

An Amamfingo Circumcision Ceremony

by
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The following description was excerpted from my Lore of Africa: 3 Northern Nguni Nations (pp. 729- 745) and is intended here to present a brief description of a rite of passage involving circumcision. The practitioners are members of an Amamfingo community (i.e. an Nguni speaking ethnic group from southern Zimbabwe).

According to Chief Johannes Hadepe of the village of Mbembesi:

We want to preserve our culture. We still have our traditional dances for girls (*ukikimba*) and boys (*ukugxiva*). The girls' dance imitates a flying bird, and the boys' dance is a stomp dance with rattles attached to the ankles. We also have stick-fighting which we call *qaqwaza* which is performed during the *Mguyo* festival in June. This fighting is dangerous, particularly if someone is angry or has a grudge to settle. The *Mguyo* festival takes place during the cold season and only lasts one day.

After the *mguyo*, however, boys who are undergoing initiation [i.e. puberty rites] stay in the bush for 3 months. Before initiation they are called *amakwenkwe* [uncircumcised boys], and after it they are called *abakhwetha* [circumcised students or initiates]. This is deemed a necessary transition stage before they are socially recognized as *amadoda* [men]. Initiation takes place when a boy is 19 or 20 years old.

Some of the boys from neighboring village of Emandluntsha started late this year (in September) and are still in the bush with their *ikhankatha* ("teacher"). The boys usually are 5 or 6 to a hut, but this varies. My own two sons Brighton (aged 22) and Pilisani (aged 20) underwent their initiation 2 years ago.

In the bush, the boys are taught how to live in the forest, how to obey their father and their mother, and how to have sex, as well as the other responsibilities of manhood. During this time they are not allowed to be seen by pubescent girls. If they see them, they must run and hide. Furthermore, children are not permitted to see them eating.

The boys are coated with a white mud which they are not allowed to wash off until near the end of the initiation. With regard to the hut (which is called *ibhuma* in our language), it is the father of the children who digs the hole and places the sticks of the framework in the ground. The mother then puts on the thatching.

Sometimes the boys do not eat vegetables in the bush as they only are supposed to eat *sadza* [a stiff porridge] and meat. They hunt animals like *umvundla* (rabbit) with their knobkerries; but when animals are scarce they are given meat by their fathers. If there is a shortage of meat in the bush, for example, they enter the kraal and send someone to tell their father to send them meat. After this, they may be given a goat to eat. They are also allowed to have milk.

Young pre-pubescent girls are permitted to bring them food, but not women. We do not have a special ceremony in the bush for girls. Their mothers teach them how to be women in the home.

In regards to the consequences of the ceremony, I am thankful to Johannes' son Askim Hapepe , who said (with regard to his own circumcision ceremony):

The first thing that we are told is that we are big now and must do things well. We are told we can marry, but not without money. We are also told that whenever we go somewhere we must inform someone where we are going and when we expect to be back. We are taught to assume responsibility for the cattle and how to plow a field. We are told we must fetch the oxen (that are left to graze at night) at 0400 in the morning and many other things like this.

The circumcision wound takes about one week to heal; but even so one does not really feel fit until after about one month. Our time is largely spent relaxing and carving things. We carve things like the *uphini* (spoon) and *iphelo* - a stirring instrument used to destroy bubbles when making *sadza*.. We can also make mortars and pestles as well as yokes for oxen.

When we return from initiation, all of our things must be new. The blankets we use during the rite are given to the young herd boys. Five days before coming home, we wash with soap. After washing off the clay your skin color is different. If you were black for example, you find yourself red. That is, even your skin becomes new.

On November 17, 2000 I got the opportunity to see the tail end of Michael Dlamini's initiation ceremony in Mandlutsha; but before I actually see it I had to get permission. Lungani Mpengesi (who we will talk about in more detail later on) took me first to see the head of Mandlutsha village to inform him of my intent. After obtaining that permission, I was advised to ask permission of the "owner of the boy", which in this case happens to be his mother. Unfortunately, she operates a rural shebeen [beer hall] and is not at home and so I was obliged to trudge to the main road to locate her at her establishment.

After receiving the thumbs up from the mother of Michael (one of the initiates), I went to the *ibhuma* where I photograph Michael and his co-initiate Dumisani (attired in their old blankets) standing on either side of their teacher Mbizo Hlabangana.

We (my guide and I) announced our arrival and were introduced to the *inkhankata* (teacher) who showed us the goat skin poultice in which the penis is wrapped.

The *inkhankata* then told us that during the first 7 days after circumcision, the initiates are not permitted to drink water and that the only thing they can eat is *sadza* mixed with soil. When they walk they must do so crouching so as to impede the flow of blood. The only person who is allowed to touch the foreskin is the father of the initiate, who has the additional responsibility of burying it somewhere.

On the 8th day, they drink water mixed with soil. They are no permitted to eat salt during this period because it is said to cause an erection which can be very painful. He further told us that Michael's ceremony - which began in September - only lasted for 2 months, during which time he was their instructor.

He said that he, himself, did not perform the circumcision; for that task is the role of the *ingcibi*, who cuts and then departs. The teacher, he says, must remain with the boys for the first 8 days and then is free to come and go.

Michael's father then appeared on the scene and was quite angry about our presence, because he had not been consulted. He was assuaged, however, when my guide explained to him that we had the permission of the "boy's owner" (i.e. his mother) and that I intended to give Michael photographs of the rite.

We then observed the boys entering the hut and doff their blankets. When they emerged again they stood in front of the house, completely nude, and were given final instructions by their teacher. They then ran to an undisclosed location where they bathed and fetched a stick. Upon returning they were each given further instructions and a new blanket which they wrapped around themselves. The only witnesses to this event (besides my guide and I) were Michael's father, the teacher, four old men, and a number of small boys who performed various chores for the initiates during their seclusion.

The two initiates then walked off with their man-hood sticks (*kwepile*) to their homes without looking back. The carrying of these sticks, which were fetched while completely naked, indicates (I was told) that they are coming from the bush.

At this juncture, the father entered the hut and set it on fire using ordinary matches. The old things used by the boys and not destined for burning were given to the small boys who helped by fetching water and doing other chores for the initiates. This burning is, to my mind, symbolic of the fact that the earlier phase of the life of these initiates is over and that they now have a new social role to play in the village - a more serious role filled with an increased responsibility to family and clan. They are not yet men though, as I soon learned; for they must pass further tests that still lie in store for them. They have, however, been formally instructed and ceremoniously prepared for the road that leads to manhood.

One day, too, their tiny helpers [pictured on pg. 736] will undergo this very same initiation ritual which has been perpetuated among the Amamfengo from time immemorial. Upon returning to Mthimkulu (the village in which I was staying) I was delighted to find that Manfred, a son of my host, was in the process of skinning a goat for our evening meal; and that the ladies were preparing crumble pap.

After our meal we sat around the fire and listen to Jane Hadepe recite folk-tales to her children and grandchildren. I was still curious about the circumcision process and was delighted to learn upon my return to Mthimkulu that Lungani Mpengesi, the very man who took me to see the ceremony, is a circumciser and that it was he who circumcised Michael and his friend.

When performing a circumcision, the *ingcibi* (circumsiser) wears a head-dress made from black ostrich feathers, a red apron, an ordinary shirt, and a leopard skin. Some circumcisers also wear beads. In the bush, the circumcision rite involves ritual magic. Certain herbs are burned and placed in the water used to bathe with in the bush. It is taboo for the *ingcibi* to sleep with a woman for from 3 to 4 days before circumcising someone, and he must abstain from sex the following day also. However, the boys, themselves, have no special restrictions before undergoing circumcision.

I then asked Lungani to tell me something about himself as well as describe his art and he responded, saying:

I was born here in Mbembesi (Bubi District) 37 years ago and am a roof thatcher and circumciser by profession. I now, however, live in Kennilworth, another Xhosa [i.e. Southern Nguni] community some 110 kilometers [around 68 miles] north of Bulawayo. Xhosa land is now crowded and so some 153 families have relocated to that area. The government provided both land and transportation in 1990 to further this resettlement scheme and there are some 500 families (3,147 individuals) there now. The village is near a forest and we maintain the same customs there as we do here. We also have another Xhosa community near Fort Rixon initially populated by some 200 families. I am married and have 2 daughters and a son.

I use an ordinary knife about 300 mm long that is sharpened on both sides which somewhat resembles a small narrow spear. [I clean the blade with methiolate spirits both before and after use. In making the cut, I place the left index finger inside the foreskin. I do not pull the foreskin; but I can push the head of the penis back slightly with the thumb. I hold the foreskin with the other finger and then cut it off using my right hand,

The foreskin is then buried in the *ibhuma* by the boy's father before the hut is burned to the ground. After making the cut, I do not dress the wound. The foreskin has two layers of flesh and only the top layer (*ijwabi*) is cut off; the two layers separate on their own.

I then fold the remaining foreskin (*iyinga*) backwards so that the head is emerging. Then maize husks are used to bind it in place. After this, a goat skin (*itycba*) is wrapped around the corn husks and is tied in place. This remains on the penis for seven days. If the rules laid down are not followed, complications occur.

During these seven days, the recently circumcised initiate can not drink any water nor can he consume salt or soft food. The only thing he eats is dry sadza (*umpholokoqo*) which is mixed with sandy soil as punishment. The reason for the prohibition of the consumption of water is to force the initiate to absorb water from his own body. This absorption promotes rapid healing of the wound. The newly-circumcised does not wear any special apparatus, but one of his legs is tied about 3 feet above the ground to prevent accidental contact or rubbing. If one gets an erection it is very painful. When this happens you are hit with a stick and the pain disappears.

Circumcision usually occurs when the boys are between 18 and 20 years of age. Both Michael and his friend were 20 years old. During the initiates' stay in the bush, he is not permitted to eat chicken or honey. Neither is he permitted to gaze on any woman. If he sees one coming, he must run and hide. The only time the women participate in this ceremony is when they go to thatch the hut.

On the 8th day, a special meal is prepared with ordinary sadza, a slaughtered goat, and *utshwala* (traditional beer). From this day on they are permitted to consume liquids. The wound tends to heal according to the nature of the person and most boys are completely healed in 2 weeks time.

The remainder of the time spent in the bush is actually a transition period where they are given time to assimilate the lessons imparted to them by their elderly teacher. They are taught to: obey their parents; report an absence when leaving; purchase things that are useful for the future; and to declare their intent to marry and receive the consent from their parents before such marriage. Though they do not receive any special instruction on sex it is emphasized that a circumcised boy has specific duties and responsibilities and that he is expected to behave properly. He is told that he should not have sex before marriage; but most boys have sex anyhow.

While the initiates are in the bush they are allowed to herd cattle, work in the fields, carve things like yokes or plates, make bricks and burn them, etc. They are helped in these tasks by *amakwenkwe* (young pre-pubescent boys) who also bring the initiates water. The food is brought to the initiates' hut by their small sisters as they can not see anyone above the age of their mother.

I became a circumciser because everyone of my father's brothers practice that profession. I was taught how to circumcise by the son of my father's eldest brother. I first assisted him in a cutting in 1991 and was permitted to operate on my own in 1996. At present, all of my work has produced normal results. The penis head can push backwards. That is, the foreskin can move forward and the head recedes. If this happens, a needle is bent like a hook and the head of the penis is pulled forward with it.

This problem usually occurs during the first 7 days, but it can occur afterwards. I know only of two cases where *bakwetha* (newly circumcised boys) have died as a result of the process. This happened about 2 years ago.

I asked him if he thought this custom would endure, and he replied:

My son is only 6 years old now; but I am fairly certain that if and when he reaches the age of 20, he will most certainly undergo circumcision.

The rite itself depends entirely upon the parents. They need one or two beasts (i.e. cows or bulls) and a goat. These animals are specially prepared for the boy's consumption. They can not just eat any part; for example they are not permitted to eat the innards of the goat; but rather must be given the right shoulder which is specially prepared for them.

First, the blood parents will negotiate to set a date for the celebration. The house is built on the first day of the celebration by men who must have been previously circumcised. After the hut's framework has been built, it is thatched by the women. It takes from 3 to 4 hours to erect the framework, and another 3 to 4 hours to thatch it. All of this is done on the same day. The poles and grass are brought to the site the day before construction begins. After the thatching is complete, certain old men light a fire inside the hut and spend the night there. This fire is sort of an eternal flame, for it is not allowed to burn out until the boys return home.

Early the next morning, the boys are washed with cold water, this causes the blood to diminish and also deadens the pain. They are circumcised outside of the hut while sitting on blankets which get bloody. They are then bandaged and enter the hut where they sleep on the ground. They do not use sleeping mats nor do they wear any clothing. The only thing that covers them is their blanket (*ingubo*).

The night before the circumcision, there is a great all night festival with dancing and most people do not sleep. The name of the dance performed by boys inside the hut is the *ukugxiva*. Men and women dance next to the kraal and circulate around the bonfire in a dance called *ukuguya* and the one or two cows are consumed during the afternoon and night.

There could be as many as eight boys in one hut and after initiation they must **respect one another as blood brothers** for the rest of their lives. While in the bush, they eat the same meal three times a day - *sadza* mixed with sand.

A special mud (*ingceke*) found near the river is prepared by old men and smeared on the bodies and faces of the initiates anytime during the first 7 days of internment. This is done to indicate to all around that these are initiates (*abakhwetha*) in transition from boyhood to manhood. Prior to this state they were *amakwenkwe* and after it they will become *amadoda*.

They wash this mud off their bodies a week before the rite is over; but continue to smear their faces with mud. They must use soap, and as a result their skins become much lighter. [Note that this can be likened to a snake that sheds its skin and is in the process of growing a new one].

The things the initiate is taught are many, principle of which are: (1) do not become addicted to drugs or alcohol; (2) behave properly to others at all times; (3) never engage in irresponsible behavior; (4) procreate (i.e. have children); (5) learn a trade (farmer, herder, thatcher, etc.); (6) provide for your children; (7) don't be greedy; (8) be faithful in marriage (usually implies one wife); (9) go to church (be it Presbyterian, Methodist, Anglican, etc.); and (10) do not fight.

Stick fighting (*ikhaba*), however, is considered a game rather than a fight (i.e. quarrel or dispute) and is customarily performed in the morning after a circumcision. Someone shouts "*iyee*" after the cut is made and then the boys play *ikhaba* in the bush about 100 yards from the circumcision hut. This fighting typically lasts from 35 minutes to an hour and there are referees that monitor the action.

The participants wear ordinary clothes and only those who have been circumcised are permitted to fight. Uninitiated herd boys do fight with sticks, but not on this day. Championships are sometimes held.

The fighting stick is called *induku*. The sick used for striking is called *umuqayi*; whereas the stick used to defend with is known as *umhlanganiso*. The wrapper bound around the hand to protect the knuckles is called *iphethelo*.

The blows landed, also, have names depending upon where the stick strikes one's adversary. A blow to the head is called *iduma*; a blow to the hand is called *ukungquphela*; and a blow to the legs or other parts of the body is called *ukubetha*.

The attributes that go to make a good stick-fighter is courage, speed, striking techniques, and defensive (parrying) skills. All are important. Some techniques involve moving and striking at the same time, jumping, and squatting. Fighters are not allowed to jab with their sticks or aim for the eyes.

If you want to fight a certain person, you say "*fikakum*" ("I challenge you") and if you don't want to accept the challenge, you say "*khulula*" ("I decline"). When you score a blow you say *ndikubhetile*.

We Xhosa people came to Zimbabwe in different capacities. Some accompanied the first whites as laborers; some came as preachers; some followed relatives who had arrived earlier. When we first arrived here we spoke in Xhosa; but now isiNdebele is mostly spoken in the schools. However, many of us still speak Xhosa in our homes. Our culture, too, is unique for we are the only people in Zimbabwe who practice stick-fighting and none of our Ndebele neighbors have circumcision rites.

I thanked the Hadepe household for their hospitality and told them that I hoped to return some day after completing the book I was writing [i.e. Three Northern Nguni Nations]. I was then sent on my way with a last nourishing meal and a shoulder of uncooked goat. [Note that unlike this submission the book has numerous photos illustrating everything that took place.]

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