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Initiation as a rite of surveillance: Precarious manhood and the making of masculinity in Jeffrey Rakabe's Led by Shepherds: An initiate's memoir

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ABSTRACT

This paper critically examines masculine identity formation by analysing Jeffrey Rakabe's memoir Led by Shepherds, using the text as a sociological narrative to interrogate how manhood is produced, validated, and policed within ritualised contexts. Drawing on critical masculinity scholarship, the paper explored how initiation rituals function as sites of bodily discipline, sexual regulation, and peer surveillance, reinforcing hegemonic masculinity while rendering masculine status precarious rather than secure. The analysis challenges the assumption that ritual participation alone confers stable manhood, demonstrating instead that initiation often inaugurates an ongoing process of masculine surveillance in which legitimacy must be continuously performed and defended. Particular attention is given to the role of sexual purity and heterosexual dominance in marginalising subordinated and queer masculinities, as well as to the often-overlooked maternal perspectives that reveal the relational and emotional costs of masculinity-making practices. By conceptualising initiation as a rite of surveillance rather than a rite of passage, this paper contributes to contemporary debates on precarious manhood, hegemonic masculinity, and rituals in the Global South, highlighting how culturally sanctioned practices of masculine becoming reproduce inequality both between men and women and among men themselves.

Keywords: Masculinity, Initiation Rituals, Hegemonic Masculinity, Precarious Manhood, Ritual, South Africa.

INTRODUCTION

The ceremony wasn't magical - it was a rigid checklist. To be a 'real man' meant strength without vulnerability, stoicism without emotion, silence instead of tears.

The above excerpt illustrates that masculinity in this context is not something that one becomes but something one is continuously tested for, granted conditionally, and always subject to withdrawal. The question What is a real man? has long occupied masculinity scholarship, particularly in relation to ritualised practices that symbolically transform boys into men. Initiation rituals are frequently framed as rites of passage that resolve masculine uncertainty by conferring male status. This paper advances a contrary argument that male initiation rituals often intensify masculine precarity by producing a form of manhood that must be constantly proven, defended, and policed. Rather than stabilising masculine

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identity, initiation inaugurates an ongoing regime of surveillance in which masculine legitimacy remains fragile.

This paper critically examines masculine identity formation by analysing Jeffrey Rakabe's memoir Led by Shepherds. The memoir is treated not as a literary object but as a sociological narrative that makes visible the everyday operation of hegemonic masculinity within ritualised contexts. Rakabe's account illuminates how masculinity is collectively produced through bodily discipline, sexual regulation, peer enforcement, and symbolic violence, while simultaneously exposing the emotional and relational costs borne by initiates, women, and families.

From a theoretical perspective, masculinity is neither an internal essence nor a stable achievement but a performative and hierarchical social practice that requires ongoing recognition.[1] Hegemonic masculinity operates by naturalising particular masculine configurations as culturally legitimate while subordinating alternative masculinities and femininities.[2] Initiation rituals function as key sites where this hierarchy is ritualised, embodied, and made meaningful through collective validation.

However, as scholarship on precarious manhood demonstrates, masculine status is not secured once achieved but remains vulnerable to loss through perceived weakness, nonconformity, or failure.[3] Masculinity is thus best understood as a hard-won and easily lost social position. Initiation rituals, rather than resolving this instability, often intensify it by establishing standards of masculine endurance, sexual dominance, and emotional restraint that must be repeatedly reaffirmed throughout the life course.[4]

This paper advances three interrelated arguments. First, initiation rituals operate less as rites of passage and more as rites of surveillance, producing men whose masculine legitimacy depends on continued conformity to dominant norms. Second, the ritualisation of sexual purity and heterosexual dominance functions as a mechanism through which subordinated and queer masculinities are actively marginalised, positioning non-heterosexual and non-conforming initiates as structurally vulnerable to masculine failure.[5] Initiation thus produces not only 'real men' but also abject or failed men against whom hegemonic masculinity is defined.

Third, the maternal perspectives foregrounded in Rakabe's narrative reveal the often-overlooked relational costs of hegemonic masculinity. Mothers emerge as unacknowledged witnesses to the emotional severing, bodily risk, and symbolic violence that accompany masculine reproduction. Their experiences expose the social and affective consequences of masculinity-making practices that prioritise dominance and endurance over relationality and care.

By foregrounding the instability, exclusion, and relational harm embedded within initiation practices, this paper contributes to contemporary masculinity scholarship that conceptualises manhood as fragile, hierarchical, and continuously contested. In doing so, it extends critical masculinity studies in the Global South by demonstrating how culturally sanctioned rituals of masculine becoming reproduce inequality not only between men and women, but also among men themselves.

METHODOLOGY

This paper is grounded in a qualitative research paradigm, which is epistemologically suited to the interpretive, meaning-centred inquiry. Qualitative methodology proceeds from the recognition that social life is not reducible to measurable variables but is produced through shared meanings, cultural practices, and situated experiences.[6] Where quantitative approaches seek to establish general patterns across large populations, qualitative inquiry is oriented toward understanding the texture and complexity

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[1] Judith Butler and Gender Trouble, "Feminism and the Subversion of Identity," *Gender Trouble* 3, no. 1 (1990): 3–17; Raewyn W Connell and James W Messerschmidt, "Hegemonic Masculinity: Rethinking the Concept," *Gender & Society* 19, no.6 (2005): 829–59.

[2] Raewyn W Connell, "Teaching the Boys: New Research on Masculinity, and Gender Strategies for Schools," *Teachers College Record* 98, no. 2 (1996): 206–35.

[3] Joseph A Vandello and Jennifer K Bosson, "Hard Won and Easily Lost: A Review and Synthesis of Theory and Research on Precarious Manhood.," *Psychology of Men & Masculinity* 14, no. 2 (2013): 101.

[4] Michael S Kimmel, "Guyland: The Perilous World Where Boys Become Men," *(No Title)*, 2008.

[5] Cheri Jo Pascoe, "Dude, You're a Fag. Berkeley," *CA: University of California, Berkeley Patterson, Mark*, 2007; Connell, "Teaching the Boys: New Research on Masculinity, and Gender Strategies for Schools"; Kopano Ratele, "Analysing Males in Africa: Certain Useful Elements in Considering Ruling Masculinities," *African and Asian Studies* 7, no. 4 (2008): 515–36.

[6] N. K Denzin and Y. S Lincoln, *The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research* , 5th ed (Sage, 2018).

of particular social phenomena, how people make sense of their worlds, how power operates within everyday experience, and how identities are constructed and contested through interaction and narrative. For a paper concerned with the lived experience of masculine identity formation within ritualised contexts, a qualitative approach is not merely methodologically convenient; it is analytically necessary.

The paper employs textual analysis as its primary methodological approach, treating Jeffrey Rakabe's memoir Led by Shepherds as a sociological document rather than purely a literary text. Textual analysis, broadly understood, involves the systematic examination of written, spoken, or visual artefacts to uncover the meanings, ideologies, and power relations encoded within them.[7] The theory proceeds from the premise that texts are not transparent records of reality but social constructions that produce, reproduce, and sometimes contest dominant cultural understandings. Within sociology, textual analysis has been applied productively to a wide range of materials, including policy documents, media representations, organisational communications, and personal narratives, precisely because these materials are understood as sites where social reality is actively constituted.[8]

More specifically, this paper employs a theoretically informed close reading, a form of textual analysis that moves between the particular details of the text and the broader theoretical frameworks through which those details acquire sociological significance. Close reading involves sustained, attentive engagement with the language, structure, and rhetorical strategies of a text, attending not only to what is explicitly stated but also to what is implied, elided, or rendered ambiguous.[9] It asks not simply what a text says but how it says it and what social and ideological effects it has. In the context of this paper, this means reading Rakabe's narrative closely for the ways in which it constructs, enacts, and occasionally troubles dominant discourses of masculinity, initiation, and gender hierarchy.

This interpretive approach is informed by critical discourse analysis, which understands texts as embedded within social structures of power and ideology.[10] Rather than treating language as a neutral medium of communication, critical discourse analysis proceeds from the position that language actively constructs social reality and that textual analysis must therefore be attentive to the political and ideological work that texts perform. For this paper, this means reading Rakabe's memoir not only as a personal account of initiation but also as a discursive site in which hegemonic masculinity is produced, contested, and made available for critical examination. The analytical focus is on identifying the discursive constructions of manhood that animate the memoir, the metaphors, silences, contradictions, and normative claims through which masculine identity is articulated and regulated.

The selection of Led by Shepherds as the primary text for this analysis requires explicit methodological justification, since the decision to treat a memoir as sociological data is not without epistemological complexity. Memoirs occupy a distinctive position in qualitative research. They are simultaneously personal and social, individual and collective, confessional and analytical. As a genre, the memoir invites its author to make sense of lived experience retrospectively, through a narrative frame that is inevitably shaped by the social worlds the author inhabits and the discourses available to them.[11] This retrospective, meaning-making quality is precisely what makes memoirs valuable as sociological sources. They do not simply record events; they interpret them, and in doing so, they reveal the cultural logics, emotional economies, and normative pressures that structure social life from the inside.

Led by Shepherds is particularly well-suited for several reasons. First, Rakabe's memoir provides a sustained, detailed, and reflexive account of male initiation from within the experience itself. Unlike interview-based or ethnographic data, generated through the research encounter and shaped by the presence of the researcher, the memoir represents an account produced independently, on the author's own terms, with the kind of retrospective depth that only narrative distance can enable. This does not make the memoir more 'authentic' than other qualitative sources, since all accounts are partial,

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[7] A. McKee, *Textual Analysis: A Beginner's Guide* (Sage Publications, 2003).
[8] Stuart Hall, "The Spectacle of the Other," *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices* 7 (1997): 223–90.
[9] C Barker and D Galasinski, *Cultural Studies and Discourse Analysis: A Dialogue on Language and Identity* (Sage., 2001).
[10] Norman Fairclough, "Critical Discourse Analysis," in *The Routledge Handbook of Discourse Analysis* (London: Routledge, 2023), 11–22, https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003035244-3; Teun A Van Dijk, "Principles of Critical Discourse Analysis," *Discourse & Society* 4, no. 2 (1993): 249–83.
[11] Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives* (U of Minnesota Press, 2010).

positioned and constructed, but it makes it a rich and candid site for examining how a man who has lived through initiation makes sense of that experience in relation to broader social expectations of manhood.

Second, the memoir's Southern African context lends it particular sociological significance. South Africa is a society in which the politics of masculinity are deeply entangled with histories of colonialism, apartheid, racial capitalism, and post-apartheid transformation.[12] Initiation practices in this context do not occur in a cultural vacuum; they are shaped by, and in turn help to reproduce, broader social hierarchies of race, class, and gender. Rakabe's account opens a window onto the lived intersection of these forces, allowing for an analysis that is simultaneously attentive to the micro-dynamics of individual experience and the macro-structures of social inequality. This makes the memoir not merely a personal document but a sociologically revealing text that illuminates how gender ideologies are reproduced and negotiated within a specific and historically significant social context.

Third, Rakabe's memoir is notable for its critical self-reflexivity. The author does not simply recount his experience of initiation as a straightforwardly positive or culturally mandated rite of passage; he scrutinises it, questions its logics, and attends to the costs it imposes on himself and others. This critical stance makes the text particularly generative for sociological analysis because it does some of the researcher's interpretive work from within the text itself. Rakabe's willingness to name the violence, fear, exclusion, and ambivalence embedded in masculine rituals gives the memoir an analytical quality that complements and enriches the theoretical frameworks brought into play in this paper.

It is important to acknowledge the epistemological limitations inherent in working with a single autobiographical text. A memoir represents one person's perspective, shaped by individual biography, cultural location, and the conventions of the genre itself. It can be a representative account of all initiation experiences and does not claim to do so. However, this limitation does not diminish the text's analytical value; it simply requires that the claims made on its basis are appropriately bounded. The paper does not aim to generalise on initiation rituals in the abstract but to use Rakabe's account as a lens through which to examine the sociological processes by which hegemonic masculinity is produced, sustained, and sometimes contested. In this respect, the memoir functions as a specific instance examined not for its own sake alone but for what it reveals about broader social processes and theoretical questions.[13]

The analytical procedure outlined in this paper entails a comprehensive reading of the memoir to identify key thematic clusters that align with the paper's conceptual concerns. These themes include the production of masculine identity through initiation, the role of surveillance and bodily discipline in enforcing masculinity, the management of sexual purity and heteronormativity, the marginalisation of subordinated and queer masculinities, and the relational costs that women, particularly mothers, incur in the reproduction of hegemonic masculinity. Specific passages are selected for close reading where they illuminate these themes with particular clarity or where they generate productive tensions with the theoretical literature. Throughout, the analysis examines the relationship between individual experience and social structure, reading Rakabe's personal narrative as both embedded in and constituted by the broader social and cultural forces this paper seeks to understand.

DISCUSSION

Defining 'Real Manhood' in Academic Literature

Scholarly understandings of masculinity have shifted decisively away from essentialist and biologically determinist accounts toward conceptualisations of masculinity as socially constructed, historically contingent, and hierarchically organised. Early sociological and anthropological work often treated manhood as a relatively stable status achieved through biological maturation or cultural rites of passage. Contemporary masculinity studies, however, emphasise that masculinity is better understood as a set of socially regulated practices that require continuous validation rather than a fixed identity.[14]

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[12] Robert Morrell, "Of Boys and Men: Masculinity and Gender in Southern African Studies," *Journal of Southern African Studies* 24, no. 4 (1998): 605–30; Ratele, "Analysing Males in Africa: Certain Useful Elements in Considering Ruling Masculinities."

[13] Robert E Stake, "The Art of Case Study Research" (sage, 1995).

[14] Raewyn W Connell, "Masculinities". University of California Press. *Berkeley, Los Angeles* 82 (2005); Kimmel, "Guyland: The Perilous World Where Boys Become Men."

Connell's formulation of hegemonic masculinity remains foundational for understanding how particular configurations of masculinity become culturally dominant while subordinating alternative masculinities and femininities.[15] Hegemonic masculinity does not describe the most common form of masculinity but rather the most culturally exalted one, typically characterised by dominance, heterosexuality, emotional restraint, and physical endurance. Crucially, hegemonic masculinity derives its power not only through coercion but through cultural consent, operating as a normative ideal against which all men are measured.[16]

From a performative perspective, masculinity does not precede its enactment but is constituted through repeated acts that acquire legitimacy through social recognition.[17] Masculinity, in this sense, exists only insofar as it is successfully performed and validated by others. Initiation rituals can therefore be understood not as moments that reveal an underlying masculine essence but as formalised performances designed to produce the appearance of stable manhood through bodily discipline, symbolic violence, and collective affirmation.

Anthropological studies of initiation have long documented the centrality of endurance, pain, and separation from femininity in the cultural production of manhood.[18] Across diverse cultural contexts, manhood is frequently constructed as something that must be earned through trial, often by demonstrating the ability to withstand physical suffering, suppress emotion, and submit to authoritative instruction. These practices reinforce the idea that masculinity is precarious and is achieved conditionally only through compliance with culturally sanctioned tests.

However, contemporary masculinity scholarship has increasingly questioned the assumption that ritual participation resolves masculine uncertainty. Research on precarious manhood demonstrates that masculine status is widely understood as tenuous, requiring ongoing proof and vulnerable to loss through perceived weakness, nonconformity, or failure.[19] This framework is particularly useful for analysing initiation rituals, which not only mark masculine transition but also establish enduring standards of masculine adequacy that must be repeatedly reaffirmed.

Rakabe's narrative illustrates how initiation functions less as a culmination of masculine becoming and more as the beginning of a lifelong process of masculine surveillance. The ritual confers provisional recognition while simultaneously intensifying the risk of masculine failure, as initiates emerge into social worlds where their manhood must be constantly defended against accusations of softness, impurity, or inadequacy. In this sense, initiation rituals do not stabilise masculinity but institutionalise its insecurity.

Importantly, hegemonic masculinity is constituted through exclusion as much as inclusion. Masculine legitimacy is secured by positioning certain bodies and identities as abject or failed, including queer men, emotionally expressive men, and those unable or unwilling to conform to dominant sexual and behavioural norms.[20] Initiation rituals often play a central role in this process by equating 'real manhood' with heterosexual dominance, sexual control, and repudiation of femininity. Non-heterosexual initiates are thus rendered structurally vulnerable, required to either conceal their identities or risk symbolic and material exclusion.

Scholars working in Southern African contexts have further demonstrated how initiation practices are embedded within broader political, economic, and historical conditions that shape contemporary masculinities.[21] Colonial disruption, labour migration, urbanisation, and economic precarity have transformed traditional masculine roles, intensifying anxieties about masculine legitimacy. In this context, initiation rituals often assume heightened symbolic importance as sites where

[15] Connell, "Masculinities". University of California Press.
[16] Connell and Messerschmidt, "Hegemonic Masculinity: Rethinking the Concept."
[17] Butler and Trouble, "Feminism and the Subversion of Identity."
[18] David D Gilmore, *Manhood in the Making: Cultural Concepts of Masculinity* (Yale University Press, 1990); Gilbert H Herdt, *The Sambia: Ritual and Gender in New Guinea* (Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1987); Victor Turner, "The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure, Rev. Ed," *Piscataway: AldineTransaction. First Published*, 1969.
[19] Vandello and Bosson, "Hard Won and Easily Lost: A Review and Synthesis of Theory and Research on Precarious Manhood."
[20] R W Connell, "The Men and the Boys University of California Press," *Berkeley CA*, 2000; Pascoe, "Dude, You're a Fag. Berkeley."
[21] Morrell, "Of Boys and Men: Masculinity and Gender in Southern African Studies"; Ratele, "Analysing Males in Africa: Certain Useful Elements in Considering Ruling Masculinities."

threatened masculinity is reasserted, even as the social conditions necessary to sustain hegemonic masculine ideals become increasingly unattainable.

Taken together, this literature suggests that 'real manhood' is not a stable status conferred through ritual, but a fragile social position produced through ongoing surveillance, discipline, and exclusion. Initiation rituals play a key role in this process by formalising the criteria for masculine legitimacy while embedding insecurity at the core of masculine identity. This theoretical framing provides the foundation for analysing Rakabe's memoir as a narrative account of how hegemonic masculinity is ritualised, contested, and lived in practice.

The Agents of Masculine Reinforcement: Sites of Surveillance and Discipline

Masculine identity is not produced in isolation but emerges through a network of social actors and institutions that collectively monitor, regulate, and enforce masculine norms. Rather than functioning as neutral agents of socialisation, the paper explores how families, peers, elders, institutions, and cultural narratives operate as sites of masculine surveillance, shaping how manhood is recognised, challenged, or withdrawn.

Firstly, the study argues that families constitute a primary site where masculine expectations are first communicated and internalised. Although fathers and male relatives are often positioned as key transmitters of masculine norms, maternal figures play a crucial, if ambivalent, role in preparing boys for masculine transition. This is seen on page 4 when Koko Nkumi uttered the words *"Ke molao! How can you not be proud?" (It's the law; how can you not be proud?).* Feminist scholarship has long demonstrated that maternal labour is central to gender reproduction, even within patriarchal systems that ultimately devalue feminine influence.[22]

Led by Shepherds illustrates how mothers occupy a contradictory position. They are expected to support initiation while simultaneously managing fear, grief, and emotional loss. Maternal concern is often reframed as interference or weakness, reinforcing the idea that emotional attachment must be severed for masculinity to emerge. This is seen in Rakabe's mother's reactions towards the whole process. Her utterances include *"You're too young",* and she says, *"We'll go to the doctor",* and she packs Rakabe's blanket with care. In this way, the family functions not only as a site of preparation but as an early arena where emotional restraint and masculine distance are normalised.

Second, community elders and ritual specialists wield institutional authority over the formal recognition of manhood. Their power lies in their capacity to confer or withhold masculine legitimacy through initiation. Drawing on Turner's concept of ritual authority, these figures act as gatekeepers of masculine status, positioning themselves as custodians of tradition and masculine knowledge.[23]

However, this authority is not merely symbolic. It establishes hierarchies of masculine value, distinguishing between legitimate men, failed initiates, and those excluded from ritual participation altogether. Through bodily discipline and symbolic violence, elders reproduce hegemonic masculinity as a moral and cultural obligation, making dissent difficult and costly.

Third, peer groups function as some of the most aggressive enforcers of masculine norms. Masculinity is continuously tested, policed, and affirmed within homosocial contexts where deviation from dominant norms invites ridicule, exclusion, or violence.[24]

Rakabe's account vividly captures how peer surveillance intensifies during initiation, where stoicism, pain endurance, and heterosexual bravado become central markers of masculine credibility. In Led by Shepherds, Rakabe asserts:

> *The fear of being a leshoboro didn't just push us toward initiation. It pushed us toward this warped, dangerous idea of masculinity in which aggression equalled strength. Vulnerability was a weakness. Women weren't our equals; they were living, breathing proof of how much of a "real man" you were.*

[22] Nancy J Chodorow, *The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender* (Univ of California Press, 2023).
[23] Turner, "The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure, Rev. Ed."
[24] Kimmel, "Guyland: The Perilous World Where Boys Become Men"; Pascoe, "Dude, You're a Fag. Berkeley."

Fear of being labelled weak, feminine, or sexually deviant compels initiates to perform masculinity in exaggerated ways. Masculinity thus becomes not only a personal identity, but a collective performance enforced through threat and humiliation.

Finally, schools, religious organisations, and media further entrench masculine norms by rewarding conformity and marginalising deviation.[25] For instance, there are South African films that depict this very well. In the film *Moffie* (a derogatory Afrikaans term for gay), Nicholas van der Swart must complete two years of compulsory military service to defend the racist apartheid regime. The film depicts the indoctrination and brutality of a gay man struggling with his sexuality in an apartheid-era military school. *Inxeba* tells the story of a gay factory worker who travels to the rural Eastern Cape, South Africa, to oversee the Xhosa initiation process, only to have his 'secret' discovered. The film depicts a story of tragic forbidden love, but it is also an exploration of masculinity, how it is forced to conform to strict norms of acceptable behaviour and expression through traditions and social pressures. These films illustrate how institutions play a role in how representations of masculinity valorise dominance, emotional restraint, and heterosexual success, reinforcing the belief that these traits are natural and desirable.

Together, these agents create a dense web of masculine surveillance in which men are continually evaluated, ranked, and disciplined. Masculinity is never simply achieved; it must be constantly defended against erosion.

Beyond Ritual: Is Initiation Sufficient for 'Real' Manhood?

A central question emerging from Rakabe's memoir is whether participation in initiation rituals genuinely confers manhood or merely establishes formal prerequisites for male status under which masculinity must continue to be proven. This section argues that initiation is '*necessary'* but not sufficient for stable manhood.

While initiation rituals confer symbolic recognition, masculine legitimacy ultimately depends on everyday performances of gender.[26] As Bourdieu and Nice suggest, masculinity is reproduced through habitual practices such as speech, posture, emotional expression, and sexual conduct that extend beyond ritual context.[27] In the book, Rakabe demonstrates how the lessons of initiation do not remain confined to the ritual space but spill into everyday life, where initiates are expected to enact dominance and emotional detachment. Masculinity, once authorised, becomes a disciplinary script that governs daily interactions, particularly with women and younger boys. Below are the excerpts from the book that illustrate this:

> *Back at the village, that lesson didn't stay at the camp. It followed us, creeping out of the shadows.*
>
> *The quiet boys who had left unsure and small came back with a swagger. They didn't just walk into the village; they owned it…They now expected respect, not just from the other boys but from the women too.*
>
> *It was as if they had learned how to walk taller by stepping all over the women in their lives.*
>
> *Those men didn't earn respect; they demanded it: the kind of respect you get when people are scared of you. There was no understanding, no compassion. Just a lot of misplaced power and a lot of pain. I remember looking around at the women, seeing how they couldn't quite grasp what had happened, how they were left to face the monsters that their boys had become - monsters with swagger but no soul. But it worked, and that's what made it so dangerous.*

Taken together, these excerpts show that initiation opens the door to manhood without keeping it open, since the swagger of the returning boys is something they have to keep performing in front of the village. What Rakabe describes is respect that is demanded rather than earned, and an authority built on fear and on the silencing of women is a fragile basis for legitimacy. In the terms Bourdieu and Nice offer, the ritual installs a set of dispositions, but these only hold when they are repeated through everyday

[25] Connell, "Teaching the Boys: New Research on Masculinity, and Gender Strategies for Schools."
[26] Candace West and Don H Zimmerman, "Doing Gender," *Gender & Society* 1, no. 2 (1987): 125–51.
[27] Pierre Bourdieu and Richard Nice, *The Logic of Practice*, vol. 7 (Stanford university press Stanford, CA, 1990).

speech, posture and conduct, so the status conferred at the camp has to be re-earned each day. The cost of that arrangement falls on the people around the initiate, particularly the women left to face what Rakabe calls "monsters with swagger but no soul". Initiation is therefore necessary but not sufficient for stable manhood, because the recognition it grants is symbolic and provisional, and the lasting measure of a man becomes the daily performance of dominance and detachment that his community goes on to demand of him.

Internal Integration

The psychological integration of ritual experiences into coherent masculine identity varies considerably among initiates.[28] Some may deeply internalise ritual lessons, experiencing genuine transformation in self-concept and behaviour. Others may participate superficially, fulfilling external requirements without significant internal change. This variation challenges simplistic equations between ritual participation and authentic masculine achievement.

As societies transform, the relationship between traditional initiation and contemporary masculine requirements becomes increasingly complex.[29] Traditional rituals may prepare initiates for masculine roles that no longer exist or fail to address skills essential to modern masculine success. This disjunction creates potential tension between ritual achievement and practical masculine competence in contemporary contexts.

Rakabe's book suggests that while initiation provides important cultural authorisation for masculine identity, it represents only one component of a lifelong process of gender construction and validation. The significance of initiation lies not simply in its completion but in how its lessons and transformations are incorporated into ongoing masculine performance and self-understanding. This perspective aligns with contemporary gender theory's emphasis on masculinity as processual rather than achieved, something continuously enacted rather than permanently secured.[30]

Sexual Purity and Masculine Transition

Many initiation rituals incorporate explicit or implicit notions of sexual purity as a component of masculine development. These rituals often frame the transition to manhood as requiring separation from feminine/maternal influence and the acquisition of appropriate sexual knowledge and practice.[31] Rakabe's exploration of this dimension reveals the tensions between traditional views of sexual purification and contemporary sexual attitudes and behaviours.

> *"Boa nyoba?" (Do you have sex?), the king would ask as if he was in charge of deciding who was pure.*
>
> *The men - these brave, stoic men - would spit, physically spit, their faces twisting in righteous disgust as if sex was something you picked up off the ground and had to wash your hands of immediately afterwards.*

These excerpts expose the contradictions. Initiates must demonstrate restraint while being prepared for heterosexual conquest. This paradox reinforces hegemonic masculinity by equating sexual control with moral authority and sexual dominance with masculine success.

Initiation often includes implicit or explicit instruction in heterosexual practice and ideology, reinforcing heterosexuality as fundamental to the 'ideal' masculine identity.[32] As Pascoe demonstrates, the repudiation of homosexuality frequently functions as a central mechanism through which adolescent boys establish masculine credibility among peers.[33] Rakabe suggests that this aspect of initiation creates particular difficulties for non-heterosexual initiates, who may find themselves unable to authentically participate in this dimension of masculine validation.

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[28] Gilmore, *Manhood in the Making: Cultural Concepts of Masculinity*.
[29] Morrell, "Of Boys and Men: Masculinity and Gender in Southern African Studies."
[30] Connell, "Teaching the Boys: New Research on Masculinity, and Gender Strategies for Schools"; Butler and Trouble, "Feminism and the Subversion of Identity."
[31] Herdt, *The Sambia: Ritual and Gender in New Guinea*.
[32] Roger N Lancaster, *Life Is Hard: Machismo, Danger, and the Intimacy of Power in Nicaragua* (Univ of California Press, 1994).
[33] Pascoe, "Dude, You're a Fag. Berkeley."

> *"…the freshly circumcised penis was no longer a penis. It was a spear, a mighty weapon of masculinity. They said it symbolised strength, dominance and all those other things men are supposed to embody."*

The physical modifications that often accompany male initiation rituals (circumcision, scarification, etc.) frequently carry explicit sexual significance, marking the body as properly prepared for adult sexual relationships.[34] As Rakabe recalls: *"With that cut, my childhood was gone: Mmas lullabies, the dusty soccer fields, my secret dreams- all of it, slipping away."* The permanent nature of these changes means that the sexual dimensions of masculine identity become inscribed on initiates' bodies.

Contemporary scholarship has begun to question the theoretical foundations and practical implications of associating sexual 'impurity' with masculine transition. Feminist and queer theorists argue that such associations reinforce problematic hierarchies wherein the feminine becomes equated with contamination and pollution.[35] Additionally, as societies increasingly recognise diverse sexual identities and practices, traditional notions of proper masculine sexuality become increasingly contested.[36]

Rakabe's memoir aligns with this critical tradition by highlighting how traditional sexual prohibitions often conflict with initiates' lived experiences and modern sexual ethics. As urbanisation, globalisation, and changing social norms reshape sexual landscapes, the disconnect between ritualised sexual ideologies and contemporary sexual realities becomes increasingly apparent. This disconnect raises important questions about whether initiation rituals that emphasise sexual purity can remain meaningful for younger generations with different sexual attitudes and experiences.

The Possibility of Failure: Precarious Manhood

Central to understanding masculine identity formation is the concept of failed masculinity, the idea that masculine status requires continuous demonstration and can be easily lost through perceived inadequacy or transgression.[37] This precariousness manifests in the perpetual anxiety many men experience about proving their masculine credentials and avoiding behaviours coded as feminine or weak.[38]

Rakabe illustrates this precariousness through its depiction of initiation rituals in which participants face the very real possibility of not coping with the required hardships. Such failures carry profound social consequences, potentially resulting in lifelong stigmatisation and exclusion from the privileges of adult male status. As Ratele observes in his research on South African masculinities, men who fail to complete initiation rituals may be permanently labelled as 'boys' regardless of their chronological age or other accomplishments.[39]

The concept of masculine failure extends beyond formal initiation contexts to encompass various domains where men may be judged inadequate: sexual performance, economic provision, physical courage, emotional stoicism, and homosocial competition.[40] Each of these areas presents opportunities for men to 'fail' at manhood according to dominant cultural standards. Contemporary scholars have also noted that economic restructuring and changing gender relations have made traditional markers of masculine success increasingly difficult to achieve for many men, creating widespread status anxiety and identity crisis.[41]

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[34] Eric K Silverman, "Anthropology and Circumcision," *Annu. Rev. Anthropol.* 33, no. 1 (2004): 419–45.
[35] Butler and Trouble, "Feminism and the Subversion of Identity"; Grosz Elizabeth, "Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism," *Bloomington-Indianapolis: Indiana University Press. Fausto-Sterling, Anne (2008),"The Bare Bones of Race", Social Studies of Science* 38, no. 5 (1994): 657–94.
[36] Connell, "The Men and the Boys University of California Press."
[37] Vandello and Bosson, "Hard Won and Easily Lost: A Review and Synthesis of Theory and Research on Precarious Manhood."
[38] Kimmel, "Guyland: The Perilous World Where Boys Become Men."
[39] Ratele, "Analysing Males in Africa: Certain Useful Elements in Considering Ruling Masculinities."
[40] Gilmore, *Manhood in the Making: Cultural Concepts of Masculinity*.
[41] Linda McDowell, *Redundant Masculinities?: Employment Change and White Working Class Youth* (John Wiley & Sons, 2011).

Maternal Perspectives on Initiation

The emotional and psychological experiences of mothers whose sons undergo initiation ceremonies represent an understudied dimension of masculine identity formation. Rakabe contributes by centring these maternal perspectives, revealing the complex emotions that accompany this transitional moment.

Research suggests that mothers often experience profound ambivalence about their sons' participation in initiation rituals, simultaneously recognising their cultural importance while fearing for their children's physical and psychological well-being.[42] This ambivalence comes from several sources. Rakabe paints the following picture:

> *Those boys who didn't come back, the ones who died during the ordeal? Instead of being buried at home, these poor boys were dumped in the bush, far from their mothers, far from their families. No goodbye; just... gone. We were supposed to accept that.*
>
> *Oh, it's just part of the process, you know, part of becoming a man. You're telling me that this ritual meant to turn boys into men, this sacred, time-honoured tradition, couldn't even guarantee that the boys made it out alive? How do you trust a system that consumes its own, that chews up and spits out its children without a second thought?*
>
> *If you were unlucky enough to get the news that someone didn't make it, well, buckle up because the delivery wasn't exactly what you'd call tender. The elders showed up at your home with their faces grim, as if they were carrying the weight of the world on their shoulders. Instead of breaking the news to the family gently, they'd break a food bowl - just smash it right there in front of your mother. Crash. In that instant, you knew your son was gone - your heart ripped out by pottery. But if the elders were really in a rush, they'd just plant a stick in your yard. No knock on the door; just a silent, standing stick. That was it. The stick needed no explanation. It was like a silent middle finger to your entire existence, the message being loud and clear: "Your son's been eaten."*

In contexts where initiation involves physical hardship or bodily modification, mothers must contend with the very real possibility of injury, infection, or death.[43] News reports of initiation-related fatalities intensify these fears, particularly as traditional practices may lack modern medical safeguards. Mothers, therefore, face the difficult task of balancing cultural expectations against concerns for their children's immediate safety.

Mothers may also worry about the psychological impact of initiation experiences, particularly those involving isolation, intimidation, or exposure to violence.[44] The emphasis on emotional stoicism and separation from maternal influence that characterises many male initiation practices may conflict with attachment-oriented parenting philosophies that emphasise emotional openness and connection. As Chodorow suggests, the mother-son relationship often involves complex negotiations around intimacy and distance that become particularly salient during masculine transition rituals.[45]

Initiation rituals typically reconfigure family relationships, formally establishing the sons' relative independence from maternal authority.[46] For mothers, this transformation can involve significant loss and adjustment as their relationship with their sons undergoes a cultural redefinition. As Rakabe observes, mothers must negotiate new boundaries and expectations while continuing to provide care and guidance appropriate to their sons' transitional status.

Contemporary mothers often navigate a complex cultural terrain where traditional initiation practices meet modern values, medical knowledge, and legal frameworks.[47] Those living in urban or multicultural contexts may experience particular tension between preserving cultural heritage and accommodating their children's integration into diverse social environments. Rakabe highlights how these negotiations

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[42] Louise Vincent, "'Boys Will Be Boys': Traditional Xhosa Male Circumcision, HIV and Sexual Socialisation in Contemporary South Africa," *Culture, Health & Sexuality* 10, no. 5 (2008): 431–46.
[43] Vincent, "'Boys Will Be Boys': Traditional Xhosa Male Circumcision, HIV and Sexual Socialisation in Contemporary South Africa."
[44] W. S. Pollack, *Real Boys: Rescuing Our Sons from the Myths of Boyhood* (Random House, 1998).
[45] Chodorow, *The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender*.
[46] Herdt, *The Sambia: Ritual and Gender in New Guinea*.
[47] Vincent, "'Boys Will Be Boys': Traditional Xhosa Male Circumcision, HIV and Sexual Socialisation in Contemporary South Africa."

unfold within specific family systems, with mothers developing various strategies to balance competing considerations.

Research by Ncaca on Xhosa mothers' perspectives on traditional circumcision in South Africa reveals this complexity, with many mothers simultaneously valuing the cultural significance of the ritual while advocating for safety improvements and greater maternal involvement in preparation and aftercare.[48] The above suggest that maternal perspectives on initiation represent important sites for examining how gender traditions adapt to changing social conditions.

CONCLUSION

This paper has argued that male initiation rituals do not stabilise masculine identity but instead institutionalise its precarity. Through bodily discipline, sexual regulation, and collective surveillance, initiation produces a form of manhood that must be continuously defended against failure and exclusion. Masculinity emerges not as a secure status but as a fragile social position maintained through conformity and domination.

Rakabe's memoir is a great narrative lens through which the workings of hegemonic masculinity are made visible. By analysing initiation as a rite of surveillance rather than a rite of passage, this paper contributes to contemporary debates in masculinity studies that emphasise instability, hierarchy, and exclusion. Finally, this analysis demonstrates that the costs of masculinity-making extend beyond initiates themselves. Women, mothers, and marginalised men bear the relational and emotional consequences of practices that prioritise endurance and dominance over care and mutual recognition. Understanding masculinity as precarious and socially enforced opens the door to reimagining gender practices that do not rely on exclusion, fear, or violence as conditions of belonging.

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[48] M. Ncaca, " Yithi Uyindoda! (Say, You Are a Man!): An Ethnographic Study on the Construction of Religion and Masculinities in Initiation Schools in Cape Town Townships " (Stellenbosch University , 2014).

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