

# INITIATION RITES IN PERSPECTIVE

**Ikhwelo** - manhood - means many things to many people's cultures, encompassing the many colours, norms and values of society. From an African perspective, it has different meanings, ranging from physical and mental maturity to mental strength and from graduation from childhood to adulthood and so on. However, certain African groups that have been practising initiation for centuries have different ways of practising this rite of passage to manhood. The initiation of boys is a rite of passage according for many African groups such as the amaXhosa, amaHlubi, abeSuthu, amaVenda, baPedi and others. The initiation of boys was a proud moment for any parent taking his boy to the mountain in years gone by. Consequently the celebration of coming from the initiation school was characterised by endless feasts, jubilation and festivities to celebrate the successful passage to manhood. However, this noble tradition is now under serious threat owing to the high incidence of injury and fatality reported in the media especially during the initiation season. Statistics of injuries and fatalities during initiation in other provinces prompted the communities, the Provincial Government and the City of Cape Town to host the inaugural Initiation Indaba in 2009. This event was attended by the different community initiation forums, traditional and civic leaders, medical doctors and traditional surgeons (amakhankatha) and other stake-holders. The objectives were to look at how this cornerstone of culture can be practised in a manner that is safe yet retains its essence, given the changing environment in which the communities who practise initiation live. The meeting passed the following resolution: "We, the custodians of the initiation cultural practice, resolve to act in the interest of our communities in ensuring that the practice of initiation which is one of the cornerstones of our culture, is practised in a manner that is safe, secure, healthy, sustainable and responsive to challenges emerging from the environment and is passed on as a legacy to future generations." The gathering further resolved that initiation should become an integral part of the City of Cape Town's and Western Cape Provincial Government's planning processes and mainstreaming. The alignment of these processes and the approach of the City and the Provincial Government to initiation-related issues are enhanced. The City of Cape Town's *Policy Framework and Guidelines for Initiation* are being developed. Initiation is practised in a sacrosanct manner. Initiates take a RPR (a blood test for sexually transmitted infections) before undergoing the ritual. Environmental health practitioners who have undergone the ritual according to traditional requirements are given access to initiation sites and conduct health promotion and routine inspections. The City, in collaboration with the Provincial Government, provides infrastructure, support and access to resources for the training of practitioners as well as appropriate support during the season, working with local initiation support organisations. A requirement has been to develop and adopt an initiation protocol which involves initiation forums (elders, traditional leaders, etc.), health practitioners, lingcibi (traditional surgeons), amakhankatha (caretakers), environmental health practitioners and other relevant stakeholders. Learning has been drawn from the Langa Model, the first of its kind in South Africa, and this model is being contextualised and replicated in sites identified and agreed to by custodians, the City and the appropriate community structures. The season is once more upon us and the second annual Initiation Summit took place on 23 October 2010, where stake-holders involved in this initiative reflected on the year and prepared for the coming season. Participants should contact their local initiation forum for registration and further details as numbers are limited. (Compiled by Geoff Mamputa at Arts and Culture for City Vision Khayelitsha)