

The Camera as an Ethnographer in *Inxeba*

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Abstract

After the release of the film *Inxeba*, a film by John Trengrove, both the public and its critics displayed backlash toward the film's display of homosexual intimacy. Many reviews claimed *Inxeba* depicted pornography and as a result, was deemed unacceptable for public viewing. This backlash led to *Inxeba* receiving an R-rating in South Africa. This paper employs an interdisciplinary analysis to discuss *Inxeba* as a case study of media within the South African context. The primary fields included in this analysis include media anthropology, film study, gender studies, and African studies. The paper focuses on how the camera can be used to portray understandings of masculinity as hegemonic, instead of an exploitative, revealing, and misrepresentative colonial tool. Furthermore, this paper analyzes the backlash that *Inxeba* faced due to the colonial imports of homophobic norms, and how the film reframes masculinity and homosexuality as entangled within Xhosa culture.

Introduction

In John Trengrove's film *Inxeba*, the camera acts as both a fictional ethnographer, and an ethnographic tool. The camera spotlights the quotidian, challenging realities of public queerness, and the constrictive expectations of normative masculinity in South African societies. Firstly, I will explain what ethnography is, and how it ties into the framing of the film. I will discuss how the camera and the use of framing creates an intimate connection with the characters, primarily the protagonist Xolan, to display a sense of ethnographic realism rather than acting as an expose. Secondly, I will analyze how *Inxeba* has been received as pornography by South African critics (Mbao). I will argue that the film's intimate scenes highlight how masculinity and homosexuality are not mutually exclusive. I will ground these critiques in the condemnation of homosexuality in South Africa, as it is portrayed as a Western import. Thirdly, *Inxeba* portrays the secretive and private event of the sacred coming of age Xhosa ritual of Ulwaluko, and as such, is contentiously debated (Mbao). I contest the critic's view, and further assert that *Inxeba* uses the Xhosa ritual as a backdrop to highlight how LGBTQ+ experiences are innately Xhosa through Xolani and Vija's intimate relations throughout the ritual's process.

Film as Ethnography

The sexual intimacies between Xholani and Vija presented in *Inxeba* are displayed through an ethnographic lens, this can be seen through the use of framing during the film in which the viewers are placed in seemingly real interactions. As a result of this framing that aims to replicate real interactions, the audience is pushed to feel intimately involved with characters and empathize with them. An example of such an interaction through framing is when Xolani

and Vija are speaking in a field while the sun sets (Tren Grove 43:37-48:55). In this scene, Xolani and Vija speak of their childhood and the issues surrounding the secrecy of their relationship and desire for closeness. Along with intimate and private scenes like this, almost all of the shots are handheld at the eye level of the characters. Mbao points out that there are no shots that seek to display cinematic cliché, and the scenery and setting are used "for moments of tenderness or strained communication", not for "scenery as narrative" (82). The audience is thereby seemingly placed as a passive viewer within the scene during Xolani and Vija's most intimate moments. This framed viewpoint creates a sense of presentness that verges on authenticity to invoke a perceived ethnographic realism.

According to Hammersley, 'ethnography' cannot be defined concretely, as "[ethnographies] vary considerably in character, and behind them lie some fundamental division" (3). However, I find Wolcott's definition useful, as he states "[ethnography] is the business of inquiring into other people's business" (Wolcott 284). Although this definition is meant to be taken in jest, the relationship of the ethnographer showing interest in, and gaining knowledge from interacting with others is important. The 'business', referred to by Wolcott, that *Inxeba* inquires into is that of the intimacies and fear of persecution surrounding hidden queer relationships. The passive audience relationship in *Inxeba* thereby strengthens the understanding of "the ubiquity of heteronormative social and cultural orders emblematic of life in contemporary South Africa" (Kiguwa and Siswana 11). This viewpoint has underlying issues surrounding ethnography being problematic, but ultimately *Inxeba* operates within a form of ethnographic observation "whose contribution to our knowledge of the social world is essential" (Hammersley 12). This framing of the film and its intended subjects of focus, Xolani and Vija, reveal the intimacies of queer relationships from a simulated ethnographic perspective of the viewer.

Film as a Normalizing Medium

While the application of camera framing in *Inxeba* acts to capture queer intimacies, it has been criticized as the presentation of homosexual pornography. However, *Inxeba* is not pornographic, rather, it uses the framing of intimate, sexual encounters to portray homosexuality and masculinity as compatible traits of queer identities. Since these sexual encounters are used to frame homosexuality and they display no sexual acts explicitly, the film is not pornographic, as the scenes do not serve a sexualizing purpose. *Inxeba* displays the complex nature of these identities through the hurried and taboo nature of Xolani and Vija's queer intimacy.

An example of this is the first scene where Xolani and Vija engage in a sexual encounter (Tren Grove 13:50-18:24). The encounter starts with an over-the-shoulder shot following Xolani and Vija into a seemingly empty and private building. Their brief sexual engagement ends, and the partners speak as they smoke. The hurriedness and secrecy surrounding the interaction are almost palatable, yet their engagement afterward focuses on their roles within the Ulwaluko ritual. This scene shows the taboo that is tied into Xolani and Vija's relationship. Although normalized in terms of procedure and brevity, the sexual acts do not display any graphic or explicit content, but rather the closeness of bodies and intimacy attached.

Another scene to examine to understand the complex identities of queer intimacy is when Xolani and Vija embrace in a field, the camera's framing tightens, focusing closely on Xolani and Vija as they intimately kiss (Tren Grove 45:58). Although only the silhouettes of their figures are seen, and the camera reveals very little, what information is given is important. As we, the viewer, are aware of which characters are engaging and why. The dark atmosphere and close framing emphasizes the privacy of Xolani and Vija's kiss, and displays how they seek refuge even for innocent intimate encounters. The importance of Xholani and Vija's relationship is represented not only through their actions, but how the framing portrays their intimate moments.

There is also a scene set in the darkness of night, where Xolani and Vija are barely visible except for silhouettes, which consume most of the frame (Tren Grove 32:45-33:35). The intimate encounter and framing show nothing explicitly pornographic, but display the intense physical closeness that Xolani and Vija engage in. No genitalia are shown in any of these scenes, and the camera is often positioned so close to the couple that bodies become indistinguishable. People forge relationships during the Xhosa ritual, and the viewer is then asked to question the intersection of queerness and Xhosa masculinity surrounding Xhosa culture (Scott). These scenes do not intend to be pornographic, yet the South African film board banned *Inxeba* from public viewing, placing it under the same category as pornography and after much uproar from the public, it was subsequently unbanned (Mbao).

The depiction of queer relationships in *Inxeba* is one of notably few in South African cinema, and despite being perceived as pornographic, it received public praise (Mbao). The public praise is rooted in the understanding that these more explicit scenes represent the underlying secrecy in Xolani and Vija's sexual encounter and the complexity of their masculine intimacies. As Mbao states, the queer character's masculine intimacies in *Inxeba* are layered. The intertwined complexity of the Xolani and Vija's roles makes it so they "are not reducible to their sexualities", articulating codes of masculinity within a gendered environment that polices their identities and social interactions (Mbao 82). The backdrop of the Ulwaluko ritual is used to frame the taboo nature of queer intimacy; underlying sexual encounters do not portray sexual imagery for pleasure, but use them to emphasize the complex social dynamics of these encounters.

The Setting as a Framing tool

Inxeba does not use the setting of the Ulwaluko Ritual to reveal the details of the ritual that are deliberately kept private by Xhosa men who have participated. Instead Tren Grove uses the Ulwaluko ritual as a backdrop to both juxtapose and mirror the "hegemonic masculinities" surrounding the ritual, and understandings of sexual orientations within South African society, specifically that of "Queer Intimacies" (Scott 31-32). Critics argued that *Inxeba* revealed Ulwaluko ritual details that were not meant for public consumption (Levine 178). Gqola argues that the protectiveness around Ulwaluko hinges on the threat of erasure, as the ritual and its cultural ties are ever threatened (qtd. in Scott 31). These cultural ties are what Tren Grove uses to display the complex intimacies of queer relationships and are an entangled part of how the film

displays queer relationships to masculinity within society and Xhosa culture. Outside of sexual encounters as Khankatha, or caregivers, Xolani and Vija are placed in roles beholden to their societal expectancies, which act as a backdrop to approach the subject of heteronormative social convention. This social backdrop then creates heteronormative expectations which Xolani and Vija must navigate while identifying themselves and their restricted love for one another in opposition to hegemonic masculinities.

Ratele argues it is important to study these queer masculinities within tradition, as labeling them as separate from “traditional masculinities” (151) creates a separation of what can be considered “authentic masculinities” (Scott 30). Alongside this proposed understanding of studying queer masculinities, there are previous films and ethnographies that “exposed” the Xhosa ritual yet did not receive the same backlash (Scott). Scott argues that the reactions against the film are rooted in homophobic denial of queer bodies in Xhosa culture, as same-sex attraction is seen as “un-African” and damaging to Xhosa culture (29). Furthermore, as a Western import, this viewing of queer relationships being taboo is imposed by outside forces, and as such stifles the voices and legitimacy of LGBTQ+ experiences.

As Hoad suggests, the emergence of “homosexuality” and the use of the term, carries “contaminating contingencies of its Western origin at the height of European imperialism” (xvi). The legitimization of same-sex rights as a result of apartheid allows those who had colonially imposed stigma around same-sex relationships as untraditional, “un-African”, and inauthentic (Hoad xiii). Therefore, the social backlash in retaliation to *Inxeba* appears related to the subject matter of the film – queerness – being presented as part of Xhosa culture, rather than the film revealing intimacies of the Ulwaluko ritual (Scott 35). *Inxeba* being set within a traditional ritual that has defined roles of masculinity is thereby important to the ethnographic realism of queer intimacies the film portrays, and is not reductive to Xhosa cultural secrecy.

We can see an example of the aforementioned masculinity in the scene proceeding Xolani and Vija's argument, where Vija steals a goat intending for Kwanda to slaughter it, which starts a physical confrontation between Xolani and Vija (Trengrave 1:00:00-1:01:39). Other scenes that display these hegemonic masculinities are the multiple moments of initiates cutting trees for firewood, wherein one Vija states “do I smell a bunch of goats?” (Trengrave 35:06). These scenes display the inherently dominant masculine culture presented within society. When slaughtering the goat, a form of outward presentation of masculinity and strength is required of Kwanda. Fighting against this social pressure presented by Vija, Xolani challenges the status quo by engaging in a physical confrontation. While both denying the imposed display of masculinity that is asked of Kwanda, and as his caretaker, Xolani uses a masculine retaliation of force to protect Kwanda from the social dogma. The belittlement and roles imposed onto the initiates, comparing them to that which must be slaughtered as proof of one's masculinity, are thematically tied with Xolani and Vija's fight. As Mbao points out, the Ulwaluko ritual allows Vija and Xolani to use their shared role as Amakhankatha, or caregivers, to facilitate their desired intimacy, provided within a space where masculinity and close proximity to men is not unusual (81). The fear that Xolani and Vija's queer intimacies will be exposed intertwines with outward displays of

masculine dominance, and the Xhosa views of what are socially acceptable forms of masculinity and sexuality.

Summary

Using the camera as an ethnographic tool to normalize queer intimacy, rather than something which damages the display of Xhosa culture, acknowledges the lives of LGBTQ+ in South Africa. Although this social setting is constrictive, Xolani and Vija have intimate and loving encounters in private, separating them from the cultural restrictions of their love. Regardless of the accusatory nature of the masculine forces around Xolani and Vija which seek to punish same-sex relationships, they find comfort in engaging intimately with each other.

Trengrove portrays these ideals through the camera as an ethnographer. The framing and carefully curated moments show the queer intimacy of Xolani and Vija, as they navigate a space that is seemingly unaccepting of them. The sexual relations that follow between Xolani and Vija are then framed with closeness, darkness, and obscure acts so they are portrayed non-pornographically, as the focus of sexual encounters is not sexually driven, contrary to the film's critics. This is all done within the setting of the Xhosa Ulwaluko coming of age ritual, where the uplift of the film can be seen in a positive light. The rituals, complex social ties, and nature frame much deeper, stifling social conventions surrounding Xolani and Vija's homosexual relationship. As Kiguwa and Siswana argue, the film frames Xolani and Vija in a society where "non-normative sexual desire is not only taboo but governed as part of the disciplinary and regulatory practice of sexuality and masculinity" (5). Scott points out that the film provides an "articulation of black queer bodies", which "challenges normative assumptions about black boys and men and their culture, and we are all better for it" (36). This portrayal then acknowledges and validates LGBTQ+ experiences and recognizes them as innately African.

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