

THE VALUE OF RELIGION AMONG ZULU TEENAGERS

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INTRODUCTION

Religion plays an integral role in the development of Zulu teenagers. It is of utmost importance to define the complexity of the concept of religion. Religion can mean fundamental beliefs, superstitions as well as western style. This essay will focus quite extensively on the African view of the religion although the literature review is overwhelmingly western. Culture, norms and customs are one other aspect that can 'fatten' the concept of religion. Furthermore, more emphasis will be on the value part of the religion. The definitions of some basic concepts, herein referred to above, will be given in order to shed more light on the understanding of the whole activity. Culture has a value on marital issues such as wedding ceremonies, reed ceremony, initiation ceremonies, which is a graduation from childhood to adulthood, *umemulo* – this is a ceremonial function performed by the father to say that his daughter is ready to get married. This ceremony, on western terms is equivalent to 21st birthday party.

DEFINITION OF FUNDAMENTAL TERMS

RELIGION

Religion is a system of symbols which act to establish powerful pervasive and long lasting moods and motivation in men formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic. Religion can further be defined as a system of beliefs and practices by which a group of people interprets and responds to what they feel is sacred and, usually, supernatural as well.

VALUE

A value is a belief that something is good and desirable. It defines what is important, worthwhile and worth striving for. It has been suggested that individual achievement and materialism are major values in Western industrial society. The fundamental values that are kept and looked upon on daily basis, among other things, are respect not only for one's parents and peers, friends, members of the extended families, any layperson and strangers as well, such as foreigners. Discipline is the pivot of the fundamental values of black people. Caring, not only for yourself and immediate family members, is one other human value that positively contributes towards the development of Zulu teenagers.

NORMS

A norm is a specific guide to action, which defines acceptable and appropriate behaviour in particular situation. For example, in all societies, there are norms governing dress.

CULTURE

A set of rules or standards shared by members of a society, which when acted upon by the members, produce behaviour that falls within a range of variation the members consider proper and acceptable.

SOCIETY

This a group of people who occupy a specific locality and who share the same cultural traditions.

MULTICULTURALISM IN SOUTH AFRICA

South Africa is one of the countries in the world that experience multiculturalism. As a result, the new constitution declares South Africa to be a secular state and enshrines religious freedom for all. This freedom brings a lot of confusion to the upcoming teenagers who are commonly raised on Christian principles and Zulu cultural traditions. All sorts of immoralities have cropped up as a result of religious confusions imposed by political upheavals in the country. Crime, rape, serial killings, drug

trafficking, stealing and alcoholism have increased incredibly. Secularisation has given rise to gangsterism, which is nightmarish to the community of South Africa. Zulu culture has strong moral values in such a way that some other cultures tends to look down upon them as highly primitive and barbaric. Tourism is the only industry that promotes the continued existence of traditional culture. The Zulus who live in townships and cities have a tendency to intentionally ignore all cultural activities and refer to them as outdated.

CHARACTERISTICS OF A CULTURE

Through the comparative study of many different cultures, anthropologists have arrived at an understanding of the basic characteristics that all cultures share.

CULTURE IS SHARED

Culture is a set of shared ideals, values and standards of behaviour. It is the common denominator that makes the actions of individuals intelligible to the group. Because they share a common culture, people can predict how others are most likely to behave in a given circumstance and react accordingly. Culture and society are two closely related concepts. Obviously, there can be no culture without a society, just as there can be no society without individuals. Conversely, there are no known human societies that do not exhibit culture.

CULTURE AND SOCIETY

To all intents and purposes a newborn human baby is helpless. Not only it is physically dependent on older members of the species but it also lacks the behaviour patterns necessary for living in human society. It relies primarily on certain biological drives as hunger and thirst and on the charity of its elders to satisfy those drives. The infant has a lot to learn. In order to survive, it must learn the skills, knowledge and accepted ways of behaving of the society into which it is born. It must learn a way of life; in sociological terms, it must learn the culture of its society. Ralph Linton states that 'The culture of a society is the way of life of its members; the collection of ideas and habits which they learn, share and transmit from generation to generations'. In Clyde Kluckhohn's elegant phrase, culture is a 'design for living' held by members of a particular society. Since humans have no instincts to direct their actions, their behaviour must be based on the guidelines that are learned. In order for a society to operate effectively, its members must share these guidelines. Without a shared culture, members of a society would be unable to communicate and cooperate, and confusion would result. Culture therefore has two essential qualities: first, it is learned; second, it is shared. Without them there would be no human society.

THE ZULU

The Zulu constitute one of the major ethnic groups in South Africa and well known for their historical encounter with foreign forces under the dynamic and the able leadership of Shaka the Great, Africa's Napoleon. The Zulu people attach special importance to the various stages a person goes through, and each one is marked by special preparations and ceremonies (Krige 1962). To the Zulu, a birth of a child is of special significance for two reasons, it is the entry of yet another person in their midst and society, and second, it signifies a special stage in the lives of the parents. The birth of the first child is of supreme importance, and the Zulu view marriage as incomplete without children.

FROM CHILDHOOD TO ADULTHOOD

As a Zulu child grows and develops, he is accorded a different status and assigned new duties and responsibilities. Before reaching puberty, a Zulu child is required to have his ears pierced (Krige 1962). This is accompanied by much feasting and celebrating to show that the child is attaining new status. Usually, ear piercing is done collectively, all the children in the community who are about the same age being done at the same time. Each child's parents are expected to contribute towards the ceremony by providing beer, corn or goat. The night before the ceremony, the children who are to have their ears pierced are secluded from the others and given the advice to be strong and courageous and to be a man, in the case of boys. The person responsible for piercing ears may be of either sex, except that if she is a woman, she should be past childbearing age. The qualifications of such a person

is wisdom, experience and dexterity in carrying out the operation. It must also be someone whose wounds heal quickly. Friends and relatives give the children, whose ears are pierced, gifts.

The piercing of the ears marks the first step from childhood to adulthood, and though it is not a very important step, it nevertheless brings the child a higher status, for it is said that he is now able to hear and understand and therefore his ears have been opened in order that he may hear well. (Kriger 1962:85)

Children who have gone through this ceremony are held to be more accountable for their behaviour than those who have not. In the past, only children who had had their ears pierced were allowed to herd cows. Those who had not pierced looked after the goats. The ear piercing ceremony is held at intervals of two to three years. Some of the admonitions given during the collective ceremony to those who are to be initiated are that they work hard, obey the instruction of their elders, be men, keep away from women, be of help to their fathers, have a special regard for cattle. They sit with their knees up so that they are in a position to rise at any time. While in seclusion, they are fed on meat and beer, which are believed to be energy-producing foods.

Physical maturation is marked by nocturnal emission in boys for which a special ceremony is held. His father, to make him strong, gives the boy moral support. He also goes into seclusion and is not supposed to be seen, particularly by women. Therefore he covers himself in a blanket when he is out in the yard, and he walks in a bent position to avoid being seen. The boy has the company of his age mates, who dress and behave in the same way, and is not allowed to drink either curds or water, since these are understood to be weakening. He is also advised to abstain from sexual intercourse with members of the opposite sex to avoid conception (sexual intercourse is to be confined to the thighs).

After the puberty ceremony, a boy is given a second name by his age mates, which is used by his age mates and those younger than he is. Although given to him by his age mates, the boy suggests it in consultation with his peers, and like other Zulu names, it commemorates some important event. The clothes he used before puberty are either given away or thrown away or burnt, and the boy dresses in completely new clothing. The end of the boy's seclusion is marked by joyous dancing, shrilling in high-pitched tones by women, feasting, drinking and the presentation of gifts by friends and relatives in recognition of his newly acquired status.

A girl reaching puberty goes through an experience similar to that for a boy. She remains in seclusion for a couple of weeks or months, during which time she is fed to fatten her up. Girls in the neighbourhood are invited to attend this special occasion and are expected to sing special puberty music. They spend the nights with the initiates and go home in the mornings. The boys accompany the girls in singing, which lasts until midnight, when they return home or spend the night there in houses other than the one used to initiate. On the second day of menstruation, the girl is wrapped and goes to the river for a bath, accompanied by one other girl. A girl is expected to remain a virgin until she marries, and conceiving a child before marriage is considered a disgrace to the family.

MARRIAGE CEREMONIES

The bride price, known as *lobola*, comprises four to five cattle. In the Zulu culture, a son-in-law is a very important person, and is referred to as to handle of a hoe. Every time his father-in-law needs help, he comes to his aid, and every time a brother-in-law marries, he makes a contribution (in the form of cattle) towards the bride price. Initially the Zulu are not amused to know that someone is proposing to marry their daughter, since this implies separation from a member of the family. This attitude is reflected in the hostility expressed in the process of negotiation and in songs in which insults and name-calling are exchanged between the two parties, and they accuse each other of unchastity and witchcraft. Only after the wedding, when the two parties share meat and beer, does hostility end and friendship start.

A girl can accept a lover only with the permission of older girls. Once a girl has made a decision, a special ceremony is held and the girls and boys meet to celebrate. During this occasion, the boys thank the girl for accepting one of their peers, while the girls respond by asking the boys to be kind and truthful to them. The prospective bridegroom presents his prospective bride with a gift, while the other boys do the same to the other girls. This meeting of the two parties indicates that the two young people are seriously planning to marry. Then the young man asks his fiancée for permission to present the

matter to her parents. She refuses three or four times and refers him to the older girls. On approaching the older girls, he is told that they have to discuss the matter with the fiancée before they can grant him permission. Then he is given the permission to see his prospective parents-in-law.

Another important step is for the boy to present the matter to his father through his mother or uncle or aunt. The matter is discussed and one of the relatives, usually his mother or his aunt, is asked to present the matter to his father. It has to be someone who is likely to convince the father to go along with the proposition. This is followed by the selection of a go-between, who will be asked to approach the girl's family. The go-between has to be a friend of the family and known for his skill in negotiation and coordination, as this is considered a delicate matter. The go-between is always a man. Accompanied by a few others, including the boy, the go-between presents the case to the girl's father, who summons the girls when the visitors have gone to ask them whether they know anything about them.

He also asks for the girl in who they are interested, and then gives the girl a lecture on the advantages and disadvantages of being married to the person in question. The girls are at liberty to plead their case in case the father has some reservations and before the girls disperse, the father tells them whether or not he will accept the proposal when the boy's party comes for the second time. When the boy's party visits for the second time, it is told to bring a certain number of cattle before the father can give his final word, although this implies acceptance of the proposal. He talks to them angrily and offensively. The people in the boy's party act as humbly as they can and tell him that they are poor and do not have many cattle, although this may not necessarily be so. It is a culturally conventional way of communicating in matters of this nature, and a similar procedure, with the exception of hostility, is used by the Nyakyusa people in Tanzania. The visitors go away to come back with the *lobola* at a later date.

When they come this time, notice will have been dispatched to many friends and relatives to be present when the *lobola* is brought. The girl's side will criticise the animals, saying that they have brought mere calves rather than cattle, or that they are too thin, or too few, or that they are more like goats than cattle. The boy's party puts up with such comments, pleading poverty. In the end, the *lobola* is accepted and a goat or an ox is slaughtered for their meal. The Zulu girl may talk to the boy only after she has been given permission to do so by the older girls. Instead of saying 'I also love you', Zulu girls may simply say 'You may now leave me alone' or 'leave me alone' or 'what more do you want me to say' (Kridge 1962:105).

When the bride price has been paid in full, the boy's parents are told get ready for the wedding. Meanwhile the girl prepares herself and is given gifts by her parents, relatives and friends. The girl's preparation includes making ornaments, beads, baskets, brooms, and mats, and practicing dancing and singing. Before the bride's departure, a beast is slaughtered for her and the meat is eaten while her mother and other women go through the sorrowful experience of parting with their daughter. She is instructed to behave properly where she is going, as she is their representative and any wrongdoing on her part reflects on her people. The father dresses her in her wedding apparel and then leads her by the hand out of the house to be taken to her husband. She is accompanied by her age mates and older women and men.

As soon as the bride arrives at the groom's house, the wedding celebration begins. Presents are exchanged and there is feasting, singing and dancing. When all the festivities and ceremonies are over, the marriage is consummated and the married couple attain the status of married people.

The Zulu are a patriarchal society and, when sons of the family head marry, they bring their brides back to their father's home. Since polygamy is widely practised and each wife is entitled to her own hut, the household may grow considerably – as many as 20 huts are not unknown (Elliot 1993:6-7). Traditionally, a married woman remains under the control of her mother-in-law for about a year before she is assigned a house of her own. This is usually marked by the birth of her first child. While she is with her mother-in-law she has to do the cooking, sweeping, gathering of firewood, and gardening, and to fetch water from the well. All these practices place a great influence on the Zulu teenager's development and they value a lot to them as they switch from their young age to adulthood.

The circumcision of women has been known to lead to infection, infertility and death (Daily Dispatch 25th June 1993). Numerous attempts were made by missionaries to bring to an end the circumcision of

girls. Similar attempts have been made by some national governments, but for all we know, both sets of attempts have been unsuccessful, because of the extent to which the circumcision is embedded in the cultures in which it is practised. African ethnic groups which practise circumcision, all view ritual with strong personal as well as cultural pride. As of now, Zulu young people have refrained from engaging in this practice because it was banned long ago by the Zulu kings because of its negative effects on young people. But this practice played a big role in building a strong character in young people because it taught them reliability, trust, tenacity and ability to switch from young men to an independent old man who abides to norms and values of the Zulu community.

Circumcision was a communication means to say to a young man, “You are now grown up and you need cultural ritual to graduate from youth to adult.” Therefore you need to firstly remove the foreskin so that when you start practising sexual intercourse you may not contract sexually transmitted diseases and secondly you will be taught how to raise children, treat your wife, provide security and support for the family and get your family together at all times. Not much will be alluded to under circumcision because it is practised mostly by Xhosa speaking people and Basotho. Besides circumcision there are other rites of passage that are practised among Zulu religion.

ANOTHER VIEW OF MARRIAGE

This is the most colourful of the many Zulu rituals. Wedding celebrates joining, giving, sharing, and the future. The Zulus are a polygamous tribe and man may choose many wives; each marriage is negotiated with the bride’s father and paid for with cattle. No invitations are sent; rather the news of the wedding spreads by word of mouth throughout the area. The entire community is involved in the wedding celebration for three days and shares in the moment. Joyous singing, ancient dances, and mock fighting by lone warriors, *ukugiya*, is part of the celebration. Cattle symbolise affluence and serve as a link between the present generation and the next because they are used as the *lobola*, or dowry. The Zulu’s ceremonial life is colourful and exciting, emphasising dress and beadwork (Johnson, E).

The men suddenly clap their hands as if to the beat of a drum, and a blood stirring chant begins as powerful voices rise. A lone warrior appears, waving sticks and a shield about him in a mystical battle with imaginary enemies. During this pure celebration of life and masculinity, women rush around him and tease him, but he acts as if nothing has happened. For the marrying warrior this is a time of sadness and growth because he has become a provider, rather than a taker of life. He will participate in elder meetings and begin to control young warriors. Thus it is an extremely stressful period of change (Johnson, E).

Then, the young engaged girls rush forward from one side in a brash, bold, beautiful, and powerful fashion. The brides-to-be have cans with pebbles in them tied to their ankles and they perform a strange mixture of jumps and offbeat steps. The wedding is a rite of passage for the bride from her first family to her second. During the bridal party, the brides use a knife to symbolically cut off the past by cutting the cans from their ankles. This is the most important part of the ritual for the bride’s family because it shows the loss of a valuable family member and is the very basis of the tradition of *lobola*, bride price. With the knife the bride cuts away the past and approaches her husband amongst the warriors (Johnson, E). Another song and dance burst from everybody, towards the end of which, young warriors and girls gradually drift off. Yet, this is far from the end of the celebrations. The whole marriage can only be said to have finished when the bride is taken by her sisters to be bathed and examined the morning after (Johnson, E).

ROYAL REED DANCE

This is another important rite of passage to the Zulu cultures. This dance occurs in September when thousands of people go to the King’s royal residence to watch ten thousands of young Zulu maidens participating in a colourful cultural festival for four days. Since the rise of the Zulu kingdom under King Shaka, the Reed Dance festival has been celebrated by every generation. This is an exciting, joyful occasion, which portrays the rich cultural heritage of the Zulu people. The Reed Dance also is an essential way of unifying the nation and the King, who leads over the ceremony (Kwazulu – Natal Tourism). Young people are invited by the King to participate in the honourable ceremony, which is led by the chief princess and is an important rite of passage. The reed sticks are carried in a procession in front of the Zulu nation to help young maidens celebrate their preparation for womanhood. Only

virgins are permitted to take part in the festival and according to Zulu mythology if a woman participates in the Reed ceremony and is not a virgin, the long reeds break in front of the entire nation. The reed that each maiden carries symbolises the power that is vested in nature. The reeds represent a deep connection with the origin of the Zulu people because the original ancestor emerged from a reed bed.

Shouts of joy and celebration greet each woman as the reed she chooses remains intact (KwaZulu-Natal Tourism). This is an occasion for the young women to show off their singing, dancing and beadwork that they have been working on for many months. By paying tribute to the King the young women represent the Zulu nation who bestows the symbolic power to rule over the Zulu kingdom on the King for the year to come. To demonstrate his gratitude, the king responds with a sacrifice to the royal ancestors on behalf of all the young women and their communities throughout the kingdom. As the celebration draws to a close, the King joins in the dancing and singing in celebration (KwaZulu-Natal Tourism).

The Zulu have other rituals that are not associated with religion or rites of passage. Some of these traditions still exist in present day South Africa. For example, when an item is given to another person after a trade, purchase, or as a gift it is always passed in the same way, using only the right hand with the left hand under the right forearm. This is to show the receiver that there are no hidden weapons and, therefore, nothing to fear. The Zulu also do not enter another's home unless they have been invited. A young Zulu will never look an older person in the eyes or talk before being spoken to, so they must be greeted first. In addition, the Zulu do not rise in front of their chiefs because they believe that the person with lower rank should always have his head below the person of superiority. If offered food or drink, it is disrespectful to reject it.

From this information, it is apparent that the Zulu did not have as simple a tribe as some people believe. Just because a tribe is labelled as "primitive" does not mean that it is not complex. The Zulu, for example, were involved in architecture, art, dance and music and they made useful tools and intricate clothing. Religion also played a large part in Zulu life, which is seen from its influence on rites of passage, myths and rules. This exploration of the Zulu tribe allowed the researchers to appreciate cultural customs that exist in other parts of the world.

CULTURAL OBSERVANCES

When a beloved one in the family has passed away, all the family and the extended family members come in unity to provide moral support and plan about the entire burial process. The chief patriarch is the one who will give orders that will be carried out in the process. A cow is slaughtered to accompany the deceased. All the family members' faces must show sadness otherwise you will be implicated to have practised witchcraft which led to the death of the family member. Elderly women put across their shoulders some shawls as a mark of respect to the deceased. The patriarch will burn the incense and begin to converse with the ancestors. At that moment everybody will be confined in the room and silent until the conversation is over after which a goat will be slaughtered and skinned instantly. Tiny pieces will be cut from the tripe of the goat and be placed at the front part of the room and be burnt on the open clay pot. When the funeral is over, all the members of the family will be ordered to remain after everybody has left. They will cut off their hair and a black strip of cloth will be pasted on the shoulder of the outer garment up until a cleansing ceremony is performed where all the black strips will be taken off.

After a few months a big ceremony will be done where all the members of the community will be invited to be part of the celebration. This is a cleansing ceremony where a traditional healer will perform something to introduce the deceased to other members of the family who died long ago. It is believed that following this process will bring fortunes to the family. There are traditional medicines that are taken by all members of the family. This in itself teaches young people to respect cultural imposition without questioning. If a person does not take order of all the proceedings he will go mad and even a terrible disaster may befall him/her.

WESTERN INFLUENCE

Western civilisation has distorted the logical thinking about cultural traditions. Many young people gradually drift away from the origins of their culture due to the process of 'rainbow nation' and the 'dawn of democracy' which provides people with a Bill of Rights that infringe the cultural stereotypes. Due to the advancing levels of technology, South African youth is beginning to question the authenticity of cultural traditions. The Zulu teenagers have completely shunned the traditional activities and declared them as primitive and have no direct impact on their lives. Christianity and some other religions have played a pivotal role in overthrowing the kingdom of cultural religions.

Many young people regard slaughtering animals as cruelty against God's creation and believe that animals are meant for mere food and nothing else. The Christian bible teaches that it is satanic to have contact with dead people because dead have no share among the living. Young people have lost respect for their parents because they identify themselves with western culture. They stroll on the streets with their lovers and kiss in front of their parents. They begin sexual relations as early as the age of 13 years and probably at the age of 14 they fall pregnant. Parents are bound to shoulder the responsibility of raising the child. The Bill of Rights protects young people from corporal punishment; as a result, they have a freedom to do as they please. As it was stated a time ago, young people nowadays participate in the conversation between their parents, which is a thing that was very taboo a long time ago.

INDIVIDUAL DEVELOPMENT

In the past, Zulu traditional life was highly structured and discipline underlined its every facet. Each person had a place and specific functions to perform, depending on gender, age and rank in the household. Distinction between members of the household was reinforced by the fact that every individual passed through a number of well-marked stages, none of which could be entered into without preparation and ceremony. The first stage in the transition from childhood to adulthood was marked by the ear-piercing ceremony, which every child had to undergo before reaching puberty.

CONCLUSION

Personally I don't see young people reverting to the cultural practices due to the ever-advancing technological developments. Young people are in a competition to tally with the changing time. Many of them commit themselves in sports and studying for university degrees and thereby trying to meet the demands of the century and align themselves up with the demands of time. Fashion has dominated their minds and the type of music they play is taking them away from culture. Their mind is dominated by western developments. Youths from mega-cities and townships undermine those who come from still primitive environments and regard them as illiterate and backward. Western education has also made us think that our indigenous culture is uncalled for. But it will take sometimes for cultural religion to completely undergo extinction because of rural life that still exists in full force.