Initiation School Amongst the Southern Ndebele People of South Africa: Depreciating Tradition or Appreciating Treasure?

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Initiation School Amongst the Southern Ndebele People of South Africa: Depreciating Tradition or Appreciating Treasure?

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ABSTRACT

The concept "initiation school" refers to a type of school that was initially established as a secret rite, which, in a symbolic sense, serves as the teenager's "transit education" or "passport" to adulthood. Currently, in South Africa, many opinions are voiced against initiation, mainly because it prevents children from attending formal school for up to ten weeks to attend the initiation schools, and, a rising number of youngsters lose their lives as a direct result of the unprofessional circumcisions that are executed. The matter has become so serious that a new Bill to monitor registration and control of initiation schools was approved in Parliament in 2003. Despite this controversy and the control measures that have been put in place, initiation schools still forms the backbone of traditional education.

This research aimed to determine what the initiation schools of the Southern Ndebele people of South Africa entails and what value the Southern Ndebele people attach to this type of traditional education. The study revealed that their initiation, when viewed against the work of Arnold van Gennep (1909, 1969) consists of three significant phases, i.e., the phase of severance, separation and isolation, the phase of thresholding, restoration, preparation and entrance and the phase of inclusion, absorption and incorporation. The study also revealed that initiation, as it is performed today, is consistent with community values and, to a large extent, serves to contribute to the education of the young people of the Southern Ndebele Tribe in that it supports and assists the parents with the difficult task of disciplining their children and transferring the norms and values of the Southern Ndebele, such as respect for others, the observation of

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their traditions, caring for and affirmation of their cultural identity and the stabilisation and perpetuation of their cultural temperospatiality.

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Initiation schools\(^1\) in Africa have traditionally been culturally entrenched among the different indigenous groups as part of the traditional education of the child and can include sexuality education (Young, 1965, p. 30; Mphalele, 1992, p. 8) or education for life (Lewinsohn, 1958, p. 29; Crooks and Baur, 1996, p. 121; Fafunwa and Aisiku, 1982, p. 10).

Some of the best known initiation schools in Africa are Poro and Sande in Liberia (Mtezuka, 1995, p. 39). These are bush schools organized by migrants. In Sierra Leone and Guinea many initiation schools disappeared after 1822 with the introduction of Western education. Other well-known schools are the Dipo Ceremony in Ghana, The Fertility House in Calsbar and Nigeria (Mtezuka, 1995, p. 39) and the Jola in Senegal (Mark, 1992, p. 49).

Initiation schools are common throughout South Africa. To outsiders, the concept “initiation school” refers to a specific type of school that has to do with the child’s “growing-up”. Thus far the knowledge of outsiders. The initiation of boys and girls was initially established as a secret rite and has remained a well-kept secret since the introduction. For centuries, girls have been warned that they will become insane if they tell others about the secret of initiation (Khumalo, 1996, p. 26). The initiation of boys was kept secret from especially the mother who had to remain ill informed and ignorant about “how boys become men” (Mabena, 1999, p. 3). This fact apparently explains why Western researchers still find the deeper dimensions of initiation incomprehensible (Eliade, 1958, p. 10).

There are numerous initiation schools still functioning amongst the different cultural groups in South Africa (Jewkes and Vundule, 2001, p. 733), e.g. amongst the Southern Ndebele\(^2\) (Gupta and Mahy, 2003, p. 42; Bozongwana, 1983, p. 18), Northern Sotho, Tsonga, Venda and the Xhosa (Mwamwenda, 1995, p. 19).

For the majority of the South African people, initiation schools have the very special meaning of representing a symbolic passage

\(^{1}\)The concept “initiation” or “initiation school” is discussed under Possible Complicating Factors below.

\(^{2}\)The focus of this research is on initiation amongst the Southern Ndebele in particular (refer to Focus of Research below).
(or "passport" (Mtezuka, 1995, 64) to manhood or womanhood; "An uncircumcised man is never dignified" (Mtezuka, 1995, 64). Before the initiation, young men and women are regarded as relatively unimportant members of the family and communal life. It is even believed that before the initiation, the male has not been united with his soul and consequently is not really human (Mtezuka, 1995, p. 63; Elliot, 1989, p. 15).

MOTIVATION FOR THIS RESEARCH AND STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Initiation schools in South Africa are continuously in the news due to, inter alia, the disruption of the formal school calendar (Feni, 2002, p. 3), the many children being absent from formal school tuition for several weeks (The Herald, 2002, p. 8) and the rising number of youngsters that annually lose their lives "in the name of culture" (Seakamela, 2003, interview). Therefore, in some quarters, the accountability and relevance of initiation schools are currently being questioned by communities (Mquqo, 2002, p. 3), some traditional healers (The Star, 2002, p. 3), unions (Maluleke, 2002, p. 1; Naude, 2002, p. 4), parents (Mdaki, 2002, p. 2) and initiates (Wa Maahlamela, 2002, p. 1; Initiate X, 23 April 2004, Interview; Initiate Y, 23 April 2004, Interview). Arguments are voiced in a heated debate; "Close down torture schools!" (The Daily News, 27 June 2002, p. 24), ",How good can the observation of culture be if you lose two sons?" (Mdaki in The Star, 27 June 2002, p. 2), "It's murder!" (South African Police Service, 2002; p. 2), "Adapt to the modern world or die" (Mashego in City Press, 30 June 2002, p. 17).

In other quarters the issue of initiation is fiercely defended. The National House of Traditional Leaders, chairman chief Mpiyezintombi Mzimela ascribed the tragedies to the fact that the province (Gauteng) was mushrooming with fly-by-night-circumcisers from outside areas that pose themselves as ingcibi (surgeons) (Mkondo in Daily News, 23 July 2001, p. 6). On the same note, president chief Phathekile Holomisa (Congress of Traditional Leaders of South Africa) lambasted the Department of Health for proposing the new Bill³ to monitor registration

³According to the Application of Health Standards in Traditional Circumcision (legislation passed October 2003), no person, except a recognized traditional medical practitioner, may perform any circumcision without the permission of a medical officer designated for the area.
and control of initiation schools (Mquqo, Rapitso, Vincent and Makgotho, 2002, p. 1). Further measures of control inter alia include the development of a permanent initiation village by the Government of South Africa. The aim with this special village on a nature reserve is an attempt by government to minimize the medical complications when initiates are circumcised (Makinana and Dlakavu, 2002, p. 1) and the prosecution of the parents of the initiates.

Despite the current controversy surrounding the safety of young people attending initiation schools in South Africa, and the many opinions voiced against initiation in general, the latter still seems to form the backbone of traditional education among indigenous South African cultures, including the Southern Ndebele culture (Mabena, 1999; 4; Makopo, 2002, interview).

Across societies and time, people have initiated new members into groups, through ceremonies and rituals designed to foster a feeling of belonging (http://www.alfred.edu/sportshazing/initiationrites.html).

For the most part, present-day Western society lacks initiation rites. One only has to look at young peoples' difficulty in finding themselves and at the lostness that so many people feel, to see that something is missing in our society. It is specifically in this regard that the value of the initiation school as an indigenous African tradition should be understood. Whether we are moving from adolescence to adulthood, or from adulthood to elderhood; whether we are making a significant shift in our life situation, ritual can still open the way through form and enchantment to restore the deep connection needed to keep our balance and to survive. It allows our own life and nature to be our teacher and guide, and tragedy and joy to be transformed into the beauty of our ways.

For the purposes of this research, the primary question (among the many questions that can be asked [see Results from the preliminary Study below]) is the following; What does the initiation school, in particular that of the Southern Ndebele, entail, and what meaning and value do they attach to this type of traditional education?

VALUE OF THIS STUDY

The value of this study lies in the fact that the results can provide insight into and promote understanding of traditional education in general and the initiation school of the Southern Ndebele in
particular. From an educational point of view, the study can provide valuable information on the traditional Ndebele teachings on sexuality, sexual health and how the issue of HIV/AIDS can be addressed in, e.g., traditional "curricula".

DELIMITATION OF THE PROBLEM

To ensure that the researchers undertake a penetrating analysis of the research problem and do not become involved in non-relevant (although interesting) detail and too broad an investigation, the field of study was delimited to focus on the initiation of boys and girls amongst the Southern Ndebele people in particular those currently resident in the areas of Denilton and Groblersdal (in this regard also refer to Geographical delimitation and The research; possible complicating factors, below).

Geographical delimitation

Geographically, the first Ndebeles originated from the Zulu and Xhosa groups of the previously known Natal Province (the current KwaZulu Natal) (Hambrock, 1981, p. 3). They migrated to Transvaal (the current Gauteng Province) during the first half of the nineteenth century and divided into two main groups, of which one migrated to the north and the other, the southern section, settled mainly on farms north of Pretoria. The two groups, who became known as the Northern and Southern Ndebele, can be distinguished by dialectic differences (Clarke, 1986, p. 17-18). As mentioned above, this research focuses on the Southern Ndebele currently resident in the areas of Denilton and Groblersdal.

Historical delimitation

The Southern Ndebele never became urbanised. When the period during which they were indentured to their respective farmer hosts had lapsed, "they had become so used to farm life and were looked upon with such a friendly eye by the country folk" that they preferred to remain on the farms (Mtezuka, 1995, p. 8); a fact that largely contributed to their maintaining intimate contact with each other and practising their traditional set of customs. "They retained their identity right up to the present
day” (Mabena, 1999, p. 33). This fact possibly also contributes to the South Ndebele’s careful preservation of the custom of initiation over many decades.

**METHOD OF INVESTIGATION**

The nature of the research problem demanded that relevant and current first-hand knowledge be obtained. This was done by means of (a) a literature study (to gather sufficient background information on the topic), and (b) the conducting of interviews (to obtain first-hand knowledge on the problem under investigation as well as to determine the views of Ndebele individuals upon the matter).

Due to the fact that the preliminary study revealed that only limited scientific literature was available, the conducting of the interviews became even more important. This was done in an attempt to supplement the available literature and background information. The literature study consisted of two basic aspects, namely the scrutiny and selection of relevant literature and the determination of the reliability of the literature selected. The interviews had to be conducted with individuals who were directly involved, e.g. tribal chiefs, elders, parents and initiates. The study was carded out in two phases; the preliminary phase and the in-depth phase.

**PRELIMINARY PHASE**

The preliminary phase can be regarded as the preparatory phase during which the field was explored, material was identified and selected, and arrangements for the execution of the interviews were made (see Goal with preliminary phase below). The in-depth phase mainly consisted of the gathering and interpretation of data.

**Goal with the preliminary phase**

The preliminary phase was conducted with the following fourfold goal in mind;
• To enable the researchers to determine the scope and magnitude of the research that had been done on initiation schools, and particularly those of the Southern Ndebele;
• to familiarize the researchers with the existing knowledge available in the primary sources and, should it be necessary, to supplement the research with more background information and to become conversant with the available secondary sources;
• to enable the researchers to become acquainted with the concepts currently used in this field as well as the concepts with unique cultural connotations attached to them;
• to enable the researchers to properly interpret and evaluate the data which will be yielded in the in-depth phase of the research.

During the preliminary phase electronic and printed sources were utilized to identify the relevant material. A variety of relevant key words were used for this purpose. Suitable persons, who had been directly involved with or had undergone the initiation themselves, were identified and contacted.

Information yielded during the preliminary phase

During the preliminary study, significant information was yielded which revealed important facts. It was found that relatively few scientific studies on initiation schools, particularly those in South Africa, had been done. The reason for this very fact might lie in the secrecy attached to initiation schools in general. A few articles, of which the scientific character is questionable, had been published in popular magazines.

This investigation further revealed that the research that had been done on the topic was done on an ad hoc basis without being consolidated culturally, and without presenting a holistic picture of this kind of traditional education within a particular cultural framework. It seemed as if the indigenous people of South Africa are viewed as one single cultural group and not as a multitude of diverse cultures, each with its own unique heritage, customs and characteristics.

The investigation revealed that most of the writings on this topic unilaterally focused on the negative consequences of initiation (particularly of boys), e.g. the endurance of hardships
and the consequent injuries and sickness that occurred as a result of prolonged exposure to the elements. The research also centred round the subjection of the initiates to extremely harsh and dangerous circumstances - enduring hunger, thirst, torture and the negative results of circumcision, such as infectious wounds, hospitalisation, amputation of the penis and even death. Scientific writings on, e.g. the cultural value of initiation or the initiation of girls, particularly in South Africa, are relatively few in number.

IN-DEPTH STUDY

The in-depth study consisted of a literature study and the conducting of interviews.

Literature study

The most important consideration in selecting a reliable sample of literature for this study was to ensure that it was as closely representative of the universe (Southern Ndebele culture), as possible. Complementary thereto, it was equally important to identify material that was directly relevant to the initiation of the Southern Ndebele child. The focus in this study was to firstly identify and select material on the Southern Ndebele people, resident in South Africa. Secondly, it was necessary to focus on material that was directly related to their education in general and initiation schools in particular.

The data which the researchers had identified and gleaned (the "raw material") were carefully studied and subjected to two critical processes; firstly, the process of elimination, and, secondly, the process of internal and external criticism. During the process of elimination the focus was on retaining material which was directly relevant to the theme of the study and which could be of authentic value in answering the research question. The material that was considered was continuously measured and evaluated against the criteria that constitute and describe the main concept, namely initiation as an aspect of the traditional education of the Southern Ndebele child.

The scientific act of external criticism was applied when the authenticity and applicability of a research report was to be
established, i.e. to determine the why, where, how and by whom the research was done, thus to establish whether the source was what it claimed to be. During the process of external criticism it was also necessary to differentiate between an original text, later printings and revised editions. The process of internal criticism was realized by analysing and interpreting the findings and conclusions that had been made in the selected documents. This was done in an attempt to minimize illogical and biased assumptions and deductions.

Interviews

The informants were only approached after the questions were decided upon. Each question was measured against criteria like the following: What is the aim with the question? Will the answer shed light on the problem? Can this question inhibit or embarrass the interviewed person, or cause resentment, or “put him on the spot”? Will this question stimulate a flow of information? Is the question clear or is it ambiguous? How can the informant be put at ease? How will the interview be managed that the balance between revelation and the withholding of information be maintained? How will verbal responses and nonverbal reactions be monitored?

It is evident that the interaction that takes place in an interview, is highly complex. The topic of this study made the interaction even more complex due to the sensitivity and personal nature thereof. The interviewees nevertheless have seemed to be at ease and willing to oblige. Not all data were usable, either because of ambiguity in meaning or inapplicability to the frame of reference of the study, or incompleteness. Some information had to be set aside because it was in sharp contrast to the observed (and reobserved) behaviour of the interviewees.

The in-depth study provided valid fundamental and intimate information on the concept and phenomenon “initiation”, particularly as viewed by the Southern Ndebele, the main aims and objectives of their traditional education, the cultural framework, the Southern Ndebele initiate, the duration of initiation, the puberty and initiation ceremony for girls, initiation of boys, the initiation school and circumcision and the value the Southern Ndebele people attach to this kind of education.
THE RESEARCH; POSSIBLE COMPLICATING FACTORS

The issue of objectivity

Considering the fact that this research was conducted on the sensitive and confidential topic of initiation, the researchers, to be as objective as possible, had to reveal meritorious discipline and self-control. Objectivity was regarded as of wider a scope than the researchers just being dispassionate or unbiased in the collection and interpretation of the facts, or the researchers not tailoring their view to fit preconceived notions or preferences. Research integrity demanded of the researchers to overcome personal and prejudicial attitudes, personal preconceptions and value judgements, and to guard against traditional or "received systems of thought". In an attempt to render this research as scientific and therefore valid, a member of the Southern Ndebele culture, who is an academic and researcher, was invited to take part in the research. Invaluable contributions were made, especially with the translations, the conducting of the interviews, during the round table discussions and the interpretation of the facts.

Care was further taken to not only pursue the seemingly weighty ideas or apparent discoveries, but to also set aside the obscure or involved ones. This meant that each idea had to be considered, and each fact or discovery had to be measured according to its significance with regard to answering the primary question of the research. The aim was to prevent own ideas and "false insights" from crowding our minds.

The concept "initiation" as a possible complicating factor in this research

The semantic confusion

Against this backdrop, it is therefore particularly interesting to note that various expressions for the concept "initiation" seem to exist in the relevant literature, for example, "traditional education", "sex education", "education for life", "bush education", "secret societies" or "indigenous education". These concepts are used interchangeably (Elliot, 1989, p. 15; Mabena, 1999, p. 24; Fafunwa and Aisiku, 1982, p. 15; La Fontaine, 1985, p. 29; Mashiyane, 1992, p. 39; Mtezuka, 1995, p. 58) which can be confusing.
Van Gennep’s “Rites of Passage (1909, 1969)

The semantic confusion discussed earlier can, however, be assuaged by referring to the academically stabilising work of the twentieth century anthropologist, Arnold van Gennep (1909, 1969), who first defined the dynamics of the Rites of Passage in 1909. Van Gennep’s stable and reasonable description of initiation as a process which unfolds in three identifiable (yet fully interrelated) stages, namely (a) severance (separation), (b) thresholding (restoration, entrance, onset, beginning, dawning of a new age), and (c) incorporation (inclusion, absorption) remains one of the best scientific lenses for understanding this phenomenon (www.ancienthealingways.co.uk/writing.php?id=1).

A careful study of Van Gennep’s work reveals two distinct readings of his description of initiation as a three-stage process. The first reading may be phrased as follows; “Initiation as severance should lead to purposeful human co-existence through initiation as (a) thresholding and (b) incorporation.” This first suggested reading of the intulogical and dialectical tension that seem to exist between Van Gennep’s three stages of the initiation process, can be presented as follows (Figure 1).

The second suggested reading of this dialectal correlation is phrased as follows: “Initiation as separation should lead to purposeful human co-existence through initiation as (a)

![Figure 1. Correlation between the three stages of the initiation process: first reading.](image-url)
restoration and entrance, and (b) inclusion and absorption.” This second reading may be presented as shown in Figure 2.

Against the décor of the above-mentioned two readings of Van Gennep’s three-stage description of the initiation process, it was necessary to clarify the concept “initiation” even further in an attempt to, firstly, fulfil the aim of this research and secondly, to render our research as scientific and our discussions as scientific discourse. This clarification is thus necessary to facilitate our study and to avoid misunderstanding that could lead to erroneous conclusions.

**Different (other) types of education in Southern Ndebele culture**

It is important to note that the relevant literature and informants mention the following different types of education in Southern Ndebele culture that should not be confused with “initiation”;

- The concept “enculturation” refers to the spontaneous education that the child receives from birth, which can be viewed as an introduction into the ordinary life as a member of the Southern Ndebele tribe (Makopo, 2002, interview). This concept mainly occurred in scientific writings (Elliot, 1989, p. 15; Mabena, 1999, p. 24; Fafunwa and Aisiku, 1982, p. 15).

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![Figure 2. Correlation between the three stages of the initiation process; second reading.](attachment:figure2.png)
The concept "traditional" or "indigenous education" con­curs with and indicates a continuation of the spontaneous enculturation of the child in the home or tribe (La Fontaine, 1985, p. 29; Mashiyane, 1992, p. 39; Mtezuka, 1995, p. 58) and is used to refer to any informal education the child receives in the group (Mnguni, 2002, interview).

The concept "formal education" is only used when reference is made to formal compulsory, state provided education (Mnguni, 2002, interview).

The "initiation school" provides a different type of education (Makopo, 2002, interview; Mnguni, 2002, interview) which will be discussed in the following paragraphs.

**Initiation in Southern Ndebele culture**

Initiation, bush school or secret society in Southern Ndebele culture refers to the secretive and closed preparation of the young teenager for adulthood. This type of school is presented in a single block and mainly serves as the child's transit-education during which he or she progresses from childhood to adulthood. "It denotes a body of rituals that marks the passage from one stage of development to another" (Mabena, 1999, p. 24; Fowler and Fowler, 1972, p. 527; Mbiti, 1971, p. 94; Rooth, 1984, p. 69; Monroe, 1957, p. 3). The literature also refers to oral teachings of which the purpose is to exert a pertinent influence on, and produce a decisive alteration in the social status of the candidate to be initiated (Bozongwana, 1983, p. 29; Mabena, 1999, p. 12; Snoek, 1987, p. 101). An explanation of "initiation" in the context of the Southern Ndebele culture and against the theory of Van Gennep follows below.

The researchers decided to analyse the work of scholars like Mabena (1999, p. 24–31), Mbiti (1971, p. 94–96), Rooth (1984, p. 69), Monroe (1957, p. 3–10), Thomas (1987, p. 20) and Mtezuka (1995, p. 58) in the light of the two readings of Van Gennep's three-stage process proffered above. The results of this literature study were subsequently corroborated by and augmented through the outcomes of the structured interviews the researchers had with scholars like Mahlangu (2002), Makopo (2002), Mnguni (2002), Ntombeni (2005). According to these scholars and against the Rites of Passage presented by Van Gennep, the initiation school of the Southern Ndebele people may best be understood under the following subheadings;
1. Initiation as severance and separation
The phase of severance and separation (Van Gennep) can be described as the first phase of the secretive and closed process of initiation that takes place when a young person is prepared for adulthood. During this phase, the young person has to "dissociate" and "disjoin" (Kritzinger, Steyn, Schoonees and Cronje, 1970, p. 316) him or herself from a childlike lifestyle and identity. This severance or abstraction is not a superficial or partial detachment, but a rather intense process that involves the total person (intellectual, psychological, social, emotional, spiritual, etc. [Mtezuka, 1995, p. 67]). During the isolation, the child has to progress from an "old self" to a "new I" with a new identity and a new role to fulfil. The child becomes a new person and at first, a stranger to him or herself. Based on the principle that through abstraction comes clarity, the child, during the process of isolation, has to master the developmental task of altering his or her self-concept and the way he or she thinks about it.

1.1 The phase of severance and isolation as part of the Southern Ndebele initiation – an introduction
Both boys and girls, ranging from twelve to twenty years of age, undergo initiation. Initiation is also offered to adolescents who are about to marry and have not yet attended any initiation school. Unless the child has attended a state school (which is compulsory in South Africa), he or she had very little formal schooling up to the point that he or she goes to initiation school. In the traditional setting, there are no teachers or tutors specially employed to assist with the education of the children and no schools or special places that are set aside for learning. Traditional children learn by being around and imitating their parents and other adults. They also learn through experience and as such gradually learn to exercise control over their behaviour on their own. By letting the children assume responsibility and by making them, as members of a larger group, responsible for the performing of certain tasks, their own behaviour and the behaviour of their peers, the "system" contributes to the education of the child (Makopo, 11 July 1995, interview).

The young boy is generally regarded as relatively unimportant, an undignified member of his family, not united with his soul, and, consequently, "not really human". He is therefore relatively free to do as he pleases (up to the point of going to initiation school), and any form of misbehaviour, even theft, is not condoned from a young
boy (Makopo, 11 July 1995, interview). Before going to the initiation school, boys are called “umsogwabo”, a term which refers to their insignificant status. The attire for the insignificant is referred to as “amabetshu” and the basic item of clothing to reveal their “inferior status” is a front apron, made from a goat’s skin to which they can add any number of decorative items (either borrowed from their sisters or friends such as decorative badges or pieces of beadwork made by their mothers or sisters) (Mphahlele, 1992, p. 9).

The initiation ceremonies for boys are known as “wela” and those for girls, “ukuthomba” and “uqude” (first and final stage). The boys and young men who have been chosen and are ready for initiation are referred to as “amaja”. They are differentiated from other boys or young men by hornlike structures made out of grass and reed (“umshojo”), which are placed on their foreheads for a period of a month, prior to initiation. The age of initiates is regarded as very important. It confers economic and social privileges, primarily as far as the distribution of game, rewards and wealth is concerned.

Otterbein (1969, p. 118) states that the exact age for initiation among African cultures cannot be determined, as this differs from culture to culture. He maintains, however, that generally speaking, initiation takes place between ages ten to twenty years. Ntombeni (2005, p. interview) however emphasized that the girls rarely start menstruating before the age of thirteen years and therefore only start their initiation when they are thirteen years of age. The first menstruation and the first ceremony are referred to as “ukuthomba”.

During the isolation, each initiate receives a new name, different from the one given to him or her at birth, a symbolic indication that he or she has entered a different developmental stage with a different, new identity.

1.2 Time and place of isolation
The isolation of boys takes place between April and June, always in wintertime when there is less risk for their wounds to become septic. The boys spend the time of isolation in a secluded and special rural camp, always under the supervision of an elder, appointed by the chief. Temporary grass shelters, hidden by bushes or trees, are erected, preferably on hilltops outside the village or in the mountains.

As mentioned above (par. 1.1), the isolation of the girls only takes place after she has started her first menstruation.
Traditional Southern Ndebele girls seem to have a close relationship with their mothers and are expected to report everything that happens to them, to their mothers (Mtezuka, 1995, p. 66; Ntombeni, 2005, interview). This includes the requirement that when a girl menstruates for the first time, she has to inform her mother, who will inform her father. The mothers and sisters, as well as the elderly women of the closest family will also be informed, so that they can become involved in the applicable ceremonies.

During her isolation she is kept at home (except for the “washing” which takes place at the river) or after the final stage when she and the other young girls gather for a feast at a demarcated place.

1.3 Duration of isolation
The duration of the isolation differ between cultures. Among Southern Ndebele the ceremonial training of the boys is completed within two to three months. The duration usually depends on the healing process after the “cutting” or surgery (circumcision). Child (1993, p. 149) describes that circumcision takes place on the second day at the initiation school and that the healing has taken place satisfactorily by the end of the ceremony, about two to three months thereafter.

Southern Ndebele girls are not circumcised. There are two isolation periods for girls. The first period lasts from between five to ten days for the first menstruation or menarche and the second stage, referred to as “uqude”, follows, which lasts for two to three months (Makopo 11 July 2002; interview). This second period of isolation is usually held after the second or third menses. The girl is kept in her mother’s but or in one of the rooms in the house, depending on the size of the house “and her father’s wealth” (Mtezuka, 1995, p. 55). She is kept in isolation for a period of eight weeks. “During this period, she is not to be seen by anybody besides her mother and aunts” (Mtezuka, 1995, p. 55). It seems as if a lateral system of authority prevails as the aunts are closely involved, not only in the rather private matters of the girls’ growing-up, but also in the general disciplining of the young girl.

2. Initiation as threshold, restoration and entrance
Van Gennep describes the second phase in his *Rites of Passage* as that of threshold, restoration and entrance. (http://
www.ancienthealingways.co-uk/writing.php?id=1). The concept "thresholding" was originally used to refer to the piece of timber or stone which lies beneath the bottom of a door (the sill of a doorway); hence, the entrance to a house or building (Emery and Brewster, 1948, p. 1985). With regards to the initiation of a young person the concept "threshold" refers to that period when a young person, in his or her state of isolation, while being in a confined, isolated space, consciously lingers on the threshold of, or in the "great divide" between childhood and adulthood.

It is during this period of thresholding, before the young person takes the plunge into a new developmental phase with a new identity, that the actual restoration (Van Gennep, 1909) (to bring back to a former, original, or normal condition; to reinstate in dignity" [Emery and Brewster, 1948, p. 1540]) and preparation (Van Gennep, 1909) ("to put in due condition by training or instruction" [Emery and Brewster, 1948, p. 1383]) of the young person for adult life, take place.

2.1 Restoration, preparation and entrance of (a) the Southern Ndebele girl

It is during this phase, while in isolation and waiting on the threshold of life, that the young girl undergoes her restoration. She is mainly tutored on the secrets of womanhood. These teachings include aspects such as the rules of hygiene and privacy, advice with regard to sexuality, childbirth, health, married life, on how to be a good and loving mother, and the best honoured wife. Self-respect and self-discipline (Makopo, 11 July 2002, interview) and submissiveness (Ntombeni, 2005, interview) are highly valued and expected of the girl. She also learns the appropriate feminine behaviour as observed by the group, e.g., the correct use of the left and the right hand when eating (the right hand is used for lifting food to the mouth and therefore, at all times, has to be kept clean) (Ntombeni, 2005, interview).

The teachings include lectures on sexuality and relationships with members of the opposite sex. She will be allowed to be friends with boys, to receive visits and to go out with them, but is warned not to be tempted to partake in sexual actions, “viz caressing as it can lead to sexual intercourse” (Mtezuka, 1995, p. 42). Although no internal intercourse is allowed the girl is encouraged to have external intercourse as it is believed not to be “dangerous”. By “external intercourse” it is understood that a man is not allowed to ejaculate inside the female’s body – ejaculation is to be done
outside the vagina, thus "external intercourse". The girl is warned that, should she conceive a child before marriage, as a form of punishment she will be forced to marry a widower, the oldest man in the village or community, or a man with many wives where she will have the lowest status (Makopo, 11 July 2002, interview).

On a question about the prevention of HIV/AIDS, Ntombeni (2005, interview) remarked that she heard about it and that "it is sad" but that she, as an elder, can't do anything to prevent the youth from being infected.

On the last day of her isolation the young girl will make a symbolic "entrance" into the outside world. Her girl friends will start to dance and sing outside the hut, early in the evening until the following morning when she will appear and they will accompany her, singing and dancing, to the river ("emlangeni") where she must be washed and "purified". The girl is literally washed in the river to make the "dirt" flow downstream and away and she "becomes" the new person, prepared and restored, with a new identity (Mtezuka, 1995, p. 39).

(b) the Southern Ndebele boy
Boys grow up with the knowledge that they have to identify themselves with their own peer group ("undangani") until the "time comes" for them to go to initiation school and, after that, to get married (Mphahlele, 1992, p. 44). It is culturally and traditionally determined that the boy cannot marry until he has successfully completed initiation school. But after completing initiation school, the boy has to get married. The family would suggest that, if there is a brother in the group that has recently completed initiation school, he must marry before the next brother is sent to initiation school. If he fails to get married within four years of completion, his parents together with his school teachers have to choose a wife for him.

It is only through initiation (in the phase of thresholding) that the Southern Ndebele boys are able to learn the definition of and identification with the male role maintained by the organized adult males and to view the wall from the male adult’s point of view. Not all the initiates succeed in passing through this rigorous period, in some instances some young men actually die (Ntombeni, 2005, interview). The survivors of the initiation period are considered to have
proved themselves worthy of rejoining society as responsible and worthy adults. The initiates experience a considerable amount of social pressure to succeed and pass through the period of transition and transformation (restoration): i.e. the rebirth of the person with a new identity. To symbolise the break with the past, all the objects used ("wela") during the ceremony are burnt and while the fires rage, a feast is held; a celebration to manhood!

Unlike girls, boys are taken out of the village to a chosen place only known to the males of that community (in this regard also refer to par. 1). Boys attend initiation school for three to four months, staying there until they have completed the course, together with their teachers.

During the restoration and preparation, the boys are tutored on bodily changes, their relationship with members of the opposite sex, e.g., the importance of not having internal intercourse until after they got married and their roles as fathers and marriage partners. As part of their social education (also refer to the par. The social preparation of the child, p. 24), the initiates inter alia learn to honour the chief and tribal custom, respect those older than themselves, value those things which are of value to the society and to observe tribal taboos, especially those connected with food and their sexual life.

Initiation is a period during which the individual is continuously being tested and invariably even the best effort is judged by the supervisors of the initiation to be inadequate and deserving of a beating. The hardships that are endured by male initiates, such as standing in freezing rivers for hours, carrying burning coals and eating stale food are all aimed at teaching the initiates the correct behaviour that their society will expect of them, such as being humble and respectful to their elders. While undergoing these hardships they gain an appreciation for the values and comforts of society and can't wait to rejoin their families to take up their new roles.

**Circumcision of boys as a symbol of their preparation for life**

The initiates must be humble and respectful to all and have to use the special terms characteristic of the school whenever they speak. The initiates are highly secretive of the content of initiation, they are told not to disclose information. Child (1993, p. 149) cited that the initiates seem clearly aware of the critical meaning of the ceremony as a
turning point in their lives. On the one hand they fear the
danger of castration or death from circumcision, but on the
other hand, they experience the absolute necessity of taking
part, in order to shift from one mode of life to another. Both
the initiates who were interviewed stated clearly that they
do not see the so-called value of initiation schools and do
not understand all the fuss made about the ceremony of
initiation. The boys stated that, if they had a choice, they
would certainly not agree to go to the initiation school
(Initiate X, interview, Initiate Y, interview).

The identity of the person performing the circumcision is
kept a secret; it could be a magician, a witchdoctor or an
elderly member of the village chosen by the chief. During
an interview (Mahlangu, 2004, interview) the following
statement was made; “whatever happens at initiation, it
must not be discussed or revealed to anybody who has
never undergone such training”.

It is believed that the foreskin of the penis is removed by
cutting it with a sharp knife. This is to be done without an
anesthetic on the first day of initiation. It is to be done in
secret, which in most cases, is out in the veld. After cutting,
the wound is not covered, but has to be dressed regularly by
a mixture of medicines prepared by the village’s witchdoctor
to avoid it becoming septic. The boy’s body is smeared with
ash to identify him as an initiate.

It is believed that a man who has been circumcised is
more favoured and loved by women, since he is suppose
to be more capable of satisfying women sexually. It is
also believed that he will never be a carrier of sexually
transmitted diseases. After this, for the first time, he is now
regarded as a “man” and is expected to get married soon
and to beget children.

Not all the initiates succeed in passing through this
rigorous period and in many cases young men actually
die. The survivors of the initiation are considered to have
proved themselves worthy of rejoining society as adults. This
initiation ceremony symbolizes the rebirth of a new person
because the person that rejoins the society is considered to
have a new identity, almost as if he has been reborn.

Amongst the Southern Ndebele people, the aim of the
preparation of the young person during thresholding and
restoration (in his or her new status) is to teach the child the
responsibility and practical aspects of how to establish and
maintain physical, social and spiritual security (survival),
not only for him or herself, but also for the future family and group. A brief overview of the physical, social and spiritual education, follows.

• The physical preparation is done by teaching the child the fundamental arts of survival and individual responsibility with the aim to control the environment and to master external circumstances. The initiate has to obtain the necessary wisdom of life. The aim is to teach the child to adjust to the environment, to learn through established or fixed ways to cope with immediate circumstances and daily needs to provide physical security. It includes the development of will power, especially in boys through, for example, asceticism, self-denial, mortification, physical endurance and self-control (Kanga Kalemby-Vita, 1977, p. 39; Mahlangu, 2002, interview; Makopo, 2002; interview; Mnguni, 2002, interview). It also include lessons on the collection of food, the picking of fruit (eating and living from the veld) and pharmacopocis [selecting herbs for medicinal purposes]). They have to obtain the skills of hunting, providing clothing, shelter and protection, primarily for the purpose of maintaining security, in this case, physical security, which remains of utmost importance, since, "without means of securing themselves, nothing else has much meaning" (Makopo, 2002, interview). The physical education of the child aims at security and protection of the individual and his or her family against the destructive forces of nature and from both human and animal enemies. Adaptation with the aim to survive and be secure can thus be regarded as the major educational goals and themes.

It is an education acquired for life and through life, which focusses on "... a sense of observation, spontaneous activities, exploitation of nature, educative games, co-education of both sexes through games and initiation rituals, learning of the art of oratory, dance, fables, and songs. These are admirably and very naturally organized in such a way as to make complete and mentally-balanced men [and women] who are well adapted to their environment" (Fafunwa and 33 Aisiku, 1982, p. 14). The physical preparation also includes the education on procreation, human sexuality and marriage (Mahlangu, 2002; interview, Makopo, 2002, interview; Mnguni, 2002, interview).
• The social preparation of the Southern Ndebele child is aimed at preparing him or her for communal life. Mphahlele (1992, p. 8) explains that social education "aims at conformity and indoctrination and the integration of the young individual into tribal group values and societal behavioural norms which can be viewed as one of the most important instruments or media for the sustainability and transfer of the Southern Ndebele culture".

Although the child grows up within the group and as such becomes familiar with tradition of his or her particular tribe, it is nevertheless important to realize that, during initiation, the typical traditional behaviour is specified and instructed in great detail and is strictly demanded from every member of the group. The correct traditional behaviour is an important prerequisite for a person to enter the real Southern Ndebele tribal affairs. This also includes his or her education on how to deal with one's more profound feelings in the group, by using language, music, dancing, ornamentation, masks, beadwork and ceremonies (Mahlangu, 2002, interview; Makopo, 2002; interview, Mnguni, 2002, interview);

The child’s social education also encompasses his or her preparation for citizenship in the tribe, enabling him or her to take care of social obligations and responsibilities. The initiation school provides a physical environment in which the adolescent can meet and get to know his or her peers (Mabena, 1999, p. 13) and as such get an opportunity to practice how to act as a group member and responsible citizen.

• The spiritual education of the child forms an equally important part of the child’s preparation for adult life and also takes place in the phase thresholding and restoration (prior to his or her entrance into the adult role). It mainly serves as the child’s annexation into the world of the unseen and supernatural and entails the teaching of - essential rites, dances and ceremonies to please the gods,
- the importance of careful observation of norms, customs and traditions in an attempt to please and worship the ancestors,
- the adult’s role in religious practices,
- how to be "an entity in unity, not only with other men, but also with the whole of nature, comprising the earth, water, fire, light, etc. It is finally an issue of making
man pass from the situation of being an individual to
the social situation, aimed at full cosmic participation”
and, “the world of the unseen (spirits)” (Mwamwenda,
1995, p. 19),
- moral codes that, in the case of boys, are articulated
as “manly behaviour” (Mabena, 1999, p. 13) and is
“an integrated experience that combines physical
training with character-building, and manual activity
with intellectual training” (Fafunwa and Aisiku, 1982,
p. 10),
- the secret of power, real or imaginary, and profound
African philosophy and religion. Secret mythical cults
are functional in Southern Ndebele community life,
since the curriculum is focussed on the needs of the
society (Mtezuka, 1995, p. 65). Secret cults serve as
institutions of higher or further education for those
who are identified or selected by the chief or elders.

3. Initiation as inclusion, absorption and incorporation
The concept “include” was originally used to refer to something
or someone that is “shut in; close; to put within limits; to
contain as a subordinate element” (Emery and Brewster, 1948,
p. 809). The concept “inclusion”, in the context of this article
within the parameters of initiation, reveals its meaning with
radiant clarity. The concept “absorption” explains this phase
in the process of initiation even further with “to be sucked in
and occupied mentally”, especially in the context of the “new
identity” in a new role in the group (Emery and Brewster, 1948,
p. 4). This process, as described by Van Gennep, (1969), when
viewed holistically, is concluded and consolidated in the idea of
in-corporation (L. in, + corporate) which can be explained as “to
form or combine into one body or uniform substance; to unite
intimately; to be introduced into a body as an integral part, as in
a society” (Emery and Brewster, 1948, p. 812).

3.1 Initiation as inclusion, absorption and incorporation in
Southern Ndebele culture
It is interesting to note that none of the informants referred
to different phases in the initiation of their young people, as
if it didn’t exist. It seemed as if they view and value it as
being one major event, a turning-point and acme in the life
of the individual.

After the young girl made her “entrance” (refer to par.
2.1a above) and the purification ceremony at the river
has taken place, the girls return back home, singing and dancing ("ugugida with words that praise the father. He now becomes the focus of attention since it is "obvious" that soon he will be receiving "lobola" (a traditional payment in the form of cattle) for his daughter's hand in marriage. When her father presents her with a blanket, it is an indication that he is satisfied and now regards her as "no longer a child" (Ntombeni, 2005, interview). Depending on the wealth of the father oxen are slaughtered and different kinds of food prepared for the feast that is to be held at the father's place. The young girl receives presents from her friends and relatives and wears her dancing apron that is made from beads in a very special pattern that represents her new status. The apron is known as "utshogolo". Mainly singing and dancing will take place (Mtezuka, 1995, p. 48). At the end of this ceremony, the girl is considered to be mature and ready for marriage.

Her new status will be revealed in her change of clothing. She is now expected to wear beadwork ("rholwani") around the neck and ("ingolwani") around the waist with strings and beadwork around her upper arms. Although the latter restricts her movements, the girl soon gets accustomed to it and adopts the fluent and elegant movement that is expected of her. The ceremony for the girl concludes at the father's hut, it is a more intimate party and does not proceed to the chief's kraal. Male friends are not invited or allowed.

After the healing of the "cutting" of the young boys has taken place, they line up, called by their new name, and the procession moves to the chiefs kraal. More oxen will be slaughtered. During the welcoming ceremony, more singing and dancing will take place to rejoice with the achievers. The variety of food served to the guests include sour milk, sorghum beer and maize meal porridge (pap). During intervals between their cooking duties, the women perform ritual dances in the front courtyard, ululating and waving bead-covered sticks ("amadondolo"). The women chant songs of praise to their brave sons and with such instruments as seed peels or caterpillar cocoons tied to their ankles, animal horns or whistles, they build up a frenzy that echoes across the veld towards the secluded grass shelters. After the initiation school the boy is called "lisokana". His attire changes to "indebe".

Although the initiation of the young girl formally consists of only two phases or stages, there is the post initiation period
that is often regarded as part of the traditional initiation ceremony. It is important to understand that the Southern Ndebele girl, after her initiation, is regarded nubile. She will then have a special traditional dress code that is an indication of her age and new social status (Ntombeni, 2005, interview) and as such will be noticeable. Her new status is only made public through her more mature behaviour, and characteristic new attire. The beaded front aprons are replaced by stiff, square board ones, traditionally made of hardened skin, but currently also of cardboard or hardboard. Canvas is put on the back of the apron, and masses of colourful beads are threaded or fastened to the front, each colour having a particular meaning.

Marriageable girls may also be seen wearing blankets with their breasts uncovered. They also wear a profusion of heavy beaded hoops, or alternatively copper bands around their necks, arms, legs and waists. However, unlike married women, who have these bought for them by their husbands, unmarried girls buy it for themselves. Parents can also provide these ornaments as gifts to the young girl.

Value of the initiation school for the Southern Ndebele people

When questioned on the value of the initiation school, the informants bluntly stated that it should be continued. On the follow-up question, "Why should it be continued? Why is it important?" the following answers were given:

Makopo (2002, interview) motivated the continuation of the initiation school by supplying the following reasons:

• It develops the child’s latent physical skills;
• it develops character;
• it focuses on the inculcation of respect for elders and those in positions of authority;
• it contributes to the development of a sense of belonging and it encourages active participation in family and community affairs;
• it helps the child to understand, appreciate and promote the cultural heritage of the community at large.

Mahlangu (2002, interview) ardently stressed that the initiation school should be continued. He motivated his statement and view
by saying that it teaches the child what the parents can’t, mainly because of the parent’s languishing authority over the child. Mnguni (2002, interview) also commented on the undisputed value of the lateral discipline exercised by the elders and the pressure exerted on the child during initiation to obey and conform.

Ntombeni (2005, interview) firmly believes that the initiation school strengthens the hands of the parents with the moral and ethical teachings and the inculcation of norms and values, “the teaching of right and wrong” (Ntombeni, 2005, interview).

In an attempt to better understand the value that is attached to initiation as a process that takes place in the life of the Southern Ndebele child, it is necessary to finally view it in the framework of the aims that the parents and society have with the total education of their children, the aims upon which the initiation school is built and to which it contributes considerably, the aim “to produce an individual who is honest, respectful, skilled, co-operative and who conforms to the social order of the day” (Fafunwa and Aisiku, 1982, p. 11; Mtezuka, (1995, p. 39); Mwamwenda, (1995, p. 19); Mabena, (1999, p. 33); Mokopo, 2002, interview; Ntombeni, 2005, interview; Mahlanga, 2002; interview). Amongst the Southern Ndebele, initiation is culturally viewed as the strength of the child’s preparation for adulthood, and an indispensable part of his or her education (Mtezuka, 1995, p. 63; Mabena, 1999, p. 25; Khumalo, 1996, p. 26).

It seems that the major developmental task for Southern Ndebele teenagers is learning how to fit in, be accepted socially by other members of their group, how to meaningfully fulfil their need for a sense of belonging, as well as to understand the history and culture of their people, the Southern Ndebele. The research reported in this paper suggests that their initiation rites are comprised of pro-social behaviours that build social relationships, understanding, empathy, civility, altruism and moral decision-making. (See also http://www.alfred.edu/news/initiation_rites/initiation_rites.html.) In this sense initiation practices can be regarded as an invaluable part of the education of the Southern Ndebele child.

CONCLUSION

For the Southern Ndebele, their rites of passage have always been the mechanism used to affirm their identity as a scattered nation. To this day, these affirmations take the form of oral tradition, personal decoration, performance art, artistic and
architectural expression. Initiation ceremonies provide a pretext for bonding with other Amandebele and the reciprocity of these ceremonies ensure frequent contact with each other (Rich, 1985, passim). Initiation school systems should, therefore, obtain broad community participation to ensure that the content of the programme is consistent with community values. In the process of policy development representatives can resolve various perspectives and opinions, and thus establish a commitment for implementing scientific curriculated programmes, including the establishment of standards and values of the education programme activities and materials used. It is therefore important to involve parents, teachers and community representatives in developing and assessing initiation school policies and programmes for pupils and parents.

Based on the research reported in this paper, we wish to conclude by suggesting that for the Southern Ndebele, the qualified value of the initiation school seems to reside, above all, in its ability to stabilise and perpetuate their cultural tempero-spatiality and to care for and affirm their cultural identity as a proud and autonomous people. Intulogically, and in the light of the two readings of Van Gennep’s three-stage process proffered above, this identified value of their initiation school may be represented graphically as follows:

Figure 3. An intulogical interpretation of the value of the initiation school amongst the Southern Ndebele.
REFERENCES


Initiate X. Interview; 25 April 2004.

Initiate Y. Interview; 25 April 2004.


