IT’S HARD TO BE A MAN

THE XHOSA CIRCUMCISION RITUAL

Issue 48

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IT’S HARD TO BE A MAN

A MONTH WITH THREE INITIATES
DURING THE XHOSA CIRCUMCISION RITUAL

by
Richard Bullock
29 May 2015
The male initiation ceremony of the Xhosa people of South Africa, *Ulwaluko*, is an age-old tradition. It’s a mystical, secretive ritual that occurs far away from the eyes of the public, and virtually the only information non-participants and non-family members ever have about it is the disturbing death toll from what the newspapers call botched circumcisions. As a result, there is pressure from some quarters to ban the custom altogether.

And, as winter approaches and a new crop of *abakwetha* are preparing to ‘go to the mountain’ to earn the right to call themselves men, the controversy is bound to resurface. But, having spent the 2014 winter season filming a documentary with three *abakwetha*, I can testify that the ceremony is a test of courage, and is much more than a circumcision ritual.

**Banning it is a ridiculous notion. *Ulwaluko* is fundamental to Xhosa life**

I think banning it is a ridiculous notion. Ulwaluko is fundamental to Xhosa life, but it’s not a rigid, inflexible ritual. It changes with the times. For example, the *abakwetha* no longer actually go to the mountains, but somewhere close by yet cut off from the village. And the seclusion period is much...
shorter. When 63 year-old Bangile Pakamile went through initiation he was away for six months, and his younger brothers, who are in their forties, spent three months in seclusion. Now their sons Sandile and Anathi, and their close friend Lulama, will spend one month in the bush.

There are two seasons for the Ulwaluko – winter and summer. Despite village elders murmuring ‘we had it harder’, the month in the bush is by no means easy, particularly in winter. Every boy knows the inherent dangers – the number of deaths mount up on the front pages like a recurring nightmare. Indeed, by the time Sandile, Nathi and Lulama had safely stepped out as new men, 39 initiates had died in the Eastern Cape, and more than 300 had been hospitalised.
The adults of the community build the hut in which the initiates will live for the month of the ceremony.

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The initiates, who are known collectively as *abakwetha* or individually as *umkwetha*, surrender their names. Their clothes are shredded in the days leading up to their exclusion, and they carry a short stick with a white cloth tied to one end. Women cut dry grass for thatching while men chop down flexible saplings. Dressed in traditional clothing the adults construct a domed dwelling called *iboma* that will serve as home for the *abakwetha*. Each of the customs is intricate and detailed, but there is no instruction booklet, so the men constantly remind each other of the many important details as the preparation continues.

The structure is surrounded by a symbolic barrier of thorn branches with a single entry and exit point. One member of the construction crew accidentally stepped across the thorn branches and was scolded by one of the elders. His indiscretion was probably due to ceremonial brandy rather than a failure to adhere to traditional guidelines. Alcohol has woven its way into every stage of the ceremony. Where traditional beer known as *umqombothi* might have once served a role, brandy and Castle Lager have been added. I find myself included in this custom, and a bottle of brandy is requested from me. All those present contribute in one way or another.

_{The number of deaths mount up on the front pages like a recurring nightmare}_

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another. The greatest contribution comes from the parents of the initiate. By my calculations it costs somewhere in the region of ZAR10,000 (US$900) to put a boy through the initiation. There are cows and at least two goats to slaughter, traditional blankets, a month’s worth of food, traditional surgeon fees, overseer fees and food and drinks for parties. And the brand new smart clothes worn at the end of the month can cost in excess of ZAR2,000 alone. It’s a significant burden on already financially stretched families.

*Read more beneath the advert*

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**Buttons with no holes**

John Pakamile, 20-year veteran overseer of the initiates, tells
me that the early white settlers brought two things to the Xhosa people. Alcohol and buttons with no holes. I sat dumfounded, pondering ‘buttons with no holes’. John laughed at me and said: ‘We had everything we needed. Fresh water from the rivers, wild animals to hunt, livestock and gardens – what use did we have for money?’

For rural people far away from industrial and commercial centres, making ‘buttons with no holes’ is a constant struggle. But despite the economic hardships many live full and dynamic lives filled with humour, warmth, love and generosity. It is a close community, and participation in the *Ulwaluko* involves every member of the wider family group as well as friends. While elders ensure practices are correctly adhered to, five or six younger boys will be in constant attendance to the *abakwetha*. Delighting in their role as *inqalathi*, the young boys chop wood from the nearby forest, and begin making a pile of firewood outside the entrance to the *iboma*.

In order to comply with regulations governing traditional circumcision, initiates must be at least 18 years of age, and
must present written parental or guardian consent to the central office of records for initiates. In terms of the act, the initiates, the traditional surgeon, and the overseer must all be registered and have the necessary permits. There are actually traditional police who visit during the season demanding the official papers, which are kept in a plastic sleeve and tucked up into the thatching of the *iboma*. Failure to comply may result in fines and/or prison.

At the office of records we met with the traditional surgeon. Although the circumcision is still done with an assegai (spear), I am assured by John that hygiene standards are rigorous. For two initiates the spear has two sharp blades, one on each end. For three initiates the surgeon brings two spears. The surgeon is an outsider who only appears for the removal of foreskins. He attends to all the initiates in the area, and thankfully is not at any time a participant in alcohol-related rituals.
Going to the mountain

When the big day arrives for Sandile, Anathi and Lulama there is a huge gathering at the family homestead. The *abakwetha* are stripped naked and ushered inside the family kraal (traditionally a collection of huts within an enclosure). They sit on the bare ground where they are draped in grey blankets while a cow and goat are slaughtered. There is a great deal of alcohol consumed by those in attendance, especially the old men who sit looking on from a semi-circle of chairs. Axes and knives flash in the winter sun as the animals are butchered, cooked in big pots, then rapidly consumed by all.

All the while, in the swirl of dust, blood and noise, the abakwetha sit quietly with heads bowed in submission while attending men explain what is to come, and what is expected of them. Their heads and pubic hair are shaved. They are offered choice cuts of goat and cow, and encouraged to fill up.
In normal times, the boys are avid surfers of the ocean near their village in Chintsa. Lulamu, Anathi and Sandile not long after circumcision. During the long cold nights and days, little helpers look after the initiates by collecting wood and stoking the fire in their hut.

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They find the surgeon waiting for them in the bush with spear in hand
At dusk all the men rise and encircle the *abakwetha* singing an immensely powerful song. They slowly shuffle and dance along the road while the entire village ululates and shouts. The energy in the group feels edgy and somewhat dangerous. The men carry an assortment of sticks, and small scuffles break out as they near the edge of the village. Suddenly the three *abakwetha* drop their blankets and run for their lives as the men tear after them shouting and wielding their sticks. It must have their teenage hearts beating out of their chests.

Having escaped one terror they find the surgeon waiting for them in the bush with spear in hand. They sit down with legs apart and a rapid single cut from the assegai removes the foreskin. The boys make no sound; they don’t even flinch, stoic bravery being an important part of this and the hurdles to come. Their wounds are dressed with a medicinal plant called *izichwe* and then tied with a leather thong around their waists. There is only a small group in attendance, and in the fading light I can just see one of the boys’ shoulders rise as the thong is pulled taut, but he makes no sound.

The white cloth tied to the stick that they carried is thrown high into the air, a signal that it is done. A collective cry from the village follows — it is the last time the women will see or hear anything of the *abakwetha* for a month.
Seven days of pain and hunger

For the first few days the abakwetha are understandably in great pain and discomfort. They eat only half-boiled maize and no water for seven days. They have a single blanket and a little straw between them and the cold earth. The little inqalathi are their lifesavers keeping the fire burning through the night. It’s freezing cold and the abakwetha lie with their knees raised getting progressively weaker as the days go by.

Their overseer John Pakamile shows them how to dress the wounds with ischwe leaves, visiting them up to four times a day during this critical time. After five days, John covers their faces, arms and legs in the white clay of the initiate. It is supposed to keep them warm and protect their skin from the sun, but no deeper meaning is forthcoming. The initiates must
keep up this application of white clay or be punished. They are also given beautiful white blankets with red stripes, and they sit silently in the sun as John delivers the next set of instructions.
It will be two days before they are allowed water. They appear thin and weak. They tell each other stories to keep away
boredom, and they talk about food often. Their jaws hurt from grinding half-cooked maize.

They must show vigilance in their actions. John makes them hold the water bottle for him to wash his hands after dressing the wounds. Even though they are dying of thirst, they never complain.

On the morning of the seventh day they are so weak they can barely stand. What were once three vigorous teenagers now appear like old men, hunched over their sticks. They hardly talk as they slowly apply white clay to their bodies before leaving the iboma. A goat is slaughtered outside, and the men in attendance drink ceremonial brandy in the warm winter sun. The abakwetha are given great spoonfuls of maize meal and sour milk followed by hunks of broiled goat. Their personalities and vigour begin to return; they begin to laugh, tell jokes and even dance.

In the days that follow they go for walks to collect leaves for dressing their wounds. The big stiff leaves are rolled between two bottles to soften them for comfort. I tried to help by collecting leaves and, on offering some to Sandile, he looked at them and said, ‘Not big enough, Rich.’ I don’t think he meant to joke, he just needed bigger leaves than I would.
After their initial seven days of meagre food and no water, the initiates are given better food and colourful blankets which help keep them warm. Below, an initiate puts fresh leaves on his wound while a visiting friend texts on his cell phone.

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The seclusion, suffering and pain represent the trials of life

There are two other iboma built across the hills where six more abakwetha are undergoing the Ulwaluko. We went for a long walk to see how they were doing. Their iboma are very impressive. I later find out one of the boys fathers works for a thatching company, and that he used old thatch and poles. These initiates are attended by a gaggle of their own inqalathi. These micro-lumberjacks scale the thorn trees and work their machetes to keep firewood coming.

As the days pass slowly the abakwetha walk in the hills chopping wood, teasing the inqalati and following their strict regimen. By day 20 their spirits are high. They dance, stick fight and hunt for rabbits in the bush. Their little helpers continue to devastate the thorn tree population.

The inqalathi are learning all the time. They watch all the ceremonies and learn the ‘language’ of the abakwetha, taking in with some trepidation what their own rite of passage will require when it is upon them.

The verbal transfer of knowledge seems secondary to the symbolism. The seclusion, suffering and pain represent the trials of life; it is the process that matters, not what is said. It is a test of personal character and fortitude. Of course no boy should needlessly die, but I wonder if the Xhosa would place such a high value on the ceremony if there were zero chance of fatalities.
of fatalities.

I won’t go to Makiwane

The *abakwetha* sing a beautiful song about their ordeal. Patrick, one of the *inqalathi*, translates it for me. While the backing singers repeat the phrase ‘It’s hard to be a man’, Lulama who has a higher voice, sings the guidelines of the *abakwetha*. In particular one verse is repeated: ‘*I won’t go to Makiwane, no, no, no, it is not the time for Makiwane. Be quiet little boy, it’s hard to be a man.*’

Cecilia Makiwane Hospital is the public hospital on the outskirts of East London. I ask them what it would take for one of them to go to hospital. Sandile calmly points his finger at the ground of the *iboma* and says, ‘We will never go. We
‘We will rather die here than go to hospital’

Meanwhile the death toll for initiates stands at 35 in the Eastern Cape for this winter season, and there is still a week to go. This reluctance to seek outside help is one of the key reasons so many initiates die, but some overseers do act responsibly. Last year pneumonia spread amongst initiates nearby. The supervisor blamed bad spirits in the *iboma*, and got all the boys proper medical attention. When they were well again they went back into another *iboma*, well away from the previous site. A smart application of spiritual beliefs saved the boys lives – and upheld tradition.
I have filmed the *abakwetha* carrying out the morning ritual of applying white river clay many times, but today, perhaps through boredom, they adorn Anathi’s back with a giant NIKE logo – another strange clash of the traditional and the new. Lulama gets Zebra stripes on his back and Sandle gets his girlfriend’s name. It seems rebellious. I dread to think how many whacks of the cane John might give them if he sees the NIKE logo. Maybe he won’t mind. Understanding the taboos is a minefield, and perhaps that’s the idea – to keep the *abakwetha* on their toes.

At this stage their mood is high and they count the days towards the 12th of July. I have taken to showing them videos of my children in Sydney. We all laugh, they see Charlie’s fourth birthday cake and are stunned as if they have never seen anything quite so amazing.
Boys to men

John and his youngest son cut palm leaves that they bend into three crowns for the initiates as a symbol that their homecoming is near. Their heads are freshly shaved, and John instructs them to shave the head of one of the *inqalathi*, ten year-old Athiti. It is an honour for him, as he will serve as a mascot over the coming two days. He will lead the procession back to the village and participate as if he were an *umkwetha* himself.

On their final day in the bush the *abakwetha* and *inqalathi* work hard chopping a huge stockpile of wood. Men build a bonfire outside the *iboma* and play a traditional initiation
game called *ceya* through the night. It’s played with short and long twigs concealed in each hand and it’s accompanied by what seem to be impersonations of animals, spirits with strange clicks and squeals. In the firelight the wild gesticulations, explosive laughter and warmth between the men of all ages is magical. How long have men played *ceya* by the fire under the spectacular African night sky?
At dawn, John leads the *abakwetha* to the river. Before entering the water they pay homage to the ancestors by daubing river clay on their foreheads, then they stand knee-deep and carefully wash all remnants of white clay from their bodies. In the cold morning light they head back to camp naked. Bangile, the eldest of the Pakamile family, covers their bodies in butter. He then covers them in coloured blankets leaving them just a tiny peephole through which they hold their black sticks.

Forming a single line behind young Athiti they shuffle away from the *iboma*, where the men break into song and set the hut alight. Within minutes it is fireball; all the trappings of the last month, incinerated. The *abakwetha* do not look back as they walk on followed by dozens of men young and old. As they move through the village, women ululate, and small children join the group. When they reach the Pakamile homestead the women beat sticks onto a sheet of corrugated iron.
The boys sit outside the kraal, the little mascot Athiti at one end and an older man at the other representing the generations. Seated around the boys are more than a dozen old men. Each of them stands to impart words of wisdom to the *abakwetha*. At the conclusion of each speech a symbolic offering of a one or two Rand coin is made, representing the first step on a much larger journey. All I can think about is buttons with no holes.

After the speeches the initiates are moved inside where they are surrounded by friends and siblings. Two girls enter and transform the boys by painting their faces with red ochre and wrapping their heads with black and white cloth. From being *amakhwetha* the initiates have become *amakrwala*. Finally they begin to relax their stoic demeanor.

The following day, after a hearty breakfast of soup, vegetables and meat, the three *amakrwala* are escorted to Lulama’s rural home, a beautiful spot overlooking a pristine valley.
A proud Athiti, chosen as the mascot of the initiates homecoming. Back among their community after a month, the initiates’ faces are painted in dark red ochre.

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As a thank you to the overseer and the people of Chintsa village, the family slaughter a pig for their guests, and mark the occasion with more brandy and beer. While family members sit in the morning sun, men butcher the pig and cook it on the open fire. The *amakrwala* sit in the grass, and Lulama sees his siblings for the first time in a month. At a certain point John ushers him into a hut. Here Lulama washes himself and bathes his whole body while standing in a large enamel dish. He finally reappears in brand new western clothes. Lulama's face is then smeared with a brownish paste to mark the final stage of the transition.

The entire group then travels back to Chintsa village. Sandile and Nathi wash and dress in their own smart flat caps, jackets, pressed trousers and leather-soled shoes. Bangile, the oldest man, embraces them and warmly slaps them on the back. There are some brief speeches and ceremonial brandy shots, and it is finally over. They walk out of the hut and take their first steps on the long journey of life as men.
It’s hard to be a man

Not once did I witness fighting, drinking or disobedience from the *abakwetha*. Likewise, the adults in direct supervisory roles performed their duties skillfully and responsibly. Because the tradition isn’t written down or uniform across the Xhosa nation, I am sure there are many variations on the ceremony, and I suspect the deaths and mutilations may be the result of badly run initiation schools. Perhaps because I have witnessed a school that is run well, I am biased, but people from my own culture circumcise babies, and voluntarily risk their lives with breast augmentation and nose jobs. We are quick to judge traditional cultures, and even
quicker to forget our similarities.

I loved the warmth and comfort shown by the community of men. I have never sat in communion around so many fires, and seen children and adults work together so effortlessly for a common cause. All had their role and all had respect for one another. I was shown incredible kindness and understanding, and was never questioned about my presence or purpose. They trusted me. The long ceremony gave me the time to ponder my own role as a man, something westerners like me blunder into via alcohol-fuelled 21st birthday parties.

When I asked the *abakwetha* why they had to go through all this, they replied: *It’s hard to be a man. You can’t buy it, or be given it, you have to be it. You have to endure pain, hunger and hardship. When times get tough in your life, you know you got through your initiation, so you can get through whatever challenge you are faced with.*

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Thank you to our audience for taking this photographic journey with us through this wonderful continent. We look forward to the next one! And a very special thank you to our photographic jury leader Heinrich van den Berg for his expertise and valuable guidance. You can view some of Heinrich’s exceptional work here, and learn about his latest publication here.

**View the “Audience Favourite” Winner here**
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ITS’ HARD TO BE A MAN

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Australian born RICHARD BULLOCK began his professional life as an advertising copywriter in Sydney with Chiat/Day/Mojo. This was followed by a long stint at TBWA
Hunt Lascaris in Johannesburg South Africa, where his love for the African continent took hold. Along with his South African wife, Richard travelled and worked all over the world, often returning to their second home in Chintsa on South Africa’s east coast. In 2004 he began writing and directing film projects for clients and eventually crossed over from advertising to directing full-time, helming projects globally for Adidas, Sony, Amnesty, Omega, Motorola and many more. One of his most unique talents is directing projects in remote and sometimes difficult locations. He has shot films about climate change in Peru, eye surgery in Mongolia, heart disease in Rwanda and plastic surgery in South Africa. His long form films have run on the National Geographic Channel, Eurosport and the BBC. One of his latest projects involved documenting the controversial Xhosa circumcision ritual not far from his home in Chintsa. His story about the month he spent with three young initiates can be read in IT’S HARD TO BE A MAN. The documentary film is still in development.

You can see Richard’s film work [here](#).