

ULWALUKO. (Circumcision)

(A plea "to reconcile" the rite of circumcision to the Church)

by

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Primarily the MS. is a plea in defence of the rite of circumcision. The writer tries to show that circumcision in itself is not so pernicious and immoral as the early missionaries have shown it to be. On the contrary, he regards it as a salutary and dignified national custom.

In their wholesale condemnation of this rite, it is to be noted that the missionaries were strongly supported by the first Bantu converts. This support, significant and suggestive though it is, does not seem to have impressed the writer. He admits, however, that certain unsavoury practices have, through neglect and carelessness, attached themselves to the custom, and he maintains that it is these practices that degraded the custom in the eyes of foreigners.

Coming into contact for the first time with a primitive race, the early missionaries were bound to make mistakes here and there in their zeal to foster Christian standards. If they had studied carefully the customs and practices of the people among whom they worked, they might have seen something worth preserving in some of the customs, e.g. circumcision. Instead they rejected and condemned the rite of circumcision as the root of all evil in the most uncompromising terms, thus relegating it to the heathens in whose hands it has degenerated. If the Church had acted as sponsor, the custom would have been cleansed of all the evil practices which have made it such an ugly thing.

Many church-goers, even some ministers, (let alone those outside the Church), practise the custom privately, and when they are disciplined they leave the Church and, with a group of followers, start one of their own. Hence the rapid growth of so many Bantu religious sects in South Africa. Is it, therefore, not worth the while of the Church to review this question of circumcision with the object of purifying it and of restoring its former dignity?

The chapters on the rite as practised by the amaXhosa, and how it is conducted from beginning to end, constitute the greater part of the MS. The writer shows a thorough grasp of his subject and presents it in a most palatable form. He does not dwell on the surgical aspect of the rite, but emphasises the "educative" aspect of it as a means of initiating the boys into manhood and all that it implies - all the privileges, obligations and responsibilities that attach to every self-respecting tribesman. "All childish conduct must be a thing of the past with them, and they must henceforth speak and act with the dignity of men."

Such authors as T.B.Soga and J.H.Soga have contributed valuable information on this subject, but none of them, I dare say, has dealt with all its aspects as fully as the present writer, who has given in addition a list of the valuable lessons to be learned at the circumcision school. This has greatly enhanced the value of the MS.

Closely connected with the rite of circumcision is the practice so common among the amaXhosa of reckoning the years of a man from the date of his circumcision. The usual practice was to make the time of circumcision of the boys coincide with that in which the young heir to the chieftainship was to be circumcised, so that a man could say, "I was circumcised at the same time as Chief So-and-So." Therefore, the writer gives a table of the outstanding Xhosa chiefs with the corresponding year of circumcision. The writer must have taken time and pains to collect and collate such useful information. No Xhosa book that I know of contains this information.

In conclusion, it may be that the writer in his defence of circumcision has put greater weight of interpretation on the significance of the rite than it can bear, but there is no doubt that he is honest and sincere, and means well. In my opinion the greater value of the MS. lies in the fine description of the rite itself, and the valuable table of chiefs and the corresponding dates of their circumcision.

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