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SECRET CIRCUMCISION SONGS OF THE TSONGA

The Tsonga, a Bantu-speaking people numbering about 1,200,000 in Mozambique and 700,000 in the Transvaal, possess a circumcision school in which initiates are required to undergo not only severe hazing, but to learn a considerable body of songs, chants, and musical formulae. Revelation of the material to outsiders is normally punishable by death. We give here the fourteen core songs of the rite, together with explanation.

Mayiwayiwane

Solo: *Hi lawaya mayiwayiwane!*
Mayiwayiwane hi lavo n'teka-a
Hi lavo n'teka maxangu ya manana!
Hi lawaya mayiwayiwane

The Circumcized Ones

Solo: *There they are, the circumcized ones!*
The circumcized ones have come to take me
They take me to suffering. Alas, mother!
Here come the circumcized ones

Mayiwayiwane is the name of the penultimate dance at the boys' circumcision lodge; it is also the name applied to the experienced initiates who come every five years to collect the *xuvurhu*, the uncircumcised. This is done in the early morning under the light of *Khwezu*, Venus, because Venus announces the day so must the little candidates be conducted by the morning star as they abandon childhood and enter adulthood. A longer, related song goes as follows.

Mayiwayiwane

Call: *Tsema hlampfi Mayiwayiwane*
Hi lava taku, hi lava taku
Mandembye sungwi
Response: *Tsema hlampfi Mayiwayiwane*
Hi lava taku, hi lava taku
Mandembye sungwi

Call: *Tsema hlampfi Mayiwayiwane*
Hi lava taku, hi lava taku
Mandembye sungwi

Response: *Tsema hlampfi Mayiwayiwane*
Hi lava taku, hi lava taku
Mandembye sungwi

Call: *Ee!*

Response: *Wa nga hlakahla*

Call: *Hi lava milenge*

Response: *Hi lava tsakayi*

Call: *Hi lava milenge*

Response: *Hi lava tsakayi*

Call: *Hi lava madzovo*

Response: *Hi lava tsakayi*

Call: *Hi lava milenge*

Response: *Hi lava tsakayi*

Call: *Tsema hlampfi Mayiwayiwane*

Hi lava taku, hi lava taku

Mandembye sungwi

Response: *Tsema hlampfi Mayiwayiwane*
Hi lava taku, hi lava taku
Mandembye sungwi

Circumcized Ones

Call: *Chop the branches, Circumcized Ones*
Here they come

Response: *Chop the branches, Circumcized Ones*
Here they come
From the Mandembye circumcision-lodge

Call: *Chop the branches, Circumcized Ones*
Here they come
From the Mandembye circumcision-lodge

Response: *Chop the branches, Circumcized Ones*
Here they come
From the Mandembye circumcision-lodge

Call: *Hey!*

Response: *Shake off yourselves*

Call: *The Ones-with-Feet*

Response: *Shake off yourselves*

Call: *The Ones-with-Feet*
 Response: *Shake off yourselves*
 Call: *The Ones-with-Skins*
 Response: *Shake off yourselves*
 Call: *The Ones-with-Skins*
 Response: *Shake off yourselves*
 Call: *The Ones-with-Feet*
 Response: *Shake off yourselves*
 Call: *Chop the branches, Circumcized Ones*
Here they come
From the Mandembye circumcision-lodge
 Response: *Chop the branches, Circumcized Ones*
Here they come
From the Mandembye circumcision-lodge

This song belongs to the passing-out ceremony following the *Mayiwayivane* dance, but it is also employed by the previous schools's seniors as they round up the new inmates and escort them to the river. *Tsema*, to chop off, and *hlakahla*, to shake off, both carry an association of transition from the old to the new, i.e., separation. Circumcision is but one of the many Tsonga separation-rites of passage to be undergone. Reference is made, in the third line of this song, to the lodge in the bush — the *sungwi* (*sungi* in Ronga). The word may derive from *sungwe*, a purgative medicine, and another possible verbal association is *sunga*, to strangle.

Kwece-Kwece!

Call: *Vanuna lavakulu va lava ku ni dlaya*
Ndzi file manawe-e!
 Response: *Va lava ku ni dlaya!*
 Call: *Kwece-kwece mabanga*
Vanuma lavakulu va lava ku ni dlaya
Ndzi file manawe-e
 Response: *Valava ku ni dlaya!*

Slash, Slash!

Call: *Grown men wish to kill me*
I am dead, mother!
 Response: *They wish to kill me!*
 Call: *They sharpen their knives*
The grown men wish to kill me
I am dead, mother
 Response: *They wish to kill me!*

Cuénod (1967) translates *kwece-kwece* as "the sound of knives being sharpened", and Henri Junod (1897) reports that the password between initiates is *khekeretana wa mufagu*, the knife which circumcizes. Many of the young fledglings do not yet fully understand the nature of the ceremony, but, from hearsay, they associate the impending ordeal with folktales such as that reported by Henri Junod in 1897, entitled *L'Homme-au-grand-Coutelas, The Man With the Big Cutlass*. The possibility of death in the *sungwi* is not wholly remote, for there are Transvaal legal documents which indicate cases of non-recovery from wounds.

A He Lavo Wachi

Call: *A he lavo wachi*
 Response: *Manana li Maphephu!*
 Call: *A he lavo wachi*
 Response: *Manana li Maphephu!*

Do Not Seek to Strike Me

Call: *Do not seek to strike me*
 Response: *Mother Maphephu!*
 Call: *Do not seek to strike me*
 Response: *Mother Maphephu!*

Wachi means 'to box the ears of'. The phrase *Mother Maphephu* is frequently heard in the Transvaal — it has a folklore association like *Old Mother Hubbard*. It is not an uncommon name — there is a Chief *Maphephu* in the *Sibasa* district, according to N. J. Van Warmelo (1935), and there was a Chief *Maphephe* in the *Maharimane* clan in 1901.

Andlala Mabetsa

Solo: *Ndzika-ndzika! I xinyenyana*
Ndzika-ndzika-a! xinyenyana
Nyenyana ndzika
Xinyenyana ndzika-ndzika, xinyenyana
N'wana N'wa-xinana xinyenyana
Ndzika-ndzika, xinyenyana
Andlala mabetsa xinyenyana
Ndzika-ndzika, xinyenyana

Spread the Mats

Solo: *Ndzika-ndzika! The Winter-Bird*
Ndzika-ndzika! The Winter-Bird
The bird Ndzika-ndzika
Ndzika-ndzika! The Winter-Bird
Child-of-the-Toad
The bird Ndzika-ndzika
Spread the mats on the ground
The bird Ndzika-ndzika

After first receiving a beating from their seniors the boys are stripped of their clothes during the *andlala mabetsa* separation rite — *andlala* meaning 'to spread out' and *mabetsa* meaning 'stitched *milala* palm-leaves'. *Ndzika-ndzika* signifies 'winter-bird', being a corruption of *vuxika*, winter, and also an ideophone supposedly representing the cry of this unknown bird. Henri Junod (1897) reports the rite as follows:

They must not understand the meaning of the words which are sung by the host of shepherds and men, as it would frighten them too much: "The little boy cries — Bird-of-the-Winter".

To gain insight into the phrase *Child-of-the-Toad* which occurs in our song *Andlala Mabetsa*, on

ust again refer to Henri Junod's work on the songa — *The Life of a South African Tribe*. Explaining the text of a circumcision song celebrating the *sungi* or *sungwi*, Junod writes that the *inana* (frog) which cries is the little circumcized boy whose cry is hardly heard amidst all the noise of that terrible day. He is a small powerless thing, like the frog. There is a Pedi circumcision song, given by Roberts and Winter in *Initiation Rites of the t-Pedi*, in which the boys, submerged in the river, sing thus:

*Little frogs, little frogs
Give flesh in the water
Whom shall I send?*

Wa Gurumbela

Chorus: *Wa gurumbela, N'wa-Xipere-pere
Wa gurumbela, N'wa-Xipere-pere
Wa gurumbela, N'wa-Xipere-pere
Wa gurumbela, N'wa-Xipere-pere*

You Are Shaved

Chorus: *You are shaved: Son-of-Xipere-pere
You are shaved, Son-of-Xipere-pere
You are shaved, Son-of-Xipere-pere
You are shaved, Son-of-Xipere-pere*

Not only is the head shaved at circumcision, but, in former times, it was shaved at the fixing of the *xring* (*xidlodlo*), and at funerals. The Zulus do not now practise circumcision, because during the *lu wars* a three-month seclusion period would have depleted their military strength. However, they perform a puberty rite which has been described by Eillen Krige (1936): "... the head was shaved clean with an *insigo*, after which he was *inda'd*". A Tswana praise-poem referring to shaving is given by I. Schapera:

*When the tribes were gathered yonder
And all the chiefs went to be shaved,
As he was not shaved
As he did not have his hair cut,
He asked it is who stays as he was.
The lion that limps is not worthy of a man,
It's a coward it's not worthy of a crest
The all-powerful one can never be shaved.*

Xi-mbutana

Call: *Xi-mbutana manawe!*
Response: *Aa! He-ha hi nga dyangi*
Call: *Xi-mbutana manawe!*
Response: *Aa! He-ha hi nga dyangi*
Call: *Xi mbutana manawe!*
Response: *Aa! He-ha hi nga dyangi*
Call: *Xi mbutana manawe!*
Response: *Aa! He-ha hi nga dyangi*

The Young Goat

Call: *Young goat! Oh, mother!*
Response: *We sleep, with hunger*
Call: *Young goat! Oh, mother!*
Response: *We sleep, with hunger*
Call: *Young goat! Oh, mother!*
Response: *We sleep, with hunger*
Call: *Young goat! Oh, mother!*
Response: *We sleep, with hunger*

Inmates of the lodge do not often suffer real hunger, but the food is deliberately made revolting, so that they have difficulty in eating it during the early days of their seclusion. The reference to a young goat originates in the traditional phrase 'to drink goat's milk', which means 'to be beaten with the *mbuti* sticks'. *Mbuti* means goat, and it is the stem of *xi-mbutana*, the title of our song.

Mafe!

Unison chorus: *Mafe, mafee-hee!
Mafe, mafee-hee!
Mafe, mafee-hee!*

Mafe!

Unison chorus: *Mafe, mafee-hee!
Mafe, mafee-hee!
Mafe, mafee-hee!*

Mafe, the title-word of a chant which is mandatory in all Tsonga circumcision lodges, has three possible origins, given below:

m a f i, milk from the human breast;
f a, to break or to die;
m a f e n i, the ones who escaped death.

It is a secret, sacred word, to be murmured in a hushed voice within the precincts of the lodge. Henri Junod (1897) preserved the following version of the *Mafe* song:

*Sing your song, bird of the morn
Mafe-e-e-e!*

O! Mafee!

Solo: *Ofee! Mafe-e-ha!
O! O mafe-e-eha! Ya ti-khomba!
Ofee! Mafe-e-ha!*

O! Mafee!

Solo: *Ofee! Mafe-e-ha!
O! O mafe-e-ha! The group of mature ones!
Ofee! Mafe-e-ha!*

Mafeni!

- Call: *O Mafe! Mafe!*
Response: *Mafe! Mafe!*
Call: *Ye-e-e! Mafeni yowe!*
Response: *Mafe Mafe!*
Call: *Xa vuya Xi-Thongani xa wiyafa xitsenge-e*
Response: *Mafe Mafe!*
Call: *Ye-e-e! Mafeni yowe!*
Response: *Mafe Mafe!*

The Ones Who Escape Death!

- Call: *O Mafe! Mafe!*
Response: *Mafe! Mafe!*
Call: *Ye-e-e! The Ones who escape death!*
Response: *Mafe! Mafe!*
Call: *The little Tsongas — how they must suffer!*
Response: *Mafe! Mafe!*
Call: *The Ones who escape death!*
Response: *Mafe! Mafe!*

In the second of these two versions, *Mafe* is extended to *mafeni*. Noel Roberts gives *mafefu* as a circumcision password of the Bagananwa of Ma-Loch.

The term *Xi-Tsongani* comes from the word *Tsonga*, utilizing both a prefix and a suffix. *Tsonga* came from *Thonga*, which came from *Ronga*, the phonetic laws of Zulu changing R into Th. The appellation *Ronga* derives from *buronga*, dawn, and thus means People of the East. In this song, the reference to death applies to the 'death' of the child and the 'birth' of the man, which occurs as each inmate of the *sungwi* undergoes his initiation.

Nghondzo Yi Fambile

- Group of high voices: *Tsakani, Mavuluvulu!*
Nghondzo yi fambile
Group of low voices: *Nghondzo yi fambile*
Group of high voices: *Tsakani, Mavuluvulu!*
Nghondzo yi fambile
Group of low voices: *Nghondzo yi fambile*

The Heron Has Gone

- Group of high voices: *Rejoice, tadpoles!*
The heron has gone
Group of low voices: *The heron has gone*
Group of high voices: *Rejoice, tadpoles!*
The heron has gone
Group of low voices: *The heron has gone*

This is sung by the candidates as they are led to the river for immersion, and it was accompanied, during our tape-recording, by simulated bird-whistles. Tadpoles symbolize the young initiates immersed in the water, and the *ngbondzo*, a bird of

the heron family known as the hammerkop, symbolizes something from Heaven which they fear. The hammerkop is universally feared by tribes of the Transvaal; Percival Kirby (1934) states that Pedi witchdoctors utilize portions of the bird called the hammerkop, *Scopus umbretta*. Alice Werner (1933) concludes that the bird known to Afrikanders as hammerkop seems in some way to be associated with lightning. Pierre Cuénod, wildlife authority and son of the Reverend R. Cuénod, author of the *Tsonga-English Dictionary*, assured me that the *Tsonga* will never approach the nest of this bird, and should its flight-shadow touch their huts, it represents a bad omen. Alexandre Jaques (1957) mentions that the hammerkop's nest sometimes contains snakes, reptiles the *Tsonga* imagine to be ancestor-gods.

Nghondzo Yi Fambile

- Solo: *Dlayani mavuluvulu, nghondzo yi fambile-e-e ha!*
O nghondzo yi fambile-e
Dlayani mavuluvulu, nghondzo yi fambile-e-e ha!

The Heron Has Gone

- Solo: *Kill the tadpoles, the heron has gone!*
O the heron has gone
Kill the tadpoles the heron has gone!

This is a second version of *Nghondzo Yi Fambile*, and the singer, instead of telling the tadpoles to rejoice, urges their death. The *Tsonga* possess a literary flair, and will allegorize rather than refer directly to the substance of rites. Compare the above immersion song to that of the Pedi given below:

- Follow me, O initiates*
Initiates, listen
Listen and hear me
You our children
The cartilaginous gland
It is only a festering sore
Of the loins

Nghondzo Yi Fambile

- Call: *Mavuluvulu! Nghondzo yi sukile*
Response: *Dlayani mavuluvulu! Nghondzo yi fambile*
Dlayani mavuluvulu!
Call: *Ndzi ta byela mani?*
Nghondzo yi sukile
Response: *Dlayani mavuluvulu! Nghondzo yi fambile*
Call: *Mavuluvulu nghondzo yi fambile*
Response: *Dlayani mavuluvulu! Nghondzo yi fambile*

Call: *Ndzi ta rhuma mani?*
Nghondzo yi fambile
 Response: *Dlayani mavuluvulu! Nghondzo yi*
fambile
 Call: *Ndzi ta tshama kwihhi?*
Nghondzo yi fambile
 Response: *Dlayani mavuluvulu! Nghondzo yi*
fambile

The Heron Has Gone

Call: *Tadpoles! The Heron has gone*
 Response: *Kill the tadpoles! The heron has gone*
 Call: *To whom shall I tell it?*
 Response: *Kill the tadpoles! The heron has gone*
 Call: *Tadpoles! The Heron has gone*
 Response: *Kill the tadpoles! The heron has gone*
 Call: *Who shall I send? The heron has gone*
 Response: *Kill the tadpoles! The heron has gone*
 Call: *Where shall I stay? The heron has gone*
 Response: *Kill the tadpoles! The heron has gone*

This is a third version of *Nghondzo Yi FamBILE*, and it illustrates the improvisation which takes place during an antiphonal performance of a song. During the tape-recording of this song there was a heated rhythmic background of hand-clapping and drumming, and a group of dancers imitated frogs, alerted against the hammerkop. One ornithologist's description of the hammerkop's habits states that it has a habit of turning up unexpectedly at any small pond or wyaside paddie to look for frogs.

Zondzo va Tinghondzo

Solo: *Salanini, salanino-i, salanini mayivavo, ha-a!*
Ha-he!
Zondzo va tinghondzo-o-o, zondzo va
tinghondzo-o-o, ha-he!
Mayivavo hayi salanii he-e! Ha-he!
Salanini, salanini, he! Zondzo va
tingondzo-o-o!
Zondzo ndzi nghondzo mino ha-he!
Zondzo ndzi nghondzo mino ha-he!
Salanini Gavaza, ho-o! Ha-he!
Salanini Gavaza, ho-o! Ha-he!

Curse of the Herons

Solo: *Goodbye, goodbye, father, ha-a! Ha-he!*
I'm cursed by the herons, cursed by
the herons, ha-he!
Goodbye, father, he-e! Ha-he!
Goodbye, goodbye, he! Cursed by the herons!
I'm cursed by the heron, ha-he!
I'm cursed by the heron, ha-he!
Goodbye Gavaza, ho-o! Ha-he!
Goodbye Gavaza, ho-o! Ha-he!

This song is related to the three previous songs, but the singer employs the plural prefix *ti*, refer-

ring to *many* hammerkops. He sings farewell to his father, and to his mother, Gavaza, symbolizing separation from the past.

Zithari!

Solo: *A hi si tisiva ka ndaba*
Hi va ka zithari
He ndzisana ya mukhomi ya rila
He n'wana manana va ta dlaya

As Long As That

Solo: *We have not yet been summoned*
to the council
That of "zithari"
The youngest of the graspers weeps
They will kill my mother's child

This is a secret formula chanted during one of the final instruction sessions of the *sungwi*. The newly circumcized inmates grasp sticks and shout *zithari*. Henri uJnod explains its meaning thus:

When the instructor has finished, he lifts his stick with a certain gesture and all the boys shout at once: "Zithari!" Viguet told me that that exclamation meant: "They are as long as that" and that it was an obscene allusion.

Zithari!

Call: *Hina hi gwaza-a*
N'wina majaha hi mpindzi
 Response: *N'wina majaha hi mpindzi*
 Call: *Gwaza, mo-ho! Majaha u zithari!*
 Response: *N'wina majaha hi mpindzi*
 Call: *O u ya munyama majaha u zithari!*
 Response: *N'wina majaha hi mpindzi*
 Call: *Hina hi hlova, n'wina majaha hi mpindzi*
 Response: *N'wina majaha hi mpindzi*

As Long As That!

Call: *We stab it*
Stab the black one with a pick
 Response: *Stab the black one with a pick*
 Call: *Stab it, ho! The men are as long as that!*
 Response: *Stab the black one with a pick*
 Call: *Oh! The black one is as long as that!*
 Response: *Stab the black one with a pick*
 Call: *We wear leaf-finery, and stab the*
black one with a pick
 Response: *Stab the black one with a pick*

This is one of the mandatory songs of Tsonga circumcision rites, and it accompanies stabbing motions as the boys squat in a circle around a specially-constructed, long, open fireplace built of stones, called the Elephant. The would-be 'hunters' stab the

Elephant, which is 'black' because the fireplace interior is blackened.

The Pedi circumcision schools, according to G.M. Pitje in *Traditional Systems of Male Education Among the Pedi* (1950), use a similar song:

*We stab the Elephant with assegais
Make friends wherever you go*

Hunting and killing an elephant is considered a manly achievement, for it requires great courage, skillful teamwork, and sometimes human decoys. For another explanation as to why the fireplace is called the Elephant, we might consider a word which appeared in the first circumcision song that we cited. The song was *Mayiwayiwane*, and the word that we must examine is *maxangu*, sufferings. The stem, *xangu*, means suffering, affliction. It also means the tip of an elephant's trunk, and in the sixth line of our song — "The black one is as long as that", the black elephant's trunk is bestowed a phallic symbolism.

Hogo-o!

Unison chorus: *Hogo-o! Huwelele
Hogo-o! Huwelele
Hogo-o! Huwelele
Hogo-o! Huwelele*

Solo murmur: *Skuhukhuve sa vasali!*

Hogo-o!

Unison chorus: *Hogo-o! Hoo! Hey!
Hogo-o! Hoo! Hey!
Hogo-o! Hoo! Hey!
Hogo-o! Hoo! Hey!*

Solo murmur: *A coming together of parting ones!*

The recording of this chant, with its hushed, awed boys voices, conveys something of the significance that these circumcision songs hold for the participants. Cuénod translates *hogo* as a term much used in circumcision songs, obscene, often taken to mean copulation, shouted derisively at females seen by initiates.

Hogo-o!

Call: *Vavasati ke valoyi elewe*
Response: *Hogo-o!*
Call: *Ha huwelela*
Response: *Hogo-o!*
Call: *Mabasadi ke valoyi hogo*
Response: *Hogo-o!*
Call: *Huwelela*
Response: *Huwelela*

Hogo-o!

Call: *The woman who is mother to
all women is a witch*

Response: *Hogo-o!*

Call: *Ha huwelela*

Response: *Hogo-o!*

Call: *The woman who is mother to all
women is a witch*

Response: *Hogo-o!*

Call: *Huwelela*

Response: *Huwelela*

This second version of the *Hogo* chant concludes *sungwi* songs, and we come to those which are performed after the *Mayiwayiwane* dance, that is to say during and after the *ku nenga* procession. Cuénod translates *ku nenga* as "to walk hesitatingly, as a chameleon".

N'wa-Rimpfani

Call: *A va ri voni N'wa-Rimpfani*

Response: *Hundzuka mavala N'wa-Rimpfani,
hundzuka mavala*

Call: *Hi loyi N'wa-Rimpfani*

Response: *Hundzuka mavala N'wa-Rimpfani,
hundzuka mavala*

Call: *Kanya-kanya N'wa-Rimpfani*

Response: *Hundzuka mavala N'wa-Rimpfani,
hundzuka mavala*

Child-of-the-Chameleon

Call: *They do not see the Child-of-the-
Chameleon*

Response: *Change your color, Child- of-the-
Chameleon!*

Call: *Here he is, Child-of-the-Chameleon!*

Response: *Change your color, Child-of-the-
Chameleon!*

Call: *Dance, dance, Child-of-the-Chameleon*

Response: *Change your color, Child-of-the-
Chameleon!*

Kanya-kanya is an ideophone representing the movement of dancing feet during the Chameleon Procession; it is reserved for this occasion, and the initiates are called the *Ma-Kanya*.

Ngoma Ya Ma-Kanya

Call: *Hayi ngoma*

Response: *Ya Ma-Kanya hoza tana!*

Call: *Hayi ngoma*

Response: *Ya Ma-Kanya hoza tana!*

Circumcision of the Ma-Kanya ("Chameleon-like")

Call: *Ha! Yee! Circumcision*

Response: *Of the Ma-Kanya, come!*

Call: *Ha! Yee! Circumcision*

Response: *Of the Ma-Kanya, come!*

So titled because its performers must dance like chameleons, this song terminates the *Ku Nenga*

passing-out rites. The dance-steps are slow, interspersed with sudden jerks, extending first one leg then the other, on to the *milala* palm-leaf mats which are spread before them. Crouched over and smeared with paint, the dancers emulate the chameleon because of its wisdom. This is contrary to the beliefs of their neighbors, the Pedi, as the following Pedi song shows:

*I, the court jester, the stupid one
Do not cry
I'm that chameleon of the chief's court*

The tradition of the Chameleon Procession is at least one hundred years old. In 1870 an initiate named Nkokana reputedly astonished an assembly at the Shivuvane Mission Station by dancing like a chameleon. His performance was so realistic that he became entranced, and then, possessed of madness, died within a few days.

N'wa-Lumpfana

Call: *N'wa-lumpfana*
Response: *Hundzuka mavala!*
Call: *N'wa-lumpfana*
Response: *Hundzuka mavala!*

Child-of-the-Chameleon

Call: *Child-of-the-Chameleon*
Response: *Change your color!*
Call: *Child-of-the-Chameleon*
Response: *Change your color!*

The reference to color-change bears an analogy to the metamorphosis undergone by Tsonga boys during their three-month seclusion in the secret bush-school, but it also refers to one of the school's traditions: if one encounters a chameleon in the *sungwi* one must flick snuff into its mouth. It will then turn from green to orange, and finally to black, this ill-treatment being revenge for having brought Death into the world. The traditional account of how Death came is thus: The first chief sent the chameleon with a message that said "men will die and rise again". The lizard was sent with the message "men will die and rot". The chameleon dawdled and arrived last, which is why men die and rot. There is a song known to the Gabon Pygmies which casts the chameleon in the role of messenger:

*Chameleon, chameleon
To him who sent you
Go back quickly.
Chameleon, chameleon
Your eyes are dead
Your ears do not hear
Chameleon, chameleon
You have delivered your message
Go back to him who sent you.*

The following Tsonga proverb is applied to people who appear to have changed in their ways:

*Lumpfana hundzuka mavala
Friend, you have changed your interests (color)*

A Hi Ngoma Majaha

Solo: *A hi ngoma majaha
Javurisa n'wana manana
Amahehe n'wana manana
A hi ngoma famba u ya teka ximesisana*

The Circumcision Rites Are Over, Men

Solo: *The circumcision rites are over, men
Javurisa, my mother's child
The circumcision rites are over
Go now, and take a wife*

Javurisa is the name of a young male. He has completed his trials in the bush-school, learned the secret formulae, and is no longer *xuvurhu*, unclean. The time has now come for him to engage in *gangisa*, courtship.

Shangana-Tsonga circumcision is a time of separation, liminality, and reincorporation. Passage through the rites indicates male maturity and marriage-eligibility, and the songs and formulae learned form a credential with which the traveller may establish his identity and status relative to other males he encounters. The texts are replete with cultural references, beliefs, values, and ritual symbolism such as hazing, the mat which separates them from the dust they knew as children, the tortured frog and chameleon, shaving, hunger, mother-son separation, the genital organs, obscenities, hunting skill, and male maturity.

Group singing of the songs inculcates integrative values, conformity, and submission to tribal authority in the shape of the hierarchy within the bush school and its controlling forces outside — the headman, chief, and Paramount Chief. While circumcision constitutes a visible sign of manhood, knowledge of the songs constitutes an audible sign of achievement within the Tsonga ascending social ladder, other bodies of songs later symbolizing additional states in the life-cycle, and in the human procession from infancy to old age to the spirit world.

ABSTRACT

The most dramatic of the Tsonga rites of passage — those integrative ceremonies where status is redefined — is the boys' circumcision rite; the rite is marked by the mandatory learning of secret songs, chants, and musical formulae. The writer was unusually fortunate in encountering fresh graduates of the bush school willing to divulge some of this material and in tape-recording it together with relevant information concerning its performance. Common topics are the beatings incurred, the mother-son separation, the symbolic bird and the toad, the separation rite of shaving, male maturation, sexual references, the chameleon who changes color (i.e., status), and marriage-eligibility.

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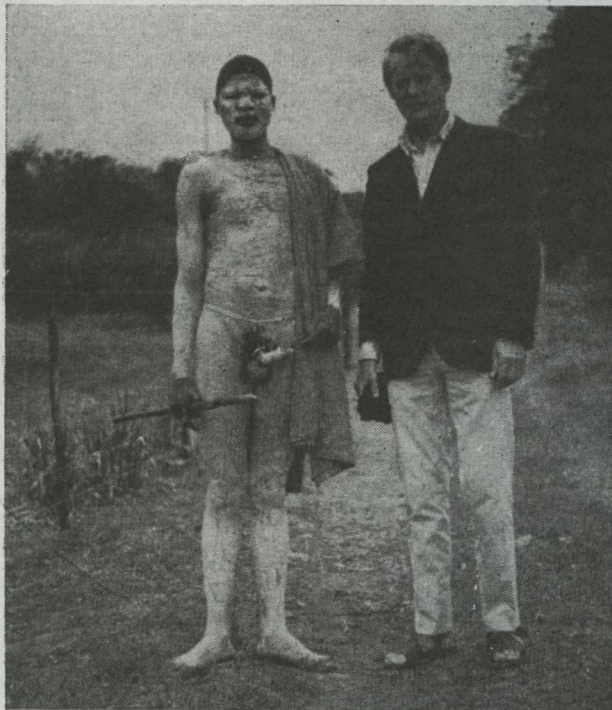


Plate 1.
Author with South African
circumcision initiate.