

## ***Efukwini: Sacredness and the aesthetics of birth amongst amaXhosa. A pastoral care perspective***

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### **Abstract**

*Efukwini* is an IsiXhosa concept that refers to a birthplace in an umXhosa home. It is where the mother and her new-born will spend the first 10 days of his/her life away from the rest of society, attended to by a select group of older women or guardians. During this time, the child will be given a name and *ukuwisa* (the falling off of the stump of the umbilical cord) which is called *inkaba* is expected to take place. In short, this ritual takes the foetus from birth to babyhood. Similarly, a parallel can be drawn between *ulwaluko* (the initiation ritual), which takes a boy to manhood. Newly graduated initiates are referred to as *amakrwala*, a name bestowed upon them during the process of *ulwaluko*. The young male initiates are to remain inside the ceremonial home for the first week. Both these rituals are considered sacred among the amaXhosa people. However, in more recent times, the birth ritual has lost its appeal. This article therefore seeks to discuss, explain and theorize the purpose and meaning of the practice of *efukwini* from a narrative pastoral care perspective. A secondary aim is to understand why less emphasis has been placed on the ritual of childbirth while the practice of *ulwaluko* has survived the transition into modern day IsiXhosa culture.

### **Keywords**

*Efukwini; ulwaluko; ukuzimasa; rituals; pastoral care*

## **1. Introduction and background**

I grew up in a village where knowledge was passed on orally. At night time, seated around the fire, the elders would share stories about the heroes and heroines of my clan. As children, we were told bedtime stories *iintsomi* (fictions) around the fire either inside or outside the house. “We tell stories because in the last analysis human lives need and merit being narrated” (Ricoeur 1984:75).

Mucherera (2009:1) further indicates that people create history out of stories rooted in their ancestry. The above-mentioned author continues, saying that past and present narratives of indigenous Africans can be woven together to create a hopeful future using narrative pastoral counselling. In this story-telling, the concept *efukwini* will be introduced, explained, unpacked, and analysed to highlight the sacredness and aesthetics of these amaXhosa rituals, and draw parallels between them. The concepts “place” and “space” will be used interchangeably in this article. Although these two concepts are in fact interrelated; they must, however, be distinguished. The ancient Greek term *chora* means space or place.<sup>1</sup> Bollnow (2011:28) refers to Aristotle who examined in detail the problem of space as linked to place (*topos*) and time (*chronos*). What is important for our reflection on the connection between space and meaning is the fact that the value of space depends on position (Bollnow, 2011:29). Both place (*topos*) and space (*chora*) are interrelated. The Aristotelian concept of space therefore indicates place (*topos*), location, and position. Everything in space has its natural place. Stemming from the verb “*choreo*”, space as an existential category primarily means to give room, and more generally, to give way and to shrink back. In particular reference to vessels, it means to hold something, or to have room to receive something (Bollnow, 2011:30).

Space is indeed a many-layered concept. Due to the fact that I want to connect a systems understanding of the value and meaning of our being human to space as a category of position, orientation and the soulfulness of life, I will thus concentrate on space as a dwelling place in our spiritual search and quest for meaning; space then as an existential category, i.e. “experienced space” Bollnow (2011:216). Space in the true sense is what Bollnow (2011:43) pointed out: only needed by the human person.

In an existential orientation, it is important that space should refer to the *intimacy of dwelling*. As a human being, we dwell in this world. Dwelling then refers to a form of “trusting-understanding bond” (Bollnow 2011:261). “Everywhere it is a question of designating a particular intimacy of the relationship, with which something mental or intellectual is to some extent merged into something spatial” (Bollnow 2011:263).

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1 For this interpretation, see the discussion of Økland (2004:154) on the meaning of *chōra* and the current debate in French philosophy, for example, Derrida.

Human spatiality as a mode of dwelling in this world presupposes *human embodiment*. The only way in which a human soul can dwell is via and through the human body. One thus occupies space and has space. As (Merleau-Ponty in Bollnow 2011:269) points out: The human being is admitted to the spatial world through my body; “the world is given to me *à travers mon corps*, in a sense right through my body, which itself is something spatially extended and whose various sense organs are already separated from each other by spatial distances. Incarnation is therefore to be at home in one’s body within the dwelling space of trusting relationships.

Space as a resort for dwelling, and a starting point for wandering, a place to rest as well as a region to be transcended, presupposes a free space, a kind of “home” – exposure to comfort and compassion. This is the reason why hope as a mode of trusting should be connected to space. Hope then as a new state of being (the bright side of trust and affirmation) within the shadow side and cold atmospheric quadrant of homelessness or houselessness. In space, we should be protected.( Bachelard in Bollnow 2011:281) says: “Space, vast space, is the friend of being.” On the contrary, the spaces of amaXhosa rituals are regarded as sacred spaces. The spaces are not supposed to be contaminated. For this reason, only a select few are allowed *efukwini* and *eBhomeni*. In amaXhosa ritual practices, power lies in these spaces and is characterised by inclusion and exclusion (Mndende 2002:193). The ancestors are the host in these spaces. Hence, who is allowed to enter these spaces becomes important.

## 2. Methodology

“Oral forms of knowledge, such as ritualistic chants, riddles, songs, folk tales and parables not only articulate a distinct cultural identity, but also give voice to a range of cultural social and political aesthetic and linguistic systems—long muted by centuries of colonialism and cultural imperialism” (Elabor-Idemudia 2002:103). Elabor-Idemudia very eloquently sums up the methodology employed in this article. Chilisa (cited in Louw 2018) argues for a postcolonial indigenous research methodology that unmasks processes and strategies for decolonizing Western-based research. She proposes intra-networking: “Knowledge systems situated within the interconnectedness of daily relating and mutual sharing. Social science

should therefore involve spirituality in research [sources of wisdom], respecting communal forms of living that are not Western and creating space for inquiries based on relational realities and forms of knowing that are predominant among the non-Western Other/s”.

Cilliers (2018) indicates that “local knowledge is generated from down up, i.e. as an answer and response to basic needs, sometimes even as survival strategies; while other, non-local forms of knowledge, for example knowledge brought with colonization, often, if not always, comes with a different agenda, an agenda that would be hidden in order to ensure the success and legitimacy of the act of colonization – as a sort of knowledge moving down from above”. This article, therefore, will make use of the relational indigenous research paradigm, wherewith reality is collectively constructed, taking into account the connection that people have from birth to death, and the connection with the living and the dead Chilisa (2012:123). Indigenous epistemology is viewed as knowledge that has a relationship with the people and has a place in the culture and the daily life experiences of the people Chilisa (2012:122).

The positionality of the researcher becomes important. Riessman (2008) believes that the construction of any work always bears the marks of the person who created it. I position myself within the prevalent indigenous epistemology by acknowledging the wisdom in the rituals of amaXhosa and by inviting their participation as I narrate their stories as a vehicle for data gathering (Bastille,2000). Bruner (1990) argues that the primary way for any individual to make sense of the experience is to cast it in narrative form. Furthermore, Morkel (2012) states that the starting point for doing this is the life stories of people in their particular contexts, and she proposes that it is the story or self-narrative that determines which aspects of our lives are expressed. In addition, Morkel (2012) asserts that “we live by the stories that we have about our lives: they shape and constitute our lives”. Nadar (2014) takes this further in her article titled, “Stories are data with Soul’ – lessons from black feminist epistemology” and refers to putting a human face on research as a methodology. One way to accomplish this is through narrative research. Nadar indicates five ways that can enhance general research practice. I will name only three here: Firstly, “stories are a tool of knowledge gathering as well as knowledge sharing”. Secondly, “stories engender a yearning for change that can be translated into a

working for social transformation,” and thirdly, “stories make us reflexive as researchers” (Nadar, 2014:23). Nadar also asserts that narrative research calls us to be reflexive about our positioning. In the following section this article will look at the similarities and differences of the two rituals.

### Distinct yet similar

“To be human is to belong to the community, to do so involves participating in the beliefs, ceremonies, rituals and festivals of that community” (Falola 2003:55). AmaXhosa are no different. The birth of a child can be an auspicious and sacred time for a family. Beliefs and rituals surrounding this important rite of passage vary from clan to clan. *Efukwini* is considered a sacred place because it is where the birth of an umXhosa child takes place. *Efukwini* starts *emva kwecango* (which literally means, behind the door). It is important to note that this is the same place where the bride stayed when she arrived *kwelikhaya* (in this family), while the ritual is performed. She will remain there until the ritual is complete, and then will be given a name as well.

Coming back to *efukwini*, the new mother and her baby will remain *emva kocango* for the first 10 days of the infant’s life. Following the birth of the child, the mother will be called *umdlelane* (a mother who is breastfeeding).

Similarly, one can draw a parallel between the young male initiate who is also given a new (temporary) name, that of *umkhwetha*. The first 7–10 days are also crucial in the life of the young initiate. Back inside the hut, a fire is made, and the older women attend to the *umdlelane* and her new-born. Once again, the same thing takes place at the initiation school. The light of the fire is kept burning and the initiate/s are with *ingcibi* (the man who cuts the foreskin). *Efukwini*, on the one hand, is a space reserved only for the women who will help the new mother-to-be give birth and for the older women of the family, and at the initiation school, on the other hand, only men are allowed to be present and a few boys responsible for bringing them food.

Furthermore, the *efukwini* (women) must go hatless; under ordinary circumstances it would be a sign of disrespect towards the ancestors to go

around the hut without a “doekie”<sup>2</sup>. But bringing a new life into the family proves to be an exception to the rule and being hatless in this instance symbolises their purity. In addition, they are not to defile themselves with sex. The same applies to the *ikhankatha* (guardians) of the initiates. They must not defile themselves with sex while they are attending to the wounds of the initiates.

The new-born is being prepared for the umbilical cord to fall off; this process is referred to as *ukufahlwa*. Once this has taken place, the *umdlezane* will stand up for the first time to bury the umbilical cord *emva kwecango*. The burial of the umbilical cord takes place *emva kocango* where the baby was born. This ritual of burying *inkaba* has great significance for the clan, as it seals the attachment of the baby to his/her ancestral lands. The place where *inkaba* is buried symbolises one’s ancestral home and the relationship between the individual and his/her clan, land, and the spiritual world. Likewise, the foreskin of the initiate is also buried. Due to the secrecy surrounding *ulwaluko*, no one really knows where it is buried. The entire process takes 10 days. The *umdlezane* is also only permitted to eat *isidudu* (soft porridge). Similarly, the initiates are only allowed to eat plain unseasoned *umngqusho* (mealies), nothing else. Nor are they allowed to drink water for the next 7 to 10 days.

### The link between efukwini and ulwaluko

Upon exiting the birth canal the baby usually cries symbolizing the beginning of life. When a young isiXhosa-speaking man undergoes *ulwaluko* (initiation practices), he is instructed to shout “Ndiyindoda!” (“I am a man!”) immediately after the removal of his foreskin (Mfecane, 2016). This symbolizes the significant new stage of this young man’s life. He is no longer an *inkwenkwe* (a boy), although he is not yet regarded an *indoda* either, this will only take place when the ritual has been completed (Mfecane, 2016). The infant is considered a baby when *inkaba* has fallen. This is the shift from infancy to babyhood. “Ulwaluko entails, among other things, circumcision followed by separation from society for a period of three to six weeks. During the separation period, the initiate – known as *umkhwetha* – lives in the secluded temporary *ibhoma* lodge together with

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2 *Doekie* is the Afrikaans word for hat.

a designated guardian called *ikhankatha*" (Mfecane 2016:207). The baby and *umdleze* stay here for 10 days, together with the designated female guardians called *abafukamisi*. The first eight days of *umkhwetha* are called *ukuzila* (seclusion). This is a difficult and exhausting time due to their lack of proper sleep. In regard to *efukwini*, *ukuzila* is also practiced by the women who are the guardians of *umdleze* and her baby. As already mentioned above, it is imperative for the guardians in both rituals to refrain from sex. Although both rituals are deemed sacred, the on-going celebration of *ulwaluko* has been upheld, but the same cannot be said for the birth ritual. This is unfortunate, since birth is an important rite of passage and ought to be treated with honour and respect; it should therefore also be celebrated today alongside *ulwaluko*. *Ulwaluko* has stood the test of time, even though the South African socio-political environment has changed dramatically over the past century and despite the attempts of many missionaries, colonists, as well as public health and medical personnel, to name a few, to halt its practice, the institution remains (Ncaca 2014). This forms the problem statement of this article.

### **Mourning the death of amaXhosa birth ritual**

The question that begs an answer here is, what happened to the amaXhosa birth ritual? The birth of a child is an important event, not only for a family, but for society as well. It is an amaXhosa belief that children ensure the continuity of a clan, and therefore, a woman's ability to bear children is considered vital. Without birth, there would be no initiation school in amaXhosa culture. The birth ritual gives the mother of the child and the women involved in the process an opportunity to be a part of the sacredness and aesthetics of amaXhosa ritual. In that, during the initiation school, the mother of the young man has no say and is not supposed to know anything about the child she gave birth to.

Sesona Nggakamba<sup>3</sup> reported in the article that since the start of the 2018 summer traditional initiation season on November 16 seven initiates had already died in the Eastern Cape. This is just one report of many. Despite the many reported deaths of young black male initiates, the government and traditional leaders fought for this ritual to be kept in the bush. But, I

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3 Sesona Nggakamba, 2018, News24, 12 December.

ask, who is fighting for the birth ritual? It is interesting how the rainbow nation of South Africa is fusing and changing cultures. AmaXhosa women are now permitted to have a water birth, as well as give birth in a hospital or at a birth centre, and even cut her own baby's umbilical cord. In addition, the midwife is not likely to be a member of her own family. The above discussion points to the need to bring back the sacredness of our country's birth rituals. These do not have to be identical to the old ways practiced, but perhaps a fusion of essential elements that will connect us to our ancestry and each other. There is no recollection of any deaths during the time of *efukwini*.

### **The role of pastoral care in the spaces of the rituals**

"The reciprocity of narrative and ritual enhances the possibility of weaving human and divine stories into a single fabric" (Anderson & Foley 1998). The above-mentioned authors qualify what they have stated by asserting that rituals do not only construct reality and produce meaning, but also help fashion the world as a habitable and hospitable space. As explained above, *efukwini* is an IsiXhosa word that refers to the space where the birth took place in the home of umXhosa. This birth takes place *emva kocango*. The notions of place and space becomes vital in caregiving and humane encounters. Rituals are connected to space and place. Cilliers (2016:49) describes the birth space metaphorically when he talks about silence as the space where we struggle with the most basic questions of our lives, and theologically as the space where we have an encounter with God. Cilliers continues saying, as we try to approach God, we discover that this God has already approached us through the miracle of birth.

To cut open the womb of the umXhosa woman during birth – *emva kocango* – is a very limited space. So is the cutting of the foreskin of an umXhosa young man in a small *ibhoma* (the home of an umXhosa young man for 4–8 weeks) (Mfecane 2016). In both cases, the spaces where these rituals are performed are small and limited. Space, according to Louw (2008:26), is the container of meaning. Louw further asserts that humans fill space with values, perceptions and association in order to create a dynamic relational environment and systemic network of interaction where language, symbols and metaphors shape the meaning and discourse of our lives. This we see in Jesus' place of birth (in a manger) and place

of death (on the cross). Louw further implies that space can become the location and a covenantal encounter between God and His people. God is therefore meeting or encountering the new mother and her baby through birth *efukwini*. Cilliers (2016) acknowledges that silence in Christ was and is cut or split open, like the womb of an umXhosa woman, through the Word that became flesh, and that this is the space for grace.

There is vulnerability, strength, messiness and aesthetics of life in all of the above. In this messiness and aesthetics of life, one encounters God face to face through birth – *emva kocango*, and the vulnerability of a crucified God encounters and affirms the vulnerability of a young man *eBhomeni* (Louw, 2008). The image of a vulnerable God impacts the kind of masculinity this ritual creates. Ncaca (2012:4) believes that the initiation school contributes to the dehumanizing of women and portrays them as sexual beings. In addition, Kobo and Velle (2016) assert that a boy child is taught from birth to be strong, masculine, and a leader, and is reminded that *indoda ayikhali* (a man does not shed tears, as it renders him a weak being). This kind of masculinity is contrary to Jesus' kind of man. The Man-God chose to cry on the cross and display a sense of weakness; in this vulnerable state He faced the people. Through this image of a disfigured God, the young man can encounter the Man-God – who exposed his vulnerability on the cross and in the manger.

In an African spirituality, this is the healthiest time in the society – the time of birth and the time *lolwaluko*; it is also a very vulnerable time – *ebhomeni* and *efukwini*. *Cura Vitae* is about the quality of place, space and the positive affirmation of our being functions (Louw, 2008). Therefore, I propose the paradigm of *ukuzimasa* (to just be present). The challenge for the pastoral caregiver in this paradigm is twofold: firstly, one has to be seen worthy of occupying the space, since amaXhosa ritual has an element of exclusion, and secondly, there are no doing functions, as Louw (2008) calls it. One is in the space, in the presence, in the comfort, in the vulnerability and pain of each other, and owns all of the above. The pastoral caregiver loses her/his power in this paradigm. The most important part in this paradigm is “being” in the space, rather than doing or knowing. The initiates are seen in relation to the powers and people around them, as in relation to the ancestors and the environment (Louw 2008:172). Furthermore, Pembroke (2011) uses the analogy of the Trinity – God is three and God is one.

This dynamic has a spatial reference. The Three draw close to each other in the intimacy of love, but they also give each other space to be. In this way, both unity and particularity are held together. Pastoral care in this paradigm seeks to care for the initiates and their families during the season of initiation, where many young men die, by being present and embody the vulnerable Man-God *ebhomeni*. *Efukwini*, on the other hand, at the beginning of life, understood from this paradigm, embodies the Holy Spirit in the space and time of joy and pain.

### 3. Conclusion

In this article, the author unpacked the birth ritual of amaXhosa people and further theorized the concept of *efukwini*. The link between the initiation school ritual and *efukwini* was also identified and explained. In addition to highlighting the similarities and dissimilarities between the two rituals, this article also noted the role of pastoral care in both rituals. The literature showed that the amaXhosa young men are groomed at the initiation school to be superior to females, it is therefore important for pastoral care to reframe this kind of Man, through a Christology of the cross, as a man that can be seen crying. As a way forward, this article proposed *ukuzimasa* as a paradigm for pastoral care that will embrace both rituals and introduce different kinds of masculinity for young amaXhosa men, and embody God, the Holy Spirit during birth *efukwini*.

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