

Gendered Naming and Values Attached to amaXhosa *Amakrwala* (Graduate-initiates)

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ABSTRACT This paper is based on a study that explored the gendered naming and values attached to the amaXhosa *amakrwala*, and the kind of behaviour expected from them after being 'declared men'. Drawing from an empirical study that sought to understand the conceptual underpinnings of the practice, the paper presents the perceptual voices of both the graduate initiates and name-givers. The study was qualitative in nature and the participants were selected purposefully. Interviews of 40-50 minutes were conducted in the isiXhosa language which was the mother tongue of the respondents. The data was collected from 10 graduate-initiates, 4 male name-givers and 2 female name-givers. The results revealed that the names given to amaXhosa graduate-initiates reflected social identity, values and social expectations.

INTRODUCTION

IsiXhosa is the second most frequently spoken language in South Africa's households. It is spoken as a first language by more than three quarters of the population in the Eastern Cape Province of the country (Census 2011: 25). The speakers of the language are known as amaXhosa. Most of its male folk perform initiation rituals. Initiation rituals are defined as events performed in a community in order to mark the passage of young people into a new stage in life (Davies 2009). Davies (2009) further points out that the process of initiation ritual accompanies the movement of people from one social status to another. Such movement could involve a change from being a boy to a man or from being a married woman to a mother. In addition, Bix (2006) points out that rites of passage are conducted in order to mark the transition from one stage of life to another and such rights signify changes in individuals' lives, while confirming their identity and status in the community.

Ntombana (2009) concurs with the above authors and adds that the amaXhosa initiation practice is a rite of passage with a strong educational role which does not exist in isolation, but benefits all amaXhosa social structures as graduate-initiates assume new social responsibilities within their communities. According to Mhlahlo (2009), the initiation ritual of amaXhosa men consists of four phases. These are: the 'entering

stage' (*umngeno*), the phase of being an initiate (*ubukhwetha*), the 'coming-out phase' (*umphumo*) and the phase of being a graduate (*ubukrwala*). Each phase has distinct characteristics. The last stage (*ubukrwala*) is a crucial stage in the initiation ritual of amaXhosa men. Cox (1998) states that at this stage; an initiate is presented to society with a new status, new names, new clothes, new rights and duties. Some men are reported to have been given more than one name. In a collection of essays on rituals and symbolism, Turner (1967) draws parallels between the Ndembu of Zambia and amaXhosa. Arguing that a certain kind of socialisation is effected on individuals, he notes that as male graduate initiates are assumed to be adults upon the performance of the ritual, they are expected to behave according to certain customary norms and ethical standards. Accordingly, Shaw (1997: 20) concurs and makes reference to the fact that after the amaXhosa initiates have returned home from the initiation school they are guided through a six-month process during which their elders teach them manhood protocol. During this process, the amaXhosa graduate-initiates are called *amakrwala*. The main focus of this study is on the last stage, that is, the phase of being a graduate (*ubukrwala*). Having explored the significance of the initiation rite in general, the focus of the study upon which this paper is based, is on the male initiation ritual among selected amaXhosa-speaking community.

Objectives

The study sought to explore the voices of both the name-givers and *amakrwala* among the amaXhosa speakers, in order to examine what implications such socialization could have in the manner in which men conduct themselves in the communities. It explores the values attached to the naming of amaXhosa *amakrwala*, and the kind of behaviour expected from them after being declared men. This paper was first presented at a conference of the Names Society of Southern Africa which was held in 2012 in Lesotho.

Literature Review

Starting from birth, umXhosa person goes through graduation stages which recognize his growth, and assign him a recognized place in the community (Birx 2006). The male initiation stage is one of such graduation stages, which is marked by a specific ritual aimed at introducing the individual to his new counterparts, and to the ancestors. In addition; Ntombana (2009) states that amaXhosa male initiation practice is regarded as a rite of passage, because it has an historic role in building up the moral lives of boys as they graduate into manhood. Among the isiXhosa speakers, graduation from boyhood into manhood is characterized by an initiate adopting specific behaviour appropriate to this stage. He is expected to dress in a certain manner, which is consonant with his new status, and, along with that, acquires a new name. It is significant that his new status and name are broadcast at a public ceremony as a form of demonstrating value attached to the amaXhosa *amakrwala*. According to Akinnaso (in Mandende 2009), in all cultures, the basic purpose of naming is to provide a symbolic system of individual identification. This naming process is no exception to the amaXhosa *amakrwala*. Besides the intent of the symbolic system, Makhubedu (2009) points out that the names given to *amakrwala* signify the bearer's adulthood stage. Thus, the aim of naming in African societies is not only to distinguish one individual from another but it is important to note that the meaning of the name carries more weight than does identification. In a Hindu tradition, Jayaraman (2005) refers to the fact that a name not only reveals a person's self-identity, but also his/her cultural

and caste identities. The literature has shown that through naming, important events are recorded for future reference (Jayaramon 2005; Neethling 2004). Concurring with these authors, Makhubedu (2009) lists birth, marriage and the male initiation stage as significant events during which name giving is ascribed. Through these important life events, cultural values of amaXhosa are entrenched.

According to Mandende (2009), it is customary among most amaXhosa communities that subscribe to the practice that, upon graduation from a male initiation school, new names are bestowed on *amakrwala*. Comparing the practice with another South African indigenous community, Mandende (2009) points out that in a Tshivenda context, when boys returned from initiation schools, they would have new names such as Matevhu-tevhu, Maluta, Nkhalebeni, Ntshvheni, Nndanduleni or Nndwakhulu. All these names indicate bravery and greatness. Within the Tshivenda culture, the initiation school personal names would from that point on replace graduate-initiates' birth names. This practice is different from that of amaXhosa as graduate initiation names do not replace birth names. In fact, from this study it was found that in most cases the names do not last longer than the stage of *ubukrwala* (graduate-initiation stage). Neethling (2004) points out that among the amaXhosa community names express some sort of expectation and aspiration from the name-givers for the child. Neethling further states that a common manifestation is a name which reflects a good or positive human quality or attribute, such as, *Nomonde* (patience), *Lukhanyo* (light), *Mncedisani* (helper) and *Mthobeli* (the obedient one). Accordingly, when the isiXhosa speaking people give a name, they hope that their child will one day exhibit this particular character trait, and the child, when growing up, may respect his/her parents' wishes and expectations. Neethling posits; when this happens, the amaXhosa are fond of saying *ulilandele igama lakhe* meaning, "He follows his name". Guma (2001), in Mandende (2009) states that, among the Basotho tradition, the meaning attached to names plays a significant role in the definition of "personhood", because it is believed that a given name determines the type of person the individual will be. Therefore, names are believed to have influence on the character of the bearer. In addition, Neethling (2004) points out that most isiXhosa

speakers do believe in some supernatural force which dictates, guides, punishes, facilitates, or exerts influence upon people in their daily lives. Therefore, the idea of joy as well as that of a gift or blessing is also common in names.

The literature has shown that among the amaXhosa community, young men who have gone through initiation are expected to change their lifestyle regarding social responsibility, given words by the old men of the community, with a purpose of preparing them for adult life and its responsibility. A change of behaviour from that of boyhood times is expected. The amaXhosa community perceives the initiation practice as an institution of values and morals (Stinson 2007; Pauw 1975, 1994; Gitywa 1976). Taking into consideration Neethling's (2004) point of view that the names express some sort of expectation or aspiration from the name-givers to the child, one can anticipate that the names given to amaXhosa *amakrwala* are derived from the above listed community expectations.

A study that was conducted by Magini (2010), on meaning contained in Xhosa names revealed that most amaXhosa names have symbolic meaning. It noted that parents name their children with specific intentions. Indeed, each name tells a story. Magini's study further revealed that one can tell whether the parents are religious or not, by examining the name they give to their children. For example, the names; Nobandla (congregation) and Kholekile (faith) derive from religion. While on the other hand; for example, the names Phelo (last born) and Aphelele (meaning, 'that's enough', indicates that a family has had enough boys).

Onomastics literature has revealed that naming of amaXhosa *amakrwala* reflects masculinity. Morrell (2005) points out that masculinity may be understood as the way in which a person, a group of people or a whole society builds an understanding of what it means to be a man. The studies (Gwata 2009; Magini 2010) conducted among isiXhosa speaking people on male circumcision indicate that women are excluded from the entire initiation process, as it strictly becomes men's business. Further, once circumcised men are expected to assume new responsibilities, including participation in traditional meetings, responsibility for community activities, and protecting women (Gwata 2009; Ntom-bana 2009). Therefore, research on the role played by the new names bestowed on amaX-

hosa graduate-initiates is important as it is likely to shed light on the significance of naming and adherence to the expectations attached to the name.

METHODOLOGY

Undertaking the Study and Methodological Approach

The purpose of this study was to understand values and gendered naming of amaXhosa *amakrwala*. This qualitative study was conducted in South Africa (Eastern Cape Province) over a seven-month period, between the months of March and September 2012, with a focus on young men who had graduated from the initiation school. The participants were selected purposefully, as the researchers intended to generate data from both graduate-initiates, and name-givers. The interviews of 40-50 minutes were conducted in the isiXhosa language, which was a mother tongue of the participants. Three field researchers who spoke a common language with the respondents collected 47 graduate-initiate names. Audio-recording was used with the permission of the respondents, and notes were also taken in the process of interviews. Later the interviews were translated into English by a professional translator. All respondents were from six districts in the Eastern Cape, that is, Butterworth, *Ngqamakwe*, *Dutywa*, *Gatyana*, *Ngcobo*, and King Williams Town. These districts are well-known for practising male initiation in the traditional way.

Participants

The sample consisted of sixteen respondents (10 graduate-initiates, 4 male name-givers and 2 female name-givers). The young men who had gone through the initiation process within the past twelve months were targeted. The ages of the graduate-initiates ranged between 18 and 21 years, whereas the ages of the name-givers ranged between 40 and 60 years. The participants were given pseudonyms to conceal their birth names and identities.

FINDINGS

Prior to analysis, interviews were transcribed, read, and initially coded by the researchers.

Analysis of the research data revealed three main themes: (1) significance of naming; (2) social identity; (3) and masculinity. In this section we focus mainly on the verbatim voices of the interviewees and their experiences in accordance with identified themes.

Significance of Naming

All participants voiced the notion that the meaning contained in their names had value, and reflected transformation from boyhood to manhood. This is supported by literature. Akinnaso (1980: 277) points out that in all cultures, the basic purpose of individual naming is to provide a symbolic system of individual identification. Such a symbolic system is usually historically constructed, socially maintained and based on shared assumptions and expectations of members of a particular community. All graduate-initiates agreed that they acquired new names during initiation.

Themba Mlunguza of Mt Frere said the following about his new name: “*My new name is Hlwayisi, and it means intelligence, clever(ness); and it also means that I am the main initiate (one who belongs to the main house where other initiates have asked to join through their parents). My new name has significance attached to it in that it differentiates me from other initiates; and a form of leadership is attached to it. The name also means that I am expected to be responsible, accountable, to be brave, to give instructions, and to be spot-on on things.*”

The above quote suggests that *Hlwayisi* understood the significance and value attached to his name. As a ‘new man’, he seemed to understand the leadership role he was expected to play. It was found that constructions of masculinity in this community are subject to what the man is able to provide, in particular that which is material and tangible; e.g. money and buying groceries for the family. Thus, it becomes important to ‘perform’ this gender expression of masculinity (Butler 1990) as a form of adhering to normative and generally accepted understandings of the male gender in this community. Through this naming process men are supposed to ‘perform’ in particular ways, with an assumption that such characteristic are ‘natural’ or biologically-determined (Courtenay 2000).

The flipside to these standards is that ‘macho’ masculinity ideals discourage men, and especially young men, from seeking and affirming their unique idiosyncratic identities (Moolman 2013).

Madoda Mangqalaza of *Gatyana* district said that he understood the meaning of the name given to him to require him as a man to be tough, a masculinity trait that was found to be valued amongst all the interviewees. Reflecting on the cultural significance of his name he expressed: “*The name that was given to me during initiation is Qhawe. This name means majesty, huge, and heroic. The name has something to do with traditional leadership. It also has a political connotation in that political heroes were associated with this name. Based on the meaning of this name, I am expected to be a future traditional leader, who can cater for all the needs and complaints of his people.*”

Madoda Mangqalaza’s expressions demonstrate that this value is based on gender perceptions that assume men to be tough and violent, and women to be weak and emotional. Toughness plays a prominent role in this image: naming in this instance serves to assert their responsibility and authority of providing support and protection, in particular to females.

It was found that name givers were also cognizant of community values in choosing the names of graduate-initiates, an indication that they subscribe to communal cultural values. Reflecting on a name he coined, one of the name-givers, *Mzimasi Skhobeni* of *Dutywa*, indicated: “*I named my son Jongibandla. This name means to take care of the community. I expect him to build this home, and contribute to the community*”. The choice of such a name is evident of general expectations put on men; i.e. to look after his family, but also lend a hand in caring for the extended family as well as other members of his community.

However, some graduate initiates revealed that their names had no meaning. Despite that at surface value the names do not have any semantic significance the names were different from those given to boys who had not undergone circumcision. Thus, in essence such names indeed marked the assumption of a new stage, and the coming of new life. Hence, *Mandla Siziba* of *Gatyana* said the following about his name: “*My new name is Solanti. The name indicates that I have assumed a new stage. The name*

is associated with the coming of new life. It also represents dignity, and I will be addressed differently from the way I was addressed in my boyhood."

Social Identity

The results of the study indicated that name-giving and the achievement of the graduate-initiate stage signify socialization. Brix (2006) points out that rites of passage such as initiation are conducted to mark the transition from one stage of life to another and to signify significant changes in individuals' lives, while confirming their identity and status in the community. In this study the graduate-initiates and the name-givers stated that giving new names to the graduate-initiates implied responsibility and commitment, not only within one's family, but to the community at large. The importance of this kind of 'community service' manifests itself in the following responses:

Mandla Siziba, a fifty-year-old university graduate was adamant about a widely held belief within his community. He said the following about failure to hold the values of ubukrwala, and the effects thereof.

"Not showing respect for elderly people may lead to scolding or reprimanding by community members. Sometimes amakrwala fail to collect all community cattle from the fields; and in such cases the graduate-initiate is reprimanded by his parents, community elders and the traditional leader. If you do not assist the neighbours, your parents will be criticized for not bringing you up properly. This may also lead to one being an outcast and tasks needing responsibility will not be assigned to him, as he will be regarded as rude." Community sentiments shared by Mandla Siziba were echoed by a man who is more than two decades younger than him. This is an endorsement of the fact that such values are held in contemporary times and respected by community members across the age range. Those who fail to uphold these community values are deemed an embarrassment to their families and even to the local leadership. Madoda Mangqalaza made direct reference to effects that may arise due to a failure to uphold the values of ubukrwala: *"Failure to uphold the value attached to ubukrwala may lead to traditional leaders' losing their recognition as leaders of our customs. The history of our peo-*

ple may not be preserved, and the important actions during past incidents may be forgotten. This may lead to the distortion of our history, and the traditional leaders will lose their reputation."

Regarding the issue of the activities carried out or avoided once a name is bestowed; the respondents revealed that a change of behaviour was important. Turner (1967) points out that these individuals (graduate-initiates) are assumed to be adults, and are expected to behave according to certain customary norms and ethical standards. In addition, Vincent (2008) states that circumcised men are expected to take on greater social responsibility in their communities, acting as negotiators in family disputes, weighing decisions more carefully, and cooperating with elders. In the current study, all participants cited that to be a man means that one is able to differentiate between what is right and wrong. The ability to draw that distinction qualifies one to be a man. Such regard was eloquently expressed by a lay preacher Mandla Siziba, who considered his social responsibility a cultural obligation. He noted; *"One of the activities I am expected to carry out is to attend social gatherings where community matters are discussed. In such gatherings one can learn from the experienced and the elderly. As a young man, one is supposed to avoid bad companions, bad influences such as in stock theft, and unacceptable language; as one is expected to be a good role model for the young children."*

Linking his cultural identity to his social responsibility Khayaletu Mlunguza of King Williams Town highlighted the fact that: *"Name practices and values associated with the names are significant when interacting with other people outside your cultural group, because they encourage respect for traditional practices. Another important factor is that, as you move out of your cultural group, you should know that you are the ambassador of your cultural group, and therefore your group will be judged according to your behaviour. This is another form of inculcating good behaviour among community members. Being a group member means collective effort when it comes to community matters."*

Masculinity

According to Morrell (2007: 607), masculinity is a collective gender identity, and not a nat-

ural attribute. He further points out that there is no one universal masculinity, but much masculinity; and these are not fixed character types, are configurations of practice generated in particular situations in a changing structure of relationships. In the current study, the role and responsibility of men is clearly defined. The transition from boyhood to manhood is characterized by power and change in status. Among the IsiXhosa-speaking people, becoming a man signifies that one is now able to share in the full privileges and duties of the community; to acquire knowledge which is otherwise unavailable; to gain respect, and to be entitled to marry (Mhlahlo 2009). The results of the study revealed that the graduate-initiates, based on the names bestowed upon them, had a special role to play in their families and in their communities. The meaning behind their names clarified to them the expectations of the name-givers. One of the name-givers, *Nokhwezi* of *Nqamakwe*, named her son “*Uzusondle*”. The name means that the young man is expected to feed his family. In other words, this name sets a goal which the young man is supposed to achieve in life, in order for him to prove his manhood. Other names like “*Gxalabalibanzi* and *Qhawe* signify the leadership role the name-bearers are supposed to play. In other words, these young men are expected to play a leadership role, despite the circumstances, so as to prove their manhood. According to Neethling (2004), these positive human qualities in amaXhosa names express some sort of expectation or aspiration from the name-givers for the child.

According to Morrell (2007), masculinity is viewed as oppressive to women. In addition, Gwata (2009) points out that the exclusion of women from the entire initiation process in amaXhosa tradition carries social and cultural significance. He further says that, not only are women denied access to the initiation schools, they are also denied knowledge of the central aspects of the ritual. This restriction, according to Gwata, not only affirms the inferior position of women in amaXhosa culture, but it also delineates quite stridently the separateness of the sexes. In the current study, one of the social responsibilities given to the graduate initiates is that they should provide for women, as though women are objects to be taken care of. One of the respondents stated that now that he was a man, women in his family would avoid some speech sounds asso-

ciated with his name as a sign of respect and in recognition of his new status. This could be seen as undermining the status of women.

DISCUSSION

The results of the study revealed that names given to amaXhosa graduate-initiates reflected social identity, values and social expectations. The majority of the names reflected the roles and responsibilities which the graduate-initiates were supposed to play in their families and in the community. The social role of an individual within the community is defined by Elkin and Handel (1989: 26) as the process by which a person learns the ways of a given society or social group, so that he or she can function within it. Among amaXhosa graduate-initiates this is realized in that they have a right to attend and participate in community gatherings; they have an obligation to fetch the community cattle from the grazing camp and they are taught to lead the traditional events. All these responsibilities mark the beginning of the new life. This is supported by the results of a study conducted by Gwata (2009) on socio-cultural significance of male circumcision among young amaXhosa men. The findings of that study revealed that circumcision among IsiXhosa-speaking people is perceived as an agent of socialization, intended to nurture initiates.

The current study also revealed that the significance of naming graduate-initiates among amaXhosa people is the preservation of history, culture and family heritage. The respondents in the current study revealed that naming of graduate-initiates had important values in keeping cultural practices; it was a form of recognition for men who went through that process. The respondents further pointed out that failure to uphold those values could lead to the manhood fraternity being shamed by the community. Most respondents were of the view that harsh caution could come from the elders; the community culture could be undermined, people’s history could be distorted, and there could be loss of reputation of traditional leaders.

The study revealed that once a name was bestowed, the name-bearer was expected either to carry out or to avoid certain activities. The respondents mentioned that the graduate-initiates were expected to attend social gatherings where community matters were discussed, and

at which they could learn from the experienced and the elderly. This shows that, at this stage, the graduate-initiates are regarded as future community leaders who are given opportunity to learn from their elders. The respondents also mentioned that amaXhosa graduate-initiates were expected to avoid certain activities, such as having bad companions or friends and being involved in stock theft. Neethling (2004) points out that a common name given to amaXhosa children is a name reflecting a good or positive human quality or attributes that parents hope that their children will one day exhibit this particular character trait.

CONCLUSION

The discussion of the paper demonstrates the importance of naming and points out that naming is not an innocent practice. A number of values, including those that may be considered gender biased, are reflected in the names of graduate-initiates. The results of the study revealed the manner in which how masculinity as a social construct is reflected in the new names given to amaXhosa graduate-initiates. This manifests itself in the list of responsibilities given to the graduate-initiates. Some of these responsibilities seem hard to achieve, and yet they are created to test the young man. They test the strength and potential of young men who wish to prove themselves “real men”. However, some of these responsibilities may endanger the lives of graduate-initiates, who may try to force matters under difficult circumstances, in order to prove their manhood. The fear of “failure” may put the graduate initiates in a difficult position. This study confirmed what had been pointed out in previous studies; that some personal transformation occurs in the behaviour of the circumcised men, however, that transformation was limited. For instance, the name bearers may find it difficult to reflect the positive personality traits embedded in their names. While on one hand the study demonstrates that most graduate-initiates are given names that reflect cultural values of amaXhosa, the existence of aptonyms should not be ignored. An aptonym is a proper name that aptly corresponds with a person’s character. Thus, coincidence may happen where the name-carrier turns out to portray behaviour corresponds with their names. It is recommended that future studies on amaXhosa graduate-

initiates consider examining how many and to what extent do graduate-initiates live up to the expectations of their names.

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