

Reclaiming the Philosophical, Educational, and Psychological in African Initiation Schools through Afrocentric Education

Simphiwe SESANTI

DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.4314/ft.v15i1.3>

Submission: Jan 12, 2026 Acceptance: Jun 15, 2026

University of the Western Cape (UWC)

Email: ssesanti@uwc.ac.za

ORCID No:0000000345465218

Abstract

European colonialists not only *physically* dislocated Africans from their land but, also, dislocated them *philosophically, educationally, psychologically, and epistemologically* by *displacing* Afrocentric education, and *replacing* it with *Eurocentric education*. They projected initiation schools as centres promoting violence against young women and men, fully cognisant that initiation schools were aimed at transforming *playful* girls and boys into *responsible* adults expected to serve their communities. Initiation schools' existence belied colonialists' claims that Africans were 'adult children' needing colonialists' 'civilisational' guidance. While Africans successfully resisted attempts to wipe out initiation schools, colonialists' relentless campaigns succeeded in projecting them as violent 'circumcision' centres. Consequently, Africans themselves elevated the 'physical' above the 'philosophical', thus reducing 'human beings' to mere 'biological bodies'. This reduction resulted in the loss of appreciation of 'initiation schools' as African 'schools of philosophy', thus losing the *philosophical* in initiation. I argue that African scholars should, through Afrocentric education, lead the *reclamation* of the *philosophical*, the *educational*, and the *psychological* in initiation for a mass-driven African Renaissance for building *humane* and *responsible* African women and men.

Keywords: Afrocentric Education, Circumcision, Culture, Initiation, Philosophy, Psychology

Introduction and Background

In 1929, the Church of Scotland Mission in Kenya instructed African Christian converts and those who wanted their children to attend its schools, to abandon African initiation schools, arguing that initiation was a "horrible" and "painful" practice "suitable only to barbarians" (KENYATTA 1965, 25; 129). Female initiation was labelled "female genital mutilation" (FGM) (NJAMBI 2011, 179; 188). Two years later, in 1931, in Geneva, the Save the Children Fund, hosted a conference, where several European delegates called for the abolition of female circumcision, calling it a "barbarous" and "heathen" custom (KENYATTA 1965, 126). The conference delegates argued that "for the sake of the children", a call should be made to "Governments under which the customs of this nature were practised to pass laws making it a criminal offence for anyone who should be found guilty of practising the custom of clitoridectomy" (KENYATTA 1965, 126 – 127).

Reflecting on the European colonialists' determination to destroy female circumcision, Kenyatta (1965, 130) observes that "certain misinformed missionaries" focused only on the surgical side of the practice "without investigating the psychological importance attached to this custom". I beg to differ. The colonialists fully appreciated the custom's *psychological* importance. Kenyatta (1965, 130) is correct, though, in observing that the "secret aim" behind their attack was, as the Gĩkũyũ themselves suspected, to "disintegrate their social order and thereby hasten their Europeanisation" (KENYATTA 1965, 130). The Gĩkũyũ communities correctly held the view that the destruction of their cultural practice sought to destroy a symbol which identified the age-groups, so that they could prevent them from perpetuating a "spirit of collectivism and national solidarity which they have been able to maintain from time immemorial" (KENYATTA 1965, 130).

When the Gĩkũyũ community refused to renounce women's circumcision, the missionaries banned children from their schools whose parents refused, causing conflicts between the Gĩkũyũ and the European Christian missionaries (KENYATTA 1965, 125; ABDULLAHI 2006, 12; NJAMBI 2011, 186 - 187). Following petitions, the colonial government and the missionaries agreed, between themselves, to lift the ban, but maintained that "teachers must be only those who had denounced the custom" in the hope that such teachers would "mould the children in the way favourable to the missionary attitude" (KENYATTA 1965, 126). Thus, Christian missionaries used Eurocentric education against initiation schools. But, instead of succumbing to pressure, the circumcision tradition's adherents broke away from European missionaries' churches and established their own independent churches and schools (KENYATTA 1965, 126; ABDULLAHI 2006, 12; NJAMBI 2011, 187). The establishment of independent schools by Africans in Kenya is one of early indications of recognising that Eurocentric education was being used to impose European philosophy on African philosophy, a recognition that all education is grounded in, and driven by philosophical orientations.

It is against this background that the World Health Organization (WHO, 2014) defines Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) as "procedures that intentionally alter or cause injury to the female genital organs for non-medical reasons", a practice reflecting "deep-rooted inequality between sexes", constituting "an extreme form of discrimination against women", which also "violates a person's rights to health, security and physical integrity, the right to be free from torture and cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment, and the right to life when the procedure results in death". This "intentional" injury-causing and "harmful" practice, involving "pricking, piercing, incising, scraping and cauterizing the genital area [...] is recognized internationally as a violation of the human rights of girls and women" (WHO, 2014). In 2010, WHO (2014) published a "Global strategy to stop health care providers from performing female genital mutilation" in collaboration with other key UN agencies and international organisations. Subsequently, in 2010, the UN General Assembly adopted a resolution on the elimination of "female genital mutilation" (WHO 2014).

Cognisant of the foregoing, Njambi (2009, 172) notes that in “discussing the ‘mutilation’ of women’s genitals, localised terms and conceptions are usually deleted, and/or avoided, and are replaced by a generalised ‘female genital mutilation’”, this “shift” being “an important victory for the abolitionists in that it prevented dissenters from defending such practices” because “[w]ho would try to defend mutilation, especially defined in the language of torture and oppression?” Njambi’s foregoing intervention is a philosophical engagement that draws our attention to the fact that *definitions* and *conceptualisations* are key in determining the trajectory that discourses take and setting the terms and standards thereof which validate certain outlooks while invalidating others simultaneously. Njambi (2011, 182) further points out that contrary to the view that female initiation is an instrument used by males to control female sexual freedom and pleasure, a historical examination of female initiation among the Gĩkũyũ reveals that this practice “was a strategic move on the part of Gĩkũyũ women to challenge men’s monopoly of such an important ritual performance”. This “strategic move” was informed by a recognition that “[b]ecoming a woman or man in society was not determined by birth but by a series of initiation ritual markings that would take place throughout one’s lifetime” (NJAMBI 2011, 184 – 185). This means that by seeking to be initiated, Gĩkũyũ women were claiming *agency* to graduate from *being girls* to *being women* just as initiation enables *boys* to become *men*.

Njambi’s (2011, 193) argument that European colonialists’ “concern” for African women initiates was structured on “familiar colonialist presumptions about who is civilized and hence authorized to act on behalf of the Other”, presumptions that “often focused on the protection of women from the backward traditions enforced by native men”, rests on a number of false premises on the part of European colonialists. Njambi (2011, 183) argues that the cutting of the woman’s hood, which covers the clitoris, thus signifying a girl’s entrance into womanhood is, contrary to claims that it is disempowering, in fact, empowering. This is because the expectation that “one must endure bravely and without flinching whatever physical pain that may be experienced”, was central in preparing women “physically and psychologically to participate bravely in the *Mau Mau* movement” (NJAMBI 2011, 190; 193). The *Mau Mau* was a guerrilla movement that waged an armed struggle against British colonialism for Kenyan independence.

In the *Mau-Mau* movement, “women were the most important elements” (SHREVE 2006, 74). As scouts, women gathered intelligence about the movement of the British soldiers and police so as to enable the *Mau-Mau* to have accurate information about where and when to attack the enemy, and recommending the kinds of weapons necessary for such attacks (NJAMBI 2011, 191). Scouts had to be women in recognition of their “ability to appear innocent and to disguise themselves quickly with various paraphernalia” such as wigs and head covers (NJAMBI 2011, 191 – 192). Not only did the Gĩkũyũ women demonstrate excellence in intelligence-gathering, but also, “[w]hen they were caught, as they sometimes were, they resisted the terrible tortures of their captors so courageously that General China [of the *Mau Mau*] wrote that they [women] were braver than men”

(EDGERTON IN NJAMBI 2011, 192). The torture, inflicted on female Mau-Mau freedom fighters by British policemen, white settlers and African collaborators, included rape, sodomising them with bottles, filling their vaginas with boiling water, stinging nettles and snakes, crushing their breasts and forcing them “to bare their buttocks and sit on a wire mesh that had been heated red hot over a charcoal burner”, resulting in the death of many women (EDGERTON IN NJAMBI 2011, 192). These tortures were not only meted out on Mau Mau guerrilla fighters, but also on civilian women and girls when colonial soldiers went about searching for Mau Mau fighters (NJAMBI 2011, 191). The tortures included rape of mothers and their daughters, squeezing of women’s breasts with pliers, swinging of women by their long hair, and stepping of soldiers on their necks, or all over their bodies while lying on the ground during interrogation.

The foregoing accounts seek to highlight that African scholars, such as Kenyatta and Njambi did not allow European colonialists to monopolise the spaces of ideas, but contested them and centred African ideas in the discourse – a philosophical engagement.

The Objective and Approach

In this article I move from the premise that even though initiation has survived to this day, it is distorted in many ways, resulting in many Africans participating in rituals without appreciating their depth, leaving space for unskilled chance-takers to perform harmful operations on young women *and* men, thus giving ammunition to the opponents of initiation. I argue that African scholars should, through Afrocentric education, *reclaim* and *restore* the *educational*, the *philosophical*, and the *psychological* in initiation. Discussing initiation in academic institutions by Africans is necessary for provoking African academics to think about practical initiatives to reclaim the meanings of being ‘women’ and ‘men’ as informed by Africans’ own philosophical perspectives. However, merely discussing these meanings in academic settings is inadequate. Afrocentric scholars must take these meanings to initiation schools and gatherings where the return of initiates is celebrated. This critical aspect, that is, drawing initiates’ attention to the *philosophical foundations* of initiation is, to a very great extent, presently missing. Rather, initiation is reduced to physical operations, rituals whose *philosophical significance* is not explained, and, thus, omitted.

I begin by defining my positionality – Afrocentricity. I then link the discussion of Afrocentricity to the African Renaissance, cognisant of, and giving space to the contestation of the concept. This is followed by definitions of key concepts, such ‘initiation’ and ‘circumcision’ drawing from the works of African philosopher, John Mbiti and African historian, Jomo Kenyatta. I then discuss the disintegration and moral decadence in African communities – in the continent and in the diaspora – as a consequence of African culture’s destruction by colonialists, followed by a discussion of the concept ‘African Renaissance’ within the context of initiation, and, thereafter, conclude.

Afrocentricity and the African Renaissance

Afrocentricity is a *philosophical perspective* advancing the view that whenever African issues are discussed, Africans’ history and culture must be the basis, free

from colonialists' imposed terms (ASANTE 2003, 3). Afrocentricity's inclination towards centering Africans' history and culture is not the same thing as rejecting critique of negative aspects associated with African cultural practices because it "does not champion reactionary postures and is not regressive", but "seeks to modify even African traditions where necessary to meet the demands of modern society", reference to "modern" not reduced to what is "Western" (ASANTE 2003, 52). In interrogating "initiation schools" as "schools of philosophy", I move from the premise best captured in Gyekye's (1995, 39; 43) observations that philosophy is a "conceptual response to basic human problems at different epochs" and that "philosophy is essentially a cultural phenomenon [...] part of the cultural experience and tradition of a people".

I approach this discussion not just as a proud initiation graduate who defends the continuation of this cultural practice, but one whose penis was injured due to the negligence of *ikhankatha* (nurse), who often came to my initiation house drunk and, therefore, not focused. While I was lucky to emerge from the ordeal with my penis intact, others were not that lucky – their penises were amputated. Notwithstanding the ordeal, I also appreciate how the pain I experienced *within a few hours* of the surgery compelled me to reflect deeply about the pain my mother, as a result of arthritis, had gone through *for six years* at the time of my initiation while my pain was hard to handle *within a few hours*. When my temporary abode was threatened by heavy rains and strong winds, I began to seriously spare a thought for those who lived *permanently* in shacks while my experience was only *temporary*. What this means is that even though this was not impressed on me at the time, my *initiation school* became what it was supposed to be, *a school of philosophy* because my experiences *compelled me to reflect deeply*. Informed by the *conscientising* aspects of initiation, I stand in its defence and advancement. Defending and advancing 'initiation' is not synonymous with defending harmful circumcision practices of females and males alike. I unequivocally and completely condemn harmful practices. But even then, I insist that corrective actions must not be externally imposed, especially by people who have a colonial history of violent and brutal treatment of Africans both physically and epistemologically. I am encouraged by, and welcome the move by Africans who, while defending initiation, are openly and actively opposing harmful practices.

In line with Afrocentricity, I examine both female and male African scholars' works, on the continent and in the diaspora, which have examined initiation. African women's voices are especially important in a world where some males, amongst amaXhosa, an ethnic group to which I belong, falsely believe that male initiation has nothing to do with them. Such males are ignorant of the fact that historically, amongst amaXhosa, women were responsible for building male initiates' houses. They are ignorant of the fact that women built male initiation houses in the shape of a woman's womb, a fact carrying great symbolical significance. This is because in entering the womb-shaped houses, young men were *symbolically returning* to their mothers' wombs – their first homes – in order to be *reborn*. The red ochre that new initiation graduates put on to this very day, represents mothers' red blood that newly-born children emerge with when they are born. Contrary to the misleading mis-education of today where some males teach male initiates to disrespect women, in the past, there was great emphasis on young

male graduates to honour women, especially their mothers. Phyllis Ntantala (1992, 236), an isiXhosa-speaking academic, revolutionary, and writer, highlighting the centrality of teaching respect for women on the part of male initiates, notes that in this “ceremony that marks the rite of passage from boyhood to manhood” the graduate must ensure that his “mother’s ointment jar is never dry”.

Sindiwe Magona (2023, 51), another isiXhosa-speaking, internationally acclaimed and award-winning autobiographer, novelist, poet, playwright, short story writer and former primary school teacher, cognisant that initiation is aimed at shaping young people to be “respectful” to everyone, young and old, female and male, and that this emphasis is alarmingly destroyed, squarely puts the blame for the distortion of initiation on “the fathers of our children, African men” who have allowed boys to come back from initiation as rapists who violate, instead of protecting women’s dignity.

Not only does Magona’s observations demonstrate an understanding of the true purpose and meaning of initiation, but also demonstrates courageous leadership by an African woman. Magona’s (2023, 51) leadership is reflected in her recommendation of the *reclamation and restoration* of male initiation to its respectable status, urging adult African men to teach initiates about “what it means to be a human being” and to “teach them the ways of humanity”, thus, Magona pointing the way to the African Renaissance. The African Renaissance – in this exercise mass-based, and inclusive of both Africans on the continent and those in the diaspora – entails, amongst other issues, a *reclamation of definitions* of African cultural concepts, thus liberating them from being distorted, misrepresented, misinterpreted and misunderstood by others and Africans themselves. The call for the African Renaissance echoes Boateng’s (1990, 121) observation that “[w]hile a wholesale revival of the past is unrealistic and unacceptable, education planners should note that a total rejection of the African heritage will leave African societies in a vacuum that can only be filled with confusion, loss of identity, and a total break in intergenerational communication”, and that “a recognition and consideration of traditional educational philosophy and process is bound to give more meaning to what is being done today”.

Arguing that the “Renaissance is an historical concept signifying a specific period in the history of Europe”, Ramose (2003, 601) notes that the renaissance is a “European historical movement which originated in Italy and spread through the other parts of Europe”. Ramose (2003, 608) further points out that the “attempt to implant the ‘renaissance’ into Africa is an implicit denial of Africa’s right to choose from her experience terms and concepts that can be used to understand and interpret African history and politics”, further arguing that such an approach is problematic because “one of the results of the fixation of the African gaze to the North is that Africa thereby concedes prominence and leadership to the North”. Africa must look to herself because, Ramose (2003, 608) insists, “African history has yielded and continues to yield fertile experience from which to extract key analytical concepts”.

A deeper examination of history reveals that the use of the concept ‘re-birth’”, or ‘reborn’” or ‘renewal’” is older than the Italian or European Renaissance. In Sir Ernest Alfred Thompson Wallis Budge’s (2008, 623) book titled [The Egyptian Book of the Dead], in chapter CLXXXII, we find the following words uttered by Thoth and addressed to Osiris: “Homage to thee, O Governor of those who are in Amenti, who makes mortals to be born again, who renewest thy youth [...] thou art renewed [...]”. The statement is estimated to have been in existence as far back as 3 500 BC, the reference being ancient Egyptians’ creation myth, meaning that ancient Egyptian Africans, in their literature, used the concepts “born again” and “renewed” far ahead of the Italian Renaissance.

In the narrative of the ancient Egyptians’ myth of creation, there was a man, Osiris, who was killed by his brother, Seth, with the latter cutting the body of his brother into pieces (BUDGE 2008, xcii). In response to the dismembering of Osiris’ body, Osiris’ sister, Isis, who was simultaneously his wife, re-membered or “reconstituted” Osiris’ body, and, “by means of magical words”, Osiris “came to life again” (BUDGE 2008, xcii). Drawing inspiration from this creation myth, ancient Egyptians believed that Osiris had “conquered death, and had risen from the dead” (BUDGE 2008, xciii). This narrative is older than the Bible’s story about the death and the resurrection of Christ.

While, on the one hand, initiations are aimed at building human beings, the reality in South Africa is that many lives are destroyed.

Initiation: Definitions and Distinctions

Being human is not, in African philosophy, a given, but something striven for and to be achieved, a task which human beings can fail to accomplish, meaning that being human is more than “a brute biological fact” (MENKITI 2006, 324; 326). Thus, the notion that “biology” forms the rationale for the ordering of our social world is an outcome informed by a “bio-logic”, in other words, “biological determinism” (OYĒWUMÍ 1997, ix).

Initiation refers to rites which transform children into adulthood, this entailing “a change from passive to active membership in the community”, a “symbol of a new birth, a new person, a new social status” (MBITI 1990, 118). The period of isolation from, and returning home to families, is a process of symbolic death and rebirth (MBITI 1990, 118). The act of “rebirth [...] emphasizes and dramatizes that the young people are now new, they have new personalities, they have lost their childhood” (MBITI 1990, 118). Since “becoming a woman or a man was not determined by birth”, initiation, therefore, “provided men and women with the necessary ingredients for facing the world with courage that extended throughout their lifetimes” (NJAMBI 2011, 193). This is because during initiation, young people “learn to endure hardships, they learn to live with one another, they learn to obey, they learn the secrets and mysteries of the man-woman relationship” (MBITI 1990, 119). It cannot be overemphasised, as Boateng (1990, 119) observes, that “[t]he point to note here is that all ceremonies [...] are mostly marked by tests of endurance that immediately pushed childhood behavior and frivolities behind the new initiate”. Thus, initiation has “*a great educational purpose*” (emphasis added) (MBITI 1990, 119). It is a “process of education for male and

and female [...] to prepare them for the life they are to follow, and the system under which they are to live” (BLYDEN 2016, 13).

In the Bundo Society for girls, teachers are “women only”, where women are taught everything which prepares them well to play the role accorded to them in their communities (BLYDEN 2016, 13 – 14). In some African societies, “after a girl has been initiated, she is entitled to be referred to by all who have not been initiated as ‘mother’” (BOATENG 1990, 119).

Initiation also “inculcated a sense of respect for elders, of brotherhood among members of the age set in question” (DAVIDSON 2004, 85). There is emphasis on respect for elders because in African culture “it is extremely important that the young respect and obey older people whether they are their immediate parents or not” (MBITI 1990, 122). However, initiation schools were not *primary institutions* for inculcating a sense of solidarity, sisterhood and brotherhood. Rather, they served as *institutions of higher learning* which consolidated the aforementioned values. It was at the *foundational phase* of African traditional education that children’s education “included knowing and associating with members of one’s age-group as brothers and sisters, and to regard them as brothers and sisters until death and beyond” (WILLIAMS 1987, 166). The notions of solidarity, sisterhood and brotherhood were not inculcated merely through the word of mouth but also through ‘parental conduct’ which was more than ‘biological parenthood’. In African cultural contexts, children do not only belong to their “biological parents” but are also parented by any adult in a community, a communal network which regulates the behaviour of both adults and children (MTHEMBU 1996, 220). In line with communal parenting, among the Gikūyū, towards the end of the initiation process, the woman and man in whose homestead the initiation process takes place, address the initiates as “tribal daughter” and “tribal son” and the initiates, in return, address the homestead’s mother and father as “tribal mother” and “tribal father”, signifying that the children are “born again, not as the children of an individual, but of the whole tribe” (KENYATTA 1965, 145).

Among the Maasai, initiates become “mystically and ritually bound to each other for the rest of their life [...] in effect one body, one group, one community, one people” (MBITI 1990, 123). Thus, a man’s wife is equally the wife of other men in the same age-group, entitled to sexual engagement whether or not the husband is at home (MBITI 1990, 123). Far from this arrangement privileging males to have unlimited sexual freedom, in West Africa, when girls leave initiation schools, seldom are they willing to separate from their companions, and “with the communistic privilege which they enjoy, they often solicit the husbands assigned them on leaving school to take their most intimate friend as a mate” (BLYDEN 2016, 18). Among the Gikūyū, female initiates were entitled to the same rights (NJAMBI 2011, 183). This means that in such cases women were no passive sexual objects. Rather, they exercised *agency* and *freedom* and *equality* in sexual relationships – neither men nor women had monopoly over their partners’ bodies.

In calling for the reclamation of African philosophy in education, Williams (1993, 194; 195) points out that elementary education in Africa has to be the area of the greatest initial emphasis whose main objective must be the “development of better human beings in terms of cooperativeness, good manners, brotherhood, goodwill and service to community” (WILLIAMS 1993, 194 – 195). Conscious, as well, that European colonialism arbitrarily did away with African parental involvement in their children’s education when colonialists imposed their Eurocentric schools, Williams (1993, 194) further points out that the educational renaissance in Africa should ensure inclusion of parents in their children’s education whose exclusion by the colonial impact left them in darkness, so that African parents can be “worthy guides for their children and active participants in the economic and social life of their community”. While “initiation” is a cultural expression among all Africans, not all Africans practise “circumcision”.

Initiation without circumcision

Among amaXhosa and amaZulu, female initiation without circumcision is known as *ukuthombisa* (FUZE 1979, 31; SOGA 1989, 59). It is a serious matter not handled by just anyone, but by experienced elders because if the rituals are not conducted meticulously, misfortune (in childbirth, for example) could haunt a woman even after getting married, thus resulting in the woman having to go back to her maiden home to rectify the negligence by performing the rituals properly (SOGA 1989, 59 – 60). Among amaZulu, the initiates are taken into a hut where they remain in seclusion for a period of time where they sing songs that *serve as an educational process* (FUZE 1979, 31). Among the rituals performed among amaXhosa is the hitting of the breast a little, and the squeezing of the vagina (SOLWANDLE, 2025). The pain experienced in this exercise symbolises the real human life struggles that lie ahead amongst them being the giving of birth and breastfeeding (SOLWANDLE, 2025).

Due to a variety of reasons, among them colonial invasion, this practice has been, to a large degree, neglected by amaXhosa to such an extent that very few families still observe it (SOGA 1989, 59 – 60). The damaging consequence of this abandonment is that it gives a false sense of superiority to amaXhosa males over amaXhosa females since males continue to enjoy transition from boyhood to manhood, something many amaXhosa females do not enjoy currently. Thus, a girl’s transition to womanhood is dependent on women getting married. Consequently, some individuals in amaXhosa communities disrespectfully address adult women as ‘girls’ even when their own boy children have, through their mothers’ efforts, graduated from boyhood to manhood. This patriarchal attitude has nothing to do with amaXhosa, but a consequence of colonialism, selfishly allowed by amaXhosa men since it gives them an unfair advantage over amaXhosa women.

While at one stage amaZulu practised male circumcision as part of initiation, under the instruction of their king, Shaka, the practice was terminated (FUZE 1979, 28 – 29). Ending ‘circumcision’’, though, was not synonymous with ending ‘initiation’’. Following the termination of circumcision, when a boy reaches puberty and starts emission, such would be indicated by the boy himself by removing cattle from the kraal, secretly, and returning them in the morning or afternoon (FUZE 1979, 30). On his return home, the boy utters not a word, remaining silent

even when spoken to (FUZE 1979, 30). His father then summons a doctor to treat and give him food mixed with medicines (FUZE 1979, 30). During this process, cold water is forbidden to him and he is allowed to only drink warm water (FUZE 1979, 30). If the boy gets thirsty, a hoe is removed from its handle, heated in the fire until it becomes red hot, whereupon it is dipped into cold water to make it tepid for him to drink (FUZE 1979, 30). The boy remains silent until his father slaughters a goat for him and his head is shaved (FUZE 1979, 30). When this process is completed, the boy is allowed to talk to people and his father presents him with a spear, signaling that he is now a man (FUZE 1979, 30).

Remaining *silent* for a period and abstaining from drinking cold water carries symbolic cultural relevance. It is about inculcating a sense of *discipline*, an ability to *reflect* or *meditate*, and *self-control* through *abstention* from pre-mature sexual engagement. The silence imposed on the boy is aimed at teaching him against becoming an incessant talker, in the belief that a person “who is always talking is being ‘spoilt’, ‘hysterical’ or ‘conceited’” (FUZE 1979, 30). Therefore, the training is about inculcating *humility*, and doing away with *arrogance* and *aggression*. The same goals are aimed at in circumcision.

Initiation with circumcision

Among the Akamba, the Maasai and the Gikūyū, circumcision is not only for boys, but for girls as well (KENYATTA 1965, 128; MBITI 1990, 119; 123). In all African communities that still practise the circumcision ritual, in the boys’ case it is the foreskin that is cut. For females, among the Akamba, it is “a small portion of the girls’ clitoris” that is removed (MBITI 1990, 119). Among the Maasai, “a portion of their [girls’] sex organ is cut or pierced” (MBITI 1990, 123). Among the Gikūyū, it is the “tip of the clitoris” that is cut off (KENYATTA 1965, 140). The “cutting of the skin from the sexual organs symbolizes and dramatizes separation from childhood; it is parallel to the cutting of the umbilical cord when the child is born” (MBITI 1990, 120). Driven by the belief that a sexual organ attaches a child to a “state of ignorance”, a “state of inactivity” and a “state of potential impotence”, Africans who practise circumcision believe that “once that link is severed, the young person is freed from that state of ignorance and inactivity” and “born into another state, which is the state of knowledge, of activity, of reproduction” (MBITI 1990, 120).

Three or four days before the physical operation, the initiates, among the Gikūyū, engage in a ceremony, where they sing the whole night, their songs also calling upon the spirits of their departed Ancestors to impart their *wisdom* to the initiates as they embark on a new journey in their lives. A day before the physical operation, initiates, among the Gikūyū, are made to swear, from that day onwards, to, in every respect, deport themselves as adults, participate in the welfare of their communities, not to lag behind whenever called upon to perform any service or duty in the advancement of their communities, and not to reveal their communities’ secrets even to a member of the communities themselves who had not yet been initiated (KENYATTA 1965, 136). Ahead of the physical operation, the initiates are taught to bear the pain with fortitude, that is, without crying, an advice which carries both *philosophical* and *psychological* significance (MBITI 1990, 119; 123). The “physical pain which the children are encouraged to endure, is the

beginning of training them for difficulties and sufferings of later life” (MBITI 1990, 120). With particular reference to the Gikūyū female initiates, girls are warned that blinking or crying when the operation is performed, would be cowardice, thus exposing her to ridicule by her companions (KENYATTA 1964, 140). For that reason, she is advised to fix her eyes upwards until the operation is completed (KENYATTA 1964, 140). The foregoing is significant because it shows that historically, Africans neither regarded boys as having a monopoly of bravery and fortitude, nor regarded female children as being weaker than boys. While there is an expectation that initiates should not exhibit fear, there is, also, an acknowledgment of the naturalness and normality of fear and, therefore, practical measures are taken to assist the initiates to deal with the challenges that circumcision poses. Initiates are given a special diet a fortnight *ahead* of the initiation so as to prevent blood loss during and after the physical operation, to ensure speedy healing of the wound, as well as precaution against blood poisoning (KENYATTA 1965, 130).

In a further move to make a girl’s sexual organs “numb and to arrest profuse bleeding as well as to shock the girl’s nerves at the time”, since she is “not supposed to show any fear or make any audible sign of emotion or even to blink”, cold water is thrown on her organs (KENYATTA 1965, 140). Caution is not only exercised *ahead* of the physical operation, but, also, *during and after* the process. In this regard, immediately after a girl is circumcised, the woman who throws the water on the girl’s sexual organs, sprinkles milk mixed with some herbs on the wound, the objective being to “reduce the pain and to check bleeding, and prevent festering or blood poisoning” (KENYATTA 1965, 140).

The meticulous approach to circumcision notwithstanding, things did go wrong, at times. Sometimes due to negligence on the part of an initiate or a nurse, wounds did become septic and resulted in the formation of much scar tissue in the area of the *labia majora*, a condition which resulted in difficult childbirth for female initiates (KENYATTA 1965, 147). When such cases found their way to the hospitals and attracted the attention of missionaries, they used such cases as the basis for asserting that the practice was “barbaric and a menace to the life of the mothers” (KENYATTA 1965, 147). Critics of the custom went as far as saying that as a result of the custom, almost every first child died at child-birth (KENYATTA 1965, 147).

Among the Gikūyū, after an oath-taking ceremony, on their homeward march, the “initiates are warned never to look behind [...] for to do so would bring misfortune to them at the time of *irua*” (KENYATTA 1965, 136). The initiates are warned that if they look backwards, “the childhood misdeeds [...] would come back to them” (KENYATTA 1965, 136). In further emphasising the break from childhood into adulthood, Kenyatta (1965, 136) further observes that the songs that the initiates sing on their homeward march “are directed towards denouncing all things that are not fit and proper for any adult member of the community to do”. In addition, “the phrases embodied in these songs are to encourage the initiates to become worthy and honourable members of the adult community into which they are to be graduated” (KENYATTA 1965, 136).

Though Kenyatta (1965, 133) does not state the reason, he observes that among the Gĩkũyũ, *a day before* initiates are circumcised, they shave their heads and remove their clothes. *After completing the initiation*, another symbol of *rebirth* is performed in the purification ceremony which “consists of shaving the heads (kwenja) of the boys and girls” (KENYATTA 1965, 146). Kenyatta (1965, 146) further points out that the “clothes and ornaments worn during the transitional period are discarded; their bodies are painted with red ochre mixed with oil, after which they are dressed in new clothes”. The issue is not just about the old clothes discarded and the new clothes worn, but about the *symbolism* carried out by these expressions. Here, great attention is given, and many measures are taken, to ensure that children are conscious of, and appreciate the significance of *moving from childhood to adulthood*. This is because the transition from childhood to adulthood is about embracing *responsibility* and *maturity* as opposed to *selfishness* and *childishness*.

Initiates are also expected to declare whether or not they had engaged in pre-marital sex, and if such a confession is made, a purification ritual is performed (KENYATTA 1965, 131). This means that pre-marital sex, historically, in African cultures, was regarded as an immoral and disgraceful act. Even though this was the case, Africans were aware that young ones had sexual desires, and so, as Kenyatta (1965, 149) notes, “[i]n order not to suppress entirely the normal sex instinct”, both girls and boys were taught that “in order to keep good health”, they had to “acquire the technique of practising a certain restricted form of intercourse, called *ombani na ngweko*”, translated as “fondling”, an “intimate contact between young people” which is “considered right and proper and the very foundation stone upon which to build a race morally, physically and mentally sound”. This *ngweko*, or fondling, “is looked upon as a sacred act and one which must be done in a systematic, well-organised manner” (KENYATTA 1965, 150). This education about *ngweko* is not only found among the Gĩkũyũ, but among other Africans as well. In isiNguni languages, *ngweko* is known as *ukusoma* (FUZE 1979, 29). While both girls and boys are taught these cultural values, Kenyatta (1965, 152 – 153) emphasises that a Gĩkũyũ man is taught from childhood to develop the technique of self-control in sexual matters which enables him to sleep in the same bed with a girl without necessarily having a sexual intercourse, thus highlighting the importance of self-control.

Among the new responsibilities of the initiated to both the earth-dwellers and spiritual world-dwellers, is the preparedness to “shed their blood for their country, and to plant their biological seeds so that the next generation can begin to arrive” (MBITI 1990, 119). The shedding of one’s blood through circumcision into the ground is a spiritual act because it binds the initiate “mystically to the living-dead who are symbolically living in the ground, or are reached at least through the pouring of libation on to the ground” (MBITI 1990, 120).

Attempts at destroying Africans’ initiation culturally dislocated and alienated Africans both on the continent, and in the diaspora with tragic consequences.

Africans' cultural dislocation on the continent and in the diaspora and their quest for the African Renaissance on a pan-African basis

In 2024, the Congress of Traditional Leaders of South Africa's (Contralesa) chairperson in the Eastern Cape, Chief Mwelo Nonkonyana, called for the suspension of initiation for at least two years following deaths of 12 initiates due to dehydration and vomiting (NGCUKANA 2024, 8). Nonkonyana's proposal sought to force parents, traditional leaders, and government "to deal decisively with the issue of initiation deaths and bogus traditional circumcisions" and to confront "cases of exploitation and extortion, with illegal schools mushrooming all over the place", a "disgrace" run by "criminal syndicates" who were "doing things that were foreign to the age-old rite" for quick money. While the Eastern Cape House of Traditional Leaders' chairperson, Chief Mpumalanga Gwadiso, disagreed with Nonkonyana, arguing that the suspension would contribute to the fueling of the "mushrooming of illegal schools", attributing the deaths of initiates mainly to dehydration since "most of the boys did not drink enough water or drank no water at all [...] in the belief that they would heal faster with no water in their system", significantly, he conceded that "a lot still needed to be done to educate people about dehydration and the human body". The traditional leaders' interventions followed media reports in 2023, of at least 34 deaths of initiates (NGCUKANA 2024, 8). It was also reported that about 200-odd men's penises had fallen off after they had attended initiation schools, "unleashing trauma they were unable to open up about" (SEFARA 2025, 14).

The African traditional leaders' move was significant because it came from people who, for long, had been resisting calls for the tradition's abolition. They can no longer ignore calls from Africans, themselves, who are witnessing big numbers of deaths in initiation schools as a result of operations performed by chance-takers and complete denial of water to initiates in the belief that drinking such delays the healing process. The loss of knowledge about good diet and good medicine must not simplistically be attributed to Africans' negligence but, rather, also to Africans' alienation from their land, through land dispossession by Europeans. The resultant poverty contributed into them seeing initiation as a money-making exercise, leading to chance-takers performing damaging operations resulting in amputations and deaths. Happily, though, South African government health officials, in the Eastern Cape, are visiting initiation schools to ensure that no one is initiated without being issued medical certificates of examination by medical doctors.

The dispossession of Africans was not limited to land but also entailed deliberate epistemological dispossession. In South Africa, among those who were on the receiving end of Christian missionaries' arrogance was Samuel Edward Krune Mqhayi, celebrated "not only as a great literary figure but also a great historian" and "the greatest figure in the history of Xhosa literature" (OPLAND 2009, 26). In 1894, Mqhayi "withdrew from school and, in defiance of his missionary teachers, he entered an initiation lodge [...] was circumcised, risking expulsion from school" (OPLAND 2009, 4). He was later readmitted, "enduring only strong reprimands" (OPLAND 2009, 4). Exhibiting hostility and intolerance, the European-controlled Lovedale Press, which published some of Mqhayi's writings, rejected his manuscript, *Ulwaluko*, which argued for the acceptance of initiation by the

Christian church (OPLAND 2009, 14). The suppression of Mqhayi's writings by the Lovedale Press deprived later amaXhosa generations exposure to written material that gives the *rationale* for initiation and the necessary *education* that is central to initiation.

In the diaspora, confronted by, and confronting African-American males' drug addiction, drug-peddling, internecine violence, and violence against their female partners, African-American psychologist, Na'im Akbar (1991, vii), notes that in order to understand African-American men's problems, it must be appreciated that their crisis has its genesis in their being dislocated from Africa, and enslaved in America. The significance in Akbar's argument is the recognition that colonialism imposed confusion and alienation on enslaved Africans, thus robbing them the ability to develop on their own cultural terms, an indication of Akbar's recognition that prior to African-Americans' experience of slavery, these African descendants had their own ways of life which had worthy values. Akbar (1991, 10) is conscious that African-Americans' "ancestors were very clear on the need to describe what true manhood was and to provide systematic ways to cultivate the growth of males into boyhood and ultimately into manhood".

Cognisant that traditional African philosophy taught that being "a man" meant being able to control one's sexual urges, Akbar (1991, 4 – 5) draws a distinction between a "male" and "a man", by pointing out that the "male mentality is dictated by appetite" and that "a male [...] is essentially no more than a dangling piece of flesh located about three inches below the navel". A male's "view of women is exclusively of someone to satisfy [his] various needs" (AKBAR 1991, 9). Such an attitude is a tendency identified by hooks (2004, 70; 71) as "Equating manhood with fucking", particularly, the "male need to fuck". It is informed by a false belief that males can find "affirmation of their power in sexual conquests", that they must "fuck as many women as often as [they] can for as long as [they] can get away with it" or "fuck a lot of women until you get tired of it, and then find one to marry and just fuck her". Such miseducation of males sounds familiar to amaXhosa males who, like me, during initiation, are wrongly ill-advised that upon graduation, they must not have sex with their regular partners, but must have casual girlfriends on whom they can 'rub off their fat'. If they engage in sex with their regular girlfriends, they are told, such would result in the latter losing their appeal and, thus, attraction for marriage. Such defiling misdeeds, falsely taught in the name of 'African culture' are contrary to African traditional teachings of respect for human (including women's) dignity.

Dislocated from their cultural milieu, Akbar (1991, 9) points out that African-Americans "have a community full of boys masquerading as men and, as a consequence, the community is lacking in effective leadership to change the condition of African-American people". These boys, who regard themselves as "players" or "playboys", like to play games with other people (AKBAR 1991, 8). The boyish mentality in these males manifests itself in their preoccupation with expensive toys such as driving the flashiest sports cars which carry two people when a person has five family members, equipping their homes with the latest stereophonics when children's school supplies are put on hold (AKBAR 1991, 8). Akbar (1991, 9) further charges that the "black-on-black homicide rates and gang killings are clearly examples of boys playing with life".

Patriarchy was also imposed on enslaved Africans in America where African males, who were violated by European colonialists, in turn meted out violence on African women. In this regard, hooks (2004, ix; xii) notes that in the USA, when women get together and talk about men, “the news is almost always bad news”, and that when the focus is specifically on black men, “the news is even worse” because black men are not seen as anything more than “animals, brutes, natural born rapists, and murderers”. Tracing African-American males’ patriarchal attitudes to slavery and colonialism, hooks (2004, 3) notes that “gender politics of slavery and white-supremacist domination of free black men was the school where black men from different African tribes, with different languages and value systems, learned in the ‘new world,’ patriarchal masculinity”. hooks (2004, 4) further states that “enslaved black males were socialized by white folks to believe that they should endeavour to become patriarchs”, and, consequently, “[w]hen slavery ended [...] black men often used violence to dominate black women, which was a repetition of the strategies of control white slave-masters used”. This brutal, inane childishness, insane and violent boyishness is not natural but nurtured, to a great extent by the media which glamourises “brute patriarchal maleness” (HOOKS 2004, 27). hooks (2004, 27) further notes that contrary to the notion that black males are lured by the streets, it is the mass media in patriarchal cultures which prepare them “to find their manhood in the streets, by the time they are six years old” because “[p]ropaganda works best when the male mind is young and not yet schooled in the art of critical thinking”. The media are responsible for teaching black males that only the predator survives, thus inculcating “envy [for] the manhood of those who relish their roles as predators, who are eager to kill and be killed in their quest to get [...] money, to get on top” (HOOKS 2004, 27 – 28). In this environment, contrary to the purported idea that prisons are rehabilitation centers, “[m]ovies represent the caged black male as strong and powerful”, and prisons are shown as places “where only the strong survive” (HOOKS 2004, 28). In the eyes of young black men whose minds are captured by the media, the possession of money and the things it can buy them, makes them “men” in the eyes of their families regardless of how the money is acquired (HOOKS 2004, 16). hooks (2004, 18 – 19) further points out that when money became the goal for African-American males, they thought that they had a chance and could be among the powerful, even if that meant lying and cheating, as long as that brought home the bacon.

Instead of agonising over this crisis, Akbar (1991, ix) argues that African-Americans must conceptualise a vision for black men of “an idealized form of how things ought to be, with the focus on the best concept of the potentials of the group involved”. Such a vision must be “based on a vivid and exalted concept of what those people have been at their best”, and must “incorporate the triumphs over encounters with disordered life forms and it must have a sustained conception of the resurrecting, regenerative, and transformative nature of human existence” (ibid). Akbar’s call for values which should be *resurrecting*, *regenerative*, and *transformative* of human existence is a call for the African Renaissance.

Concluding Remarks

In this exercise I sought to demonstrate that African traditional ‘initiation schools’ were ‘schools of philosophy’ where initiates were taken to in order to transform them from being girls and boys into becoming women and men. The transformation did not merely entail the *physical*, but also involved turning playful girls and boys into being *meditative* and *reflective* women and men who would meditate and reflect about the meaning of being ‘human’, ‘women’ and ‘men’”, thus being taught to consider the implications of their actions or inactions not only for themselves, but also for the members of the communities to which they belong. What this means is that ‘initiation schools’, as ‘schools of philosophy’ were meant, historically, to pass on to the young ones the *philosophy of their Ancestors* as they entered new life. I highlighted the *philosophical* in initiation by pointing out not just *the what* and *the how* of initiation, but, more significantly, *the why*. In this exercise, as part of its philosophical engagement, not only did I present the rationale of the proponents of initiation – of which I am also one – but also presented the rationale of the opponents of initiation. Even as I defended, in this exercise, the continuation of this exercise for the purposes of a mass-based African Renaissance for the pan-African community – on the continent and in the diaspora – I did so in a critical way, demonstrating how Africans, themselves, are contributing to its distortion and destruction by focusing on the *physical* as opposed to the *philosophical* by not consciously teaching the latter to initiates. Hence the appeal, in this exercise, to Afrocentric scholars to reclaim and teach the philosophical not only in their formal institutions of learning, but also to take these teachings to initiation schools and also to homecoming ceremonies of the initiates. Such an exercise is necessary as part of scholars’ community engagement.

Declaration: The author declares no conflict of interest or ethical issues for this work.

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