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Machoism and the Rape Epidemic in South Africa

SHIMA BARADARAN

Machoism, or exaggerated masculinity, is a result of Xhosa cultural practices and apartheid-based feelings of inferiority. Machoism is a primary cause of violence, objectification of women, and rape in South Africa.

A wise grandmother from Ilitha, a rural community in the Eastern Cape of South Africa, once said, "You can sense the kind of community you are in by the way the children play." At a community meeting in this same town, this woman stood and said that rape is the biggest problem they faced. South Africa has the highest rape statistics of all countries not at war. A woman is raped every twenty-six seconds, and one in three South African women will be raped in their lifetime. Rape is an epidemic in South Africa.

To explain the epidemic of rape, people in South Africa usually blame high rates of unemployment, poverty, lack of education, drugs and Western influence through the media. However, these reasons alone do not account for the overwhelmingly high incidence of rape in South Africa. Machoism, or exaggerated masculinity, is a root cause of the South African rape epidemic requiring analysis. Objectification of women and use of violence as a problem-solving mechanism are characteristics of machoism found among the Xhosa-speaking people of South Africa. Located in the Eastern Cape of South Africa, the Xhosa are the second largest national group of black South Africans. I lived among the Xhosa-speaking people for four months researching rape and violence. Although machoism is found among whites and especially among other black groups in South Africa, the scope of my research will focus on machoism in Xhosa culture.

This paper will address two different causes for machoism among the Xhosa-speaking people of South Africa: culture and inferiority. The first section of this article defines machoism and its relation to apartheid. I then discuss characteristics of machoist cultures that express the link between sex and violence and lead to the objectification of women. These characteristics include male dominance, infidelity, traditional marriage customs of bride wealth and bride raiding, and violent relationships among youth in Xhosa culture.

The final section of this article shows how inferiority and culture lead to violence against
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women. South African rape convicts are perfect examples of those who objectify women and use violence to get what they want. The attitudes of South African rape convicts are similar to machoist attitudes of average South African men. The only element that sets rape convicts apart from average men is the fact that they were convicted for acting on the machoist socialization in their culture. A machoist culture that objetifies women and has high rates of violence will also have high rape rates. The rape epidemic in South Africa will not end until machoism is rooted out not only of Xhosa culture, but South African culture as a whole. By examining machoism and the effects of apartheid in Xhosa culture and relating machoism and inferiority among South African rape convicts, I will show in this article that machoism is correlated with the rape epidemic in South Africa.

Machoism

Machoism is exaggerated masculinity that attempts to compensate for men's feelings of powerlessness or inferiority. This exaggerated masculinity is often expressed through violent crimes, such as sexually exploiting women. In machoist societies, the "culturally preferred goal is the conquest of women." Rainwater's 1964 study comparing research from Mexico, Puerto Rico, England, and the United States found that lower-class males from all regions suffer from job insecurity and compensate for this by "exaggerating their masculinity and subordinating women." One study asserts that a father's lack of affection for his son is the origin of feelings of inferiority. It shows how the separation, distance, and fear of the father forces boys to be self-sufficient. This leads to a notion of machoism that transcends generations, as the boy uses cultural means to satisfy the psychological need for approval denied to him through childhood. Although father distance is evident in Xhosa culture, this is not the only cause for machoism among Xhosa men. The psychological theory of machoism shows that inferiority is the common characteristic among Xhosa men and other men in machoist cultures.

Inferiority in black South African men is caused by multifaceted oppression on economic, social, and political levels created by the apartheid system. Apartheid began in 1948 when the Afrikaners instituted this system of "apartness" and the new government created different "nations," each with separate homelands, so whites would not have to "mingle with inferior peoples." Apartheid was a system representing the "codification in one oppressive system, all the laws and regulations that had kept Africans in an inferior position to whites for centuries." Apartheid oppressed blacks in many aspects of life as it destroyed the traditional family, undermined stable social conditions, and removed political power. Because the blacks were citizens of their own "homelands," the government allowed them to live in poverty and destroyed the traditional family through forced migration for work. The Group Areas Act, instituted by the apartheid government, separated residential areas for each race. Non-whites were moved into townships, where crime rates increased with the destruction of stable communities. Blacks watched their communities and lifestyles destroyed at the mercy of a government that continued to create new laws to further reduce their rights. They had no representation in government and lived with the "anxiety of [political] impotence."

As a "generation of people who have been actively marginalized and brutalized by their society," oppressed black men became the primary perpetrators of violence. Known as "comrades," the men rose in political protest to regain autonomy and reassert masculinity in the "face of a system that disempowered black men." They claimed, "There are no girls doing the attacking, only men. We are men. How can we tolerate being attacked by men?" To counter their political powerlessness, black men used violence to control women, whom they culturally dominated. In these circumstances, violence is a "symbol of strength and power in the machismo ethos" and is seen as a "means of regaining human dignity, esteem and respect." In a society where men feel powerless, they "dehumanize women and accentuate their
forced subservience to men” in order to feel in control. Besides directly causing political violence in South African culture, apartheid caused inferiority and led to interpersonal violence among blacks.

Even though apartheid officially ended in 1994, blacks remain oppressed in South Africa and still express machoist traits. Although South Africa is a democratic country and the black man is theoretically equal to the white man, the effects of hundreds of years of oppression take time to fade. The blacks are still the most disadvantaged group in South Africa, with the most unemployment, least opportunities for education, and highest levels of poverty. Realistically, most blacks still have little power to change their situation to live up to their traditional role as men. Many black men still have little control to change their situation and often compensate for this powerlessness with machoist practices like violence. South Africa has had a history of violence, from ancient tribal wars to apartheid. This history has led the people to be immersed in a culture that uses violence as a means to solve problems.

**Machoist Traits in Xhosa Culture:**

There are distinct gender roles among the Xhosa-speaking people: the man is the undisputed head of his family. When he goes out with his wife he walks in front. She follows five or six paces behind with her baby on her back and their luggage on her head. There is even a Xhosa saying, *Imipanda ziyanda zingaphambili:* “Even the behind of the man is still in front [of the woman].” The man is the decision maker and is culturally responsible for controlling his home and family. He is permitted to use any means, within reason, to control his family. The Xhosa man, as a respected community figure, must never be seen without a hat, jacket and a stick. He must always have a stick with him to assert control over his environment. Some people joke that Xhosa men always “have a stick under their pillow, for their wife.” In contrast, the Xhosa woman “is a child” and is silent in decisions pertaining to her family and community. She is to “supply the man with what he wants.” There are defined gender roles in Xhosa culture that enforce male dominance as a characteristic of machoism. There are many factors that contribute to the exaggerated machoistic traits among Xhosa men. The link between sex and violence, the traditional male circumcision ceremony, bride raiding and the bride wealth system are some distinct causes of machoism in Xhosa culture.

**Link Between Sex and Violence:**

The link between sex and violence is vital in illustrating the correlation between machoism and the high rate of rape in Xhosa culture. Sex and violence are both prevalent among Xhosa youth, which has led to widespread violence in sexual relationships. In a study of health among Xhosa women, researchers discovered that the most important problem among the youth was sexual violence. Most interviews illustrated that men not only set the time and conditions for sex, but in most cases use violent strategies to forcefully initiate sex. Sex often involves a beating, with the man forcing himself on the woman. These findings are not uncommon: when South African women were asked about their first intercourse, 30 percent reported that they were forced into sex. Physical assault during sex seems so common that women often see it as an expression of love.

The extent of this abuse is shown in a study of six hundred teenagers in Cape Town: 60 percent of the women surveyed said they had been beaten by a male partner. One woman describing relationships said, “as a woman you have no rights, you must keep quiet and do as the man wants.” An overwhelming trend in Xhosa culture is the use of violence in sex. This link between sex and violence is a manifestation of machoism in Xhosa culture.

**Male Circumcision:**

One of the only traditional ceremonies still practiced religiously by most Xhosa-speaking people today is circumcision. It is a cultural ceremony common in machoistic cultures to teach boys how to be men, which in turn promotes machoism in Xhosa culture. Xhosa culture is a culture that “favors the use of physical violence” as a rite of
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Boys have no standing in Xhosa social status and are merely "things." In his late teens, a boy undergoes this "painful initiation ceremony at puberty . . . which publicly defines a boy as a man." This ceremony includes a period of separation and education. During the sacred circumcision ceremony, the boys are isolated for a period of three weeks. Within this time they are circumcised and taught by their elders how to behave like a man. The boys learn, among other things, to obtain a wife and land, how to fight, and to never cry or show any pain. The circumcision ceremony enforces gender roles by equating weakness with femininity, control with manliness.

The actual circumcision teaches the boys that real men have no weak and undesirable feminine traits. Xhosa men believe that they are never to show weakness, for they are in control. During the incision, any sign of pain is feminine and weak, and men must be strong in every circumstance. Circumcisions are usually performed in groups, and any wincing of pain at even another boy's circumcision is called for being chased away and beaten by the group. Nelson Mandela recalls the pain of his circumcision forcing him to pause before calling out the phrase "I am a man" after the incision. His short pause before proclaiming manhood worried him, as he felt he had shown weakness. This is an enforcement of exaggerated masculinity, where any sign of weakness a boy may have retained from boyhood must be forced out as he becomes a man. Xhosa men are unrealistically expected to always be strong, showing no fear or pain. The circumcision is vital in emphasizing male dominance and gender roles in Xhosa culture.

The circumcision ceremony also enforces violence as the means for male control. In the process of learning how to be a man, the Xhosa boys must learn the importance of fighting with sticks and being the master of the home. This promotes physical violence as an acceptable means of asserting control over the environment Xhosa men rule. This environment is their family, property, and community. The circumcision ceremony promotes many machoistic traits as it links manhood with violence and control while linking femininity with weakness.

**Xhosa Marriage Customs**

Xhosa traditional marriage is not regarded as a mutual venture. Instead, marriage is the sale of a woman. Sex is rarely a consensual event; custom justifies a man raping a woman if he has paid for her. Women are bought and sold as objects under the bride wealth system, rationalizing rape in marriage. Bride raiding, a custom that encourages rape as a method of marriage proposal, is rarely practiced anymore but still has implications in Xhosa culture today. The Xhosa traditions of bride wealth and bride raiding lead to machoism as they condone the objectification of women in marriage.

The traditional Xhosa bride wealth system allows women to be controlled as property, free to be exchanged by men. The Xhosa man pays lobola, or bride wealth, for his bride after consulting with her father and the elders of her family on an agreeable price. After this point she becomes his property, like his land or cattle, and must submit to his desires. The woman has no choice in whom she will marry, nor the price for which she is exchanged. This traditional view of women as property implies that a man may use any means to control his wife as he would his other property.

There are injustices to women under the bride wealth system all across the world. A cross-cultural study of ninety societies practicing bride wealth showed that 84.5 percent of them also engaged in wife beating. After marriage, the woman is obliged to submit sexually to her husband if he has paid lobola for her. When asked what he would do if his girlfriend would not have sex with him, one rapist said, "I would never force sex because I was not married. It is not her duty before marriage. Once she is married, though, and you have paid a lot of money for her, then it is her duty." The Xhosa bride wealth system causes women to be a man's exchangeable property. This system also justifies the physical abuse and rape of women in marriage.

The traditional Xhosa marriage condones rape not only after bride wealth is paid but as a method of marriage proposal. Bride raiding is not commonly practiced today, but the beliefs behind this practice are still common in Xhosa culture. A
woman becomes property to a man when the payment of lobola is made by the future husband to the girl’s father. At the same time, plans are made for “the abduction.” The marriage proposal begins as the groom physically carries the woman away. The father sends the girl out on an errand during the time she is to be taken for marriage. At the designated spot three or four young men wait for her, and the leader of the young men tells her she is to be carried off. The friends of the husband “roughly grab her” as she screams and struggles to get loose. Often the girl has no prior knowledge of or choice about being “carried off” to marriage. If she refuses to walk with them they “drag or carry her away without any suggestion of respect.” She is outnumbered with little chance of escaping. Eventually she ends up in the home of the man. Once she is there, her new husband must have sex with her before she escapes. If necessary, the men who helped abduct her would help restrain her while her husband has sex with her. This ensures that she has been damaged by him; the lobola cannot be returned and she cannot return to her family. Thus, traditional Xhosa culture encourages bride raiding, which involves aggressive and violent rape of unsuspecting women. Bride raiding and the bride wealth system both illustrate the gross inequality between Xhosa men and women, an inequality that promotes machoistic behaviors.

Infidelity

Infidelity is another machoistic trait in Xhosa culture. Male infidelity often results from treating women with emotional disregard. In machoist mentality, manhood is linked with sexuality. In machoistic cultures, the man with the most sexual relations receives the most praise among his peers. A large aspect of the male circumcision ceremony glorifies infidelity, common among rape convicts as well as evident among average Xhosa-speaking men in South Africa.

The circumcision ceremony originates from the infidelity of Somaquazee, a hero of the Xhosa tribe. He was the only man left in the village during a battle with the Zulu tribe, and he had sexual relations with all the women of the tribe while the men were gone. To punish himself when the men returned, Somaquazee went into the bush and circumcised himself in secret. As a result of the unfaithfulness of Somaquazee, the men of the Xhosa tribe continued the tradition of circumcision from that day forward. The Xhosa circumcision ceremony started with men wanting to celebrate the infidelity of Somaquazee. The story of Somaquazee, now a hero for his infidelity, is now told during the circumcision ceremony. Even today, boys are encouraged to have sex with many women after circumcision. The traditional surgeon actually tells them that their wounds heal faster the more they practice their manhood and have sex. The fact that Somaquazee is a hero celebrated in the circumcision ceremony reveals the views of Xhosa men on unfaithfulness. In respecting Somaquazee, Xhosa men encourage infidelity; by circumcising themselves, they are striving to follow his example.

People all over South Africa are starting to speak out against rape: “We ended apartheid in this country. We can stop rape.”

The newly circumcised boys are encouraged to continue exerting their masculinity with extramarital affairs even after they are married. When asked why they were unfaithful in relationships, many nineteen to twenty-one-year-old Xhosa-speaking men claim that they get these ideas from the elders. The older men are a “very bad influence” and will be married and go out with younger girls. One young man commented on the parental pressure to be unfaithful: “Your father will brag how he used to have many girlfriends and he will tease you, calling you a iishumane, someone who doesn’t have any girlfriends, who is afraid.”

Although studies have not yielded hard statistics, I interviewed many Xhosa women in the Eastern Cape and discovered that most women insist that up to 85 to 90 percent of Xhosa men are unfaithful to their wives or girlfriends. Zuko, a family counselor at FAMSA (Family and Marriage Association of South Africa) who deals with infidelity on a daily basis, claims that infidelity is a problem among Xhosa men because “women and
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Sex are a way of proving you are still desirable and sexually attractive." Sexual relationships prove to Xhosa men that they are masculine because they link numerous escapades with acceptance as a man. Regardless of age, the more women a Xhosa man has relations with, the higher his status among men. This is illustrated by how open many Xhosa men are about having more than one girlfriend at one time. Of twenty-five college-age Xhosa women interviewed, 50 percent claimed that unfaithfulness was the biggest problem in their relationships; only 30 percent said they trusted their boyfriend. Today, Xhosa men often overexert their manhood and are unfaithful to women because of traditions in the culture and social pressures enforced by elders.

I found similar trends of infidelity and objectification in the South African rape convicts I interviewed. They viewed women as important only for the fulfillment of sexual desires. Many rape convicts had several girlfriends at one time, a display of emotional indifference towards these women. One rapist described his past relationships with women, "I did not have steady relationships but only sexual ones. I would move from one girl to the next. . . . I would have two to three girls per day. There were no emotions, just sex." This rape convict had a shockingly relaxed attitude about sex and considered women to be disposable. He was robbing someone one day when he felt sexually aroused, and he decided to rape the woman because it had been two days since he had sex. A sixteen-year-old rapist described how he and his friend brought his girlfriend to his house. He had sex with his girlfriend and allowed his friend to rape her afterwards. He waited outside until he thought his friend would be finished and then went back to tell her to go home so he could go to his other girlfriend's house. This rape convict displays the machoistic trait of infidelity, demonstrating complete emotional disregard for his girlfriend as he allowed his friend to rape her. In the eyes of many rapists, women are objects to use until they are satisfied, and then the women can be indiscriminately shared among friends. Infidelity is prevalent among rape convicts, as they do not allow themselves any emotional attachment with women.

Machoism in Rape Convicts

Rape convicts show, in many cases, how machoistic traits lead to rape in Xhosa culture. In South Africa, the socialized method of "achieving instant solutions" to problems is through violence. One juvenile rape convict, an accomplice in the gang rape of three women, describes spending a lot of money on them. The men expected to be "paid back" by the women by having sex with them. When the women refused the offers, the men beat and raped the women for three days. These young rapists thought it was appropriate to use violence to have sex with women if they did not cooperate. The juvenile convict admitted he would not have beat the girls if they had not resisted. The boys had no sadistic desire to hurt the girls but felt it appropriate to use whatever means necessary to get sex. It was the boys' immediate response that the girls' refusal of sex called for violence.

Another rapist, after being sexually rejected by women for four years, raped to prove his manhood. He saw that all his friends had girlfriends and felt inferior for not being able to get a girlfriend. He began "fighting and being angry" with the girls who rejected him. He would even hit girls if they disapproved of him. One rapist describes the woman he raped "pleading and crying for me to just leave her" as he raped her for 30 minutes. He told her that he could not leave her until he was satisfied. The same rapist said that rape can never be stopped because "if I cannot get [sex], [and] I need sex, I must force somebody." The machoistic traits exhibited by rape convicts are not exclusive to the convicted; the only difference between the rapists' attitudes of sex and violence and the average Xhosa man is that the rapists were caught for acting on their attitudes.

Men who rape try to prove that they are "still sexually and physically dominant" and in control. Often they prove their masculinity through sexual violence because they feel inferior. One rapist describes his feelings after a rape: "I was the best, I had put her down." This rape convict proved that he was a man because a woman was "bowing down" to him. Several rapists interviewed made comments that lead to the conclusion that they raped to assert their masculinity. One man was
insecure about his sexual performance and brutally raped his girlfriend because she was cheating on him. He used violence to show her that he was just as much a man as the other men she was with." Another rapist describes his friend raping a woman and the woman grabbing his feet and tripping him as she struggled. He became angry that this woman dropped him into the mud, and he told her, "I can show you my private organs, too! Because she pulled me until I fell, I thought that she thought I was unable to have sex with her. I wanted to show her I have male organs too!" The machoist mentality is present in several rapists interviewed, as they used rape as a method of gaining power and proclaiming their manhood.

Many rape convicts interviewed described a feeling of power when women resisted. The resistance reaffirms their control, as they force a woman to submit to their will. Men rape as much for power as for sex. One of the juveniles interviewed held three women hostage for three days while he and his three friends raped them. On the second day he was bored and wanted to let the girls go because the girl he raped the previous night began to show affection for him. The girl he was raping stopped resisting; he was no longer in control and the sex became mutual. His three friends continued to enjoy raping the other two girls, who did not stop resisting." Another rapist describes the power that rape gave him because it turned him on when the girl screamed. He commented, "I knew I was hurting her. It gave me power. I was in control." Rape convicts, although extreme examples of Xhosa machismo, show that machoist traits fostered in the Xhosa culture are what lead them to rape.

CONCLUSION

Machoism is correlated with the high rape rates in South Africa. Violence used in sex, the male circumcision and marriage ceremonies, and infidelity are all contributing components in Xhosa culture that link machismo to the rape epidemic. To stop the rape epidemic in South Africa, people must continue to speak out against violence until the characteristics of machismo are eliminated. Like the wise grandmother from Lilina, people all over South Africa are starting to speak out against rape—the "new national sport." Charlene Smith, a journalist who was raped this year, spoke out recently: "We ended apartheid in this country. We can stop rape." The rape epidemic can be stopped with changes in cultural attitudes and machoist behavior among men. On August 9, 1999, a Women's Day pledge read, "Women's rights are human rights. If they continue to be neglected, South Africa can never be more than half a democracy."" Machoism in South Africa must be rooted out by people joining together against oppression, violence, and the objectification of South Africa's women.

Shima Baradaran, originally from Iran, is a senior majoring in sociology with a minor in international development. This paper was written as part of a field study conducted in South Africa in May 1999.

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