HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies
ISSN: (Online) 2072-8050, (Print) 0259-9422

Ulwaluko: A critical site for black theological reflection

Author:
Ayanda Mdokwana[1]

Affiliation:
[1]Department of Philosophy, Practical and Systematic Theology, College of Human Sciences, University of South Africa, Pretoria, South Africa

Corresponding author:
Ayanda Mdokwana,
ayandamdokwana@gmail.com

Dates:
Received: 10 July 2024
Accepted: 11 Sept. 2024
Published: 30 Oct. 2024

How to cite this article:
Mdokwana, A., 2024, 'Ulwaluko: A critical site for black theological reflection', *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 80(1), a10034. https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v80i1.10034

Ulwaluko is an essential rite of passage for men in the Xhosa community in South Africa. This particular initiation rite of passage is a critical part of the transition from boyhood to manhood. In a post-apartheid South Africa, this African practice has received criticism for promoting gender and sexual exclusion with some calling for a halt to the practice. Using Simon Maimela's theological anthropology and Jackson's concept of modern slavery as human plasticity, I attempt to expose how post-apartheid constitutionalism has epistemically distorted the theological anthropology of this rite of passage. This is done acknowledging Ulwaluko theologically within the context of African holism. This, I argue, has had significant ethical implications for society. Recognising it as a site of black theological reflection using Maimela's theological anthropology, I argue that this particular practice can positively influence discourses on morality in South Africa.

Contribution: This article makes a theological contribution by situating African and black theology of liberation discourse within the epistemic framework of Ulwaluko as an initiation rite of passage. Recognising the prevalence of initiation rites of passage in South Africa, this discourse attempts to contribute towards thinking about the creation of humanity from these spaces of formation. This I do in the very challenging contexts within which Ulwaluko is practised.

Keywords: Ulwaluko; theological anthropology; holism; human plasticity; Jackson; Maimela.

Introduction

Ulwaluko is an initiation rite of passage among the Xhosa people that facilitates the transition from boyhood to manhood. Ntombana (2009) argues that among the Xhosa people, this currently practised initiation rite of passage dates back to many years. It must be noted that the initiation rite of passage is not exclusively practised by people of Xhosa descent but various other indigenous groups of people in South Africa.[1] The purpose of this article is to place initiation rites of passage that facilitates the transition of boyhood into manhood within the African holistic framework in order to consider the role that black theology can play in affirming the humanity of black bodies. Using Jackson's concept of human plasticity, I argue that the shifts that the practice has undergone expose how black bodies are placed on the scale that measures sub-humanity. I use Ulwaluko, the Xhosa initiation rite of passage to expose this. Utilising Simon Maimela's theological anthropology, I argue that Ulwaluko is a critical site for black theological reflection in the context of antiblackness. This article makes a theological contribution by situating black theology of liberation discourse within the epistemic framework of Ulwaluko as an initiation rite of passage. Recognising the prevalence of initiation rites of passage in South Africa, this discourse attempts to contribute towards thinking about the creation of humanity from these spaces of formation. This I do in the very challenging contexts within which Ulwaluko is practised.

Ulwaluko and manhood

Ulwaluko as an initiation rite of passage that facilitates the transition from boyhood to manhood has received criticism and has been associated with negative discriminatory factors in our society. Ntombana (2011:631–640), for instance, considers the call for the practice to be abolished because of its association with drug abuse, alcohol misuse and other societal misbehaviours.[2] Even on an epistemic level, this particular initiation rite of passage has received criticism for its exclusionary posture when it comes to women and queer people. Gogela (2020) exposes the marginalisation women go through in the preparation and matters of participation when it comes to this initiation rite of passage.

1.In my community, people committed to their indigenous traditions such as the Xhosa, Tswana and Sotho practise such rites of passage although differently.

2.Ntombana here also highlights a woman was once raped by initiates who then blamed teachings of the initiation school for their actions.

Gogela (2020:208) argues that because this practice is exclusively male-oriented, women who involved themselves were accused of meddlers and seen as witchcraft practitioners in some cases. Gogela (2020) contends that this led some women to be killed in the process. Gogela (2020:210) proposes reform to the initiation rite of passage that will consider issues such as gender equality and recognise the voices of women as equal partners in the practice. Ntozini and Ngqangweni (2016:1309–1318) expose the experiences of gay men who participated in this initiation rite of passage. These were characterised by feelings of not belonging as a result of its heterosexist posture (Ntozini & Ngqangweni 2016:1309–1318). Other issues noted were the feeling to hide and subtly deny one's homosexuality in order to fit into its heterosexist framework (Ntozini & Ngqangweni 2016:1309–1318). For some adults, Ulwaluko was seen as a form of conversion into heterosexuality (Ntozini & Ngqangweni 2016:1309–1318).

Ncontsa and Shumba (2013:1–14) in their discourse of bullying identified *amakrwala* to be among the culprits of bullying in high school according to high school learners. Ncontsa and Shumba (2013:11) exposed in their study that the impact of bullying contributed to depression, loss of concentration and inadequate academic performance among high school learners. They argue that the conditions of bullying were of such a serious nature that police sometimes had to be called to intervene (Ncontsa & Shumba 2013:11).

Recognising the calls for the abolishment of Ulwaluko, Ntombana (2011) rather calls for the reformation of the practice than for its abolishment. Ntombana (2011) argues that government has made interventions to curb the violence associated with this particular practice.[3] One of the key strategies Ntombana recognises as necessary for the reformation of this particular practice is the recognition of Amakhankatha as informal educators. Another critical reform proposed by Ntombana (2011:638) is the introduction of a curriculum at initiation schools.

It is important to recognise this particular practice within the African holistic framework that values God, the ancestors, human and the environment. Discussing the structure of this particular initiation rite of passage, Ntombana (2009) discusses the three phases which provide structure to this rite of passage. The first phase is the separation phase (Ntombana 2009:75). In this particular phase, the initiate is separated from the environment in order to adjust to an unfamiliar environment in preparation for other phases (Ntombana 2009:75). The second phase is characterised by the education phase in which the initiate will learn and be taught in this unfamiliar environment (Ntombana 2009:75). The third phase is characterised by incorporation into the community as a man preceded by celebratory events (Ntombana 2009:75). Ntombana (2009) argues:

> The graduation ceremony which celebrates the successful outcome of a long and often painful learning process and launching of a new breadwinner. (p. 75)

Ngwane (2001) exposes the fact that the idea of building the wealth of a homestead is closely associated with Ulwaluko. Consultation of ancestors in this particular process therefore is not divorced from this practice (Ngwane 2001). Mavundla et al. (2009) note that Ulwaluko is a religious rite of passage. It must be important to recognise that 'religious' refers to a sacred practice that requires sexual purity during this initiation rite of passage (Mavundla et al. 2009:395–403). This initiation rite of passage is a prerequisite for getting married and starting a family (Mavundla et al. 2009). This initiation rite of passage not only involved the initiate but his family, the community and his ancestors (Mavundla et al. 2009:395–402).

Land played a critical role in the life of the man that graduated from initiation school. Discussing the intersections of modernity and tradition in the shaping of Ulwaluko, Ngwane (2001:407) exposes how the chiefly courts provided land for new families to farm. Having a family and land for cultivation were an essential part of manhood because they determined the amount of respect you will receive from the community (Ngwane 2001:407). Ngwane's sentiments on the intersections of tradition and modernity in the formation of Ulwaluko will receive sustained attention in my discussions further down with much context. Ulwaluko as a rite of passage comes with a lot of social responsibilities. The transition phase as discussed by Ntombana (2009) plays a critical role in the creation and reconstruction of social relations in as far as manhood is concerned.

Siswana (2016), calling for the reclamation of Ulwaluko, provides at least four crucial issues that constitute the structure for learning in the process of creation, reconstruction and transformation within Ulwaluko. The very first key issue discussed by Siswana (2016:170) is the way of thinking about how self (this is with reference to the initiate) relates to the other bodies that requires respect. Siswana (2016:170) argues that this is a taught virtue. I argue that this particular principle is important for us to consider in the context of dehumanisation expressed through land dispossession, sexual and gender discrimination. This is in recognition of the African holistic framework that respects the intersections of relations between the human, land, ancestors and God. Another key issue raised by Siswana (2016:171) was the teaching of independence and self-autonomy. The third point raised by Siswana (2016:171) is social responsibility within the family and the community. At the heart of what this article attempts to expose is how these framings are epistemically expressed in the liberal humanist project that promote racial and sexual oppression in a post-apartheid South Africa. This happens in a way that challenges self-autonomy and independence. Taking into account the positive and negative issues raised with regard to Ulwaluko, I now wish to turn to Jackson's concept of *human plasticity* to expose how Ulwaluko is problematised through racial and sexual oppression in a post-apartheid South Africa.

3.This would refer to laws such as the *Customary Initiation Act* (Republic of South Africa 1997, 2021) government policies in line with the act.

Slavery as human plasticity and the post-apartheid state

Jackson (2020) focussing on the intersections of race, gender and sexuality argues that oppression of black people in the current context is expressed through, what she calls, *human plasticity*. Jackson (2020:1) premises her argument on the shift from the slavery of black people to the racialised exploitation in neoliberal democratic societies constructed through liberal humanism.[4] At the heart of Jackson's challenge is how human liberalism has reconstituted slavery in the current context without having its epistemic premise questioned (Jackson 2020:1). Jackson (2020) engages African diasporic literature that troubles racial oppression and its intersections with the creation and the recreation of sexualised and gendered black 'animalised' bodies. Jackson does not call for humanisation of the marginalised through rights and the law, but rather argues that slavery is reconstructed because of the failure to question the very epistemic premise of these humanising tools (Jackson 2020). Throughout her book, Jackson attempts to expose how western philosophy and western science continue to frame black bodies. According to Jackson, while slavery is explicit oppression towards black bodies, current democratic contexts attempt to hide racialised oppression through liberal humanism (Jackson 2020). Using African diasporic literature such as that of Morrison's *Beloved*, Jackson argues that the humanising agent which can be called the enactors of slavery through sentimental ethics attempt to humanise black people without questioning the epistemic premise of sentimental ethics (Jackson 2020:45–81[5]). For Jackson (2020:45–81), the oppressor who is the humanising agent refuses to relinquish oppressive epistemic power and holds unto the wielding power of epistemically 'humanising' the marginalised.

In the context of current democratic neoliberal dispensations, Jackson argues that the bodies of the marginalised like plastic, are used as instruments that can be created, re-created, reconstituted, transformed, reshaped, repurposed for the purpose of racialised exploitation (Jackson 2020:45–81). The humanising effect of those who yield epistemic power creates the boundaries of the more humane treatment for those who are still exploited (Jackson 2020). Jackson argues that this continues because the toxicity of the epistemic premise of the sentimental ethics by those who yield epistemic oppressive power is not called to account (Jackson 2020:45–81). Using an illustration in Morrison's *Beloved*, Jackson (2020) shows how the relationship between slavery and humanised slavery through exploitation can be expressed by the scale that measures humanity between the range of human and that which comes after the animal. As noted in this case, black bodies are placed on the scale by those who have the defining power. One example that Jackson (2020:104) uses to expose the 'thingification' of black bodies is racialised capitalism. This refers to the way in which the 'animality' of black people constructed by scientific racism and western philosophy annihilates being for the sake of the economy (Jackson 2020:104).

Making specific reference to how manhood is constructed using an illustration in Morrison's *Beloved*, Jackson (2020:45–81) exposes how men on a plantation named 'Sweet Home' given new names become 'humanised' slaves. In this case, the slave men are given the freedom to yield their authority within the perimeter of being a slave (Jackson 2020:45:81). Recognising the movement of these humanised slaves between the different spaces within the spectrum of slavery meeting different people, Jackson (2020:45–81) using this illustration argues that the humanised slaves only exist as such in as far as the 'humanising' condition was created by a particular slave owner. This humanising gesture does not exist in other slave spaces and lead more towards the animal. At the heart of Jakson's concern is the pathologised masculinities that are constructed from this form of human plasticity. This refers to the idea of giving the slave men a certain form of authority while they remain slaves. Jackson argues that plasticity as a form of reconstituting black bodies refers to the way black bodies can be shaped as the 'human', sub-human, supra-human at the very same time (Jackson 2020:35). Jackson argues that the false sense of dignity the slave owners have given to the slaves who are men, and the slave's desire for the comfortability of the slave-owners are fundamentally premised on oppression (Jackson 2020). Jackson calls for us to recognise this in recognition of the notions of authority that are already attached to manhood even in black communities (Jackson 2020:45–81).

In agreement with Jackson (2020) who calls for the thinking about black bodies outside the context of the Eurocentric liberal humanist project, I argue that Ulwaluko as an initiation rite of passage is a critical part of thinking about black bodies. I argue that black theology of liberation can play a critical role in thinking about black bodies outside of the Eurocentric liberal framework.

Post-apartheid constitutional state and epistemic violence

Recognising the epistemic creation of black bodies attached to this rite of passage, it becomes important to explore the harm done to this practice in a colonial and post-apartheid South Africa. In this section, I attempt to expose how this particular practice has been epistemically shaped in a colonial and post-apartheid South Africa. Recognising the backlash this particular practice has received over the years as discussed precedingly, Ntombana (2009) provides reasons for this cry. Key issues Ntombana (2009) identifies as leading to the unfortunate circumstances of people crying for its abolition are the time frame initiates spend at initiation school. Ntombana's study exposes the fact that the time frame has shifted from 3–6 months to 3–4 weeks (Ntombana 2009). Ntomabana (2009) also notes the misuse of alcohol by Amakhankatha as an issue. As predicted by Ntombana (2009), the *Customary Act of 2021* only allows for initiation

4.Liberal humanism is referred to western form of self-autonomy and independence that is premised on oppression.

5.Sentimental ethics refers to an ethics of empathy constructed from the humanism of an oppressive epistemic framework.

schools to run during the school holiday unless special permission is granted under certain circumstances.[6] Before we address how the state through the law reconstructs this initiation rite of passage, it is important to perhaps expose the fact that this particular practice was condemned by missionaries in colonial South Africa.

Keegan (2023) exposes the fact that Ulwaluko was viewed with scorn. According to Keegan (2023:612–614), colonial missionaries expressed much displeasure with other 'heathenish' factors of the rituals such as staying in isolation and in the bush and nudity rather than the medical procedure (Keegan 2023:612:614). They prohibited their congregants from attending initiation school (Keegan 2023:612–614). Tonono (2019:115) argues that the first form of hostility the colonial missionaries expressed was against black male bodies. As a way of civilising black masculinities, Tonono (2019) argues that missionaries who were disturbed by the nakedness of African men saw the need to convert them and dress them in order to address the 'barbaric' rhetoric the colonialists expressed towards Africans. Tonono (2019:116) argues that the impact of clothing the 'barbaric' has led to commodity capital masculinities where clothing is considered an important aspect of masculinity in a post-apartheid South Africa. This, Tonono (2019:116) argues, can perhaps be noted in the modern Xhosa tradition where clothing items such as a jacket and a hat form part of the culture. At the heart of the shift from colonial to a post-apartheid South Africa is the reconstruction and the recreation of this practice not only in terms of time, as argued by Ntombana (2009), but also through clothing as argued by Tonono (2019). Critical to note in light of Jackson's concept of human plasticity is how commodity capitalism discussed by Tonono and the colonial theft of time expressed by Ntombana express the 'thingification' of black male bodies through racial capitalism. This 'thingification' of black male bodies at best expresses the very opposite of what Ulwaluko attempts to achieve in terms of the creation of the new; how the black male body attempts to understand itself in relation to others.

Ngwane (2001:402–426) exposes the manner in which the intersections of tradition and modernity constructs, transform and shape this particular practice. Locating his study in a town called Cancele in the Eastern Cape, Ngwane argues that the period between 1980 and 1996 was characterised by tensions between older and younger men. According to Ngwane (2001:402), the older men who had graduated from initiation school viewed the younger men who had invested in state education as improper and half-cooked men. Ngwane (2001:402) refers to a particular statement which is *'Imiphunzo yentab*a' translated as *the abortions of initiation school* to describe this tension. Similarly, the state-schooled young men viewed themselves as much more civilised than the older man (Ngwane 2001). Ngwane (2001) notes that this tension was caused by the manner in which masculinities within their context were constructed at a time that was marked by high unemployment rates among men. Ngwane (2001) argues that while state education within this particular context allowed people to gain employment, initiation school grounded them by remembering to grow their father's homesteads. Ngwane (2001:402–426) argues that the period marked by unemployment made the younger men consider alternative ways of constructing their masculinities away from the rural areas. The first step of doing this was to refuse to invest in domestic economies marked by farming and planting in the rural area and rather preferring to live in the cities (Ngwane 2001:402–426). According to Ngwane (2001:402–426), domestic economy and the construction of the father's homestead in the rural areas directly relied on the income from the migrant labour system and income from skilled labour, and this led to the tension. What is very important to recognise is the fact that the very migrant labour system is a construction of colonialism. It is important to recognise that colonial violence, which did not recognise the citizenship of migrants in the cities as noted by Waetjen (2004), epistemically violated men and caused tension in the homesteads. The fundamental problem in this case is how the questioned epistemic agency of these men through 'civilisaton' and the disruption of precolonial domestic economies through colonial exploitation were never questioned. The failure currently to recognise initiation schools as epistemically legitimate and not simply as informal exposes the way in which the state continues to theo-ethically construct this particular practice.

What is essential to note is how the contemporary state epistemically reconstructs this practice through at least two laws. Elsewhere, I (Mdokwana 2024) argue that the basic conditions of *Employment Act* and the C*ustomary Initiation Act* are two forms of legislation that epistemically challenge the practice of Ulwaluko. Initiates who are part of the working class must be cognisant of the fact that they need to return to work as this particular rite of passage is only ideal when practised while on leave (Mdokwana 2024). Although this is not explicitly stated, the act makes no provision for such cultural practices. Similarly, the *Customary Initiation Act of 2021* regulates the seasons registered initiation schools ought to operate being cognisant of school holidays. While Ntombana (2009) calls for the informal recognition of Amakhankatha as educators, I, on the other hand, question the epistemic hierarchy that gives the state basic education a privilege and preference over and above initiation schools (Mdokwana 2024). Jackson's concept of liberal humanism that places black bodies on a scale of the human, sub-human, supra-human at once best exposes the challenge of Ulwaluko in contemporary South Africa. Moving from the 'barbaric' rhetoric of the colonial enterprise to a more welcoming posture in a post-apartheid South Africa, I argue the liberal humanist project in South Africa clearly measures the humanity of black male bodies. This measurement refers to the time these bodies are given to express a form of their humanity before returning to becoming things within the schema of racial capitalism.

6.This refers to the fact that education is then placed in hierarchy that informalises education in initiation schools.

'Thingification' of black male bodies and racial capitalism are not only exposed by discourses of these laws but are also exposed by the issues of land dispossession in the contemporary South Africa. Understanding Ulwaluko requires us to understand its intersections with family life and land. Land and family providence in light of Ulwaluko within the context of the African holistic framework as discussed above clearly exposes the impact of thingification in the context of land dispossession. Land dispossession in this sense has a direct impact on establishing a family. What becomes crucial in this instance, as Tonono (2019) has shown in terms of dress, is the way masculinities are pathologically formed as a result of 'thingification'. What becomes concerning in light of Ulwaluko is how thingification patho-theologically creates other black bodies such as those of women and queer bodies from an epistemically privileged position.[7]

Simon Maimela's theological anthropology

In his engagements, Maimela (1991:4–14) argues that African traditional anthropology has always been in existence and that Christian Theology can learn something from it. According to Maimela, African traditional anthropology is based on communitarianism within the framework of African holism (Maimela 1991). Recognising the inseparability between the secular and religious within African communities, Maimela (1991) argues that the quest for stable communities lies at the heart of African traditional anthropology. For Maimela, stability refers to a community free of sickness, poverty and trouble. His description of this traditionalist anthropology exposes the fact that evil is considered as something that exists and performed through witchcraft and evil spirits. Maimela argues that when evil occurs, external forces are usually believed to be the cause of instability. In this instance, God through the ancestors is consulted to deal with whatever form of instability that threatens interconnected relationships such as poverty or unemployment. While such African traditional anthropology has not received attention, Maimela argues that Christian Theology can learn something from African traditional anthropology because of its concern with material conditions of people. He expresses this concern in the face of having a Christianity that fails to address issues of inequality, racism and causes of instability in the context of apartheid. This article attempts to locate the challenges of Ulwaluko within the context of destabilisation as posited by Maimela' s discourse on African traditional anthropology. Using Ulwaluko as an example, I argue that the black and African has been framed as problematic without thoroughly questioning epistemic powers that frame Ulwaluko.

In his theological anthropology, Maimela (1994) also recognises humans as co-creators with God. Maimela's idea of human as co-creators with God is theologically premised on the idea of stewardship tied to the intellectual capacities that humans have over and above animals. Describing the human, Maimela (1994) says the following:

> To suggest that human beings are called to create the world and history is to imply that they are co-creators with God. It is to suggest also that God's creativity did not cease with physical creation because the creator continues the divine creative work through the continuing activity of women and men to whom God has entrusted the task of giving the world order, structure and beauty. (p. 18)

Recognising Maimela's claim of humans as co-creators, I attempt to address the way in which Ulwaluko is epistemically created and creates men and women in South African indigenous communities. Important in this case is to raise the issue of creation and the construction of man and cultural practices through the intersections of power and theological language. We turn to Maimela's critique of white anthropology to expose how Ulwaluko has been framed. Recognising the significance of this practice, it becomes important to discuss ethical implications of the creation of this practice in a post-apartheid South Africa.

Heresy of white theological anthropology in South Africa

Maimela expresses his displeasure with white Christian theological anthropology that fails to address the inconsistencies between its theory and practices in the apartheid South Africa (Maimela 1981:69). Referring to white Christian anthropology of the apartheid government, Maimela (1981) argues that it is problematic to assume a generalised biblical anthropology without considering where and what informs its formation. Maimela (1981) argued that these generalisations and positive affirmations of white theological anthropology in apartheid South Africa fail to expose the material conditions and the role of power in the context of racism and poverty.

Recognising some of the positive affirmations of white theological anthropology and their misalignment with what happened in practice, Maimela located its premise from the Hobbesian account of man (Maimela 1981). For Maimela, the Hobbesian account of man, which sees humans as naturally full of greed, evil, self-centred, is the framework which undergirds the theological response of white theological anthropology. This is with special reference to apartheid. For Maimela, such a theological anthropology attempted to address the evil nature of humanity – addressing the concerns of its epistemic premise – the Hobbesian account of man. What is problematic for Maimela in this case is the fact that despite that humans are viewed as evil, the 'black' was synchronised with the violent and unintellectual. In other words, black bodies for Maimela became the subjects of white theological anthropology's response to evil. The epistemic violence in this case refers to the framing of black people as intellectually inferior and barbaric compared to white people (Maimela 1981). Recognising the relationship between the state and the church in the apartheid context, Maimela draws our attention to the power the state has in controlling and managing this 'evil' manifested physically and epistemically. This is while the church provides a

7.Patho-theology, in this instance, is a neologism used to describe the state's role in pathologically constructing theology through epistemic power.

generalised theological response that attempts to humanise society. Maimela argued that the positive affirmation within white theological anthropology sounds positive because it does not expose its Hobbesian epistemic premise.

Recognition of Ulwaluko within this particular paradigm of holism of theological anthropology

As reflected in aforementioned discourses, Ulwaluko is spiritual and requires participation of the community and consultation of ancestors and the Supreme Being in the transition from boyhood to manhood. Ulwaluko prepares the boy who transitions into manhood for different responsibilities in the community. Theologically, I argue that creation and co-creation of society as postulated by Maimela take place in the cultural practice of Ulwaluko. Recognising the impact that the post-apartheid South Africa has had on the initiation rite of passage, I argue that there has been a patho-theological creation of this particular practice dating back to colonial society and apartheid. As noted precedingly in light of the Jackson's (2020) concept of human plasticity, the state in its attempts to regulate this practice without fairly acknowledging the African epistemologies delegitimises the human creating and human forming potentials of practices such as Ulwaluko.

The state plays a critical part in the theological construction of this particular theo-cultural practice that comes with significant ethical implications. This, I argue, is not only true for colonial and apartheid South Africa but is true for a post-apartheid South Africa as shown through Ulwaluko. Katoke (1984:7–10), for instance, exposes the relationship between European culture, power and missionary Christianity in subverting African cultures and traditional values. Katoke (1984:7–10) clearly articulates how Christianisation depended on civilising African people in the subversion of African culture. At the heart of this discourse is how creation and co-creation, using Maimela's sense of the word, take place through Christian conversion shaped and informed by the intersections of Western Christian theology and colonisation. Discussing the complexities of the concept of Christian conversion within colonial South Africa, Keegan (2023:40–78) argues that the idea of colonial Christian conversion in the form of baptism did not only mean a spiritual conversion premised on the spiritual versus the secular discourse of the west. Christian conversion, according to Keegan (2023:40–78), was a change of identity with material effects that required difference in forms of dress and ways of behaving. This is important to consider in light of the fact that Keegan (2023:567–625) attempts to show how discourse on conversion should be viewed in light of the fact that missionaries condemned practices such as Ilobolo, Ulwaluko and other cultural practices.

I argue that the failure to recognise the potentialities of initiation schools as equivalent to basic education exposes the extent to which Jackson's idea of slavery as human plasticity functions for African cultural practice. The relationship between the state and theology, and their intersection with Ntombana's assertion of limited time spent at initiation schools after it was 6 months in previous years significantly impede how the practice functions and in turn leads to creations of society patho-theologically. The ethical questions that should be asked is how men, women, and queer community are constructed by Ulwaluko in the contemporary context of being created patho-theologically. The question that should be asked is how this contradicts the harmony of interconnected relations between God, ancestors, nature and in turn promotes violence and discrimination. Recognising Maimela's framework of Africanist traditionalist anthropology, I argue that these questions are pertinent in how the patho-theological creation of this practice and those whom it produces in a contemporary context shapes society. Africanist traditional anthropology theologically recognises the creation and the co-creation of human beings through the practice of Ulwaluko and the impact this has on the broader community. In a contemporary South Africa, the state controls and manages epistemic violence, epistemically marginalising theological attention given to practices such as Ulwaluko.

Ulwaluko as a site of black theology

There is little theological reflection on Ulwaluko. The isolation of Ulwaluko as a tradition to the indigenous outside of the socio-political context, I argue, is the pushing of black bodies to the subhuman on Jackson's scale of the human, the between and after the animal (Jackson 2020). As objects of racial capitalism, this form of epistemic oppression as rightly argued by Tonono (2019) has created commodified masculinities without land and produced fragmented families. Ulwaluko is neatly inserted within the secular state without questioning how this secular state theologically constructs this particular practice. This, I argue, is a deliberate disruption of relations understood within the context of the African holistic framework that expresses the interconnectedness of life in Africa. Black theology activates the theological anthropology that actively asks who the African is in the context of land dispossession, landlessness, poverty and exploitation in the context of humanising society through Ulwaluko.

Black theology, concerned with the humanity of black bodies within an antiblack world as far as God is concerned, becomes essential in reflecting about the humanity of black bodies from black spaces. Maimela's theological anthropology can assist us in reflecting on the challenges faced by black bodies holistically, inaugurating Ulwaluko as a black site for theological reflection from a socio-political context. This is with particular reference to the way in which the state theologically constructs the human in the South African constitutional dispensation. Ulwaluko, recognised as a site for black theological reflection, is not perfect and requires that we critically reflect on black life which includes heterosexual men and women, queer men and women. Recognising its pedagogical capacity, I argue that Ulwaluko which is a critical part of creation of men in the Xhosa community is a critical site of theological

reflection on racial, gender and homophobic violence. This, I argue, is important in addressing male on male violence, femicide, gender and sexual discrimination which our current society is plagued with.

Un-concluding remarks

Ulwaluko has been criticised for the violence and discrimination it has enacted against women and queer men. This particular article sought to expose the negative role the state can play in theologically constructing this practice from the secular framework without acknowledging the epistemic oppression it exerts on the humanity of black male bodies. This is expressed by laws that attempt to control this practice without recognising its epistemic legitimacy and thus construct male bodies as objects of racial capitalism. This, I argue, expresses Jackson's concept of human plasticity that pushes black bodies into the category of the sub-human. Acknowledging Ulwaluko as a site of construction of black male bodies, I argue that it is a critical site for black theological reflection. Similar to Ntombana (2011), in no way do I consider this practice to be perfect and attempt to hide any form of discrimination that comes with it. Its pedagogical capacity, un-concludingly assists to critically reflect on social relationships between queer people, heterosexual people, God, ancestors, and nature epistemically. This can be done using Simon Maimela's African traditional anthropology that calls on us to realise that concepts such as sin are not spiritual abstracts but socio-politically manifested. This can be done recognising the interconnectedness of life in Africa that does not separate the spiritual from the secular. Such a theological reflection would recognise the voices of black bodies from the heterosexual to the queer in as far as construction of black bodies is concerned.

Acknowledgements

Competing interests

The author declares that they have no financial or personal relationship(s) that may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

Author's contributions

A.M. is the sole author of this research article.

Ethical considerations

The negligible-risk application was reviewed by College of Human Sciences Research Ethics Committee, in compliance with the University of South Africa (UNISA) Policy on Research Ethics and the Standard Operating Procedure on Research Ethics Risk Assessment University of South Africa. Ethical clearance number: 66898994_NOVEMBER_CREC_CHS_2023.

Funding information

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial or not-for-profit sectors.

Data availability

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analysed in this study.

Disclaimer

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