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THE PHALLUS CULT AMONGST THE BANTU;  
PARTICULARLY THE BAPEDI EASTERN  
TRANSVAAL.

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THE PHALLUS CULT AMONGST THE BANTU;  
PARTICULARLY THE BAPEDI OF EASTERN TRANS-  
VAAL.

By Rev. JOHANNES AUGUST WINTER.

The following is a translation of a manuscript written by a native minister, Martinus Sebusane, on the subject of the *Koma*, or circumcision. It was revised by the native minister, J. Mphole. The pamphlet has been translated by me, and I have added my explanations. Many authors, amongst almost every nation, have written essays about the Phallus Cult, as one of the oldest Cults, nay, by many it has been spoken of as the very first religious Cult of men. In one of the back-numbers of the *Religious Psychology*—one of the best German periodicals dealing with religion and psychology in their relations to each other—many German, French, and English writers about the Phallus Cult are referred to. Some go so far as to make out that the Cross (Christian and others) was originally a symbol of this Cult.

The following is only a small contribution, useful to men who study and are interested in the scientific researches regarding original religion, especially the sacred rites of the aborigines of South Africa.

That the mystery of germinating life should draw the attention of simple human beings, and lead them into the belief in an unseen supernatural power, we can easily understand. The golden bull, the Apis Cult, amongst many other historical facts, prove it. In how far the Old Testament Circumcision has been influenced by this Egyptian Cult, is difficult to say. I dare say, however, that the following about the old Circumcision amongst our natives will induce the reader to think that this most sacred and most secret mysterious law is nothing but the Phallus Cult, or, at least, a remnant of it. The very symbols of breeding (*sit venia verbo!*) are praised in the hymns used throughout, from early to late, during this most sacred season of our natives. The very hymn is a Cult. All Cults have it.

TRANSLATION.

*Koma* is the name of the congregation of those going to be circumcised, of those who henceforth are no more to be seen or to have intercourse with those at home. The name means Mystery (Secret), it indicates also a very great matter of the highest importance. *Go bolla*—the word for what is going to be done—means: to go out.

*The beginning of the Koma.*—The young uncircumcised boys inform all their family connections, that they are going

*go uela* (to fall in). They take off every kind of dress that they have been wearing before. The cattle are taken out, not allowed to be milked in the morning. In the evening they are milked in this way: The two preceding boys, those lately circumcised, thrash each other with long, heavy lathes of a special kind of shrub (*moretloa*). It is a sham-fight, the winners to have the right to milk.\* All women and girls must grind grain. Lots of sweet milk-porridge is cooked, to be eaten next morning. Early next day all come together at the *Kgoro*.† A number of the most brave warriors distribute the porridge into the hands of the boys, thrashing them cruelly, calling out: *Dikgomo!* (The cattle!)‡ This ceremony is to teach them to be brave in war.|| The boys, who, afraid of this severe thrashing, run away leaving their porridge, are called with that most ugly, indecent name *Maphshega*.§

After this they go out into the field, to have their hair cut, to do away with all childishness.¶ At sun-down all return to the Chief's fire and council place, where they eat and sleep, after walking round the kraal singing. They are not allowed to eat porridge, but must eat unground boiled grain mixed with soil. This food also, like everything else, has its special name. In fact, during this time nearly everything has another name, not the common words. This bad, dirty food is a symbol, to indicate: You are going to become men, who will marry wives who will cook nice, clean porridge for you. The songs all have the point to despise the boyish and childish state and to praise manhood.

The next day very early all go out into a lonely desert place. An old man is chosen by the Chief to perform the work of circumcising, in the same way as described in Genesis xvii. The præputium is cut off. All boys have to sit on a flat stone, all on the same stone, called *Setlalo*. All boys, who either themselves or through their mother, have some blemish on their character or family-name (e.g., immorality, an adulteress as mother, etc.), are not allowed on this stone *Setlalo*, but must be circumcised on another stone called by the infamous name *tlaba*. The first boys operated on are those who are chosen to suffer before their Chief (son of their Chief); they are called *Malekadigale* (the triers). Then comes the highest in rank, then those of lesser rank, down to the lowest and poorest (servants and those taken as children

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\* A certain number of years, generally from three to five, intervene between the *komas*. When natives wish to tell their age, they say: We are of such and such a *koma*. Each *koma* has, and keeps, its name.

† Fire- or council-place near mouth of cattle kraal.

‡ I have known natives who regard their cattle as something holy, who actually ask buyers: "Are cattle a thing to be sold?"

|| No kraal is regarded as defeated, the cattle of which are not taken.

§ Men suffering from diarrhœa.

¶ The proper hair-cutting designating the different tribes, is done when the time of the circumcision—generally three months—is over.



from defeated kraals). A water-melon is cut, pieces of which may be sucked by those suffering from faintness because of loss of blood. When all is over they are told the old formula: *Seo ki Tiroanc-tiroa-magongoana magoshi a gofela ba diriloe seo*, meaning: "All chiefs and all men of all times have been marked by this mark." Now they are called *Madikana* (the hidden ones). No eye is allowed to look upon them, except those who have formerly gone through this process. Women and *Mashiboro* (uncircumcised) must run away whenever they hear the special songs and hymns, singing which they roam over berg and dale. The elder boys (last and second last before these) now commence to thrash each other, as also the freshlings, with cruel big rods. Hymns and songs, fixed from the oldest times, in praise of manliness, in praise of the female parts—exceedingly indecent—are now sung from early to late during their ceaseless excursion from sunrise to sunset.

After the operation, skins or blankets are cut into broad strips reaching from hip to knee, and called *Motshabelo*. The thin lines to keep these must be so tied that nothing of them can be seen. Their name is *Kgoyana*, which means: "What is hidden must not be seen!"

The first thing to be done after the circumcision is this: The elder boys must hurry to the place, the most sacred place of their home, the sleeping and eating place, called *Mpato*. This is a kind of kraal, made of big branches freshly cut, with two openings, one for the old circumcised and one for this year's boys. Any of the latter entering by the other opening is mercilessly killed (even now). As soon as the elder boys arrive, after the ceremony, they start kindling the "holy fire," never by matches, but always by rubbing two sticks (one of hard, one of soft wood) till a flame appears. This fire must never be allowed to die out during the three months, day or night. During rain they cover it as best they can. This is the only fire to be used by them, no second fire or firebrand otherwise taken may be used. When the *Madikana* are brought there, everybody is shown his own sitting, kneeling, and sleeping place, in the same rank and order in which they have been circumcised. They are ordered to sleep on their back with widely spread out legs, taking great care that no blood touches any other part of their bodies. Only the ruling Chief's eldest son is allowed to use a blanket in the night. Before sleeping they are allowed only to kneel, but not to sit. Plenty of food is given them; in fact, they are purposely fattened like pigs, because it is a shame to bring them back to their home in a meagre condition. The porridge is cut with sticks by the elder boys and given into their open hands. On the day of New Moon no food at all is eaten—it is a fast-day. If during the eating a boy coughs, all eating is at once stopped. All teaching is thrashed into them. The greatest amount of thrashing is accompanied by: "Obey

your Chief." They are taught to regard him\* as their God. Whenever they see a Chief they must all kneel down, clapping their hands and shouting the necessary greeting: *Moriba*, and looking down as if not worthy to look at him. All men, meeting them, must also be greeted in nearly the same way. Certain fixed formulæ are used, for this greeting as well as for the answers from the men. The men usually answer the following: *Tsikana, ea rara ea matenoa, ka tipa madi a falala, ba ri; ga se madi ao ki malakapetla madi a basadi a bo-mmaoenu li dikgaitshedi.*" Which sentence signifies that they are not to think too much of their blood, it being only blood like those of women, their mothers and sisters. After some days they are given some feathers (ostrich or pigeons) and driven into a pool of water to wash and soften the wounds. All this is accompanied by thrashings. When the sores are healed, there commences their eternal roaming round about, under chosen leaders, accompanied by elder boys with rods. Then they are compelled to sing all their old hymns and songs, all kinds of manners and customs being also thrashed into them, all that a man could and should do, especially in relation to women. They are often thrashed on the soles of their naked feet, with the words: "A man ought to have shoes" (sandals). Further thrashing: "Always obey your father, never obey your mother." Before eating, morning and evening, they receive lashes on their fingers: "A man does not eat with unclean hands," compelling them to wash their hands. They receive lashes on the tips of all fingers of their left hands joined together, to teach them how to commence using the female parts. With a hot burning rod they are thrashed between the parts of their posteriors,† to teach them cleanliness there, and not to use open places or near their homes for defilement. Good and bad teachings are strangely mixed! An instance of a good one: An elder boy says to the *Madikana*, "I am going to sleep with a girl or woman"—then all must cry out: *Matsoera!*‡ spitting out before him, as before a nasty filthy thing. When crossing foot-paths, where women usually go or have just passed, all cry out the same bad word. It seems to be impressed upon them, both the use of women, and at the same time to despise all women as a lower, unclean class. Another teaching is called: *Mogano*. They receive cruel wounds in their neck, to teach them to have done with all impudence, disrespect and disobedience, in fact, to teach them humility before elders. Uncircumcised boys are called *Mashiboro*, which means: quarrelsome, disrespectful ones. Another cruel practice with their fingers, to teach them no longer to steal milk, when milking goats, is called: *Go amusha dipudi.*"

Besides these cruel and often immoral and indecent lessons, they have to roam about in the hills to catch game, or to cut poles for the Chief's use, or other work done for the Chief.

\* Who is often called the *Poo*, the bull of their home.

† They call it: *Go roka*, to sew.

‡ An infamous word.



Always in the afternoon, when approaching their *Mpato*, the elders cry out: *Tsoai la ntsoetsoe*.\* Whereupon the *Madikani* have to answer: *Mafefo*!† In connection with this they are instructed to make use also of a dead brother's wife, to obtain children for the dead brother.

When the time is near to bring them back to the home-kraal, the men make an image of a naked man from soft wood. Before this all must kneel down and with bent heads greet it with the name of one of their old famous Chiefs. Images of game are also made round it, coloured with clay, lime, coal and ochre. Then this special *Mpato* is given the name by which it will always be known, e.g., *Matooba* (that of Chief Sekukuni), *Masoene*, *Manala*, *Magasa*, *Makoa*. Every boy now also gets his own new name. Before leaving they build two little stone-heaps with the image of a hyæna made of clay (and also coloured like one), called *Piri*. This the new men destroy. Then all the men sing and dance in praise of the new men, holding long rods upwards, no more to thrash—called: *Naka tsha koma* (horns of the *koma*).

After this all are well washed, the hair cut, fresh loin-bands put on (either from klipspringers or sheep), their bodies are well greased and rubbed in with *Letsuku*,‡ a last heavy thrashing is given with the shout: *Bonna ki byo*! (This is to be a man)—and with tremendous shouting, dancing, and singing in the afternoon, they are at last brought home to their kraal—as men.

All things used during those months are burnt down. The boys are strictly forbidden to look back at them and at the place, when they go home.

Now they are men. They have been told, that from now,° they will be judged as men, no more like children.

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One or two experiences added by the Translator.

Years ago, long before the war—when that splendid Paramount Chief Kgolokoe was ruling the Sekukuni country, and I was at my station under the Eastern Precipices of the Lolu Mountains—one day a messenger from the Chief came to inform me of the death of Selatole, the Chief's brother. On the afternoon of the next day I went up with my few men, who had black bands round their arms, driving up also a black ox from me, according to the usual way of friendly Chiefs to show their sorrow. When on top of the Mountain, an *Induna*, sent by the Chief, asked me not to use my usual bridle-path, but to go by another on the left side. When asked: "Why?" he said: "Our *Koma* is on this path, and nobody can use it." I became very angry, and said: "Never in my life have I turned out of my way

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\* Sweet salt—meaning soon to be able to use women.

† A cry of astonished wonder.

‡ A yellow-brown ochre from burnt slate with iron particles.

because of Satan's festivals."\* I flatly refused, and, although late and already dark, I preferred to go home down the bad kloof, but allowed my men and the ox to go on by the other path. Early next morning a messenger arrived, saying: "The Chief is deeply sorry for my turning back, and also that he could not accept an ox given with averted head." But I still refused. A week passed. Many Chiefs going up and returning passed my house. At last a Christian Chief, whom I had baptised, also returned, and gave me a message from Chief Kgolokoe, that, if I would inform him of the day and time of my coming, he would arrange with the headman of the *Koma*, to hide the boys in the long grass, so that I may use my usual bridle path. The very next day I went. I saw the *Koma*-boys from afar lying down in the grass. The Chief received me very kindly. I found my ox still alive, and, after the customary inquiries into the sickness and death, and expressions of my sorrow, I handed it over. In answer, I had a beautiful black ox, which I ordered to be killed. The kraal was under a low hill, on top of which the *Mpato* of the *Koma* was. We heard the continual singing of the boys. Knowing that when a friendly Chief visits the Capital, they often let these boys have a quiet rest, I told the Chief to send word up, and let them rest. After a little while there was a loud shout, *Reke-reke boroko*, of thanks, and so they were allowed a rest.

When, not very long ago, I visited Mr. Haigh, at a store at Sekukuni's kraal, at the bottom of the hill, on which the *Mpato* was, Mr. Haigh told me that his horse went astray, and that it was very likely somewhere half way up the hill. Upon my saying: "Why don't you go and fetch it?" he said: "That would be as much as my life is worth."

Once, in 1888, I had the pleasure and honour to receive our then Administrator, Sir Owen Lanyon, at my house. In our talk we also touched upon the *Koma*, and the possibility or impossibility of the Government having some supervision over these secret proceedings, during which boys are often killed and nobody allowed to talk of it. Neither then nor later, up to the present day even, could the Government in any way obtain any right to interfere. I mention this only to show how secret this half cult half custom is kept, being the very backbone of our Natives' national life.

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\* I regard this *koma* as the heathen baptism, although Livingstone says that he found nothing to find fault with in it.

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