp. 38–49.

33 Wilson, *Keiskammahoek*, p. 203; also Pauw, *Second Generation*, p. 95.

34 L. Vincent, "'Boys Will Be Boys'": Traditional Xhosa Male Circumcision, HIV and Sexual Socialisation in Contemporary South Africa', *Culture, Health and Sexuality*, 10, 5 (2008), pp. 431–46; L. Vincent, 'Cutting Tradition: The Political Regulation of Traditional Circumcision Rites in South Africa's Liberal Democratic Order', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 34, 1 (2008), pp. 77–91.

35 M. Nonyonyana, Congress of Traditional Leaders, quoted in Vincent, 'Cutting Tradition', p. 81. The quote is from 2003.

36 Wilson, *Keiskammahoek*, pp. 216–19, including footnotes.

37 The term most recently used and explained in L. Gunner, 'Soft Masculinities, Isicathamia and Radio', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 40, 2 (2014), pp. 343–60.

communities' through the control of initiation.³⁸ The Masasi case makes clear the link between control of processes such as initiation and male power. In South Africa, African Christians were not sufficiently powerful, in either their mission or their traditional community, to challenge the hard masculinity at play in the persistence of circumcision.

Thus converted men had to negotiate their positions on initiation in the messy space determined by the conflictual requirements of Christianity and custom. Prior to Christianity, masculine competition was largely the product of local and generational power struggles. Christianity, however, complicated these dynamics, pitting traditional chief against white missionary in a struggle for control of African Christians. T.B. Soga's description of initiation referred directly to the customary dilemma faced by Christian men: '[t]he raw Xosas still carry on circumcision and some school natives do it on strictly private lines, because by doing this custom, they are contravening certain rules'.³⁹

Contesting Initiation within the Church

For most of the 19th century, white missionaries were opposed to initiation and circumcision. Their disquiet, discussed more fully elsewhere, rested largely on a view that initiation was sexually immoral. This distinguished missionaries, themselves representative of a colonising impulse, from other colonial forces, including colonial officials, who were equally convinced that circumcision ceremonies were an exercise in anti-colonial politics for youths of a particular age.⁴⁰ The missionaries' deeply felt beliefs drew on the conviction that monogamy was foundational to proper family life, and that any context for the exercise of sexuality represented deviation from true Christianity. They were assiduous in trying to persuade their African converts to abandon initiation.⁴¹

Among first-generation converts, and from roughly the middle of the 19th century, the missionary view on initiation gained traction. African converts of the later 19th century shared the mission-influenced view that circumcision ran counter to mission-sanctioned morality. Converts made their opposition known, both in deed, as in the case of Tiyo Soga, who refused circumcision, and in writing, in the fledgling black press from the 1870s. In 1873, three letters in *Isigidimi Sama Xosa* by 'native authors' and in Xhosa decried the practice. Klaas Goyana wanted notices of the Anti-Circumcision League to appear in the newspaper, while Solomon James of Grahamstown listed circumcision as a 'curse among the natives'.⁴² While nothing more is known of the Anti-Circumcision League, its very name is significant. The first black-initiated newspaper in the Cape Colony, *Imvo Zabantsundu*, routinely criticised the practice of customs like *lobola*, polygamy and initiation.⁴³

By 1910, the unanimity that had characterised the African condemnation of circumcision was no longer apparent.⁴⁴ 'At the present time boys are being initiated, the sons of fathers still living, who were themselves kept from the rites or took a stand against them in their youth'⁴⁵ – a bitter blow for older missionaries, yet for the younger missionaries it signalled a reason to begin modulating their condemnation.

38 Stoner-Eby, 'African Clergy', p. 75.

39 T.B. Soga, *Intlalo*, p. 81.

40 W.G. Mills, 'Missionaries, Xhosa Clergy and the Suppression of Traditional Customs', in H. Bredenkamp and R. Ross (eds), *Missions and Christianity in South African History* (Johannesburg, Wits University Press, 1995); Erlank, 'Gendering Commonality'.

41 Ibid.

42 Editor's translation and summary, *Kaffir Express*, 1 July 1873, p. 6.

43 Editor, *Imvo Zabantsundu*, 7 October 1890, p. 3.

44 'Abakweta', *Imvo*, 23 July 1912, p. 4. See the same tone in S.H. Mbulana, *Umteteli wa Bantu*, 8 October 1921, p.7.

45 'The Circumcision Rites', *Christian Express*, 5 January 1917, p. 71. Also, BCC 255.

The debate around initiation was not limited to the Eastern Cape, although much of the impetus for national discussion came from this location. Clergy across the country were concerned about initiation in their congregations. By the mid 1910s, the General Missionary Conference (GMC) had begun debating custom and tradition; it was only one of many similar inter-denominational bodies where tradition had become a central issue by the same time period.⁴⁶ Much of this was as a result of a growing interest among missionaries in comparative religion, and a developing resistance on the part of African clergy to the proscription of traditional practices. By the 1920s, debates around male initiation had spread beyond the regions in which it was practised (the Eastern Cape and the northern Transvaal), and the subject's relationship, on the one hand, to Christianity and, on the other, to black masculine anxiety in the face of increasing disempowerment, creating a community in which all men felt able to debate it.

Across South Africa, African clergy, with support from a liberal white wing within the mainstream churches, advised against prohibiting African boys from attending initiation schools. Within this inter-racial space, recommendations either suggested 'Christianising initiation', or pretending that it did not exist. Many of the churches investigated and recommended imprinting the practice with Christian authority.⁴⁷ Strategies for managing circumcision often included a substitution of the guardian's role by the local minister. One of the more fascinating texts on Xhosa custom is an unattributed manuscript that dates from some time in the early 1920s.

His guardian at Circumcision should not be more than his minister, or his preacher ... The first thing is that the minister must show the people the things which are disturbances in the way in which the custom is conducted after he has first observed it and seen well, the manner in which it is conducted ... if possible, he must go to pray for them before they go to circumcision and constantly visit them even when they are in the place.⁴⁸

Calata was concerned with challenging white thinking on Xhosa custom and showing that custom could be integrated into Christian practice. The attitude expressed here was very different from that of a century before, reflecting increased toleration for the practice within the established churches.

Much of the broader debate within the churches at this time can be traced to a growing strand of thought that viewed only some parts of circumcision as immoral. For committed African Christians who supported tradition, the parsing out of sex and initiation reflected a favourable compromise. In 'Bantu Beliefs and Customs', Calata described how initiates washed away the stain of their boyhood by having sex. 'This makes the whole custom of circumcision to be degraded almost entirely because in the course of time it bore a bad fruit in the behaviour of young men'.⁴⁹ Indeed, in his consideration of the immorality of young initiates, T.B. Soga's references were Biblical, comparing them to 'just like Lott & Sodom & Gomora', although his manuscript indicates approval of the rest of the custom. In a rather confused rendering of the relationship of improper sex to masculinity, initiates leaving

46 School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, SOAS, ICM/CBMS, Africa 2, Box 1224, Report on 6th General Missionary Conference, 1925. The GMC was an early 20th-century liberal institution, touting rights for civilised black men and advocating trusteeship for black communities still located in rural areas.

47 See Cory Ms16321, Mqhayi, Ulwaluko. Also, Cory Cl-Pr1394, J. Mazwai, Blythswood Review, March 1929. The Anglicans devoted a whole commission of enquiry to the matter. Wits CPSA AB768, Diocese of Pretoria, Native Conference Minutes, 1915–1924. Wits CPSA 787f, Initiation Ceremonies Research, 24 November 1939. 48 UCT, BC 255 A229.3.

49 UCT, BC 255 A3.229.

their lodge in the Keiskammahoek in the 1950s were warned not to look back, or they would become like the wife of Lot, and would never be proper men.⁵⁰

Public Debates around Initiation

Initiation, masculine anxiety, loss of power and Christianity produced through their relationship to one another a potent subject for debate in the black press of the early 20th century. The most ardent defenders of the practice were literate Xhosa men. One of the earliest examples lies in a series of essays in *Imvo* in 1901 by Reverend Isaac Wauchope (who sank with the Mendi in 1917), who defended circumcision through reference to its Old Testament origins.⁵¹ Initiation, as a national (he meant Xhosa) custom was ‘founded upon some real or supposed moral ideas, and are the result of the human mind’s search after the greatest good’. Wauchope’s essays on custom are also significant, showing how initiation was moving from the relatively circumscribed world of internal church debate to a broader forum in the widely circulated and bilingual *Imvo*.⁵² Wauchope, who often wrote for *Imvo*, preferred to write in Xhosa, and this piece was undoubtedly intended to introduce its ideas to a white audience.

Until the 1920s, initiation mostly remained the subject of debate in regional and mission-oriented newspapers.⁵³ However, the 1920 launch of the weekly *Umteteli wa Bantu*, which became South Africa’s most widely distributed black newspaper, expanded the reach and nature of debates concerning initiation. Critically, the subject now moved into a more national, more agnostic, and less white audience.

In an early correspondence initiated in February 1922 and lasting until October, the subject of circumcision was tracked through at least 12 letters, all but one written in Xhosa. Several were by the same author, including the regular contributor to *Umteteli*, X.Y.Z. Letters cross-referenced each other, with authors using given names as well as pseudonyms, and listing addresses from Kimberley to Umtata to Pietersberg. This was the first in a series of letter-based debates in *Umteteli* over the next two decades, linked either directly to circumcision or to circumcision as custom.

In February 1922, Moses Bandela wrote a letter from Nancefield, outside Johannesburg, in order to provoke further discussion on the subject discussed at a meeting that he had called to promote the revival of Xhosa manhood initiation. ‘I called this meeting to look into ways of encouraging amaXhosa to go back to their roots, especially their first and foremost custom which was practiced by our forefathers’.⁵⁴ His anxiety around loss of roots was palpable and helped to establish one of the threads in the letters that followed. In March, Umboneli Wezinto agreed, calling for greater investigation into the ‘origins of the decay of this important custom’.⁵⁵

This was not a neutral comment about loss, nor were these statements only about the past. They presaged various suggestions aimed at problems associated with the 1920s. Moses Bandela’s letter advocated the circumcision of grown men, because of what he viewed as the negative consequences of ‘boyish behaviour’. ‘When a Xhosa boy is past circumcision age, no good can come from him ... [t]his has created problems because a boy remains a boy even

50 T.B. Soga, *Intlalo*, p. 214. The term ‘sodomite’ also derives from this reference, though this was not the context in which Soga and the others were using it.

51 I. Wauchope, ‘Primitive Native Customs’, in J. Opland and A. Nyamende (eds), *Isaac Williams Wauchope, Selected Writings 1874–1916* (Cape Town, Van Riebeeck Society, 2008), pp. 321–2.

52 *Ibid.*

53 For this section, I consulted the following newspapers and journals: *Christian Express* and *South African Outlook* (until 1940); *Imvo* (until 1922); *Umteteli* (1920–1938); and *Bantu World* (1933–1938). My selection was determined by the availability of the papers in question.

54 M. Bandela, ‘Asiwxoleli Amaxosa’, *Umteteli*, 18 February 1922, p. 5.

55 Wezinto, ‘Isiko Lesizwe’, p.7.

when he tries to become a leader'.⁵⁶ This was not an isolated incident; Mr Bandela was referring to the 'circumcising [of] old boys' in East London. Forced circumcision was generally viewed as a last resort for anti-social behaviour, or men who behaved like irresponsible boys. Mr Bandela was suggesting a serious intervention. His comments reveal a combination of anxieties around masculinity and authority, linked specifically to being Xhosa.

The 1922 letters that elicited the most response were written by X.Y.Z, who viewed circumcision as anti-Christian. X.Y.Z's two lengthy letters described how some established churches had fallen into moral laxity through a recommitment to circumcision. He challenged the view that educated Xhosa needed to be circumcised in order to be considered men.

Back home in the land of the amaXhosa it has been accepted that the educated and the Christians do not circumcise. Many of them have been fighting and maintaining that they will not circumcise ... That battle is still being fought today and we are told to go back to our traditions which is against the word of God.⁵⁷

Perhaps most interesting about his correspondence was its transgression of the secrecy that was supposed to surround circumcision. Showing his contempt for the backwardness of the practice, his letters included the names of men who had not undergone circumcision.⁵⁸

X.Y.Z's writing was, at heart, a comparison of two understandings of masculinity. In the first, circumcision was the route to manhood. In the second, Christian moral behaviour was sufficient to secure the status of a man. 'What is manhood? It is intelligence, patience, respect, hard work, diligence, avoidance of shameful behaviour, trustworthiness, education, bravery, and love for the nation'. If his Xhosa readers disagreed, others did not. 'We, the abaKwena tribesmen do not circumcise yet we are far more well behaved than you circumcised men ... We, the uncircumcised BaKwena fear nothing, not even flying machines. We are perfect gentlemen who are constantly improving their standard of education'.⁵⁹

The very next week he had a response, the first of several. W.S.D's rebuttal targeted a key issue, that of the role of white disapprobation in the debate about custom. 'The case of X.Y.Z is a sad one because he still holds on to what a white man once said when he first arrived here, when he said that black people are stupid, that they practice heathen customs'.⁶⁰ Indeed, W.S.D's answer was only the outward manifestation of a latent concern in the correspondence, centred on the need to repudiate white opinion both of custom and of its African practitioners. G.G. Nqhini raised this issue through invoking God's support of tradition. 'Even the Almighty Qamata [God] loves His traditional customs'.⁶¹ The point was put even more forcefully 15 years later, showing how part of the local arsenal in defence of circumcision included a keen eye for theological finesse, a disagreement over how Christianity and the Bible should be interpreted.⁶² 'We learn about circumcision in the Bible because this is a commandment that was given to the Jews by God. That alone indicates that circumcision is not a sin, because God would never have led his people to sin'.⁶³

56 Bandela, 'Asixoleli Amaxosa', p. 5.

57 X.Y.Z., 'Ulwaluko-Isiqendu II', *Umteteli*, 2 September 1922, p. 7.

58 X.Y.Z., 'Isiqendu II'.

59 J.P. Makapane, 'Ulwaluko', *Umteteli*, 16 September 1922, p. 8.

60 W.S.D., 'Ulwaluko e Nancefield', *Umteteli*, 9 September 1922, p. 9.

61 G.G. Nqhini, *Umteteli*, 4 March 1922, p. 8.

62 See R. Nkosie, 'About Superstition', *Umteteli*, 14 August 1937, p. 9, for a list of Bible chapters in favour of circumcision.

63 *Ibid.*

Not only did African Christians challenge the European heterodoxy that being Christian meant being modern, they also challenged each other on their interpretations of what it meant to be Christian. Umboneli Wezinto noted parallels between traditional practice, such as the anointment of initiates, and what happened in the Bible; he also drew a direct analogy between the Ten Commandments and the advice given to initiates by their guardians: ‘this matter was set up by God. Circumcision is a sacrament that God gave to mankind’.⁶⁴ Yet Vazidlule contradicted him two months later through a counter-reference to Abraham and his acceptance of faith.⁶⁵

Almost all the *Umteteli* letters dealing directly with circumcision drew parallels with Jewish practice.⁶⁶ ‘Even among the Jews this was a powerful custom, but according to their forefather’s (Abraham’s) system infants were circumcised’.⁶⁷ Most commentary drew on the Old Testament, unlike in Kenya, where contributors to the debate on female circumcision might quote the Apostle Paul’s ambiguous commentary on circumcision.⁶⁸

What the newspaper debates briefly covered received more in-depth treatment in other genres. In 1922, J.H. Soga was at work on a subsequently published academic manuscript. He suggested that African circumcision was originally adopted from ancient Israel, theorising that Africans adopted the practice via an east African Arab influence.⁶⁹ The unknown writer of ‘Bantu Custom’ reflected common thinking on circumcision, first citing a genealogy rooted in Solomon’s links with Abyssinia, then quoting Joshua and, finally, Genesis. He concluded that ‘in fact, this custom of Circumcision is an African one’.⁷⁰ Their work emphasised Africa’s ancient connection to Christianity, placing circumcision parenthetically into the pool of Biblical references to Africa, most famously Psalm 68.⁷¹ This reference, of course, found fertile ground in Christian arguments legitimating pan-Africanism.

In work on the Lovedale Literary Society, Isabel Hofmeyr has examined the rhetoric and form of the debates that occurred among Lovedale students. She argues that the society acted as a leadership forum for an aspiring African elite. Working creatively with debate form and content, the pupils challenged the terms of white intellectual imperialism.⁷² These newspaper debates constitute a counterpart to this argument, but to a much wider audience. Through newspaper debate, African men brought into existence a ‘complex and multidimensional interpretive community’, where circumcision leveraged entry into broader discussions about the value of custom, Christianity, and the relationship of both to white assertions of civilisational superiority.⁷³

64 Wezinto, ‘Isiko Lesizwe’.

65 Vazidlule, ‘Isaqwithi ekomityini’, *Umteteli*, 15 April 1922.

66 J.H. Soga, *The Ama-Xosa*, p. 247. See also Walter B. Nqini, ‘About Superstition’, *Umteteli*, 1 January 1938, p. 8. Compare *King James Bible*, Genesis 17:10–11.

67 T.B. Soga, *Intlalo*, p. 81.

68 Lonsdale, *Unhappy Valley*, p. 390. ‘For in Jesus Christ neither circumcision availeth anything, nor uncircumcision; but faith which worketh by love’, *King James Bible*, Galatians 5:6.

69 J.H. Soga, *The Ama-Xosa*, p. 247. Ham’s son, Cush, was known to have founded modern Ethiopia. Many Bible readers have taken this to mean that Ham was the father of the north-eastern peoples of Africa. See *King James Bible*, Genesis 9. On the validity of the Hamitic myth and male circumcision, see De Wolf, ‘Circumcision’.

70 UCT, BC 255 A3.229.

71 *King James Bible*, Psalms 68:31. ‘Princes shall come out of Egypt; Ethiopia shall soon stretch out her hands unto God’.

72 I. Hofmeyr, ‘Reading Debating/ Debating Reading: The Case of the Lovedale Literary Society, or Why Mandela Quotes Shakespeare’, in K. Barber (ed.), *Africa’s Hidden Histories: Everyday Literacy and Making the Self* (Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 2006), p. 271.

73 *Ibid.*, p. 260.

In writing about Hebrew practice and quoting the Bible, Africans were demonstrating two things. Firstly, their recourse to Biblical quotation demonstrates a facility at navigating chapter and verse that matched, if it did not outperform, that of white Christians. Secondly, they were also engaging with Biblical theology. The debates foreground their intellectual acumen, an ability to take on missionary criticism within its own terrain, like the debating students at Lovedale. Vazidlule's 1922 letter contradicted both Umboneli Wezinto and standard Biblical interpretation to challenge Moses' statements about circumcision. His point was that the Bible needed to be interpreted as a set of context-dependent statements.⁷⁴

The 1922 exchange also reveals how men were moving back and forth between meetings, church gatherings and the newspaper in their arguments and conversations, becoming multidimensional raconteurs of custom. Letters referred specifically to the public nature of the debate in meetings and gatherings from Johannesburg to Mafeking to Uitenhage, from men who were equally comfortable in English, Xhosa, and Sotho-Tswana. 'What is noticeable is that everyone is talking about it in Johannesburg. It is such a heated topic that even those who have not been circumcised say they support circumcision because without it children become troublesome'.⁷⁵ 'Troublesome' was a shorthand for showing disrespect and moral laxity. The same month, Mr Maimane, in a report on the Pretoria Diocesan Native Conference, referred to circumcision as 'one of the most important subjects discussed'.⁷⁶ In September, when the editors closed the correspondence, interest was still high. 'It is clear that this matter is still important to men because even though it has been suggested that we stop debating about it, numerous letters discussing circumcision are still pouring in'.⁷⁷

In 1928 and 1929, *Umteteli* again carried several letters on circumcision. In this correspondence, the debate was even more explicitly about Xhosa initiation, and the letters were also in Xhosa. As in the previous exchange, writers eagerly followed and responded to the arguments of their predecessors. Mr Ngqeleni advocated a return to customary initiation, but emphasised the difference between Old Testament and traditional circumcision.

While Mr Ngqeleni wrote in Xhosa, he twice used the English phrase 'only a procession from boyhood to manhood', to emphasise what for him was the most critical element of the practice, and what he most needed to communicate to his audience.⁷⁸ This tactic presaged a shift that would be fully apparent ten years later: the contravention of the secrecy and closed nature of conversations about circumcision. The public discussion of circumcision was taboo for traditionalists, a direct goad to the desire of senior men to keep control of both the discursive terrain of circumcision and its practice. The newspaper debate took conversation about circumcision from isiXhosa into English, and expanded its audience to incorporate anyone – including women – who read the paper. The 1928–29 discussion in *Umteteli* directly raised the issue of appropriateness. Mr Mpalisa was very uncomfortable with the letter exchange. 'Our tradition does not allow us to discuss such in public, mainly because the readership of this newspaper includes women as well, who by tradition are not supposed to know what happens regarding initiation'.⁷⁹ Yet his comments did not shut down the exchange, and even at public meetings it was still 'top of the agenda'.⁸⁰

74 Vazidlule, 'Isakwiti Ekomityini', p. 7.

75 H.K. Mahaluba, 'Ulwaluko/Impendulo ku X.Y.Z', *Umteteli*, 16 September 1922, p. 8. Also, G. M. Matete, Mafeking, *Umteteli*, 16 September 1922, p. 9.

76 H.M.M., Native Conference, H.M.M., *Umteteli*, 23 September 1922, p. 9.

77 Editor, Ulwaluko, *Umteteli*, 30 September 1922, p. 9.

78 D.D. Ngqeleni, 'Ulwaluko', *Umteteli*, 10 November 1928, p. 8.

79 E.B. Mpalisa, 'Amakwenkwe Makoluswe', *Umteteli*, 8 December 1928, p. 9. Also, Nqini, 'About Superstition', for the same sentiment.

80 Zangwa, 'Ngo Lwaluko', *Umteteli*, 26 January 1929, p. 10. E.F.J. Fuku, 'Ngo Lwaluko', *Umteteli*, 26 January 1929, p. 10.

Public interest in circumcision and initiation was also productive of a greater, generalised interest in African custom through the more academically respectable genre of the book. Stephanie Newell's work on literary culture in Ghana has shown how different genres were responsive to context and reader expectation. Writers moved between letters and books to make different points and address different audiences.⁸¹ In 1930, *Bantu* (later *African*) *Studies*, the University of the Witwatersrand journal, encouraged J.H. Soga to translate his Xhosa monograph, *The South-Eastern Bantu*, into English for publication, and two years later a London publisher released his *The Ama-Xosa: Life and Customs*. A review of the latter described it as 'the first of that series of monographs on the Tribes of South Africa for which students are so eagerly waiting'.⁸²

The possibility of a wider audience also encouraged T.B. Soga to submit the previously self-published *Intlalo xa Xosa* for a British mission-sponsored competition in African vernacular literature.⁸³ His winning achievement was celebrated in the International Committee for Christian Literature in Africa (ICCLA) magazine, *Listen*, distributed throughout Africa.⁸⁴ The ICCLA's support for African vernacular writing spoke to the growing transnational interest in African vernacular writing, a move that seemed to have precipitated Lovedale Press's publication of the Xhosa manuscript in 1936.⁸⁵ Lovedale had initially rejected the manuscript on the grounds that it was obscene and inaccurate in its rendering of the Bible.⁸⁶ Its reluctance, though, was soon mollified, when the book went through several printings, its unavailability drawing a complaint from a Bethelsdorp lending-library reader in 1938.⁸⁷ T.B. Soga's treatment of initiation (he had contributed to the newspaper debates) mirrored those in *Umteteli* and other papers, showing the diverse textual genres and languages that literate Xhosa were using to defend circumcision.

The move to writing in English was echoed over the next few years in the pages of various papers, reflecting both the growing popularity of the letters feature but also a desire to make letter-based issues more widely accessible to non-African and other African-language speakers. By 1935, letters to *Umteteli* were contained within their own section, and were principally written in English. Custom repeatedly appeared as subject in both editorials and letters. In a solicited correspondence on 'Bantu History, Law and Customs', initiation featured alongside topics like *lobola* and respect for the elders.⁸⁸ These letters directed attention to the contemporary loss of knowledge, direct critique of 'detribalisation' hiding a more implied fear of modernity. In some ways the debate around circumcision is analogous to the debate around wayward girls, the 'immoral' urbanised African women who refused to bow to male control, which characterised the pages, including the letters pages, of *Bantu World* in the inter-war period.⁸⁹ The criticism of the cosmopolitan woman in those letters marked a fear of modernity and a loss of masculinity as much as it spoke to racial stereotypes of femininity. But while the modern-girl debate focused inwards on urban matters, the

81 S. Newell, *Literary Culture in Colonial Ghana: 'How to Play the Game of Life'* (Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2002).

82 A.L. (sic) Hoernle, 'The Ama-Xosa: Life and Customs', *American Anthropologist*, 35, 2 (1933), p. 369. This was probably Agnes Winifred Hoernle, known by many as the 'mother of South African anthropology'.

83 SOAS, CBMS/ICCLA 541/38, 'Listen', bound copies, Vol 1.1, January–February 1932, p. 6.

84 For the impact of *Listen* in Ghana, see Newell, *Literary Culture*, p. 89.

85 R.C. Brouwer, 'Books for Africans: Margaret Wrong and the Gendering of African Writing, 1929–1963', *International Journal of African Historical Studies*, 31, 1 (1998), pp. 53–71.

86 See also J. Peires, 'The Lovedale Press: Literature for the Bantu Revisited', *History in Africa*, 6 (1979), pp. 155–75.

87 Cory Ms16369, Tiyo Burnside Soga.

88 Editor, *Umteteli*, 13 April 1935, 1 and 27 April 1935, p. 2

89 L.M. Thomas, 'The Modern Girl and Racial Respectability in 1930s South Africa', *Journal of African History*, 47, 3 (2006), pp. 461–90; L.M. Thomas, 'Love, Sex, and the Modern Girl in 1930s Southern Africa', in J. Cole and L.M. Thomas (eds), *Love in Africa* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2009), pp. 31–58.

circumcision debate involved tradition. In a letter contributing to the debate, T.B. Soga emphasised giving ‘present-day detribalised and urban Bantu natives essential insight into the primitive past [in order to] connect that insight as much as possible with the present semi-civilised Christian era’.⁹⁰ The majority of contributors were in support of retaining custom and tribalism, quoting Scripture in support of their arguments about ‘bad’ Christianity as being at the root of the suppression of custom.⁹¹

The 1935 exchange was followed two years later by a rather different one. The initiatory epistle by Mr Pule carried the headline ‘Superstition’, and asked when practices like turning a mirror to the wall during lightning would be eradicated.⁹² He probably did not intend his brief aside about the paradox of a civilised yet uncircumcised university graduate to evoke the response that followed.

Mr Pule was rapidly contradicted, in an exchange numbering at least 12 letters. Some referenced the growing orthodoxy, present in medical journals of the period, that circumcision made for a healthier penis. ‘[C]ircumcision is but a custom and a healthy one too’.⁹³ Several of the letters dealt with the benefits of circumcision, and its role in cultivating a healthy body. Here, the writers were reflecting a very new assessment of physical health. By the 1930s, the modern body was of much concern to Africans, reflected in sources as diverse as beauty contests, soap advertisements and an endless barrage of information on hygiene.⁹⁴

By the end of the decade, circumcision as subject had gained a respectability that traversed genres and different textual spaces. In 1940, the renowned Xhosa poet and praise singer S.E.K. Mqhayi submitted a manuscript on circumcision to the Lovedale Press.⁹⁵ Mqhayi viewed foreskins as a masculine metonymy for colonialism, including in his praise poetry a reference to the trouble ‘brought by the races with foreskins’.⁹⁶ What little we know of the volume comes from the press records, since the manuscript was subsequently lost.

Although Mqhayi followed others in supporting a cleaned-up and Christianised circumcision, the timing of his submission is interesting. It is likely that public support for initiation, following both the newspaper correspondence and the publication of the two Soga volumes, led him to believe that Lovedale would relax its preference for publishing didactic literature or ethnic genealogy. However, the press rejected the manuscript, citing it as too controversial and referring to the lack of Christian (it meant white) unanimity on the subject.⁹⁷ Public debate on the matter, largely in support of initiation and via newspapers, had not succeeded in facilitating entry of the subject (notwithstanding the success of *The Ama-Xosa*) into the only press in the country publishing in Xhosa.

Conclusion

In the early 20th century, the initiation debate was part of an on-going and important theme, not only within the mainstream churches, but across a public space that included newspaper

90 T.B. Soga, *Umteteli*, 11 May 1935, p. 7. Also, Nqeleni, ‘Ulwaluko’.

91 N.T.J. Ncalo, ‘Mr Nazo’s letter’, *Umteteli*, 4 May 1935, p. 7.

92 E.N. Pule, ‘Superstition’, *Umteteli*, 19 June 1937, p. 7. A.S. Grootboom, ‘What a Rustenburg Reader has to Say about Superstition’, *Umteteli*, 24 July 1937, p. 8. R.M.S. Langa, *Umteteli*, 27 November, 1937, p. 8.

93 Nomeva, ‘About Superstition’, *Umteteli*, 3 July 1937, p. 8.

94 For bodies and hygiene, see T. Burke, *Lifebuoy Men, Lux Women: Commodification, Consumption, and Cleanliness in Modern Zimbabwe* (Durham, Duke University Press, 1996). The benefits of circumcision for a healthy penis are to be found in BC 255 A3.229.

95 Cory Ms16297, Minutes of Press Sub-Committee, 23 September 1940; J. Opland, *Xhosa Poets and Poetry* (Cape Town, David Philip, 1998), pp. 168–70.

96 S.E.K. Mqhayi, in J. Opland (ed.), *Abantu Besizwe: Historical and Biographical Writings, 1902–1944*, (Johannesburg, Wits University Press, 2009), p. 84.

97 Cory Ms16297, Minutes of Press Sub-Committee, 23 September 1940. Mqhayi, *Abantu Besizwe*.

articles and letters, poetry and ethnology. It is important to express just how radical a move this was, taking a practice considered emblematic of Xhosa manhood, shrouded in secrecy, and creating a debate around it, which served as a platform for the discussion of a nexus of related ideas. Firstly, discussing initiation in spaces linked to the church allowed churchmen to be transgressive in relation to African rural hierarchies. Debates around initiation reflected the growing power and ability of African Christians to place issues on white church agendas, challenging western-derived church hierarchy.

In addition, African men were moving out of their church spaces, though retaining their identities as Christians, into newspapers and the written word in order to exchange views about initiation. The debate around initiation took place as an inversion of the secrecy associated with it: African Christians wrote letters to newspapers and weeklies defending the practice, initially in Xhosa and later in English, while some presented manuscripts on the subject to Lovedale Press. Africans who inserted discussions about initiation into white spaces of power were both registering African concerns as worthy of not only black but also white attention, and asserting the importance of local practice within Christian practice.

A key theme in discussions concerned the relationship between circumcision, moral authority, and being Xhosa, in an unequivocal affirmation of the centrality of the practice to identity. Following on from this was a preoccupation with what it meant to be a man, both for Xhosa and other men. All writers also, whether Xhosa or not, viewed it as a Xhosa national custom, even if other nations practised circumcision.

These exchanges, by establishing circumcision as an object of discussion in the western media, created an arena for debate that cut across language and ethnicity. In doing so, letter-writers voiced their concerns about the erosion of tradition, modernity, and the relationship of both to Christianity. They linked their statements, anti- or pro-circumcision, into a defence that drew on Christianity and the Bible. The men who participated in this debate as members of a reading public were very comfortable and adept at writing Christianity and circumcision into a unitary space.

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