

## Masculinity, Matrimony and Generation: Reconfiguring Patriarchy in Drum 1951-1983\*

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**Abstract:** In this article I discuss some of the ways in which Drum tended to ascribe 'modernity' to particular practices and processes in opposition to other practices and processes portrayed as 'traditional'. In mid-twentieth-century South Africa, dominant discourses tended to signal (white) male adulthood through independent decision making alongside financial autonomy. In contrast African discourses tended to signal male adulthood through proximity to family members, through respect for age and seniority and through deference to the praxis of 'tradition'. In the representations of black men in its pages, Drum magazine negotiated a somewhat disorderly path through these competing racialised discourses. I suggest that Drum's claim that black males were indeed men was made through highlighting and condoning practices that demonstrated similarities and continuities between subordinate black and dominant white versions of manhood. In challenging the racial discourse the magazine paradoxically found itself simultaneously reinforcing western rather than African versions of manhood.

[Dear Dolly] My father has already paid lobola for a girl I am not in love with, and keeps telling neighbours that she is my wife to be. I have a girlfriend of my own choice, and she is the one I want to marry and settle down with. Now should I marry the girl I have chosen, or marry the girl for whom lobola has been paid? I'm a modernized man, and I can't cope with the situation. The situation is leading me to cross swords with my old-timer who lacks understanding of my position. – S.T. Sibasa

*A difficult problem indeed. It looks as though you will either have to defy your father, or marry a woman you don't love. But if you are a modernized man as you say you are, there is only one thing for you to do – marry the woman you love.<sup>i</sup>*

As a present-day commentator has recently observed 'Drum dealt in a sober, wry, mocking, self mocking, angry, outraged and irrepressible way about the multifarious implications of being black in an African country run by Tarzan and Jane.'<sup>ii</sup> This paper explores some of these 'multifarious implications' through a consideration of the gendered meanings ascribed by *Drum* to some of the issues covered and questions asked (and answered) by the magazine between 1951 and when it was sold in 1984. I suggest that in its advice columns, investigative reporting and social commentary, the magazine repeatedly endorsed particular kinds of challenges to the patriarchal and generational structures of authority and seniority typically associated with rural areas.























by helping to 'destroy the sense of inferiority and futility which has eaten into the very vitals of our national life, generation after generation.'<sup>xvii</sup> Certainly there is little question that the overarching framework of the very particular white hetero-patriarchal racism that constituted *apartheid* infused the magazine's representations of black men and their versions of masculinity. As noted earlier, several writers have pointed to the generational conflicts between black men that had emerged out of the complex economic, social and political changes that had come to characterise urban life by the middle of the twentieth century. These intergenerational conflicts were an important element of the tensions and challenges embedded in constructing a hegemonic urban masculinity in the rapidly growing towns and cities of mid-twentieth-century South Africa. Drawing on western gender discourses that privileged particular kinds of men and particular kinds of male authority, *Drum* tended to authenticate the position of those who claimed certain 'modern' (that is, western) values, its pages portraying a dominant urban masculinity in which the authority of age and tradition was diminished.

The magazine's privileged place within urban black communities thus helped affirm and endorse an urban gender regime in which young men - and to a much more limited extent young women - found an important ally in certain of their challenges to their families and their fathers. In their disorderly attempts to represent black manhood in a context in which white racist discourse constructed black men as boys, the producers of *Drum* had little choice but to partially accept dominant discourses around masculinity. Challenges to these discourses that emphasized a masculinity built around subordination to parental and /or 'traditional' authority ran the risk of reinforcing the racist notion that black men were not men. If it was the ability to make independent decisions about marriage partners that signaled adulthood - as it did in the west - then a male who listened to his elders and who had a partner selected for him risked being seen - by the white authorities - as more of a boy than a man. Bearing this in mind then, the changing images of black men presented in *Drum* are better understood as the consequence of a process by which black writers elected to adopt and adapt from the overarching hegemonic framework of western hetero-patriarchal racism in ways that reclaimed authority and agency.

## Conclusion

This article considers some of the meanings produced by *Drum* magazine since the first edition in March 1951 up until the magazine was sold in 1984. I discuss how *Drum* tended to ascribe 'modernity' to particular practices and processes in opposition to other practices and processes that were portrayed as 'traditional'. In mid-twentieth-century South Africa dominant discourses tended to signal (white) male adulthood through independent decision making alongside financial autonomy. In contrast African discourses tended to signal male adulthood through proximity to family members, through respect for age and seniority and through deference to the praxis of 'tradition'. For newly urbanized and urbanizing black South Africans, routes through these competing, unevenly weighted and differentially valued discourses had to be carefully negotiated, and challenges to dominant discourses around race and gender ran the risk of reinforcing racist ideas that black men were not men. Thus in town, signaling male adulthood through obedience to one's seniors and through subscribing to the traditions of one's forebears ran the risk of establishing adult black men as immature males. In the representations of black men in its pages, *Drum* magazine negotiated a somewhat







