Eastern African Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences
Vol. 5 No. 2 (2026): ISSN (Online): 2958-4558
DOI: https://doi.org/10.58721/ee2dz388
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Article History
Received: 22.06.2026
Revised: 03.09.2026
Accepted: 10.09.2026
Published: 02.10.2026

Keywords
Circumcision
Culture
Gender-based violence
Patriarchy

How to cite:
Tshifhumulo, R. (2026). Perceptions of Gendered Pedagogical Content in Vhavenḓa Traditional Male Circumcision: An Exploratory Key-Informant Study. *Eastern African Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences, 5*(2), 744-757.

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Abstract
Gender-based violence (GBV) constitutes a persistent public health crisis in South Africa, requiring multifaceted interventions that extend to the institutions responsible for socialising boys into manhood. This exploratory qualitative study examines the pedagogical content of Traditional Male Circumcision (TMC) as practised by the Vhavenḓa community in Limpopo Province, including the songs, teachings, and disciplinary practices through which masculine norms are transmitted, and analyses their potential role in reinforcing patriarchal norms that may contribute to GBV. Through in-depth interviews with three cultural custodians, men recognised within their communities as knowledgeable elders and interpreters of Vhavenḓa initiation practice, this study interrogates cultural narratives embedded within TMC pedagogical content. The study was approved as part of a larger study by departments within the university. The research explores connections between TMC-transmitted masculine ideals and broader patterns of gender inequality. The findings suggest that certain TMC pedagogical elements, including derogatory language toward women, harsh disciplinary practices, and teachings emphasising male superiority, may reinforce patriarchal attitudes. The study also identifies a teaching on sexual restraint that informants characterised as protective of women, though our analysis questions whether this teaching challenges or merely reproduces the underlying gender hierarchy. This exploratory analysis calls for culturally sensitive dialogue regarding TMC curriculum reform that preserves cultural value while promoting health and gender equity.

Introduction
Traditional Male Circumcision (TMC) is a significant rite of passage that marks the transition from adolescence to adulthood in numerous African communities, including the Vhavenḓa people of Limpopo Province, South Africa. Despite declining observance in urban contexts, TMC persists as a vital cultural institution that initiates young males into adult society while establishing normative expectations regarding masculine identity. Understanding TMC's role in shaping masculine identities is particularly urgent given South Africa's alarmingly high rates of gender-based violence, as the country has been reported as having one of the highest rates of femicide globally, with a woman killed by an intimate partner every six hours (Abrahams et al., 2013).

While TMC ostensibly aims to equip boys with essential life competencies for manhood, critical questions emerge regarding whether certain pedagogical elements within TMC schools, its curriculum, teachings, and disciplinary lessons, may inadvertently reinforce patriarchal norms that contribute to GBV. This study does not argue that TMC directly causes GBV; rather, it explores whether specific cultural narratives transmitted through TMC, particularly those emphasising male dominance, employing derogatory language toward women, or normalising violence as a disciplinary mechanism, may contribute to the broader cultural context in which GBV occurs.

Substantial research has examined GBV from various perspectives (Jewkes et al., 2015; Machisa et al., 2011), yet limited attention has been devoted to analysing how male rites of passage, specifically TMC among the Vhavenḓa, may intersect with gender socialisation processes that shape attitudes toward women. This gap is particularly significant given that TMC constitutes a concentrated pedagogical intervention during a critical developmental period when masculine identities are actively being formed.

This exploratory study addresses the following research question: How do Vhavenḓa men who have undergone TMC perceive the relationship between TMC pedagogical content and gender attitudes, and what implications might these perceptions have for understanding cultural contexts of GBV? Drawing on in-depth interviews with three cultural custodians, the study offers a conceptually dense account of this relationship within the Vhembe District Vhavenḓa context, laying groundwork for larger comparative studies.

Traditional Male Circumcision Among the Vhavenḓa

Traditional male circumcision occupies a significant position within the cultural fabric of various Southern African societies, functioning as a rite of passage facilitating the transition from boyhood to manhood (Vincent, 2008). Among the Vhavenḓa people, this practice, known as *Murundu, Hogo, or Mula,* involves the excision of the foreskin in a ritual imbued with profound cultural meaning. The procedure, termed *u geda*, is performed by respected traditional surgeons called *maine* (the Tshivenḓa term for traditional doctors), who also guide initiates through accompanying rituals and teachings

Tshivenda terms
Hogo/ Murundu/Mula- Traditional male circumcision is used interchangeably to mean the same practice
Hogo-it can also refer to a song that initiates sing
Midabe-trainers who were initiated previous years
Luimbo-songs
Milayo-rules
Maine -refers to a doctor, or a surgeon
Matsha matsha- is a song from TMC

TMC and Masculinity Construction

Proponents of TMC emphasise its social, health, and cultural significance. TMC has been argued to serve as a mechanism for instilling societal values, beliefs, and responsibilities in young males, reinforcing cultural norms surrounding masculinity. Through this process, boys receive an education about their roles within the community, including providing for their families, protecting their communities, and perpetuating cultural traditions.

However, critical scholars have raised concerns about the type of masculinity being constructed. Mshweshwe (2020) argues that traditional circumcision customs are pivotal in shaping masculinity within communities, but questions remain about whether this masculinity emphasises dominance, stoicism, and control over women. Ratele (2008) has documented how certain forms of African masculinity, while culturally valued, may align with Connell's (2005) concept of "hegemonic

masculinity," a form of masculinity that legitimizes men's dominant position in society and justifies the subordination of women.

The Overlooked Dimension: TMC and Gender-Based Violence

Despite extensive scholarly discourse on TMC, its potential role in perpetuating GBV remains underexplored. This gap is significant given South Africa's GBV crisis. Jewkes et al. (2015) identify multiple risk factors for men's perpetration of intimate partner violence, including childhood exposure to violence, substance abuse, and adherence to inequitable gender norms. The question this study explores is whether certain TMC pedagogical elements may contribute to "inequitable gender norms" that constitute one risk factor among many.

It is crucial to note that this study does not propose TMC as a primary or direct cause of GBV. GBV is multifactorial, emerging from complex intersections of historical violence, economic inequality, substance abuse, intergenerational trauma, and broader patriarchal social structures (Abrahams et al., 2013). Rather, this study examines whether TMC, as one site of masculine identity formation, may reinforce attitudes that contribute to the cultural context enabling GBV.

Gender-Based Violence in South Africa: Context and Scope

Zungu et al. (2024) note that it is challenging to accurately determine the prevalence and incidence of GBV in South Africa, in all its forms, as the country depends on police data and reports that have been derived mostly from GBV surveys, GBV with selected populations, and data from other national surveys that were not designed for GBV, such as victims of crime. In their study, when asking women about their experiences of physical violence, they found that 33,1% (30.8-35.5) of all women aged 18 years and older had experienced violence in their lifetime. This was translated to an estimated 7 310 389 women who have experienced physical violence in their lifetime. The intimate partner femicide rate is nearly five times the global average (Abrahams et al., 2013). GBV is recognised as a public health emergency requiring multi-sectoral interventions addressing root causes, including gender inequality and harmful masculine norms (Jewkes et al., 2015).

While TMC is not identified in mainstream GBV literature as a primary risk factor, cultural practices that reinforce male superiority and female subordination are recognised as contributing to the broader cultural context in which violence against women is tolerated or normalised (Machisa et al., 2011).

Research Methodology

Research Paradigm and Design

This study employs an interpretive paradigm (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), which assumes that reality is socially constructed and that understanding human behaviour requires interpretation of meanings, not merely observation of behaviours. Within this paradigm, the study adopts an exploratory qualitative design, specifically utilising key informant interviews, a method appropriate for gaining an in-depth understanding of cultural practices from knowledgeable insiders (Gilchrist & Williams, 1999).

Justification for Key Informant Approach

Given TMC's secretive nature and gender-restricted access (women are prohibited from circumcision camps), direct observation was methodologically and ethically impossible for this research team. The key informant approach was therefore selected as the most feasible method for accessing insider knowledge about TMC pedagogical content.

Key informants are "experts" who possess specialised knowledge about their culture (Gilchrist & Williams, 1999). For this study, men who have undergone TMC and hold recognised standing as

cultural custodians, *maine* and elders whose community-acknowledged authority on initiation practice qualifies them as key informants in this sense, represent appropriate interlocutors.

Sample size

The researcher interviewed three key informants. The informants are well known as knowledge holders who still practice the initiation school within their communities. Gatekeepers, who are rulers within their communities, gave their verbal consent to allow interviews with custodians. The study is part of a larger project funded by the University, which made it easier for the researcher to engage with community members, as the university has MOUs in place to work with local communities as part of the community engagement.

In qualitative research, sample size adequacy depends on research purpose and design rather than statistical generalisability. For exploratory studies using key informant interviews, small samples are methodologically defensible when informants possess deep, community-recognised cultural expertise (Palinkas et al., 2015). Bernard (2017) notes that ethnographic research may utilise as few as one key informant when that individual possesses comprehensive cultural knowledge. Participants in this study were selected not to represent TMC graduates broadly, but specifically as cultural custodians whose recognised authority on initiation practice positions them as experts, rather than convenience, informants. This study does not claim data saturation, the point at which new interviews yield no new information (Guest et al., 2006); rather, findings represent conceptually rich, theoretically grounded insights that merit validation through larger studies. All three participants are recognised within their communities as cultural custodians knowledgeable about Vhavenḓa initiation practice and are able to initiate others as *maine.*

Table 1: Informant demographics (presented anonymously)

Informant	Gender	Current Age	Age at TMC	Year of TMC	Background	Education Level	Current Occupation
Informant 1	Male	45	15	1995	Rural homestead	Secondary education	Education sector
Informant 2	Male	38	13	2000	Semi-urban	Tertiary education	Civil service
Informant 3	Male	52	14	1987	Rural	Primary education	Traditional healer and cultural advisor

Researcher Positionality and Reflexivity

Reflexivity, the critical examination of how researchers' identities, experiences, and assumptions influence research, is essential in qualitative inquiry (Berger, 2015). The researcher is a Venda-speaking female with a PhD in Sociology. As a Venḓa woman, she brought cultural understanding and language fluency while also representing the group that may be affected by patriarchal TMC teachings. As a woman, however, she was an outsider to TMC experiences and unable to observe schools directly.

Data Collection

Interview procedure. Semi-structured interviews were conducted between June and August 2024. Interviews began with prepared open-ended questions, but conversation flowed naturally based on informant responses, with extensive probing to explore emerging themes (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006).

Interview logistics. Interviews were conducted in informants' homes to ensure comfort and privacy. Each interview lasted 90-120 minutes. This was partly because the ice-breaking process took longer,

as per tradition. All interviews were conducted in Tshivenḓa and audio-recorded with explicit consent. Detailed field notes captured non-verbal communication, tone, and contextual information.

Language and translation. Interviews were transcribed verbatim into Tshivenḓa by a professional transcriber and then reviewed by the researcher for accuracy. This process attempted to preserve nuance, though translation inevitably involves interpretation.

Data Analysis

Data were analysed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework, applied throughout in a manner informed by the study's Black feminist theoretical framework.

Phase 1: Familiarisation. The researcher read the transcripts multiple times and listened to the recordings to capture tone and emphasis. Initial notes documented impressions and emerging patterns.

Phase 2: Theoretically informed coding. Following Crenshaw (1989), the researcher attended to how gender-related content intersected with class, rurality, and generational position among informants. Codes such as "language positioning women as inferior," "disciplinary practice enforcing gender hierarchy," and "teaching framed as protecting or respecting women" were developed deductively from this framework and then refined inductively against the data. Transcripts were coded line-by-line following Braun and Clarke's (2019, 2021) reflexive thematic analysis.

Phase 3: Theme development. Codes were grouped into potential themes through iterative discussion, guided by the power-dynamics and controlling-images lens established above. Initial themes included "language about women," "disciplinary practices," "masculinity construction," "sexual conduct teachings," and "substance exposure."

Phase 4: Theme review. Themes were reviewed against coded data and the entire dataset to ensure internal coherence and distinctiveness. Some themes were combined (for example, "language about women" and "musical content" merged into "gendered language in songs"), while others were separated.

Phase 5: Theme definition. Final themes were clearly defined, with boundaries established; each was named to capture its essence while remaining analytically useful.

Phase 6: Report production. Analysis was written up with representative quotes and critical interpretation, evaluated throughout against the study's guiding question of how each theme bears on gendered power relations.

Validation strategies. To enhance trustworthiness (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), the study used member checking (preliminary findings were shared with informants to verify accuracy of representation), peer debriefing (analysis was reviewed by two academic peers with expertise in African studies and gender studies), and community consultation (findings were presented to a community advisory group, including traditional leaders and women's advocates, for feedback).

Member checking. Preliminary findings were shared with all three informants in December 2024 via phone. No other revisions resulted from this process. The community consultation process raises a disclosure risk that warrants explicit acknowledgment. Informants were promised anonymity and are not identified by name; however, they were described as custodians or knowledgeable insiders of TMC practice within Vhembe District. The study findings are very general, and the quotations are so broad that the pool of possible identities is narrow.

Ethical Considerations

This research is part of a larger project approved and funded by a university as minimal risk to humans (category 2) in February 2024. The ethical clearance number is FHS/24/PH02/0703. This research adhered to the following ethical principles. Informed consent: all participants received detailed information sheets in Tshivenḓa explaining study purpose, voluntary participation, right to withdraw, confidentiality measures, data storage, and potential risks and benefits; written consent was obtained before interviews. Confidentiality: participant names are not used; numerical identifiers (Informant 1, 2, 3) protect anonymity; audio recordings and transcripts are stored in password-protected files accessible only to the research team and will be destroyed five years post-publication. Cultural sensitivity: the researcher was acutely aware that TMC content is culturally sacred and secret; informants were not pressured to reveal information they considered inappropriate to share, and the study does not reproduce full song lyrics or detailed ritual descriptions out of respect for cultural propriety, with analysis focused on gender-related content that informants deemed appropriate to discuss in the context of GBV prevention. Although we mentioned that children attend TMC, none was part of the interviews.

Study Limitations

The study has no direct observational data from actual TMC schools; all information is second-hand. Men willing to critically discuss TMC may not represent typical TMC graduates, and the study cannot access the perspectives of men unwilling to question TMC or speak with researchers. Findings apply only to Vhembe District Vhavenḓa practices and cannot be generalised to other ethnic groups, or South Africa broadly. This study cannot establish causal relationships between TMC and GBV; it explores potential associations requiring further investigation. Without comparison to non-TMC men, medical circumcision, or other ethnic groups, it is impossible to isolate TMC's specific effects. These limitations mean findings should be read as conceptually rich, theoretically grounded insights requiring further research, not as generalisable or causal claims about TMC and GBV.

Findings and Discussion

Five themes emerged from thematic analysis, reflecting complex and sometimes contradictory dimensions of TMC pedagogical content. Themes are presented with representative quotes (translated from Tshivenḓa) and critical analysis drawing on the Black feminist theoretical framework. Throughout, we maintain awareness that findings represent three custodians' accounts of practices from decades past, not comprehensive documentation of current TMC curricula.

Derogatory Language and Gendered Hierarchy in TMC Songs

Informants described TMC songs *(luimbo)* and laws *(milayo)* as central pedagogical tools that communicate cultural values, regulate behaviour, and establish group identity. However, several songs reportedly contain language that informants themselves characterised as derogatory toward women and uncircumcised men.

Informant 2 explained: "Some songs are insults, especially to those men who are not circumcised. But also, there are songs about women that... if I am honest, they are not respectful. Just like most traditional ceremonies, there is a deep-embedded sense of patriarchy within the laws and the songs, which is not a surprise considering that the circumcision schools' tradition was established before the era of women's empowerment. For a country of ours that has high levels of violence as well as rape levels, exposing children as young as 8 years to patriarchy can be detrimental. An example of such is in a song called *Tiya Tiya*."

When asked to elaborate on "not respectful" content, Informant 2 declined to provide specific lyrics, citing cultural prohibitions against revealing sacred content. He characterised the language, however, as portraying women in subordinate positions and using terms that objectify women's bodies.

Informant 1 corroborated this, noting: "There are songs that teach about the differences between men and women, about how men must be strong, and women are... different. Softer. But some of the words used are rough words. Not words we would use in front of women in daily life. In the initiation school, these words are normal because it is men only, teaching boys to be men."

Collins' (2000) concept of "controlling images" is relevant here. If TMC songs portray women primarily through derogatory language emphasising their subordination, difference, or objectification, these constitute controlling images that naturalise women's inferior status within the initiate's peer culture. Informant 2 drew this connection explicitly, linking such content to South Africa's high rates of rape and gender-based violence. While our design cannot establish a causal pathway from song content to individual perpetration, the informant's own framing supports treating this as a credible mechanism of cultural transmission rather than a speculative one. The justification that such language is acceptable because it occurs in male-only spaces is precisely the concern: it creates a masculine subculture where disrespect toward women is normalised, potentially carrying over into broader attitudes and behaviours.

Critical analysis must also acknowledge cultural context. Informants noted that this language is "traditional," established before contemporary gender consciousness. From an African feminist perspective (Mama, 1997), the question becomes: can TMC preserve its cultural significance while updating language to reflect contemporary gender values, or does linguistic reform constitute unacceptable cultural loss? Informant 2's own ambivalence is noteworthy: he acknowledged the problematic nature of this content while simultaneously defending it as cultural tradition. This tension between cultural loyalty and gender consciousness was evident throughout interviews.

Without access to actual song lyrics, this analysis relies on informants' characterisations. Their perception that language is "derogatory" or "not respectful" reflects their interpretation, which may not be universally shared. Future research should document and analyse actual song content, where culturally appropriate.

Construction and Perpetuation of Hegemonic Masculinity

Traditional male circumcision (TMC) initiation schools serve as critical sites for the social reproduction of gender ideologies, functioning as what Connell (2005) terms "gender regimes," institutional spaces where hegemonic masculinity is actively constructed, reinforced, and legitimized. Within these pedagogical contexts, initiates receive systematic instruction encompassing marital expectations, sexual conduct, and cultural protocols that predominantly embody rigid conceptualisations of masculinity predicated upon strength, assertiveness, and dominance, particularly in relation to women.

The interviews indicate an explicit construction of masculinity hierarchies through TMC participation:

"Initiates feel superior to those who have not attended the school" (Informant 1).

"Initiates are taught to be men; when they come back, they will no longer agree to sleep with a woman, even their mother, or even to be bathed by women, regardless of age. This is different compared to those who just go to the hospital for circumcision, who may not have those boundaries. The notion of manhood is created to an extent that initiates feel they should act as adults" (Informant 2).

These narratives illuminate how TMC functions as a mechanism for symbolic boundary maintenance (Lamont & Molnár, 2002), demarcating circumcised men from both uncircumcised males and all women through spatially and relationally enforced taboos. The prohibition against physical proximity to women, including maternal figures, represents what Bourdieu (1977) conceptualises as embodied

cultural capital, wherein bodily practices and spatial arrangements materialise abstract gender ideologies into lived social relations.

Despite proponents' assertions regarding TMC's developmental benefits, the practice perpetuates entrenched patriarchal structures that systematically privilege males over females, raising substantive ethical concerns regarding gender equity and human rights. Particularly within sociocultural contexts characterised by ongoing "masculinity crises" (Morrell et al., 2012) and endemic domestic violence, significant gaps persist in understanding the precise mechanisms through which TMC shapes masculine identity formation and subsequent gendered behaviours (Mshweshwe, 2020).

The intersection of cultural rights and individual autonomy presents a complex ethical terrain. Auchter (2017) problematises forced TMC as constituting a human rights violation, a position empirically substantiated by Makubuya et al.'s (2023) documentation of systemic abuse within male initiation contexts.

This study corroborates TMC's profound influence in constructing masculine gender identity, illustrating how these ritualised pedagogies cultivate traits and behavioural dispositions culturally coded as masculine. African cultural frameworks have been argued to intricately prescribe gender roles as dichotomously masculine or feminine, structuring individuals' life trajectories, social opportunities, relational dynamics, and identity formation from childhood through adulthood. However, critical cultural studies perspectives (Mbembe, 2001) challenge essentialist readings of "African culture," emphasising instead the dynamic, contested, and historically contingent nature of cultural practices. This lens requires examining TMC not as a static tradition but as an evolving practice shaped by colonial legacies, modernisation processes, and contemporary gender politics.

Harsh Punishments and the Perpetuation of Violence

Initiation pedagogy extensively employs physical punishment as a disciplinary technology ostensibly designed to ensure compliance, build resilience, and forge masculine character. Informants characterised these coercive measures as constitutive of manhood construction:

"With regards to imposing punishment on initiates who have been up to wrongdoing, the initiators use what is called '*Mbudzi*.' This is normally, in many instances, 4 sticks placed between the fingers of a person who would have both hands against each other, and the sticks going through the fingers of both hands, then the sticks being squeezed to create pressure and create pain" (Informant 1).

From a critical pedagogical standpoint (Freire, 1970), such punitive practices exemplify oppressive educational models in which knowledge transmission occurs through domination rather than through dialogical engagement. The systematic infliction of pain as pedagogy raises serious ethical questions regarding the normalisation of violence in masculine socialisation. Drawing on violence theory (Galtung, 1969), we argue that this represents cultural violence, violence embedded in symbolic systems that legitimises direct and structural forms of violence.

These findings align with research documenting the correlation between harsh socialisation practices and subsequent perpetration of interpersonal violence (Fulu et al., 2013). The cycle-of-violence hypothesis (Widom, 1989) suggests that individuals subjected to violence during formative periods demonstrate elevated risk for perpetrating violence against marginalised groups, including intimate partners and children. Within TMC contexts, the institutionalisation of violence as a pedagogical method may establish cognitive schemas linking masculinity with the capacity to inflict and withstand pain, normalising violence as a legitimate masculine expression.

Informants emphasised the schools' spatial segregation and attributed supernatural potency to the initiation space:

"The place where we initiate is secluded, but you will never find a snake in that space or any other thing. If a bird falls above the place, it falls and dies" (Informant 1).

"The principal, Maine, is a powerful person, and not everyone can run the school. There are specific clans of people who run them, and hence why we hardly have deaths in our area, because those who try on their own run the risk of creating health hazards and death" (Informant 3).

While empirical verification of supernatural claims exceeds this study's methodological scope, such cosmological beliefs merit analytical attention for their social functions. Drawing on Durkheimian sociology (Durkheim, 1912/1995), we interpret these narratives as establishing the initiation school as a sacred space imbued with collective power, thereby heightening its authority and the gravity of transgressions. This sacral framing potentially amplifies initiates' psychological vulnerability to harsh disciplinary measures, which become interpreted not merely as human punishment but as cosmologically sanctioned correction.

The concentration of ritual authority within specific lineages reflects what Weber (1978) theorised as traditional authority legitimised through ancestral succession. While such hereditary expertise may ensure certain standards of practice, it simultaneously limits democratic accountability and external oversight, potentially perpetuating harmful practices across generations. The tension between cultural autonomy and public health imperatives remains analytically significant.

Enforcing Discipline Through Songs and Ritual Laws

Performative elements, including songs and formalised behavioural codes (laws), constitute primary vehicles for ideological transmission within TMC pedagogy. While certain songs employ linguistic registers deemed transgressive in broader social contexts, initiates and practitioners interpret them as pedagogical instruments that foster discipline and tolerance for frustration.

One informant described explicitly sexual pedagogical content: "There is a song/law named '*Matsha-Matsha*.' Unlike the *hogo* song, this one is more formal and is used only at the initiation school, not just anywhere. This was a song that has a sexual connotation towards it, and just by listening and digesting the lyrics or words, it had more emphasis on teaching one to know how to control their sexual urges, as well as learning not to force oneself on a female. This is a song that is sung on a regular basis, and the initiates must have mastered it by the time they are going to their homes" (Informant 3).

This finding complicates a straightforward narrative of TMC's relationship to sexual violence: it suggests initiation curricula are not monolithically pro-violence but contain heterogeneous and potentially contradictory elements. It is worth interrogating, however, what form of "respect" is being taught here. If restraint toward women is framed as a discipline the initiate owes to his own manhood, his ancestors, or the authority of the *maine*, rather than as recognition of women's autonomy and equal standing, then this teaching does not sit outside the patriarchal hierarchy documented in Theme 1; it is generated by it. Respect contingent on a woman's status as another man's dependent (a daughter, wife, or mother to be protected) differs fundamentally from respect grounded in her independent personhood. Our data do not allow us to determine which of these logics "*Matsha-Matsha*" encodes, and future research documenting the full teaching, where culturally appropriate, is needed to resolve this. We flag this ambiguity so that the teaching is not read as an unambiguously transformative counterweight to the derogatory content documented elsewhere.

Another informant elucidated enforcement mechanisms: "Some songs or laws are more to enforce a level of tolerance and following orders. An example would be a certain song named '*Maiwani.*' This is a song that, when sung, requires a person to use both hands in a way that mirrors the wings of a bird in flight. This use of the hand can be exhausting and a bit painful if done for longer periods, and

the initiation leaders know this, and they do it to demand or to enforce a sense of doing what you are told" (Informant 1).

This practice exemplifies what Foucault (1977) terms "docile bodies," the disciplinary production of subjects through repetitive bodily practices that inscribe obedience and hierarchical relations. The intentional infliction of physical discomfort to enforce compliance represents disciplinary power operating at the somatic level, training bodies to accept authority unquestioningly. While obedience and endurance constitute valued social capacities, critical pedagogy raises concerns when such training occurs through coercion rather than reasoned consent, potentially cultivating authoritarian rather than democratic subjectivities.

These findings suggest that TMC plays a substantive role in moral development and character formation, extending beyond its biomedical dimensions. Traditional male circumcision has been described as constituting more than a surgical intervention, representing a comprehensive, transformative process testing courage, resilience, and commitment to communal values. Throughout initiation, young men encounter moral teachings, ancestral wisdom, and educational content explicitly designed to shape character and prepare them for adult social responsibilities. Rites associated with TMC have similarly been described as intergenerational conduits that transmit moral values, practical knowledge, and social norms across generations.

However, applying a critical lens informed by moral philosophy (Nussbaum, 2000), we must interrogate which specific moral values these institutions transmit. If the moral framework centres patriarchal gender hierarchies, masculine dominance, and violence as legitimate conflict resolution, then TMC's moral educational function becomes ethically problematic despite its cultural legitimacy. The challenge facing contemporary TMC practice involves discerning which moral teachings merit preservation as culturally valuable and which require transformation to align with universal human rights principles.

Exposure to Substance

The extended duration of initiation schools, typically spanning three to four weeks of intensive communal living, exposes young initiates to diverse adult behaviours, including drinking of alcohol that may be interpreted as normative masculine conduct warranting emulation.

Informants observed: "Midabe and elderly people drink within the school, especially traditional beer, as some people take the drinks to the school as a way to appreciate the teachers. Although initiates are not allowed to drink beer or even water when they attend in the following years as *midabe*, they can drink as much as they wish. After observing those behaviours, they risk starting to use substances" (Informant 2). "During the 3 to 4 weeks when initiates are attending the school, there is a possibility of learning through observing to use substances" (Informant 1). "Some brewers can give 20 litres of beer to the initiation school as a blessing" (Informant 2).

These accounts illuminate substance use as ritually embedded within TMC contexts, serving both social-cohesive functions (fostering communal bonds) and sacred purposes (offerings and blessings). However, social learning theory (Bandura, 1977) predicts that prolonged exposure to adult substance use within highly authoritative, masculine-coded contexts may normalise such behaviours and establish expectancies linking substance use with adult masculine status.

Epidemiological research consistently documents associations between early substance use initiation and elevated risks for addiction, health complications, and social dysfunction (Hingson et al., 2006). Furthermore, masculinity studies identify problematic drinking as frequently intertwined with hegemonic masculinity performance (Peralta, 2007), serving as both a social bonding mechanism among men and a symbolic demonstration of masculine toughness.

While TMC curricula encompass multifaceted pedagogical content reflecting diverse dimensions of human experience, the normalisation of substance use represents a problematic curricular element requiring critical attention. Traditional beer consumption and use have well-documented detrimental effects on adolescent physical health, neurological development, and psychosocial functioning. Early exposure to substance-using contexts and behaviours may establish trajectories toward regular use, potentially compromising young people's health, educational attainment, and social development.

The integration of substance use within TMC contexts presents a complex challenge for reform efforts, as such practices may be deeply embedded in ritual protocols and social customs. Public health imperatives and child protection principles nonetheless necessitate reconsidering such exposure, particularly given initiates' developmental vulnerability and the authoritative context that renders refusal difficult.

Conclusion

Traditional male circumcision initiation constitutes a deeply embedded component of the cultural, social, and historical fabric characterising numerous African societies, particularly among the Vhavenḓa people of South Africa's Limpopo Province. This rite of passage carries profound existential and social significance as a ritual transition marking the symbolic death of boyhood and rebirth into manhood, with attendant knowledge, privileges, and responsibilities transmitted intergenerationally through guarded cultural pedagogies.

The researcher's analysis suggests that TMC functions simultaneously as a vehicle for valued cultural transmission and as a mechanism reproducing masculine dominance over women. Findings specify the particular mechanisms: derogatory song content, punitive discipline, and spatial and relational hierarchy. This picture is not monolithic: songs such as "Matsha-Matsha" explicitly teach initiates to control sexual urges and not to force themselves on women, indicating that TMC pedagogy contains heterogeneous and at times contradictory elements rather than uniformly reproducing violence. However, our data cannot establish whether this restraint is grounded in recognition of women's autonomy or in duty owed to manhood and the male's authority, and, in the latter case, the teaching would remain generated by, rather than a counterweight to, the patriarchal hierarchy documented elsewhere. While TMC ostensibly aims to equip young males with essential life competencies associated with responsible manhood, the curricula and pedagogical practices documented here frequently reproduce patriarchy's more damaging dimensions. This represents a significant ethical and public health concern, highlighting an urgent need for substantive reform within initiation practices to foster more equitable gender consciousness and relational frameworks.

Reform is achievable through systematic curriculum modification emphasising respect for life, domestic violence prevention, consent education, and substantive rather than merely formal gender equality. Such transformation requires striking a balance between respecting cultural autonomy and advancing universal human rights, a tension central to contemporary debates over culture and rights. Addressing GBV effectively requires sustained commitment to transforming patriarchal cultural norms, fundamentally reshaping future generations' gender consciousness, relational behaviours, and ethical frameworks. The TMC curriculum should be strategically restructured to preserve and emphasise its authentic social, cultural, and health benefits while explicitly rejecting and eliminating patriarchal elements that perpetuate gender inequality and violence against women and girls.

Importantly, this analysis does not advocate for TMC's abolition but rather for its progressive evolution, a culturally sensitive transformation that honours the practice's profound social meanings while adapting its content to reflect contemporary gender justice imperatives. Such evolution recognises that cultures are dynamic rather than static, and that meaningful cultural practices possess the flexibility to adapt while retaining their core significance.

This study illuminates several areas requiring further scholarly investigation: comparative cultural analysis examining patriarchy's influence on GBV perpetuation across diverse African cultural contexts; masculinity construction research exploring how cultural practices, family socialisation, and peer culture interact in constructing masculine identity; intervention evaluation assessing reformed TMC curricula's effects on gender attitudes and GBV perpetration over time; intersectional analyses of cultural practice, gender identity, class, and violence; and implementation science examining effective strategies for translating reform recommendations into practice within traditional governance structures.

Acknowledgements
The author expresses profound gratitude to the knowledge holders who generously participated in this research through in-depth interviews, sharing sensitive cultural knowledge and personal insights. Their contributions were instrumental to this study's completion and the understandings developed herein. I acknowledge that this research was conducted on topics of deep cultural significance and appreciate participants' trust in sharing their experiences and perspectives. We hope this work honours their contributions by advancing both cultural understanding and gender justice. I acknowledge the University for granting me the opportunity to do this study and for funding.

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