

# Cross-cultural practices of African initiation into manhood: A psychological process of personal growth and development

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## ARTICLE INFO

*Keywords:*

Africa  
Culture  
Development  
Growth  
Initiation

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## ABSTRACT

The initiation of young boys into the traditional cultural rites of passage to manhood in Africa is upheld with enigmatic ideological practices that may not make sense to non-initiates and non-partisans of the process. This paper examined the Nama and Xhosa people's initiation ceremonies and rituals in South Africa both for the boys and girls and how it enables them take up their roles as adult men and women. Others include the six initiation practices by the Bamana men of Southwestern Mali which are 'n'domo, komo, Nama, kono, tyiwara and kore'. The importance of this initiation of young ones to attain the status of adulthood in their lives was highlighted. The initiation practices of the Keyo people which include the Nandi, Kipsigis, Tugen, Marakwet of Kenya and the Sebei of Uganda were also reviewed. Other initiation practices such as the Kwottos in the Northern Nigeria where young people engage in Ori initiation of the boys to become men and the ogo initiation in Afikpo area of South Eastern Nigeria were considered. The paper concludes that the African initiation process into manhood has both psychological and spiritual benefits to the initiates as it helps them discover themselves and have an integral sense of self and connectedness with the universe.

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## Introduction

Initiation into manhood and adulthood in Africa is a long historical practice that is performed in some African communities. The initiation process in Africa is sacred and not always made public because of the partisans' belief that there exist a connection between the initiation and the spirit of their gods. Some Africans believe that the ancestors' spirit that guide the initiation will be upset if the experiences of the initiation are told by the initiates to women, younger boys and other people outside the community (Mavundla et al., 2009). The people who practice the initiation also believe that the initiates may die or that a calamity will befall them and the community when the stories of initiation practice is made public. Thus Welbourn (1996) who published his experience of Keyo initiation in East Africa had reservations and considered the consequences from the wrath of the ancestors for exposing their initiation secret. He wrote: "In offering it for publication I am incurring the great curse of the rite itself on any who reveal its details to the uninitiates. Nevertheless, I have tried to write as a participant, for the social rite itself is incomplete without the subjective experience of those who undergo it" (Welbourn, 1996, p. 214).

One may argue that the rapid influence of Westernisation and civilisation on the patterns of living in Africa may be affecting some of the untold stories of the initiation rites. The African culture and tradition are very binding on its members which have also been argued to be different from those of the Western countries (Ntombana, 2011). The manner at which initiation is valued in the African

cultures and the meaning of such practices to the people of Africa is one that signifies a sense of connectedness to their consciousness and relatedness with their spiritual being in the cosmos. In Africa, traditional initiation is considered a generational ritual that is passed from one generation to another which are also legacies that families and communities must be perpetuate and keep alive (Blase, Jacobs, & De Wet, 2016).

In many African cultures and communities, youths who are initiated into adulthood are separated from their parents to engage in a perceived tough guided process that helps in clarifying their calling or mission on earth (Ampim, 2003). Such initiations often include both boys and girls and they are meant to understand morality and their social responsibility in the society (Ampim, 2003). Initiation plays a vital role in the lives of the African people and takes various forms from birth through adulthood to aging and beyond. As boys grow in these cultures, they anticipate initiation as what will make them become men. For instance, in a study on Bushong initiation in Central Africa, Vansina (1995) noted that there is a convincing truth among the boys that they cannot enter manhood without initiation. This psychological notion leaves the young boys with the expectation of becoming men through initiation. Although it may sound rather ridiculous to think of becoming a man through initiation, this is of course the thought processes of these individuals and what defines their existence.

### The initiation: a process of growth

The process is usually targeted at engaging the initiates in a well-guided manner such that as they enter a new phase and beginning in their lives, they will have the fundamental knowledge they require to manage the challenges in those phases of life (Ampim, 2003). Although the practice of initiation is gradually being modified or abolished in some communities, there are still some African communities and cultures where initiation is still upheld with respect. As Ntombana (2011) noted, initiation in Africa is considered a rite of passage which over generations has been practiced and is still being practiced. It is considered a cultural transformation into the symbolic values of the African culture that gives the partakers their identity. For the boys who mainly look forward to this self-realisation institution, Vansina (1995) argued that initiation trains them on symbolic thinking and give them a cosmological view of the society they live as they make meanings from those symbolic experiences. It does give them meaning because the lives they expect to live after performing the initiation is considered matured and meaningful when compared to the lives they led when they had not undertaken initiation passage of rites.

In South Africa for instance, the Nama and Xhosa people's initiation ceremonies and rituals both for boys and the girls is an example of the initiation process into higher life that concentrate on imbibing the appropriate conduct to the boys in taking up their roles as adult men (Carstens, 1982). The Nama people are a division of Khoikhoi or so-called Hottentots while the Xhosa is a South Eastern Bantus speaking people of South Africa (Carstens, 2014). For the girls, it is considered a process of re-entry into matured life that enables them face the challenges in marriage (Carstens, 1982). Again, linking marriage stability to initiation exposes the greater consequences of not undergoing this psychological and socio-cultural process of growth and development as upheld by some individuals and groups in the African culture. In Xhosa there are other rites of passage through initiation such as the Ulwaluko which is considered to be useful in the fulfilment of health, cultural, identity and spiritual needs (Mpateni & Kang'ethe, 2021). The beliefs about the efficacies of these initiations rites is the perceived maturity that follows the practice which is required for preparing and transforming the younger members of these African societies to take up roles as matured adults.

The anticipated growth process through initiation is further exemplified in the adoption into the various stages of the perceived personal development as in the case of the Xhosa initiation. The Xhosa people initiation represents the three phases or stages of rituals that are identified in the anthropological literature (Mavundla et al., 2009). The three stages are the separation stage, the transition stage and the reintegration stage which consist of the pre-initiation preparation, followed by the period of the circumcision, which secludes the initiates from the non-initiates and finally the reintegration stage when they are reintegrated back into the society (Ntozini & Ngqangweni, 2016).

The separation is for the psychological and physical wellbeing, growth and development of the initiates. In the separation stage there is a symbolic withdrawal of the individual from their previous identities (Mavundla et al., 2009). The implication of this is that the initiates during the separation stage are expected to detach themselves from their previous lives and immature existence. This involves a separation from their past to an expectant future that is full of matured manhood and womanhood.

The transition stage which happens between the period an individual is separated from their identity to the time when they assume their new identity is characterised by thorns and troubles that can only be formally granted and rewarded with psychological gratifications of growth and maturity after the reintegration stage is completed (Mavundla et al., 2009). The process is constructive and initiatory because the individuals partaking in this process expect psychological, social, spiritual and even physical growth after experiencing the overwhelming difficulties in the process. They also expect to gain a rich sense of identity from this practice, which however comes with challenges and emotional devastation that are unlocked in the end in a transformative manner. Mpateni and Kang'ethe (2021) added that the process instils good behaviour and morals to the initiates as the boys who undertake initiation transit to men.

In the Xhosa initiation, there is a significant presence of the amakhankatha (traditional guardians) whose duty is to constructively guide, direct and support the initiates. Their duty is to teach, coach and nurse the initiates to realise their sense of selves (Ntombana, 2011). The idea is to support the initiates to go through the hard and difficult initiation process with the hope of getting them transformed to be responsible as well as attain consciousness of their self. Thus, Xhosa initiation is believed to contribute to social, cultural and psychological development in human beings (Mpateni & Kang'ethe, 2021). This process can be likened to the 'individuation' process of Carl Gustav Jung in the Western context that enables the individual to become unified and gain an integrated self and personality (Lori & Christopher, 1996).

Initiation depicts a collective consciousness in the African culture as the initiates are meant to believe that the consequences of their actions will affect others. Thus, as Moore (1976, p. 362) noted, when the initiation is over, the boys who have become men are informed as follows: "Today I am giving you manhood, see to it that you do not betray it and if you sacrifice manhood, you betray the entire age grade, not only yourself". It is important to note that psychological and physical support is the key concept of initiation in Africa because the painful effects have a holding context where they become integrated thereby increasing a sense of personal identity and collective awareness shared by the African people. There are consequences when the initiation is not properly done as research by Mpateni and Kang'ethe (2021) has shown. The concomitant effects of poorly performed initiation may result to some form of physical, emotional and psychological challenges (Mpateni & Kang'ethe, 2021).

This is why the process considered one of psychological growth and personal development. Thus, guidance and thoroughness are required to ensure that the goal of the process is not thwarted.

### Other types of initiations and their significance in Africa

Reviewing the ethnographic works of Camara Laye and Dominique Zahan, Bertrand (1994) noted that that initiation in Africa is a practice that enables the initiates to recognise and realise their full humanity as they pass through initiation processes. Bertrand (1994, p. 469) identified six forms of initiation from Zahan's work to include: "n'domo, komo, Nama, kono, tyiwara and kore". This cultural practice is expected to help the men have an integral knowledge of their self. The knowledge of self (n'dono) leads a man to pursue what is social (nama) from where the knowledge of consciousness is born (kono) that owes to the knowledge that approaches the cosmos (tyiwara) to be able to terminate the divinity (kore) (Bertrand, 1994). This initiation practice is performed by the Bamana men in Southwestern Mali. The attainment of significant goals of self-knowledge, consciousness, relationship with the cosmos and divine-being underline the reasons for these initiatory practices as perpetrated in this African culture. Again, the experience of going through this process is one of terrifying pain, possible resemblance of trauma experience, but also one of change, growth and personal development.

In another culture, Welbourn (1996, p. 213) highlighted the importance of 'Keyo' initiation of young ones to attain the status of adulthood as having an integral significance in the life of the "Nandi, Kipsigis, Tugen, Marakwet of Kenya and the Sebei of Uganda". Just as the Nama and the Xhosa people's initiation practice in South Africa, the East African cultures also uphold initiation as a significant process of developing their children to discover and fulfil their missions on earth. The initiates pass through a symbolic death and rebirth process to higher consciousness which is akin to the Shamanic form of spiritual emergency developed in the West by Grof and Grof in 1998. In that process, shamans engage in an initiatory journey of separation from one's communal group to descend to the underworld where there is symbolic death and rebirth or resurrection to a new relationship with the axis mundi or "world tree" (Watson, 1994, p. 34).

Similar to the other initiations, the Keyo initiation is characterised by painful and difficult rites that are believed to make the individual strong. Thus, Welbourn (1996, p. 219) described the difficult and painful rites in the 'Keyo' initiation as follows: "*The future status of each initiate hangs on his behaviour at this point. He must not cry, not so much as blink, as the knife descends and cuts*". Significantly, this experience could be difficult and emotionally devastating because the difficult rituals enshrined in these initiations are out of the everyday experience of the initiates prior to their participation in the initiation. However, as Vansina (1995) puts it, the instructor that guides the initiates explains the mysteries and gains of being initiated.

Therefore, it is growth oriented especially where there is a leader to guide the initiates to go through the difficulties with the hope of developing their identity in the community through the practice of initiation.

Initiation into adulthood and manhood signifies almost the same thing in South Africa, the West Africa and other parts of the African cultures. In Nigeria, which is in West Africa, the Kwottos in the Northern Nigeria engage in Ori initiation of the boys to become men (Wilson-Haffenden, 1930). The initiation is interpreted as killing the boys and bringing them back to life with a new soul (Wilson-Haffenden, 1930). This practice is perceived as taking a person through death and rebirth and giving them an inspiration to communicate with spirits of their ancestors to have a transformed life, and acquire new self to deal with the challenges ahead.

The Igbo tribe in the Eastern Nigeria has a long history of initiation for young boys particularly into becoming adults and getting transformed for psychological and physical maturity. There is the Ogo initiation in Afikpo North and Afikpo South areas of Ebonyi State, South-Eastern Nigeria, where young boys are said to be transformed into adult men through the initiation. These are traditional religious and spiritual practice, which connect the African people to their gods and their ancestors, which also define their place in the world (Ntombana, 2011).

The non-Western countries for several decades have engaged in initiation as a formal means of socialisation, education and training the young ones to become adults as alternative to schooling (Herzog, 1973). It is believed in those cultures that these experiences are terrific, full of horror, and anguish but one that is supported adequately for the individual to attain greater self-consciousness and growth. It can be likened to the alchemical process, whereby the goal of the alchemist was to transmute base metals into gold (Stephen et al., 1997). The pressure and the heating of these metals are analogous to the suffering, pains and horror that are aimed at achieving transformation in the initiates. The entire process is also similar to the hero's journey of Joseph Campbell, in their passage of rituals, rites and celebrations with the beauty of inner transformation as shown in the work of Lucas (2011).

### Conclusion

The process of initiation into personal growth and spiritual awakening in Africa is practiced in different forms across the various African cultures. The manner of the initiation practice may be different but the goals of the process are the same. It is pertinent to conclude from the practices as reviewed in this paper that the aims of the initiations are directed towards psychological growth, personal development and maturity. Thus, experiencing adversity has been linked to the incubation of growth both at the personal and group levels. Psychological growth and development in Africa is attained through several training and processes and initiation into manhood is one of those major processes. This African self-development trajectory is believed to help the young boys and girls realize their full potentials to become adult men and women.

The uniqueness of each of these initiation practices is very indicative of the ties that bind the cultural ideologies and personal identities of Africans and their tradition.

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