

A Zulu Rite of Passage

According to Victor Mdluli from Esiphezi KwaZulu:

A boy typically reaches the age of puberty when he is 14 years old, that's why we call the associated ritual "the 14th" in English. In isiZulu this ceremony has three different names: **umthombo** [fountain, source, malt], **ithunga** [milk-pail], and **umhlonyana** [a medicinal herb]. Although King Shaka terminated the circumcision ceremony (**ukusokwa**), the "14th ceremony" still remains with us.

If the maternal grandmother or paternal grandfather sees the signs of puberty (e.g. **izinduna** = pimples, etc.) in the boy, the mother of the boy reports this to the boy's father. The paternal family then convenes. By paternal family I mean those having the same surname or same father or same grandfather (but possibly different fathers). This involves people who may live or stay in different places.

After they convene they choose a week to make preparations and during that week the boy's mother or grandmother starts to make **utshwala** on a Monday.

Utshwala, you know, is a kind of Zulu beer - called **isizulu** by some and **umqombothi** by others. Beers in the Zulu language have different names and different qualities. Aside from the three names mentioned above, there is also **ujwejwe** (a reddish weaker beer), **isiqatha** (a reddish beer even weaker than **ujwejwe**), **umfulamfula** (which has a white color), **inkwishi** (reddish but strong), and **ugavini** (which is whitish in color because it is made from sugar cane).

After the mother finishes making the **isizulu**, the boy's father or his paternal grandfather takes a big goat and stands in front of the kraal with the boy and, while burning **impepho** incense on a small shard, addresses the ancestral spirits saying; "O **makhedama** [departed spirits], I invite all of you to help this boy because he is now of age (**siyamkhulisa**)". After addressing the forefathers, the boys slaughter and skin (**bayayihlinza**) the goat and place it in the middle of the hut for the **amadlozi** (ancestral spirits).

Early the next morning, all the boys of his age group take all the cows to the veld or forest and leave the calves (**amankanyane**) in the corral. They remain in the forest for the whole day and do not return the cows for milking. The problem begins when the calves cry out to be fed because they crave their mothers' milk.

The father or grandfather sends the girls to fetch the cows from the forest, but the boys chase the girls away with their sticks. When the girls return, the father or grandfather sends older boys to fetch the cows. There is another fight and if these boys fail in their mission the father goes himself with older men. After their defeat, the boys sing appropriate songs as they follow their fathers and the cattle back to the cattle kraal. After first performing a ritual foot stomp dance called **isishiyamene** inside the kraal, they enter the hut to eat the goat and then continue with their dances there.

**Waze waliqili
Simnikile
Ulogwaja obeliqile**

Mdluli then narrated what happens with a girl's 14th and I choose to include it here because it is slightly different from what I learned at the University of Durban in Westville and what I learned later from Queenie who recently performed the ritual. In this way, you will get a more complete picture of the ceremony for each includes aspects of the ritual not included in the other versions. Victor's version, which he says he learned from three old women from the same places as the aforementioned three old men, is as follows:

The names for the girl's 14th is the same as for the boys. When the mother or paternal grandmother sees the "sign" (first menstruation) in the girl, she tells the girl's father and Zulu beer is prepared. If the family is poor only one goat is slaughtered on the 6th day of the ceremony. If they are rich, however, then two goats are killed: the first, immediately, to report to the *amadlozi* that their daughter is now pubescent, and the second on the sixth day.

After they make the Zulu beer, the mother of the girl informs all the relatives and neighbors. The girl remains in isolation for seven days in her grandmother's hut. On the next to the last day (i.e. the sixth day) a goat is killed. That night, all the girls of the same age come and perform a Zulu dance called the *ingcekeza*. The grandmother of the girl paints the girl's entire body with red clay.

When the girl is in isolation no one in the family, neither relatives, nor neighbors is permitted to enter the room. The grandmother is the only one who remains day and night with the girl during the seven day period. The girl is actually in a round enclosure (*isihenqo*) which was fabricated by the girl's mother and other female relatives and is set up inside her grandmother's hut.

A goat is killed on the last but one day, and all the girls of her age group do the *ingcekeza* all night. They do not sleep at all; because very early in the morning, while it is still dark, they must go to the river to wash themselves - a ritual known in Zulu as *ukushaya izibuko* [ejaculate or wash body].

After that they collect wood (*bayatheza*) and return home at 1:00 PM. They then enter the kraal and perform the *ingcekeza* dance again. After this the family of the girl's father gives the girls and assembled relatives the meat of the goat which was slain the preceding day. Note here that it is the father and the boys who are responsible for cooking and distributing the meat on that day.

Well here we have a pubescent girl and a pubescent boy and though you can imagine what the next step is so I asked Victor to elucidate upon the matter of courtship. He said

In Zulu culture, the girls remain silent when men propose love to them. Men were never confident of success in their quest for a particular girl even when they received help from love potions like *isibango* or *isinqabo* which they procure from an *isangoma*. *Isibango* is the type boys usually employ and it can be used in three different ways, for you can: 1) wash your body with it; 2) burn it and let its smoke envelop you as you recite orations; or 3) drink it and vomit it out. The *isinqabo* on the other hand is the strongest love magic.

It is, in effect, a vaseline that you employ by rubbing it on both of your temples. The *isangoma* or *inyanga* uses different kinds of leaves, trees, and roots to make his concoctions. One of these medicines is called "*bheka mina ngedwa*" ("look at me alone") and another is "*udela unina*" ("forget about your mother").

Let me tell you a story about *isibango*. In Zululand, the man who likes a girl usually courts her for two or three years and sometimes even more. One day, in 1998, I accompanied my uncle (who is three years older than me) so that he could propose love to a beautiful lady. We woke up early in the morning at 4:00 AM and dressed ourselves smartly in black trousers and white running shoes (*amateki*). We then spent the whole day on the banks of the Umhlathuze river near Mvunzane waiting for a girl named Dumazile to come [Leaping lizards! This is the very same river bank where Senzangakhona had his tryst with Nandi!].

When we saw her mother coming we hid in the bushes. This happened more than three times. We waited for a very long time. Though I began to get thirsty, hungry, and tired we continued our game of hide and seek.

At the end of the day we decided to question a lady at the banks of the river who was busy washing her clothes. I said, "Have you seen Dumazile today?" She looked at me and then laughed and laughed. I asked her why she was laughing at me so much just because I was asking about Dumazile and this question made her laugh even more.

We looked at each other and were astonished when the lady said: "You mean to tell me, my brother, that you have been waiting the whole day for Dumazile? I told her yes and asked her if she knew her. The lady replied, "Yes I know her very well. She was here for about 2 hours with me." I said, "No, that was her mother." We became very angry about the situation in which we found ourselves and decided to go home.

There was an old man near the river sitting under a tree making a wooden spoon (*ukhezo*). He was looking at us and laughing. He then shouted to me calling me by my name saying: "You two must go and see the *isangoma*. He'll give you a good medicine called *isibango*. After that you'll see the real girls and not their mothers.

Sometimes when you sit waiting for the girls you will see a big snake [this is the form taken by another suitor] and decide to run away and leave the lady. At other times you will see a donkey or a cow instead of the girl and also decide to leave. All this happens if you are not using *isibango*.

After a long time proposing love (i.e. courting), if she likes you, the girl may utter one of the following expressions: (1) "Can you go up in the tree and give me the last leaf?"; (2) "Can you give me a bushel bag filled with *izintuthwane* (ants)?"; (3) "Can you go to your home and give me the grass in the middle of the yard?"; or (4) "Can you give me the last handkerchief which has seven corners?".

The first expression means: Can you tell your first brother to come to me? [When the brother comes she will give him the bead-work symbolizing her affection for the suitor]; the second means: Can you go back to your village and tell all the boys in your age group to come to me? [This is an invitation to a ritual exchange of gifts]; the third means "Can you go and call your first brother? [When the brother comes she will give him the bead-work symbolizing her affection for her suitor]; and the fourth means: "Please call seven boys to come to me!"

I asked if his uncle was eventually successful in his quest and he replied:

No. Dumazile is now married; but to someone else. Love is hard to understand. The girls do not say what they mean and the boys do not say what they mean.

This selection was excerpted from pp 213-215 of my [Three Northern Nguni Nations](#).