

Ndebele (Ndzundza) Puberty Rites

As I sipped my coke - and you sipped whatever you chose to drink - I asked Khobongo Petrus Mahlangu (the Kgodwana Cultural Village Director) to enlighten me regarding the Ndebele male (*iwela*) and female (*ukuthomba*) initiation rites. He responded to my inquiry saying:

The *iwela* ("crossing over") is an Ndebele male initiation school which starts in the last week of April and ends in the first week of July. That is, it takes place during the cold, winter season. The initiates are rounded up for the cross over (*ukuwela*) by *amasokana* (senior initiated boys) carrying an *iswazi* (a green tree branch about 1 to 2 meters long) and an *isihlangu* (shield). When two such groups meet the *amasokana* may engage in a stick fight with one another.

In the initiation school, boys aged from 15 to 21 are taught about behavior, marriage, sex, responsibility, and manhood by their *amasokana* guides. These senior boys are, in turn, supervised by their fathers or grandfathers who may pay a visit to the camp once a week. It is not an annual event; for it only takes place in 4 year intervals.

During the first month, the boys (*amalija*) paint their faces with white ash and remain in their mountain encampments. They don't move about much as they are in seclusion. With the start of the second month they become *amagwabo* (sg. *umsegwabo*) and the women of their homestead celebrate ceremonies marking the transition of their son from *ilija* to *umsegwabo*.

During the second month of training the boys cover their faces and bodies with white ash and only wear leather loin pants and blankets. During this month, you can see them marching, singing, and performing initiation dances for the community. During the last week of the *amagwabo*'s schooling this activity finishes and the boys stay in their encampment. Because of constant sweating the ash wears off and then they wash themselves completely.

When they recross the stream, they are made to go to the chief's kraal where they are inspected for abuse. This is then followed by a big celebration. The boys smear their bodies with animal fat so that they shine and run in a long cue outside the chief's kraal clothed only in their *isivunulo* so that everyone can see them. They run 3 or 4 rounds with each round being from 110 to 220 yards long. Then they are split up into various groups and rounded up again by their *amasokana* for the *ukukoduka* (return home). Upon arrival in their home area, the boys in a particular round-up go to the home of one of the boys in the group where they are entertained by that boys family; they then all go to a second boys home and so on until they have all been entertained in each other's home.

Ukuthomba (girls' initiation) is quite different. The girls (usually between the ages of 16 and 18) go into seclusion in their own homes for one month. On the first day of seclusion they are presented with beautiful striped and colorful blankets which they only wear when they emerge on the last day. The girl's friends come and sing for her and only females are allowed to participate. Unlike the boys' ceremony, the girls' initiation can be done anytime. In this area, it is usually done during the long school holidays between December and January.

During a girl's initiation (*ukuthomba* or *iqude*) uninitiated boys may choose to engage in a kind of stick-fighting known as *isibuku* (knobbed-stick). In this event a girl's boyfriend may be challenged, and if he is beaten he may lose his girlfriend. During this combat an adversary may strike anywhere he pleases; but head blows are preferred. In this competition, one strikes with the *isibuku* and parries with a small round shield known as *ikhanda*.

This submission was excerpted from pp. 845-846 of my Three Northern Nguni Nations. For more information concerning these rites see *glossary entry* #110 of that publication.

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