




Leveraging on indigenous knowledge systems for leadership development in young men: discernable lessons from Ulwaluko amongst Xhosa speakers



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ABSTRACT

Ulwaluko or Traditional Male Circumcision is an old African practice that has survived years of criticism and attenuation of Western civilization through religion and education. With the growing Western influence on the continent, there is mounting questioning of the virtues of ulwaluko in some circles even amongst Africans themselves. Proponents of ulwaluko see the ritual as a potent tool for leadership development amongst young men. By adopting a qualitative research design, the authors collected data by interviewing young men who recently performed the ritual. Adopting a phenomenological approach helped the author understand the lived experiences of the target group. The researcher found that over time, there have been influences that sought to weaken and derail the intended objectives of ulwaluko. The researcher also found that leadership development has always been and continues to be integral to the ritual. The recommendations from the study are that the custodians of African cultural beliefs, customs, and values should reclaim their scope of influence and dominance on cultural practices. Greater awareness also needs to be created of the virtues of ulwaluko particularly amongst the younger generations. The author concludes that ulwaluko still plays a pivotal and prominent role in leadership development amongst young African males and that its benefits cannot be undermined.

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Introduction

Traditional Male Circumcision is an old African ritual practiced by different cultures across the continent. In essence the ritual is a process of transforming young men from boyhood to manhood. In Tanzania it is known as 'Kusara' and in Lesotho as 'Lebello' whilst in South Africa it is known as ulwaluko (Gqeba, 2021). In all these different cultures, in the first instance, Traditional Male Circumcision is commonly viewed as a rite of passage. This is also a rite to prepare young men for taking up family responsibilities as a man. Through the ritual, the young man is also introduced to cultural nuances, practices, and customs of a particular cultural or ethnic group. Lastly, the period is a symbolic gesture for the young man to take up responsibilities associated with power, protection, or security and of being a custodian of the secrets of the tribe (Mshana, Mwanga, Mosha & Changalucha, 2011). Ntozini (2014) posits that ulwaluko should be viewed as a good structure in place playing the important role of moral development of boys. There is the often-underrated educational aspect of ulwaluko which teaches the initiates about things like respect, responsible sexual practices, and behavior, building of the moral fibre, appreciation of nature, marriage, and taking responsibility (Ntombana, 2011; Gqeba, 2019; Duka-Ntshweni, 2013; Kheswa, Nomgcoyiya, Adonis & Ngeleka, 2014; Mhlahlo, 2009). Throughout history, ulwaluko has faced major criticism, being undermined, and branded as a pagan practice particularly by colonialists and missionaries. Critics of ulwaluko were and are still found even within the Xhosa speaking people, one such person was Tiyo Soga, born and bred in the Eastern Cape (Gqeba, 2021). The value of ulwaluko goes beyond being a rite of passage to include physiological and psychological benefits. One such psychological benefit is leadership development. The purpose of the study is to explore how indigenous knowledge

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systems, ulwaluko, contribute towards leadership development amongst young people. The researchers move from the hypothesis that leadership development has always been at the core of the ritual of ulwaluko. The question that the research article seeks to answer is “How does ulwaluko contribute towards the development of leadership attributes amongst the initiates?”

The study will play a significant role in creating awareness on the significance of Indigenous Knowledge Systems in general and ulwaluko in particular in leadership development amongst young men.

The author used Social Learning theory to anchor and frame the discussions on the topic. The Social Learning theory was introduced by psychologist Albert Bandura. According to the theory, “learning occurs through observation, imitation, and modelling and is influenced by factors such as attention, motivation, attitudes, and emotions. It also suggests that learning takes place through people observing the consequences of other people’s behaviors (Cherry, 2022). The learning process involves the learner modelling after those who are similar, high-status, knowledgeable, rewarded, or nurturing figures in our lives (McLeod, 2023).

Methodology

Qualitative research was adopted to study the phenomenon of leadership development amongst isiXhosa speaking initiates. According to (Ugwu & Eze, 2023). Qualitative research is aimed at gaining “a comprehensive understanding of social phenomena in their natural environment.” Busetto, Wick, Gumbinger (2020) define qualitative research as “the study of the nature of phenomenon” including “their quality, different manifestations, the context in which they appear or the perspective from which they can be perceived”. Within qualitative research design, phenomenological research approach was used with the aim being to “comprehend and characterize a phenomenon’s fundamental elements.” (Ugwu & Eze, 2023). Tenny, Brannan, & Brannan (2022) posit that “phenomenology looks to investigate experiences from the perspective of the individual.” Also, phenomenology “focusses on describing and explaining an event or phenomenon from the perspective of those who have experienced it.” (Tenny, Brannan, & Brannan, 2022). To get the perspective of the target group, interviews were conducted to collect data. Semi-structured questions were used to give interviewees freedom to elaborate in their responses. Domyei (2007: 136) suggests that “[t]he researcher tends to use semi-structured interviews to elaborate on certain issues.” Thematic analysis was used to analyse the data collected. Braun & Clarke (2006: 2) define thematic data analysis as “a method for identifying, analyzing, describing, and reporting themes found within the data set.” To ensure that the data is accepted as trustworthy, the researcher ensured that data analysis was conducted in a precise, consistent, and exhaustive manner by recording and systematizing and by also disclosing methods of analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). To ensure confidentiality, the respondents were given pseudo names to conceal their identity. The researcher also agreed with the participants, through informed consent, on how their identifiable private information will be handled, managed and disseminated (Hollard & Linvill, 2019).

Ulwaluko (Traditional Male Circumcision)

Barker & Ricardo (2005) explain that Traditional Male Circumcision involves young men being removed from their families for a specified period of time to be secluded from their families and the community at large. They are placed in a place where older men teach them about the attributes of being a man through sharing knowledge, experiences and through imparting certain skills. Their training covers focus areas like dispute resolution, male-female relationships, family and community life, and inherent roles of being an adult (Langa, 2014). Ramakgopa (2008) and (Vincent, 2008) also highlight other skills that get taught to initiates, and these include greater social responsibility in their communities, negotiating skills particularly in family disputes. They are also taught critical thinking through careful weighing of decisions and closer cooperation with elders.

Contextualising Ubuntu

Sotuku & Duku (2015) opine that Ubuntu philosophy nuances can be observed in diverse forms in African societies. The concept of Ubuntu is pronounced differently in the different African languages but in essence it emphasizes the interconnectedness of people through their relationships (Letseka, 2011; Sotuku & Duku, 2014). Ubuntu is both an aspirational and inspirational model with key qualities like being respectful, caring, loving and being compassionate (Ibid, 2014). The concept ‘Ubuntu’ is a Xhosa/Zulu word that fundamentally means that *‘umntu ngumntu ngabantu’*, translated in English to mean: a person is a person through other people (Chingombe & Higgs, 2019). Ubuntu is centered on humanness and solidarity as opposed to Western individualistic and utilitarian philosophies (Nussbaum, 2003 & Bolden, 2014).

Ulwaluko and leadership

Amongst the things that the young men learn at the initiation school is discipline which is an attribute that is a lifelong virtue that leadership needs to be grounded on. Discipline is instilled by putting them on a routine and by also sanctioning them for any unbecoming behavior. Initiates are also taught companionship and solidarity through working together as a team. They assist each other in the recovery process, they hunt together, and they share whatever food they have. This develops collaboration and interdependence. The initiates are also taught to appreciate nature, both flora and fauna. They learn the medicinal and nutritional value of the plants in their vicinity (Gqeba, 2019). The other important leadership lesson to initiates is done through mentorship and role-modelling. This role is primarily played by the traditional nurse (ikhankatha) who stays with the initiates for the duration of the stay at the initiation school. Elderly men also play a pivotal role in the counseling and mentoring of young men from the initiation school (Gqeba, 2019). The other person who plays a significant role in the mentorship and role-modelling capacity is the person charged with the

responsibility of smearing fat/butter on the body of the initiate after washing off the ochre from the body. The person chosen for that responsibility is usually a successful, responsible, exemplary person and experienced man in the community. Not only does the person smear the fat/butter, but he also shares words of wisdom with the initiates. The young men are then charged with the responsibility of using that old man as a role model.

Symbolism in leadership development

Another important leadership lesson from ulwaluko is centered on the festivities that mark and celebrate their return from the initiation school, umgidi as it is known. It becomes a symbolic celebration of triumph against all odds, and it is a symbol of resilience and victory. Symbolism is a prominent aspect of the African culture as it becomes part of the learning process and oral history. The whole ulwaluko ritual is underpinned by the philosophy of ubuntu. The ritual is embedded in the Ubuntu driven African cultural beliefs and value systems. The slaughtering of a beast and, *ukushwama* (eating the right breast flesh), the wearing of the neckband hairs plucked from the family cow known as *inkomo yobulunga* kept for that purpose. The family cow plays an important role in the African culture as it is used in connecting the family with the ancestors (Phalafala, 2013).

The concept of leadership

Leadership is a broad and often misunderstood concept because of many misconceptions that are paddled by those who define it. Prentice (2004) posits that “[l]eadership is the accomplishment of a goal through the direction of human assistants.” Leadership therefore is the ability to marshal others towards the realization of a broader objective. Furthermore, (Hill, Tedards, Wild, & Weber, 2022) posit that leaders must be willing to dedicate themselves to working for the people they lead with boldness and humility sparing nothing in the process. Leadership is about the ability and preparedness to inspire others. A leader's effectiveness is incumbent on the use of ideas (original or borrowed) and how they are communicated to engage them (followers) to a point where they act according to how the leader wants them to act (Ward, 2023). Wale (2019) suggests seven leadership traits that make for an effective leader. These are effective communication, accountability and responsibility, long-term thinking, self-motivation, confidence, people-orientation and emotional stability.

Findings and discussions

Question 1

Do you think that ulwaluko still has value in developing boys into men? Please explain.

Mbongeni

“After going through the ritual, I now understand that ulwaluko is what defines us as Xhosa men, without the practice, we would lose our sense of being. It has given me a reason to be and a purpose in life.”

Fikile

“it still holds a valuable place in the society in spite of all the adaptations, threats, and influences it has gone through. It is an integral part of our culture as AmaXhosa. Ulwaluko serves to unite Xhosa men across all divides, rich or poor, rural or urban, educated or uneducated. It is a pillar that unites Xhosa men.”

Duma

“Ulwaluko carries our sense of being and it creates a sense of responsibility and identity. I need to carry myself with pride as a man who must set an example for those who come after me”

From the data collected, there is evidence to suggest that most Xhosa speaking men still see ulwaluko as an integral part of their wellbeing. They see ulwaluko as a vehicle to give them a sense of identity and a sense of belonging. They view ulwaluko as a unifying factor that brings all Xhosa speaking men, in their diversity, together behind one common belief and practice. Ntozini (2014) posits that ulwaluko is a social structure that facilitates moral development of boys. Gqeba (2021: 60) opines that after initiation school “young men go back... with the expectation that they are new persons after coming out from initiation school” Furthermore, (Gogela, 2017:4) suggests that ulwaluko continues to occupy a place of great significance in the culture of AmaXhosa in contemporary South Africa. Ulwaluko is also a spiritual ritual that teaches the initiates about cleanliness. The nakedness of the initiate inside the hut or *bhoma* is a lesson that materialism and egocentrism mean nothing to them. Their experience as initiates opens their eyes to a new reality. Their mental framework is totally altered (Fana, 2019).

Question 2

Are there any leadership lessons that you learnt during your time as an initiate? Please elaborate.

Luzuko

“I learnt how to take responsibility for my actions and how to lead a responsible lifestyle. I also learnt to charge of my life and to meet challenges head-on.”

Fikile

First and foremost, I learnt that being a man places a lot of expectations on me and how to make sure that I live up to those expectations by being a responsible man. Through being a man, I also acquired a sense of duty to my family and my community. I now know that when the elders have passed on, they will pass the baton to us as the young generation. We therefore need to learn in any given opportunity we get.”

Dabula

“The most valuable lesson I learnt is that one learns better and more when they learn from those who have travelled the road ahead of them. I also learnt that a leader is more effective when they work within a collective. We had ample opportunities to practice leadership as initiates in a rotational basis which taught me lessons situational leadership.”

There are undeniably valuable leadership lessons learnt by initiates from ulwaluko from how to conduct themselves to becoming responsible members of the community. The lessons that the initiates learn during Traditional Male Circumcision are learnt through interacting with each other, they are learnt from elders in the community and most importantly, they are learnt from ikhankatha who is charged with that responsibility amongst others. It is in recognition of this learning process that Stinton (2007) posits that ulwaluko is a way in which “members of a society communicate values and ways of living through psychological, social and symbolic interactions and teachings.” The leadership lessons learnt at the initiation school are better observed after the initiates have come out of the initiations school through their behavior and in how they have internalized the lessons learnt through the four dimensions ulwaluko is anchored on. These dimensions are educational, psychological, social and physical dimensions (Duka-Ntshweni, 2013).

Question 3

Did ulwaluko prepare you to play a role in the community? Please elaborate.

Luzuko

“The most important lesson we were thought in that regard is that no man is an island in that everyone’s success is dependent on the support they to and get from others. I was taught to be part of whatever is taking place in the community and to help expecting nothing in return.”

Fikile

“Since I became a man, I now play an active role in all community and neighborhood activities. I play this role in a non-selective way I give support regardless of my relations with the family concerned. I don’t wait to be invited to go assist when people in my community are busy with an event, I just render support as that is expected from all men. As a man, I am now the eyes and the ears of my community, I have joined the legion of other men who are protectors of the community by virtue of them being men.”

Duma

“Yes, I now consider myself an active community member in that whenever I get an opportunity to give a hand to my neighbors, I do so. I now look out for the vulnerable and the distressed to offer assistance and I believe that is my responsibility as a man.”

Most young men come out of the initiation school as responsible community members who play an important role in the community. They play this community role by modeling themselves against the lives of responsible, exemplary members. Through the data collected, it became evident that most young men take their community responsibility seriously. This is supported by (Gitywa,2017; Duka-Ntshweni, 2013; Gogela, 2017) posits that the young men “are expected to show a more decent, responsible and proper behavior guided by the norms and values of the community.”

Question 4

What lessons did you learn during your time as an initiate? Please elaborate.

Luzuko

“I learnt that there are many ailments that you can cure with using western medicines, these include cuts, whooping cough and, aching muscles.

Duma

“I learnt a lot of things like, self-respect and respect for others, trying to resolve disputes instead of being an instigator, and I also learnt to plan before I embark on any activity. These lessons were learnt in practical ways.”

Fikile

“I learnt to work with others and value their input and I learnt to share with others and these lessons changed me and how I look at life in a big way.”

There is evidence to suggest that ulwaluko changes most young men for the better. Amongst these things is the lessons they learn on the use of indigenous knowledge to the benefit and to the benefit of their communities. They learn the use of traditional medicines; they learn interdependence which is an important feature of Ubuntu philosophy. In his book *Whispers from Skeletons*, Gqeba (2019) highlights the reliance of initiates on indigenous knowledge systems.

Question 5

Did you learn anything about your culture during your time as an initiate? Please elaborate.

Duma

“I was taught my family lineage and my clan names and the importance of knowing my ancestral origins.”

Fikile

“I learnt the value of Ubuntu in a more practical way in that as a group of initiates, we were there for each other, and everyone’s success depended on everyone else. This gave meaning to the African saying “Umntu ngumntu ngabantu.”

Mbongeni

“I learnt about the rich Xhosa heritage and about the cultural role that men play like leading the rituals, why and when certain things are done to connect with and to appease the ancestors. I learnt to give context to some of the beliefs and practices by the Xhosa people.”

The ikhankatha plays a prominent role in teaching young men about their culture during their stay at the initiation school. This one of the ways that mark their transition from boyhood to manhood. The custom or rite is a rigid way of life or practice that members of a community need to learn. Ntombana (2011) views isiko (custom or rite as a very religious and spiritual practice that connects African people to their ancestors. It is for this reason that ikhankatha is carefully chosen according to a “persons maturity, knowledge of herbs, good conduct and experience in traditional affairs.” (Gqeba, 2019:

Question 6

Did ulwaluko prepare you to play a significant role in your family. Please explain.

Mbongeni

“Yes, before going through the ritual, I was just a passive observer at home, I was told what to do, when and how. But since I went to the initiation school, I am now consulted on family matters and my opinion matters. In some instances, I am allowed to make decisions, something that was an anathema in the past.”

Duma

“Now that I am a man, I have clear and specific responsibilities within the family, and I need to ensure that I do that to enhance my standing as a man. These, I learnt during my stint as an initiate.”

Luzuko

“As an initiate, I was taught to take responsibility for my hut as if it was my house. This prepared me for the life as a responsible man within the family. When I wake up in the morning and before I go to bed in the evening, I need to make sure that everything is in order at home. I have now stopped aimless wandering with friends, and I now look for things to do at home.” The participants collectively agreed that since they became men, they are now taken seriously in their homesteads. They get consulted before any decision is taken as opposed to when they were boys, when they were just told what had been decided. They also indicated that they are now given an opportunity to make decisions on some aspects of the family life. As men in the family, they now have clearly defined roles in the household.

Conclusions

Ascertaining from the data collected and analysed, and from the literature reviewed, there is ample evidence to suggest that ulwaluko still plays a pivotal role in the leadership development of young men. Ulwaluko embodies the revered principles of ubuntu that are a codification of indigenous knowledge. The article concludes that more still needs to be done to ensure that the values of ulwaluko do not fade with time. If the leadership lessons from ulwaluko are to be replicated and refined, there needs to be concerted efforts to create awareness amongst communities on the importance of the invaluable lessons from indigenous knowledge. Traditional nurses, amakhankatha, need to be empowered with relevant knowledge on how to be relevant, intentional, and decisive in training initiates on leadership responsibilities, and attributes. Traditional, cultural and educational institutions need to play a central role in the mainstreaming of ulwaluko and ubuntu philosophy in all sectors of the society.

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