

WE CALL ON THE REVIEW OF THE INITIATIONS SCHOOLS

Comment by Ray McCauley: 27 May 2013

LET me say upfront that I am not an expert on the custom of initiation or circumcision. The closest I have come to it is through what I have read in the Bible about the Jews practising it. Jesus, I read, was circumcised on the eighth day after being born and so was Paul.

Unless for medical reasons, I have never understood how the mutilation of infant boys add to their manhood (no pun intended). But I respect the fact that all cultures have a place under the sun within our constitutional democracy. Our Constitution gives all of us the right to choose our cultural identities.

Section 30 gives everyone the right to “participate in the cultural life of their own choice”. Section 31 states that people belonging to a cultural, religious or linguistic community may not be denied the right, with other members of that community, to enjoy and practise their culture. So, to the extent that certain groups practise circumcision as part of their culture and take their boys through initiation schools for the rite to be performed, I am at peace with that.

However, what I am not at peace with is when this cultural practice results in the death of innocent little boys and young men. The recent death of 33 initiates in the KwaMhlanga area in Mpumalanga and in Limpopo has angered many as has deaths in the Eastern Cape in the past. But what outrages me is that no one has as yet been held accountable for what happened in KwaMhlanga. Neither am I aware of any prosecution that has taken place in the Eastern Cape in recent years for similar cases.

The right to practise one's culture should not, in my view, take precedence over the right to life. One cannot kill innocent boys and claim he is practising his culture. People who botch circumcisions and conduct them in a way that results in death should be arrested and prosecuted. No person should die in South Africa without those responsible being held accountable.

This cultural practice resides within traditional authority. What are the country's kings and chiefs saying when young men are slaughtered like this? Are they willing, for example, to have their authority over this custom to co-exist with formal legal authority? Would they sanction or even hand over for prosecution individuals who are responsible for acts that give this custom a bad name?

I am told that more than just the removal of a foreskin, the boys who go through this ritual are taught values such as responsibility, respect for women, a man's role in the community and similar other commendable values. This is all great and should not be abandoned.

I understand that the ritual is secretive and sacred but is it not possible to leave the surgery to medically trained people and let the traditionalists do the teaching? I am thinking aloud here because the death of one initiate is one too many. If it can be avoided by having medically qualified people perform the surgery, where lies the difficulty there?

Apart from the deaths which recently occurred, we have heard other horror stories such as circumcisions being conducted with unsterilized knives, abduction of under-age boys into initiation schools, the abuse of

alcohol by some of the “surgeons”, an increase in fly-by-night initiation schools motivated by money, amputation of penises because incorrectly performed procedures and the onset of gangrene. Is all this suffering worth it? Indeed, is the sanctity of life and the right thereto less important than culture? Culture is dynamic and gets practised in an ever-changing environment. There may be merit in reviewing how this cultural is practised.

South Africa is a participant to many significant treaties that impact on children’s rights. Yet, I seldom hear our Ministry of Women, Children and People with Disabilities when little boys lose their lives at initiation schools. Non-government organisations that do work in this area are not as vocal as they are, for example, when it is the girl child who is a victim. All our children are equal and as parents and adults we should fight for their protection irrespective of their gender. After all, our silence on the victimization of boys does not enhance the safety of the girl child.

It is reassuring to hear that Parliament will soon be debating the issue of the deaths of initiates. The call by all political parties for a probe on this should be welcomed. But a parliamentary debate should not just end there. We should see action being taken.

In my last column, I asked President Jacob Zuma to pronounce himself on what has come to be known as the Guptagate. He has since spoken strongly against his name being used to secure undue favours and privileges. We should welcome that, including the public release of the report by the Directors-General who investigated the matter.

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