

# FROM CHILDHOOD TO WOMANHOOD: PUBERTY RITES OF !XOO GIRLS OF ZUTSHWA

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## Abstract

Rites of passage are rituals that mark or accompany the important changes in the life cycle of individuals such as birth, puberty, marriage and death. Girls' puberty rites mark the transition or change in status from childhood to adulthood. People throughout the world have ritual ceremonies intended to mark this transition. The aim of the paper is to document and analyze the puberty rites of girls of !Xoo of Zutshwa of south western Botswana paying particular attention to the inherent meanings associated with the performance of this ritual. The study also seeks to establish the socio-cultural significance of this rite and ritual and to explore the changes if any that are taking place in the performance of the !Xoo girls puberty rites and the accompanying rituals. This paper is based on a study that was carried out in Zutshwa in 2006 and 2015. Data was collected using in-depth interviews and open-ended questions. This paper argues that it is important to document the !Xoo culture, traditions and practices because research has shown that they are highly threatened with extinction just like those of other minority ethnic groups in Botswana. The study revealed that the !Xoo girls puberty rites are undergoing rapid changes due to acculturation, inter-marriages, education, religion and globalization.

**Keywords:** rites of passage, puberty, !Xoo, Zutshwa, childhood, menstruation, adulthood, womanhood

## 1.0 Introduction

Rites of passage are rituals that mark or accompany the important changes in the life cycle of individuals such as birth, puberty, marriage and death. van Gennep (1909) observed that all cultures have prescribed ways for an individual and society to deal with these changes. This paper focuses on girls puberty rites of the !Xoo of Zutshwa in Botswana. Puberty rites are rites of passage that mark the change in status of an individual. They mark a transition from childhood to adulthood. When a child/girl is believed to be physically and sexually mature, puberty rites are performed to help her transition smoothly from childhood to adulthood. According to Munthali & Zulu (2007), puberty rites mark the transition into a sexual world. When a girl gets her period for the first time, it means she is capable of getting pregnant and having children. Probably this is why puberty is celebrated because it indicates and guarantees the continuance of the family in particular and the community in general.

In Botswana, initiation used to be performed in almost all cultural groups but the performances differed from one culture to another. This practice was abolished

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by the missionaries among the Setswana speaking people of Botswana (Denbow & Thebe, 2006; Nkomazana, 2005). However, the Khoesan cultural groups did not abandon this practice though currently it is being performed minimally. Interestingly, some cultural groups like the Bakgatla, Balete and Bangwato have recently revamped this tradition (Setlhabi, 2014). Initiation is normally regarded as a stage where a boy is to be taught manhood, while a girl is taught womanhood. Therefore, rituals do not simply bestow or formally acknowledge changes in the life history, but in many societies they have a truly transformational intent: the main and only means by which boys can be transformed into men and girls into women etc (Haviland, 1993). Initiation is thought to help build respect in teenagers and prepare them to be good husbands and wives.

People throughout the world, including the Khoesan people have ritual ceremonies intended to mark the transition from one stage of life to another. Some research has been carried out on the puberty rites of passage of the Khoesan people (Biesele, 1999; Heinz, 1994; Hoff, 1995; Marshall, 1999; Shostak, 1981; Silberbauer, 1963; Tanaka, 1980). However, I am not aware of any comprehensive study on the rites of passage of the !Xoo of Zutshwa. This study therefore seeks to document and analyze the puberty rites of girls of !Xoo of Zutshwa in an attempt to close this gap. Thus, it contributes to the existing but limited research and literature on the cultural practices of the Khoesan people. The study also seeks to find out why and how girls' puberty rites are recognized and performed among the !Xoo of Zutshwa and to establish the socio-cultural significance of these rites and rituals. Also, given that societies are undergoing rapid changes due to acculturation, inter-marriages, religion and globalization, this study also intends to explore the changes if any that are taking place in the performance of the !Xoo girls puberty rites and the accompanying rituals. Further, the !Xoo are the only south western Khoesan group in Botswana and one of the few of its kind still in existence, therefore, it is imperative to undertake this research not just to understand the !Xoo way of life but also to document their unique traditions and practices before they become extinct like those of the other groups.

## **2. Methodology**

The research was conducted in Zutshwa, a small settlement in the south-western part of Botswana in the Kgalagadi district. Zutshwa is about sixty (60) kilometers west of Hukuntsi. The data was collected in two phases, the first was in December 2006, funded by the then collaborative research program between the Universities of Botswana and Tromso, commonly known as UB/Tromso. The second phase was done in June 2014 as part of the Department of African Languages and Literature research project entitled, *Assessing Current Language and Cultural Patterns in Botswana*, funded by the Office of Research and Development (ORD) at the University of

Botswana.

The data was collected using in-depth interviews and open-ended questions. I used these methods because of their potential to elicit information and ability to bring out the views and opinions of the informants. I interviewed women of varying ages who have undergone the puberty rite and or have participated in the performance of the ritual. To augment the data, in December 2006, the women staged the performance of a girl coming out of seclusion for me. I observed the unnatural performance and took down notes. Unfortunately, my video camera broke down so I was not able to capture the performance on video but I took pictures with a still camera with their permission. I also engaged a local research assistant who spoke the !Xoo language to help me with the translation and interpretation of the data I collected.

### **3. Theoretical framework**

This paper is highly descriptive in nature, however, it will also use ritual theory as its theoretical framework. A ritual is a customary observance or practice, it is an aspect of humanity, it is expressive, symbolical or communicative, it is rule governed, routinized, symbolic, or noninstrumental (Bell, 2009, p.70). Girls' puberty rites are a form of ritual and are performed when a girl gets her first menstrual period. They are also performed in a private place purely designated for such an activity. The main features of a ritual are formality, fixity and repetition. Further, a ritual is a form of prescribed and elaborated behavior which involves a series of actions performed in a fixed order. Usually, the performers of a ritual would have participated in it on several occasions therefore they become accustomed to the rules and procedures. This paper outlines and describes the stages and procedures that the !Xoo follow when performing girls' puberty rites. Given that a ritual is a repetitive act and a socially established performance, this theory enables us to determine whether there are any changes taking place in the performance of the !Xoo girls puberty rites and the accompanying rituals.

According to Rappaport (1992), a ritual is a form of communication. In a ritual, communication can be done using the body, language, symbols and so forth. Rappaport (1992) argued that "ritual, in sum, is not simply a collection of messages and metessages but a complex form of communication in which the two sorts of messages are mutually dependent" (p. 253). Therefore, my approach to the concept of ritual in folkloristics is focused on what is being communicated, when, where, why and how is it communicated to the girl during the performance of the puberty ritual. The paper argues that a close examination of this ritual will reveal that it communicates the !Xoo socio-cultural values and practices to the girl. It makes her into a woman who is not only knowledgeable but is also in control of her sexuality and is eligible for marriage and child bearing. Further, a "ritual embodies social

contract. As such, it is the fundamental social act upon which human society is founded” (Rappaport, 1992, p. 254). Therefore, ritual theory assists us in gaining a deeper understanding of the !Xoo worldview.

#### **4. Coming of age: !Xoo girls puberty rites**

Many cultures all over the world have special ways of celebrating a young girl’s “coming of age” or puberty. According to Schapera (1930), “the attainment of puberty is marked among all the Bushmen by the performance of certain ceremonies, through which the young people have to pass before being admitted to full membership of the group” (p. 118). In other words, they have to undergo puberty rites. In most cultures when the menstruation begins, the girl tells her mother or one of the other adult women of the village (Heinz, 1994; Rattray, 1954; Rigby, 1967; Sarpong, 1977; Silberbauer, 1963; Tanaka, 1980; Wedgwood, 1933).

However, for the !Xoo, when a girl’s first menstruation comes, she runs and hides in the bush. Sooner or later the elders, precisely women, realize that she is missing and suspect that she has seen her first menses. They would then go and look for her in the bush and bring her back home. The informants did not explain how she is taken home, but among the Ashanti “she is carried because she is believed to be newly born and therefore cannot walk” (Rattray, 1954, p.72) and the !Ko Bushmen believe that “to touch the ground in this state would cause her to become thin” (Heinz, 1994, p.121). When she gets back home, the girl is kept in seclusion in the hut for one month. She is literally removed or separated from the rest of the society. The informants explained that this seclusion gives the girl time to get used to this process and to learn how to manage menstruation in private. They also said while the girl is in the hut she is told not to look outside or look at people (have eye contact with people). Rather, she is told to sit with her back turned against the wall.

Furthermore, while in seclusion, the girl is taken care of by her mother or grandmother. She does not do anything. Everything is done for her by her caretaker, for example, she feeds her, bathes her and changes the grass that she lies on. Similarly, among the !Ko, it is the duty of the old woman and the guards chosen by her “to feed and watch over her, to carry her out of the house for defecation and to place grass on the ground where she will squat” (Heinz, 1994, p.123). Among the !Kung, “the mentor attends to the girl’s needs. She brings her food and water. She carries her out to urinate and defecate” (Marshall, 1999, p. 190).

In addition, for the !Xoo, the caretaker also cuts a twig which the girl uses to scratch her body when it aches or itches. I was told that even when she wants to pull the blanket over her body she must use this twig. She is not allowed to touch anything. This is similar to what Wedgwood (1933), observed in New Guinea. He observed that, “two peeled wands are given to her so that she may scratch herself

without her hands touching her body” (Wedgwood, 1933, p. 138). Therefore, until the girl’s menstruation is over, she is totally inactive. The informants also pointed out that in the past, a girl in seclusion did not bath because there was no water. However, there are some plants that have a pleasant smell which are put/placed in the house to take care of the bad blood odor.

There are three different ways in which the !Xoo women handle the girl’s menstrual blood.. The first informant said they dig a hole in the hut and the girl sits on that hole so that the blood drops into the hole. The caretaker covers the blood time and again with sand. Another informant pointed out that the girl uses a blanket or the clothes she is wearing as a pad. She sits on the blanket or cloth until the blood stops coming out, then the clothes or blanket is thrown very far away so that nobody sees it. However, most informants said a pile of grass is laid down for the girl to sleep on. Throughout this period, the caretaker keeps changing her sleeping position and the grass when it is full of blood. They said the type of grass used has a pleasant smell so the odor of the blood is not that terrible/unbearable. The grass she sits/sleeps on is changed by her caretaker, and is kept in the house until the day she comes out. It is then thrown far away from the hut where nobody can see it. Further, the women reported that there is no excision or circumcision at !Xoo girls’ puberty rites. From this discussion it is evident that !Xoo girls’ puberty rites are individually and personally oriented because the girl undergoes this ritual alone. This observation is consonant with Kitahara (1989), who argued that female puberty rites seem to emphasize personal and individual aspects and that seclusion is to deny the social aspect of the individual (p. 134). Among the !Xoo, like in other Khoesan cultures, the girl should not be seen by men or boys during the seclusion period.

In addition, while in seclusion the girl is given food such as meat and *digwere* (roots) mixed with some medicine which is believed to ensure that her menstruation will not be prolonged. She is fed like a baby by her caretaker; she does not touch food with her hands. She is fed so that she gains weight and so that the smell of the blood does not affect her in anyway. Everything she eats is mixed with medicine. The important thing is that the girl has to be protected while she is menstruating. Therefore, the first menstruation rites take the form of seclusion of the girl, administering strengthening medicines, and singing special songs for her (Marshall, 1999).

The next stage is the transitional stage or the liminal phase. This is the period between stages during which one has left one place or state but has not yet entered or joined the next stage. At this stage the girl is regarded as being betwixt and between defined social positions (Turner, 1969). This is because she is neither a girl because she has started menstruating nor is she a woman because she has not finished the initiation rite. This stage is devoted to the instruction and training of the girl. She

is given instruction in matters concerning womanhood, domestic and agricultural activities, reproduction and behavior towards men (Caplan, 1976; Denbow & Thebe, 2006). She is also trained in the moral and practical responsibilities of being a potential wife and child bearer. During rites of transition, initiates are given instructions and advice in preparation for their expected new roles in the society (Munthali & Zulu, 2007, p. 151). For the !Xoo, the training is not harsh because it is accompanied by a great deal of singing and dancing.

Some of the instructions given to a !Xoo girl during seclusion include the following. She is taught how to be a good wife, that she should not have multiple partners because they may end up fighting or killing each other. She is told that she is now a woman and must think sensibly because very soon she will have children of her own, whom she will have to feed together with their father. She is also told that she must not walk around the settlement aimlessly; she must stay at home and do household chores like cooking, fetching water and firewood. She should not police her husband and should not listen to what people say about him. Furthermore, she should not walk around the settlement when it is raining; if there are signs of rain she must go inside the house, but once the rain stops, she can walk about. It is believed that this makes the rain to fall abundantly and consequently helps the plants to grow so there is food for everybody. In addition, the girl is told not to beat children, and that if she has to, then she must put medicine on the stick she is going to beat them with otherwise she will make them sick.

According to Silberbauer (1963), the girl is reminded of her wifely duties, to care for her husband, to live well with him, be conscientious in gathering food and not to criticize or complain of her husband to other people particularly not to other men (p.20). A similar observation is made in Caplan (1976), who says the girl is taught not only how to conduct herself during menstruation but also how to behave towards her future husband, namely not to refuse him, nor to gossip about his sexual behavior; to respect her parents and her husband's relatives, and always be hospitable to them (p. 23). Clearly, the instructions given to the girl are aimed at preparing her for marriage life.

Furthermore, there are certain taboos that are associated with menstruation among the !Xoo. Though menstruation takes about five days, the girl is kept in the hut for a month so that she is instructed on what she should do and should not do. For example, she is not allowed to walk in between animals when menstruating; it is believed that this can kill the animals or make them sick. The informants also said she is also not supposed to walk around the settlement otherwise "*lefatshe le a swa*" literally meaning the earth will die. This basically means there will be drought and therefore no plants will grow and animals would also die. They also said while menstruating, the girl should not touch *ditswammung* (any thing that grows from the

ground/plants) without using medicine otherwise there will be drought. The women argued that nowadays drought is common because girls do not listen to their advice; they touch things without being doctored/using medicine and they do not adhere to their culture and tradition anymore.

The last stage is the incorporation stage. Among the !Xoo after the girl has been secluded for a month, arrangements for her emergence and reincorporation into the society are made. Her caretaker goes around the settlement telling people that the girl will be coming out the next day. The informants said people are told to come so that they can add what they know to the rules and instruction the girl has already been told and given. I was told that a lot of people gather at this occasion and that a bunch of grass is placed on the girl's forehead and when people come to see her, the grass is slightly moved to the side. The women explained that the grass is symbolic of the one she would have been sitting on during seclusion.

The girl comes out smeared with *letsoku* (reddish powder). This is meant to beautify her and to render her more attractive. The *letsoku* also symbolizes blood and fertility. In addition, beautiful patterns are drawn on her face using a white substance. She also wears beautiful necklaces, armbands and head bands made mainly from ostrich shells. The informants told me that nowadays people have to pay to see her whereas in the past there was no money, so the girl was given necklaces and clothes made from animal skins as payment and as gifts. The girl spends the whole day like that and sleeps like that.

The next morning the women crush some *dithotse* (seeds), mix the powder with water, then wash her face with the mixture. She is then smeared with *letsoku* again. The women reported that this gave her the freedom to walk about without fear of being bitten by snakes or being attacked by wild animals. The women argued that in the past, life was tough and dangerous so the girl had to be protected against any form of danger. Other people especially men also had to be protected when they went out to hunt, hence the emphasis on the taboo mentioned earlier that a menstruating woman should not touch the hunting gear of her husband.

On this day the women take the girl around the settlement; she goes to important places like the fields/veld, the borehole, *lekadiba* (water well). She is also made to go and fetch water from the well on this day. To do so she takes a twig/stick covered with medicine and she strikes the water with the stick and leaves the stick in the water. The women said this is done so that the water does not dry out in the well. After sunset, they take her around the settlement holding a lit stick and ululating. The lit stick/fire gives her the green light to enter people's homes without fear. They light the stick from the fire they find burning in every household. This stick is smeared with medicine which was put in her food to protect her against any evil and to protect

the people she comes into contact with.

### **5. Effects of modern conditions on the puberty rites**

The main modern change is, of course, that girls go to school (Sarpong, 1977), so most of them get their first menstruation while at school. This means they cannot stay in seclusion or be away from school for a month. The women said that even when they tried to seclude the girls for the recommended period, the teachers would come and take the girl back to school arguing that she is missing out on her education. The interviewees stated that the performance of this ritual is fading because nowadays girls do not tell their mothers that they have started menstruating; the mothers usually see this when the girl is bathing. However, the women said they usually tell the girls that something like this might happen and if it does happen she must take care of herself and make sure that other people especially boys do not see it.

Furthermore, they said the girls are taught about menstruation at school. They argued that this is not good for their children because the girls get differing advice or guidance from home and from school and this confuses them. They also argued that this is destroying their culture. So basically, there are two types of laws, the home and the school and evidently, the two are always in conflict.

The women also lamented that nowadays the children do not take heed of their parents' advice, and do not like or even eat their traditional food. They said the children always question every single thing they are told to do and demand to know what will happen if they do not obey the instructions. This has made the parents to more or less give up on practicing their tradition/custom because the children are no longer interested in their culture. The children prefer the new lifestyle because they view themselves as modernized. The women argued that because of the stubbornness of the children, there is a high rate of teenage pregnancy among the !Xoo. They attribute this problem to the fact that puberty rites are no longer practiced or are practiced minimally. However, those who still practice the rite do so with various modifications in the ritual. For example, the girl misses school for the duration of her menstruation only and the girls use sanitary pads instead of grass. This discussion clearly indicates that there is tension between the old generation and the new. Their worldviews are different.

### **6. Puberty songs**

As already indicated, part of the initiation for girls involves singing and dancing. During initiation there are many lessons for the girls to learn; these are reinforced by songs sung by the women. The women interviewed explained that the songs tell the girl that she is now an adult, she should stop playing with children, and she should also know that when she sleeps with a man she may fall pregnant. The songs are sung



while she is in seclusion, expressing their happiness that she has become a woman. When they sing, they dance in a circular motion and throw a stone at each other including the initiate. This is meant to teach her to hold things carefully; she should not drop things on the ground. They also sang and jumped over a piece of wood; this is meant to protect her against illnesses and diseases.

Other songs sung by the women refer to the fact that the girl is now an adult and therefore has to behave as such. Krige (1968) argued that Zulu girls' puberty songs show how they are connected with ideas of morality and to indicate briefly the relation of puberty rites to rituals associated with the deity *Inkosazana* (p.173). For the !Xoo, the singing is regarded as the most important aspect of this period causing the girl to mature successfully. The songs are very difficult to understand and to translate owing to the extensive use of symbolism. Further, the songs are usually very secretive and not easy for the uninitiated to know their meaning. According to the !Xoo women, the songs are meant to make clear the meaning and purpose of menstruation and to warn the girl against intercourse before marriage. Therefore, the songs highlight very important social values and provide the key to true significance of this rite of passage.

## 7. Conclusion

In conclusion, the study has shown that the puberty rites of a !Xoo girl were conducted to accompany the girl from childhood to adulthood. The ceremony consisted of the isolation of the girl from society, followed by a period of instruction and finally her reintroduction into the community. Evidently, puberty is a critical period in a girl's life as she has to acquire knowledge about her social, domestic and agricultural responsibilities. Girls' puberty rites are also an opportunity for girls to learn and understand issues about their sexuality.

The study has also shown that the performance of !Xoo girls' puberty rites and the attitude of both women and girls towards this ritual is affected by modern lifestyle especially acculturation, inter-marriages, education, religion and globalization. Further, staying in close proximity with other ethnic groups such as Bakgalagadi and Bangologa the !Xoo tend to adopt these people's cultures and consequently look down upon their own culture. The study has also shown how modern lifestyle and the continuous disruption through movements which may be labour motivated or resettlements have affected this tradition precisely the social and cultural well-being of the !Xoo people. Finally, the !Xoo are the only southern Khoesan group in Botswana and one of the few of its kind still in existence, therefore, it is important to document and investigate their rituals before they become extinct like those of other groups.

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