



Astonishing indifference to deaths due to botched ritual circumcision

'Circumcision leaves 24 dead, 100 in hospital', read the headline in *The Star* of Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, on 16 July 2002. The report continued: 'South Africa's initiation season ended at the weekend with a gruesome toll of 24 deaths reported to police and more than 100 teenagers hospitalized with gangrene and septicaemia after botched circumcisions and severe beatings. One boy's penis dropped off as a result of gangrene, at least one other had to have his penis amputated, and another will have both legs amputated, authorities said.'

Similar horrifying circumcision outcomes have been observed again this year, with reports of the deaths and mutilations being beamed across the world by all the major news services. No one understands why we as a country — or as communities — have seemingly stood by and done little or nothing as these deaths rock the country year after year. Anywhere else in the enlightened world, this kind of mayhem would have evoked community outrage and led to urgent and drastic action to prevent it.

Why are we not sufficiently agitated by the slaughter to find ways to stop it? Perhaps in today's South Africa, where violence constitutes one of the leading causes of death (including 23 000 officially acknowledged murders per annum), we have become hardened against the horror of needless death. In any event, deaths due to ritual circumcision largely occur in the impoverished and faceless rural and peri-urban communities, and those of us north of the railroad are in denial about this just as we are about much of the other misery in that quarter. The communities themselves have perhaps come to accept these occurrences as part of their fate, along with unsafe minibus taxis and random street shootings. Middle-class families from circumcising backgrounds ensure that their sons are circumcised in safe and nurturing environments. Unless this elite is moved and inspired to do something about the circumcision deaths among the less privileged, nothing will change.

A further reason for playing down the deaths may be a deep-seated fear among the affected communities (largely in the Eastern Cape and the Limpopo provinces) that this hallowed ancient tradition is under threat of extinction, and that any move to modernise it may push it over the edge. Certainly, some voices coming through on radio talk shows seem much more concerned with the survival of the ritual itself (often rather broadly if inaccurately labelled 'our African culture') than about the reported deaths and mutilations.

The modern-day ritual is largely a hoax

In fact, the barbarism perpetrated on today's hapless youth has little in common with what the ancient rite was all about. The ritual was about preparing youngsters for the challenges of

manhood in the rural and pastoral world in which they live. Furthermore, it was performed by experienced operators and overseen by traditional sages who served as teachers and sources of wisdom to the youths. The traditional practice was much like modern military training: hard, but intended to nurture. Importantly, the community through its traditional leaders and healers, not individual entrepreneurs, set up and supervised the circumcision schools.

That was then. What about now? H G Matjeke, who has done an in-depth study of the practice in the Bolopedu district in the Limpopo province, sums up the modern-day ritual as follows: 'Of late, the practice has degenerated into a money-making operation. People pay as much as R400 per boy for attendance of (circumcision) schools. The schools are launched annually at some localities (as opposed to the old tradition every 5 years). Boys as young as 6 years of age are admitted to the schools.' Matjeke goes on to observe how 'as more and more boys are opting for clinical circumcision, the school leaders have resorted to the radical practice of abducting them to these schools. Many youths are mutilated or even die as a result of malpractices at these schools.'

These malpractices include gratuitous beatings and other forms of physical abuse, extreme exposure to the elements, nutrition deprivation, and the withholding of medicines from the chronically ill. Matjeke observed how, instead of traditional herbal medicines, substances such as brake fluid and used motor car oil are used to treat the wounds of the victims. He concludes that 'negligence and lack of accountability lie at the root of the problem'.

In short, many of the so-called 'circumcision schools' of today are fake, and deadly. They have very little to do with traditional ethos and practice of this ancient ritual, and something must be done to stop the carnage.

I can think of three things that, if legislated immediately and enforced with the same vigour as the laws to enforce the ban on cannabis, could see many lives saved and the ritual of circumcision regain its traditional dignity:

- Establish a registry of circumcision schools, and require that all schools be registered.
- Require that circumcisors undergo training and be certified.
- Require that bush circumcision venues pass inspection.



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