ABSTRACT

Pain is at the centre of Xhosa male circumcision ritual. My paper seeks to explore the socio-political implications for individuals when *abakhwetha* (Xhosa initiates) fail to overcome the amount of pain inflicted on them during this period. At an individual level, the failure to conquer this pain would render such individuals to be called *amakhwenkwe[[1]](#footnote-1)* (boys) still despite removing their foreskins the traditional way and having gone through this rite of passage and acquiring its deep “secrets” in terms of the sacred terminology initiates learn, and the value of seclusion in constructing a Xhosa man. Mfecane (2016:204) writes about constructions of masculinity among Xhosa-speakers. Although acknowledging that a lot has been written about this ritual, he is very critical about the lack of theorising the notion of *ulwaluko* (circumcision). He argues that “South African research on men and masculinities has been characterised by academic dependence on the West to provide theories of masculinity upon which research questions and empirical research are based” (2016:205). Literature on Xhosa initiation and masculine identity-making is surprisingly quiet on the value of pain in the making of a man except for (Makhubu, 2012; Mgqolozana, 2009; Ntozini & Ngqangweni, 2016). I argue in this paper that, based on personal experience and contemporary debates among isiXhosa-speakers who participated in this study, the ability to withstand pain is an essential marker in the making and production of men in Xhosa speaking society. Signs indicating that one is unable to handle pain have serious implications for one’s future social standing. The paper will also reflect on growing tensions between rural and urban initiates. To men initiated in the villages, men who initiated in urban areas are considered “not men enough” because they do not experience the amount and intensity of the pain countryside initiates go through there. This explains some of the controversy around the state’s suggestion that circumcision be undertaken in hospitals.

1. Just like those who went to hospital for circumcision. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)