

# Gendered naming and values inherent in the Xhosa *amakrwala* (graduate-initiates): Implications for teaching a multicultural class

Madoda Cekiso, madoda.cekiso@nwu.ac.za and Thenjiwe Meyiwa, tmeyiwa@hsrc.ac.za

## Abstract

*Rites of passage play a central role in African socialization, demarking the different stages in an individual's development, as well as that person's relationship and role in the broader community. The major stage in African life is the transition from childhood to adulthood when they become fully institutionalized to the ethics of the group's culture. Rites of passage are for this reason critical in character building and identity formation (Shahadah) – a view equally propounded by Tajfel (1996), a social identity theorist. For Xhosa male graduate-initiates (amakrwala), names bestowed upon them during the process of ukwaluka are a prescript that signifies values held by the broader community. Drawing from an empirical study that sought to understand the conceptual underpinnings of the practice, this paper presents the perceptual voices of both the initiates and name givers. Using theories of social identity and masculinity, it asserts that the naming custom occurs in a context that, whilst one hand is endeared and seeks to build character, it stipulates a kind of masculinity and identity that is in line with what the broader community sanctions and values. Equally the paper seeks to examine implications that such socialisation could have in a multicultural and/or multilingual class – as such classes are in the rise at the research sites from which the data for this paper was drawn.*

## Introduction

Initiation rituals are defined as events that are performed in a community in order to mark the passage into a new stage in the life of an individual (Davies, 1994). He further points out that the process of initiation ritual accompanies the movement of people from one social status to another. Such a movement could involve a change from being a boy to a man or from being a married woman to a mother. In addition, Birx (2006) points out that rites of passage are done 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. While concurring with the above authors Ntombana (2009) adds that, Xhosa initiation practice is a rite of passage with a strong education role that does not exist in isolation but benefits all Xhosa social structures. 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 the Xhosa speaking community. According to Mhlahlo (2009), the initiation ritual of Xhosa speakers 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 its own characteristics. The main focus of this study is on the last stage, that is, the phase of being a graduate (*ubukrwala*). This is a crucial stage in the initiation ritual among the Xhosa speakers. 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. According to Turner (1967), these individuals (*amakrwala*) are assumed to be adults and are expected to behave according to certain customary norms and ethical standards. According to

Shaw (2011) and drawing from an interview with Laduma Ngxokolo, after the Xhosa initiates have returned home from the initiation school, they are guided through a six-month process where their elders teach them manhood protocol. During this process the Xhosa graduate- initiates are called *amakrwala*.

Among the list of issues mentioned above by Cox (1998) that characterize *amakrwala* is the new name bestowed on them. This new name symbolizes new identity and new responsibility within the community. Every cultural group has its own traditional way of doing things and, although the naming process among the Xhosas is no exception. Our findings reveal that expectations put on amakrwala may have significantly weighed quite heavily on the manner in which they conduct their lives. The literature has shown that the African people believe that names have an impact on the life of an individual and his or her family (Neethling, 2009). According to Akinnaso (1980), in all cultures, the basic purpose of 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.

## **Objectives**

This study explores the values attached to the naming of Xhosa *amakrwala* and a kind of behaviour expected from them after being declared a man. According to Mondende (2009), the fundamental purpose of naming in African society is to convey a message from the name-giver to the entire family and the community at large. Therefore, it is important to explore the voices of both the name-givers and *amakrwala* among the Xhosa speakers in order to examine what implications such socialization could have in a multicultural/ multilingual classroom.

## **Literature review**

Starting from birth, a Xhosa 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 are marked by a specific ritual aimed at introducing the individual to his counterparts and to the ancestors. In addition, Ntombana (2009) states that Xhosa male initiation is regarded as a rite of passage since it has historic role in building up the moral lives of boys as they graduate to manhood. Among the Xhosa speakers, graduation from boyhood to manhood is characterized by the fact that an initiate adopts a specific behaviour that is appropriate to this stage, dress in a certain manner, and acquire a new name. This is done to enhance and broadcast values attached to the Xhosa *amakrwala*. According to Akinnaso (1980) 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 Xhosa *amakrwala*. Besides the intent of the symbolic system, Makhubedu (2009) points out that the names given to *amakrwala* signify the bearer's adulthood stage. In addition, Mandende (2009) points out that the aim of naming in African societies is not only to distinguish one individual from another but also to the meaning of the name carries more weight than identification. In a Hindu tradition, Jayaraman (2005) points out 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). Makhubedu (2009) states that names are given after birth, when getting married names based on circumstances, names based on beliefs and names given at the initiation school. Meyiwa (2009) points out that despite the fact that other careers like teaching, engineering, etc. do not have an evident practice of “ascribing” proper names to individuals within their profession, very few *izinyanga* (herbalists) if any go without names specifically associated with their vocation. While Meyiwa’s study seeks to examine the elements that lie behind names given to Zulu herbalists, the current study seeks to examine elements that lie behind names given to the Xhosa *amakrwala*.

According to Mondende (2009), upon graduation, new names are bestowed on *amakrwala*. He further points out that in a Tshivenda context, when boys returned from the initiation schools they would have new names such as Matevhu-tevhu, Maluta, Nkhalebeni, Ntshvheni, Nndanduleni or Nndwakhulu. According to Tshivenda culture the initiation school personal names would from that point on replace their birth names. Neethling (2004) points out that among the Xhosa community, names express some sort of expectation and inspiration from the name givers for the child. Neethling further states that a common manifestation is a name that reflects a good or positive human quality or attribute, like, *Nomonde* (patience), *Lukhanyo* (light), *Mncedisi* (helper) and *Mthobeli* (the obedient one). In addition, when parents give a name they wish 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. According to Neethling, when this happens the Xhosa are fond of saying *ulilandele igama lakhe* meaning he follows his name. Guma (2001) in Mondende (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 Xhosa speakers do believe in some supernatural force that 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 Xhosa 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 is expected, and that the Xhosa community perceive 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 Xhosa *amakrwala* are derived from the above listed community expectations.

According to Magini (2010), all Xhosa names have meaning; parents name their children with intentions, that is, each name tells a story. Magini further points out that one can tell if the parents are religious by examining the name, for example, Nobandla

(congregation), Kholekile (faith), family roles people assume eg. Phelo (last born), Aphelele (many boys in the family meaning that's enough). However, Meyiwa (2009) holds a different view. In her study conducted about names given to Zulu herbalists she revealed that not all names have the meaning, some names are meaningless.

The literature has revealed that naming of Xhosa *amakrwala* reflects masculinity. Lindegger (2005:9) 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 or woman. The studies conducted among Xhosa speaking people on male circumcision reveal that women are excluded from the entire initiation process as it strictly becomes men's business. In addition, addition, men after circumcision are expected to assume new responsibilities, including participation in traditional meetings, responsibility for community activities and protecting women (Gwata, 2009; Ntombana, 2009).

### **Undertaking the study and methodological approach**

The purpose of this study was to understand values and gendered naming of Xhosa *amakrwala*. Although the study was not conducted with an intention to inform classroom practice, the results have an implication for teaching a multicultural/multilingual classroom, especially in the Social sciences, Life orientation, and Arts and culture classrooms.

This was a qualitative study focusing on understanding the values and gendered naming of Xhosa *amakrwala*. This study was conducted in South Africa (Eastern Cape Province) over a seven months period, between the months of March and September 2012, with a focus on young men that had graduated from the initiation school. The study focused on an interpretation of participants' responses to interviews. The participants were selected purposefully as we wished to investigate the initiate graduates and the name givers. The in-depth interviews of 40- 50 minutes were conducted in IsiXhosa language which was a mother tongue of the respondents. 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 five districts in the Eastern Cape, that is, Butterworth, Ngqamakwe, Dutywa, Gatyana and Ngcobo and King Williams Town. These districts are well known of practicing 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 in 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.

## **Broad findings**

Our study set out to understand the values and gendered naming of Xhosa *amakrwala*. 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.

### **Significance of naming**

All interviewees voiced the notion that the meaning contained in their names had value and reflected transformation. 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.

Mbali Zikode of Mt Frere said the following about his new name: *“My new name is Hlwayisi and it means intelligence, clever and 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 identifies 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.”*

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.

Xola Mkontwana of Gatyana district said that he understood the meaning of the name given to him. He also said that the name had significance and value attached to it. He said the following about his name: *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 is also has 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.*

Some graduate initiates revealed that their names had no meaning. However, they pointed out that the names were different from the names that were given to boys. Thus, such names marked the assumption of a new stage and coming of new life.

Mzimkhulu Xakatha of Gatyana said the following about his name: *My new name is Solanti. The name has no meaning but it 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 boyhood.”*

One of the name givers, Luntu Banzi of Dutywa said the following about the name he gave to his graduate initiate: *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.*

### **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 those rites of passage like initiation are done to mark the transition from one stage of life to another and signify changes in individuals' lives, while confirming their identity and status in the community. In the current study the graduate initiates and the name givers stated that giving new names to the graduate initiates means responsibility and commitment not only at home but to the community at large. The importance of the community service manifests itself in the following responses.

Mzimkhulu Xakatha said the following about failure to hold the values of *ubukrwala* and the effects thereof.

*“Not showing respect for the elderly people may lead to scolding or reprimanded by the 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.*

Xola Xhontana said the following about failure to hold the values of *ubukrwala* and the effects thereof: *“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 people may not be preserved and the important actions during past incidents can 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 that are carried out or avoided once a name is bestowed; the respondents revealed that change of behavior 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.

Mzimkhulu Xakatha said the following about his social responsibility: *“One of the activities I am expected to carry out is to attend social gatherings where community matters are discussed. In such gathering one can learn from the experienced and the elderly. As a young man one is supposed to avoid bad companion, bad influence like*

*stock theft and unacceptable language as one is expected to be a good role model for the young children.”*

Khangelani Kwayinto of King Williams Town said the following with regard to his social responsibility: *“Name practices and values associated with the names are significant when interacting with other people outside your cultural group as they encourage respect of traditional practices. Another important thing 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 behavior. This is another form of inculcating good behavior 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 natural attribute. He further points out that there is not one universal masculinity, but many masculinities and these are not fixed character types but 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 Xhosa 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 community. The meaning behind their names dictated 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 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 Xhosa names express some sort of expectation or aspiration from the name givers for the child.

According to Morrell (2007) masculinity is viewed as oppressing to women. In addition, Gwata (2009) points out that the exclusion of women from the entire initiation process in Xhosa tradition carries social and cultural significance. He further says that not only are women denied access to the initiation schools, but they are also forbidden knowledge of the central aspects of the ritual. This restriction according to Gwata not only affirms the inferior position of women in Xhosa 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 if 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 associated with his name as a sign of respect and 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 Xhosa graduate initiates reflected social identity, values and social expectations. The majority of the names reflected the role and responsibility the graduate initiates were supposed to play in their families and 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 Xhosa graduate initiates this is realized where the graduate initiates have a right to attend and participate in community gatherings, have obligation to fetch the community cattle from the grazing camp and 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 Xhosa men. The findings of that study revealed that circumcision among Xhosa 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 Xhosa 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 so as to keep cultural practices and 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 manhood fraternity being ashamed by the community, harsh caution from the elders, community culture being undermined, distortion of people's history and traditional leaders losing their reputation.

The study revealed that once a name was bestowed the name bearer was expected to carry out or avoid certain activities. The respondents mentioned that the graduate initiates were expected to attend social gatherings where community matters were discussed and learn from the experienced and 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 the Xhosa graduate initiates were expected avoid certain activities, like having bad companions or friends and being involved in stock theft. Neethling (2004) points out that a common name given to Xhosa children is a name that reflects a good or positive human quality or attribute and the parents wish that their children will one day exhibit this particular character trait. The names already mentioned above reflect only positive human quality. Thus, the negative human quality is not expected as reflected by the meaning of the names bestowed.

## **Conclusion**

The results of the study also revealed masculinity reflected by the new names given to Xhosa 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 put the young man on test. They test the strength and potential of the young men so as to prove themselves to be "real men". However, some of these responsibilities



maybe dangerous for the life of a graduate initiate as they 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. One of the respondents interviewed by Gwata (2009) revealed that some personal transformation had occurred on the behaviour of the circumcised men but that transformation was limited. The same could happen with the names given to the Xhosa graduate initiates where the name bearers may find it difficult to reflect the positive personality traits embedded in the name. In a similar study, Neethling (2004) raises concern about an aptonym. Specifically, he wonders how many of the name carriers turned out to have actions corresponding with their names. In the current study the same concern could be raised as to how many of the Xhosa graduate initiates live up to the expectations of their names.

## References

Elkin , F. and Handel, G. 1989. *The Child & Society: The process of Socialization*. New York, N.Y.: Random House, Inc.

Gitywa, V. Z. Male initiation in the Ciskei: formal incorporation into Bantu society. Thesis, D. Litt. And Phil. University of Fort Hare.

Makhwedu , M.G. 2009. The significance of traditional names among the Northern Sotho speaking people residing within the greater Bapholaborwa municipality in the Limpopo Province. Thesis, M.A..University of Limpopo.

Mhlahlo, A.P. What is manhood? The significance of traditional circumcision in the Xhosa initiation ritual. Thesis, Master of Philosophy in Community Development, The University of Stellenbosch, Cape Town.

Neethling , B. 2004. Name choices among the Xhosa of South Africa. *The Language Quarterly*, Vol. xx ix, No. 4, 1-6.

Ntombana, L. 2009. Xhosa male initiation and teaching of moral values: an exploration of the role of traditional guardians in teaching the initiates. *Indilinga African Journal of Indigenous Knowledge Systems* 8 (1) : 73-84.

Pauw, B.A. 1975. *Christianity and Xhosa Traditions: Belief and rural among Xhosa Speaking Christians*. Oxford University Press; Cape Town.

Pauw, B.A. 1994. *The Xhosa*. Institute for Planning Research. Port Elizabeth; University of Port Elizabeth.

Stinson, K. 2007. Male Circumcision in South Africa: How does it relate to public health? <http://.africanvoices.co.za/culture/circumcision.htm>. Accessed on 12 February 2012.

Vincent, L. 2008. Boys will be boys: traditional Xhosa male circumcision, HIV and sexual socialization in contemporary South Africa. *Culture, Health and Sexuality*, 10 (5): 431-446.