

Initiation Rites of the IsiXhosa Culture are Education Systems

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Abstract

This paper provides an overview of the male and female initiation rites of the amaXhosa of South Africa to argue that these traditional institutions meet the definitional criteria of education systems. We theorize education systems as fulfilling three key goals: knowledge transfer, character development, and socioeconomic agency. Framing certain initiation rites as being Indigenous Education Systems clarifies the precolonial education mechanisms of many non-Western societies, and how these institutions continue to function even with the advent of Western-style K-12 education systems. We delineate how the amaXhosa rites have changed in modern times and regularly intersect with larger social discourses, reflecting the ongoing dynamicity and vitality of these institutions. Cross-comparison with other cultural rites reveals remarkable similarities between traditional educational systems and uncovers institutional adaptations that could frame the conversation around methods for revalorizing Indigenous Knowledge production and transmission.

Introduction

The deconstruction of education and its definition have a long academic history. One researcher defines education as the deliberate, systematic, and sustained effort to transmit, provoke, or acquire knowledge, values, attitudes, skills, or sensibilities as well as any learning that results from that effort (Cremin 1976:27). This definition is abstract, and many institutions and practices will fulfill these traits, not just the Western school system. A Jewish education historian elaborates on this point specifically: education “is a purposeful activity that can happen in a wide range of frameworks and not only in buildings called schools. Moreover, this intentional activity does not only transmit knowledge, but it also is concerned with values, attitudes, skills, and sensibilities. Education is an activity which takes place in many diverse venues and is intended to develop knowledge, understanding, valuing, growing, caring, and behaving . . . while contemporary societies have denoted schools as the agency responsible for education, in fact, education far transcends the certificates of achievement received from pre-school, elementary, secondary,

and collegiate frameworks" (Chazan 2022: 16–17). As is already clear from these definitions, the goals of education are varied, and include both knowledge transfer but also building character traits.

The goals of education, also called the philosophy of education, have been examined in many fields by many authors, but the goals are often multiple and simultaneous (Siegel, Phillips & Callan 2018).

Passing on Knowledge

Knowledge transfer is the prototypical explanation for education, as evidenced by Chazan's epistemology, as he takes for granted that everyone agrees on this. The value of knowledge should be uncontroversial, but for the sake of this paper, we will give a couple of examples. Transmission of knowledge is crucial in specialized fields like nuclear energy, which requires a vast amount of training and skill to bring huge benefits in the form of energy, and where mistakes can be very costly (Amin, Gowin & Han 2004). Many specialists in construction, fishing, and building furniture view education as imparting these specific skills to better perform the jobs (Tambbaum & Kuusk 2014). Medical training and information distribution is a clear case of the value of knowledge itself, and the value of knowing how to teach other specialists and the public about this, as it helps people live longer and better (Wensing & Grol 2019).

Knowledge transfer is the typical pathway for legitimizing Indigenous Education Systems (Battiste 2007). Many traditional lines of work like fishing require great skill in their areas, and Indigenous Knowledge helps fishers in Alaska improve their ability to catch fish (Barnhardt & Kawagley 2008). In the same way, the traditional knowledge of the people in Siberia like the Yukaghirs helps improve hunting skills for communities that still use this skill set for food (Mustonen & Lehtinen 2013). Medicine is again viewed as a valued type of knowledge, as it directly helps health. The knowledge of traditional healers in Nigeria (and other African countries like South Africa and Kenya) has been seen as valuable by medical researchers (Adekannbi, Olatokun & Ajiferuke 2014); traditional Chinese medicine is deeply examined within modern medicine to the point of having entire institutions in Chinese universities (Hsu 1999). Brazilian farmers also employ traditional knowledge of plants to help protect their crops from pests and to increase their harvests (Ceolin et al. 2011). These brief examples, among many, show that knowledge transmission is widely valued as one of the cross-cultural goals of education.

Character Education

An equally important goal of education aside from teaching knowledge is teaching values and community. This is immediately observable in reading about the educational goals of the International Baccalaureate (IB) curriculum, which is widely used across the world. Its philosophical grounding is worded as follows: "the aim of all IB programmes is to develop internationally-minded people who,

recognizing their common humanity and shared guardianship of the planet, help to create a better and more peaceful world. IB learners strive to be: inquirers, knowledgeable, thinkers, communicators, principled, open-minded, caring, risk-takers, balanced, and reflective" (IBO 2012:3). The focus of this curriculum is not only the transfer of scientific information but also intentionally creating people with ethics and social skills.

The education system in the United States was created for moral education more than knowledge transfer. Benjamin Franklin advocated for teaching history in schools as a way of teaching morality, and that morality and education are conjoined (Franklin 1749). His writings directly led to the foundation of the University of Pennsylvania. One of the main advocates who created the public school system in the United States was Horace Mann, who wrote: "Students benefit from an education which teaches the principles of piety justice and a sacred regard to truth, love of their country, humanity and universal benevolence, sobriety, industry, frugality, chastity, moderation and temperance, and those other virtues which are the ornament of human society" (Downs 1974: 37). Thus, cultivation of morality was a major reason for the foundation of schools in this case.

Character education is still a goal of the American school system today. The Department of Education of the United States writes that "In school, character education must be approached comprehensively to include the emotional, intellectual and moral qualities of a person or group. It must offer multiple opportunities for students to learn about, discuss and enact positive social behaviors . . . State education agencies, through a collaborative community process, have chosen to incorporate character education into their school improvement plans and state standards." (United States Government 2005). This is further substantiated by the decision of multiple recent presidential administrations including Reagan, Clinton, and G.W. Bush to each increase the funding for character education by billions of dollars (Watz 2011).

One of the major goals of character education has been the creation of a cohesive society that is unified despite diversity. Character education emphasizes tolerance and community. This has been a major reason for the establishment of public schools as well as the military in modern countries. The US secretary of war admitted this when he advocated for compulsory military service "in a common service to a common Fatherland, universal military service will be the elder brother of public school in fusing this American race" (Breckinridge 1916:16). Essentially, this admits that one of the major goals of universal schooling was the creation of identity and community at the national level. The psychological grounding is called "intergroup contact theory" where people who may consider themselves to be separate communities are bound together in this institution, thus forming a new shared identity (Pettigrew 1998).

The case study of American education, and the reasons explicitly given at the creation of compulsory public education, show that the institution is largely about character and identity. While knowledge transfer is crucial, the creation of citizens

who have good morals and share an identity was ultimately the more significant reason for the establishment of education, especially universal compulsory education in the United States.

Education as Social Agency

A third widely cited goal of education is as a pathway for social gains. In modern society, educational achievement strongly correlates with family wealth: The National Bank of the United States writes that “The relationship between education and income is strong . . . in general, those with more education earn higher incomes. The higher income that results from a college degree is sometimes referred to as the “college wage premium” (Wolla & Sullivan 2017). Higher wealth leads to a huge number of capabilities and opportunities for individuals in society, so education is attractive for those who want agency and well-being. For example, both wealth and education of mothers are major determiners of infant mortality, but education even more so. Female education is thus a primary policy option for improving child health (Fuchs, Pamuk & Lutz 2010).

What happens if the government does not want a population to have agency? We have many examples of this in history. For example, the colonial administrators of several countries such as France, England, and Belgium severely limited access to education in their colonies so that the colonized people would not have power. There were only 12 teachers in all of Chad in 1932, who largely only taught the children of French families (Anthony 1991). More recent examples include the Apartheid government’s restriction of English language instruction to Black African students as a deliberate move to keep those populations out of the political and economic sphere of the country (de Klerk 2002; Heugh 2003; Makoni & Pennycook 2012). Thus, education directly affects the agency of a population in economic and political affairs.

However, another aspect of agency is control and opportunity in the personal sphere, specifically around marriage. There is much evidence showing that education is an important factor in the ability to marry, specifically in the number and quality of available matches. Across India and Bangladesh, researchers have shown that each additional educational degree corresponds to a larger dowry (Munshi 2017: 54). The same is true for Vietnam, where each year of education decreases arranged marriage rates by 14% and increases dowry payments (Smith Emran & Maret 2009). This pattern is reproduced in the West, where Belgian women strongly prefer highly educated partners (though men do not seem to care); this was shown with behavior on online dating (Neyt, Vandenbulcke & Baert 2019). Thus, education serves as a way of controlling marriage outcomes in a variety of very different societies.

Traditional African Education Systems

Beyond the transfer of knowledge, education has a variety of goals which often include teaching ethics and empathy, building identity, as well serving as an

instrument for individuals to achieve favorable outcomes in wealth, marriage, and mortality. Each of these points is true for education across the world, including the West. Examining the multiple factors that underpin education systems will allow us to argue that many initiation rites in Africa are types of educational systems. Of course, the universities in Timbuktu are recognizable examples of education in Africa, but this path is already legitimized and does not account for the communities who did not traditionally have such universities but still have unrecognized Indigenous Educational Institutions.

Many societies in Africa have rites of passage, which are rituals that must be fulfilled to progress to the next stage of life. These are often conceptualized as leaving childhood and entering adulthood. These are often composed of three stages: separation, transition, and reintegration into society (Turner 1995). These institutions are important factors in socialization, serving as a form of positive social control in teaching morality, knowledge, and community (Barker & Ricardo 2005). These institutions are often highly regimented and have many rules, among them sometimes being secrecy about the exact nature of the knowledge that is transmitted and the practices that are done (Magodyo 2013). However, certain portions of these initiations also constitute public spaces open to outsiders, as they become spaces for celebration and performance for the whole community.

Ulwaluko of the amaXhosa

Ulwaluko is an ancient institution practiced among the amaXhosa to bring boys into manhood which is still practiced in the modern day. There is much cultural weight placed on this practice, and therefore it is present very often in isiXhosa media including in books, medicine, news, plays, documentaries, and academic research. We will lean on the work of Tapiwa Magodyo who interviewed seven young amaXhosa men about the practice for an MA thesis in 2013. Participants expressed the taboo on discussing the practice – some would say this straightforwardly, and others would either leave silently or give another reason. However, some men were willing to discuss the process and were informed that they could choose what information they were comfortable sharing.

In short, the practice involves males typically aged 18-25 leaving the community for a period around eight weeks and returning as men who have been circumcised. There are many stages and rules to this process and there is variation in this custom in different areas. However, generally, young men leave the community and stay in a hut built from grass and other materials in a remote place; then they are circumcised by a traditional surgeon *ingcibi* and fed a special diet while they recover from the procedure. In this process, they are taught constantly by older men before returning to society through a large celebration called *umgidi*. The initiates are called *abakhwetha* (the initiates, but literally: the learners), signaling one of the primary purposes of this institution – to be taught.

The men interviewed by Magodyo outlined the basic characteristics of this education, which include physical training and endurance, learning customs like

the rituals of the ancestors and marriage laws, and creating brave, obedient, and strong-willed young men. The development of character is the central aim of the institution (Magodyo 2013:46), as the initiates are intended to learn decision-making, problem-solving, self-control, leadership, work ethic, self-reliance, and respect. As Magodyo writes, "the ideal *ulwaluko* man is expected to be responsible, selfless and respectful to family, elders, and society at large". Passing on knowledge is a feature of this institution, as young men are expected to learn how to meet their ancestors and learn how to perform the rituals that they will need to fulfill as adults. Other knowledge that is passed in this traditional schooling is courtship customs, marriage laws, and sexual education (Vincent 2008; Magodyo 2013:4).

However, the individual motivations of the men who have gone through *ulwaluko* are predominantly reasons of identity and social standing. The amaXhosa do not believe that anyone who has not undergone *ulwaluko* is a man, regardless of age or physical development (Gwata 2009). The status of manhood brings with it much power which gives agency to individuals: before circumcision, a male cannot marry, start a family, or inherit possessions (Stinson 2011). This prohibition on marriage of men who are not circumcised is discussed in the book *Intaka Yobusi* in which an umXhosa girl says that no Xhosa girl will sleep with a man who has not gone 'to the mountains' [to *ulwaluko*], and she will not marry him (Saule 2011, chapter 14). This status of being a man gives rights and responsibilities that are not given otherwise (Meissner & Buso 2007), and men who have gone to *ulwaluko* can participate in spiritual ceremonial roles (Mavundla, Netswera, Bottoman & Toth 2009). There is a huge social pressure on amaXhosa to undergo *ulwaluko* for identity reasons, as they will only be a full member of their culture if they go through this custom (Vincent 2008; Magodyo 2013).

The custom of *ulwaluko* meets all of the criteria for definitions of education systems, as it transfers knowledge, builds character and identity, and leads to better outcomes socially in marriage, wealth (inheritance laws), and mortality, if we consider the decrease in HIV transmission by 50-60% affirmed by multiple governments (CDC 2014; Tchuenche et al. 2018 for South Africa).

Women's Education: Intonjane

The work of Siziwe Sylvia Sotewu in her 2016 MA thesis will largely guide the analysis of *intonjane*, which is the traditional initiation rite for amaXhosa girls. This institution exists as a parallel to *ulwaluko* in guiding girls to becoming women. *Intonjane* seems less culturally prevalent than *ulwaluko*, yet some girls still undergo this ritual. In her work, Sotewu consulted many elders in her family, at her church, and groups of women in different villages, but the practice must be contextualized as being rare in wider society today.

Intonjane is begun when a girl shows signs of becoming a woman, typically at her first period but not necessarily so. Her paternal male relatives come together in a meeting called *ibhunga* where beer is brewed, and they announce the beginning of this ritual for her. The hair from the tail of an ox, called an *ubulunga*, is placed

around the girl as a sign of her readiness for marriage. It is expected that she will receive proposals for marriage from young men in the coming months following completion of the rite. A special hut is built next to the house of her family called *ejakeni*, and it is covered by a curtain made with reeds or grass (Sotewu 2016:17). The initiate is led by an older woman from her family, often her grandmother or her aunt, as well as a group of girls her age called *amakhankatha*, consisting of her friends who will keep her company. In the two weeks she is in this hut, she must not be seen by anyone other than this teacher and the group of girls. In this time, she is presented to the ancestors and taught her obligations to them as a woman. In this time, she does not wear clothes except a skirt and white ash, which is meant to teach her humility and obedience: "she has to learn so that he will have a good marriage and future" (Rasing 1995: 49). At the end of this time of seclusion, she is chased by a group of young boys and girls to her house; a goat is slaughtered in her honor, and she is fed the goat's shoulder meat off a stick without using her hands. Instead, a boy holds a stick and she must eat the meat from it. Two days later, an ox is slaughtered and she eats the right shoulder of the ox in a ceremony called *umshwamo*, and stays again in the hut. At the end of these two weeks, a celebration is thrown in her honor, where the white paint is washed and she is covered with yellow ochre. Now she is a woman and can be married and have children.

In this ritual, she is educated with various kinds of knowledge: she learns about marriage laws, social rules for respecting her in-laws, reproductive matters, and she is taught many songs that she must learn to pass on to her children. *Intonjane* is meant to cultivate humility, obedience, and respect as elements of building character. In terms of agency, she is now eligible for marriage, and finishing this process grants a higher dowry and generally more marriage offers (Mcimeli 1995:94). Thus, *intonjane* fulfills similar goals as *ulwaluko* and education systems more broadly.

Comparing the Two isiXhosa Rites

There is an important difference between *ulwaluko* and *intonjane* in modern society – *ulwaluko* is practiced universally among the amaXhosa, while *intonjane* is far less common. Few amaXhosa women of today have undergone *intonjane* themselves, as this practice had already majorly receded before the time of many who are alive today. Sotewu's experience as a woman in a family that continues to practice female initiation must be contextualized as extremely unusual and not indicative of a typical umXhosa woman's experience. In some contemporary families of amaXhosa the dictates of a consulted traditional healer, *igqirha*, call for the doing of *intonjane* and those families comply. This is substantially different from the male initiation which continues in vigor as an expected rite of passage.

There seems to be little discussion of why one practice has receded, and the other has not. In theory, the consequences of being denied manhood in the isiXhosa culture are greater than those of womanhood because of the power that accompanies that status in a patriarchal society. Instead of a debate on comparing

these, current conversation in isiXhosa culture seems to largely be dominated by male initiation, perhaps due to the absence of women's initiation in the lived experience of the vast majority of amaXhosa women. In terms of gendered notions of adulthood, however, this effectively means that the culture has shifted away from a traditional binary gender system with two self-standing genders to a marked-male system where everyone is either a man who has passed the rite, or a non-man. We take this to stand in opposition to Simone de Beauvoir's assertion that in French (and Western) society, "one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" – that in her society there exist women and non-women (1949). Regardless of one's analysis and critique of Beauvoir's application of the framework to her own society, the framework of a single marked-gender system proves useful in understanding modern social discourse around ulwaluko in isiXhosa culture as an integral component of manhood (Gwata 2009; Vincent 2008).

Changes to Ulwaluko

Much like any living cultural institution, ulwaluko faces a series of changes in modern society. First and foremost, the location of practice has begun to change. While a traditional pillar of ulwaluko was its isolation in the wilderness, some modern initiation schools have begun to appear in permanent buildings located in urban settings (Msizi 2022). The length of time has also changed, where three generations ago, initiates stayed in isolation for six months; a generation later, it was three months; today's initiates average one month (Bullock 2015).

Further changes include interventions by Western-trained medical professionals concerning a widely reported series of fatalities and accidents following faulty surgeries by sometimes undertrained *iingcibi*, traditional surgeons. As Funani (a health professional) reportedly said to traditional leaders, when discussing measures to decrease mortality:

Abakhwetha abasetyenzwa ngokusesikweni, kulinyazwa ubudoda ngenkqu . . . Masizibekeni kwimeko yaba bantwana, umntwana aye esuthwini ngegugu abuye sengena cala, yiyo loo nto bambi baphelela endimangeni, bambi bazibulale

"The initiates who are initiated in the traditional way, get their masculinity damaged by injury... Let us put ourselves in the situation of these children, that a child would go to initiation with pride and then return with no gender side (genderless), that is why some end up in mental institutions, others kill themselves" (Funani 1990:5). This analysis is corroborated by perspectives of men who faced these challenges firsthand (Mgqolozana 2009).

The interaction between traditional and Western health systems is a wider conversation in South Africa (Guma & Mokgoatšana 2020). There has been

significant conversation around the utilization of surgical methods at *ulwaluko* to reduce risk of HIV transmission, for example (Mavundla et al. 2009; Peltzer, Nqeketo, et al. 2008; Vincent 2008; Stinson 2011). In the past few generations, amaXhosa parents have begun to utilize the services of surgeons who are male amaXhosa physicians trained in Western medicine. Community education has been offered and recorded on video by male and female medical practitioners.

The pool of initiates, too, has changed. Modern law mandates that initiates be 18, even though historically initiates have been attested as young as 13 (Feni 2015) in some regions. The openness of the institution to non-amaXhosa initiates has also been contested. Various gray literature points to customary law around such cases, such as the necessity for amaSwati men to undergo *ulwaluko* in the isiXhosa tradition to be eligible to marry an umXhosa woman (Saule 2011). The restriction on marriage of amaXhosa women only to initiated men in the isiXhosa tradition logically extends outwards: a different book *Zajink' Izinto* discusses a situation of an Afrikaner boy who speaks isiXhosa and understands the traditional marriage law wanting to marry his umXhosa girlfriend, mandating his participation in *ulwaluko* (Mpofu 2021). These situations are not purely hypothetical, and a few high-profile stories have highlighted white and Indian initiates in *ulwaluko* (Feni 2021; BBC 2013; varied news reports from 2016, 2008, 2007). This is not without controversy, with substantial pushback from some traditional leaders such as Chief Mwelo Nonkonyane (provincial chairperson of the Congress of Traditional Leaders of South Africa), interviewed by the Daily Dispatch, saying: "It makes our customs lose their value and dignity. The ritual is our secret and we feel that it is being stolen from us". Nevertheless, this reaction means that in practice, *ulwaluko* is increasingly and significantly being extended to initiates who are not of isiXhosa heritage in a way that seems to not have been common in prior generations.

A related conversation about changing identities of initiates is around gender and sexuality. A better-studied phenomenon in recent times is the complicated relationship that gay amaXhosa men have with *ulwaluko*, where many simply opt out of the practice: "The ritual carries with it the implicit assumption that gay initiates have decided to 'convert' to heterosexuality . . . if they engage in the ritual while fully intending to retain their homosexual identity, they are considered as having transgressed the expected rules of *ulwaluko*" (Ntozini & Ngqangweni 2016:1310–1311). Others, feeling pressure from the material and social consequences of the status, opt to undergo the process anyway: many choose to hide their sexual orientation through the process, though some explicitly do not (Mashabane & Henderson 2020:171). Some initiates choose to complete the ritual to force respect from homophobic family members and to 'equalize' them with their heterosexual counterparts (Ntozini & Ngqangweni 2016:1316). This equalization strategy largely works – through the very rigid metric of masculinity established by the culture, gay men who complete *ulwaluko* are afforded respect at the risk of delegitimizing the very patriarchal structure that oppresses them (Mashabane & Henderson 2020:171). Again, these conclusions are corroborated by nonacademic

sources like the film *Umgidi*, where a gay man refuses *ulwaluko* and is put under tremendous pressure by male members of the family (Schutte & Singiswa 2004).

We do not believe such a debate – academically or not – exists around women's initiations in isiXhosa culture due in part to its low prevalence. It is also completely unclear how these gendered initiation systems might handle transgender or nonbinary people. By comparison, modern Jewish communities have pioneered gender-neutral mitzvah traditions and are largely engaging with this question ("they mitzvah"; "b mitzvah"; "b'nei mitzvah") (Cramer 2022). The number of initiation rites across the continent leads to some comparable case studies that might be able to clarify how this plays out in societies with different parameters. For example, in societies with strong female initiation rites, are there ramifications or exclusions for lesbians in the way shown for gay men in isiXhosa rites? What precedent exists for females undergoing male initiation and vice versa?

Such cases are beginning to appear in the popular discourse of the amaXhosa, with the unprecedented decision in 2022 for a transgender woman, Cwenga Titi of Qonce, to participate in *ulwaluko* despite having lived socially as a woman since the age of four (Dangazele 2022). Her reasoning might be opaque to someone outside the culture, as she says, "As much as I am living as a trans woman, I understand that I was born a male and in our society, one cannot be respected as a man if they haven't gone through this process." One might expect a transgender woman in her situation to refuse *ulwaluko* as a way of socially and culturally cementing her non-male gender identity, but she says that "I don't want to miss out on this important aspect of culture. It's important for me to be respected by my peers as someone who follows and honours tradition irrespective of my sexuality" (Dangazele 2022).

This example singlehandedly complicates the discussion around *ulwaluko* and gender, as it seems that adulthood for transgender women can still be tied to male initiation rites in the understanding of some amaXhosa. This is quickly complicated, though, by the perspective of Nomonde Mafunda, founder and chairperson of a major LGBT+ organization in the Eastern Cape: "I don't understand how one can transition to be a woman and still want to undergo a ritual to become a man. I don't see how this will help her . . . I am confused" (Dayimani 2022). A deeper dive reveals a multitude of lived perspectives as *ulwaluko* has been sometimes used as a 'corrective mechanism' for transgender identities (Madosi 2018:60). However, this largely confirms that discussions around identity are complicated for *ulwaluko*, and that they are also changing.

Broader Implications

In a multi-generational conversation about decolonization in Africa (Rodney 1972; Nkrumah 1965; Thiong'o 1986), the scope has expanded from a discussion of a political phenomenon (Hargreaves 1996:244) to a broader discussion concerning language, culture and history (Pels 1997). Efforts to decolonize and Indigenize the school curriculum have repeatedly been challenged by a "scarcity of local knowledge in textbooks, academic scholarship, and/or international accreditation standards"

(Shahjahan et al. 2022, citing: Knight 2018; Mngomezulu & Hadebe 2018; Van Jaarsveldt et al. 2019). Part of this scarcity may be due to a gatekept publishing industry that limits publication by knowledgeable Indigenous Knowledge custodians due to lack of Western credentials.

One specific issue around curriculum decolonization is succinctly summarized as “setting international standards based on a narrow Eurocentric and North American idea of what science is and what the subjects to be taught in whatever academic programme should be, a too narrow focus of academic programmes is imposed on university in developing countries” (Van Jaarsveldt et al. 2018). A practical example of what this may resemble might be the widely-celebrated introduction of whistled Spanish as a compulsory subject into the 6th-grade curriculum of the Canary Islands in 1999 (UNESCO 1999) while a virtually identical requirement has been documented in the initiations of the vhaVenda, an ethnic group of South Africa: male initiates learn to converse in whistled TshiVenda and female initiates explicitly are tested on comprehension of the whistled register (Blacking 1973:40–41; Kirby 1937:287).

An explicit and theoretically motivated link between certain practices called ‘initiation rites’ and the typology of education systems should dismiss any notion of an absence of education systems before the introduction of K-12 schooling for many societies. Closer examination of initiation rites reveals structured learning environments, and articulated curricular goals, and often includes a varied series of core subjects including law, theology, biology, health, and linguistics, among others. While this paper demonstrates these conclusions to be true within isiXhosa culture (and straightforwardly would do so for similar related South African rites like for the vhaVenda and the baPedi), this terminological and theoretical adjustment has wider global consequences.

A huge number of initiation rites have been described across Africa and Melanesia (Van Gennep 1961; Parkinson 1907), with enough internal diversity to mandate individual treatment of each context, much like is necessary for the broader project of decolonization (Shahjahan et al. 2018). The initiation rite of the Yolngu (Australia), named *dhapi*, resembles *ulwaluko* of the amaXhosa in many ways. The premise, beyond circumcision, is to teach theology, linguistics, law and art to young males in a secluded rural environment to allow a transition to manhood, with certain aspects of the rite kept secret (Kelly 2015). Much like for *ulwaluko*, some Yolngu communities are struggling to balance modern education’s demands on students’ time with those of the traditional initiation rite (Steffens 2009). However, through this theoretical link, we find institutional innovation by the Yolngu who have established a ‘culture school’ for outsiders, where attendees are given knowledge about food production, law, and art, with the explicit understanding that this is a different rite from *dhapi* and that closed aspects of the culture will not be shared (Henry 2014). Discussions about how and whether to implement such innovations ultimately must take place within each community but including such case studies in the ‘toolbox’ for Indigenous Education Systems demonstrates that these rites are

dynamic institutions that can have pedagogical purposes both within and outside their respective communities. These practices are relatively widespread throughout Africa despite relatively limited literature, meaning that academic analysis through an educational lens entails preliminary documentation of those initiation rites. We call on researchers to pursue this work and close the gap between what is locally obvious and what is accessible to international scholars.

Conclusion

This paper delineates the metrics for defining education, namely through knowledge transmission, character building, and social agency. These metrics hold for isiXhosa initiation rites for both men (*ulwaluko*) and women (*intonjane*) in the isiXhosa culture. This suggests that an adequate description of precolonial cultures in Africa (and elsewhere) might involve making explicit a connection between initiations and education systems that may be obvious to an African audience but is largely overlooked by outsiders. However, like all institutions, including educational institutions, some changes are occurring and deserve objective, investigative academic attention. Analysis of this case study could shed light on wider cultural communities, specifically in explicitly recognizing this form of traditional Indigenous Education System in Africa, and in analyzing their current roles in society alongside Western-style school systems. The dynamicity of isiXhosa rites of passage in the modern context shows how these practices adapt and continue to evolve as culturally relevant educational institutions. Expanding this framework outwards to other cultures shows a variety of ways that communities manage and adapt their traditional education systems.

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