Virginity Testing and the Politics of Sexual Responsibility: Implications for AIDS Intervention

Fiona Scorgie
University of Cambridge

In early August 2000 a small but vociferous crowd of teenage girls marched through the streets of central Pietermaritzburg, singing, chanting slogans and holding hand-written placards that stated “We are not being forced!” and “Down with the Gender Commission!” The girls were followed by a handful of middle-aged women, dressed in elaborately beaded outfits and conical hats typically worn by “traditionalist” Zulu women. These were the abahloli — women who conduct virginity inspections on young girls — and together, they were marching to protest against the Commission on Gender Equality (CGE) and the Human Rights Commission (HRC), who have condemned their activities. This incident — by no means an isolated one — reflects just how contentious the issue of virginity testing [ukuhlolwa kwezintombi] has become in recent years. Ostensibly an effort to promote female sexual chastity as an AIDS prevention strategy, the practice has drawn sharp criticism from observers almost from the beginning of its “revival” in parts of South Africa during the early 1990s. Communities have been divided on the question of whether — as originally claimed — it will offer a viable route to the “regeneration” of Zulu cultural pride in a post-apartheid South Africa. Critics of the practice have raised further questions about the volition of the girls participating in these ceremonies. Many have argued that the testing amounts to a violation of the right to privacy and control over one’s body. And, since virginity testing is invariably paraded as a “local” solution to the AIDS crisis, and indeed draws its justification from the tragic surge in infection rates among young people in recent years, its effectiveness in this respect has also been questioned (see, for example, Hamilton 1998, Maharaj 1999 and Leclerc-Madlala 2000). Such debates have broader implications, for they have focused attention — once more — on the difficulties that arise when applying universal conceptions of human rights to local contexts. But what makes it difficult to address these arguments is the fact that public opinion on the legitimacy of the practice has split into neatly opposed positions to such an extent that the prospects for finding common ground between them appear to be slim indeed. And, whether presented as an exotic ancient tradition, rescued from the jaws of modernity or as an example of Africa’s tendency to spawn bizarre cultural practices, media images of virginity
testing have done little to resolve the stalemate, often polarising the debate even further.¹

This article presents some early reflections on material gathered in KwaZulu-Natal during the months from May 2000 to October 2001, as part of doctoral research in social anthropology. During this time, I traced the activities of participants in the virginity testing “movement”² in townships in the Pietermaritzburg and Durban areas (mainly Edendale, Willowfontein, Kwa Mashu and Lindelani) over a period of five months. Further research was then carried out in a village in the Hlanganani region of the southern Drakensburg, where I lived and worked as a volunteer high-school teacher for just under a year. The village, some forty kilometres north-west of Ixopo, is part of the Tribal Authority of Isibonelo Esihle in the south-western part of KwaZulu-Natal. It borders a large Roman Catholic mission station known as Centocow and is located on what was once reserve land, owned and administered by the mission from around 1895. Today, the majority of residents in the area are Catholic. Main sources of income include pensions, welfare grants and remittances from migrants, and households depend heavily on domestic crops grown for subsistence. The mission hospital serves a large section of the surrounding countryside and has an AIDS “drop-in” centre that provides a testing and counselling service and on-going monitoring of the treatment received by AIDS patients. Extensive home-based care programmes and orphan-support networks have been set up by mission staff in the area in the last year, owing to a sharp increase in the number of families affected by the epidemic. Residents of this region have been actively involved in virginity testing activities since the mid-1990s, and my intention during this period of fieldwork was to examine the ways in which rural communities involved in the revival of the practice were addressing the challenges of AIDS in everyday contexts.³

The article examines how participants in the virginity testing movement frame and understand their activity as a form of AIDS intervention in South Africa. My focus is more or less evenly divided between the women who perform the virginity inspections [the abahloli; sing. umhloli] and the girls who come to be tested [the izintombi; sing. intombi]. In this respect, my intention is not to overlook the significant roles played by parties such as the CGE and HRC in the process of challenging the legality of virginity testing. Their interventions have already significantly impacted on the practice in a number of ways, but this issue remains to be addressed elsewhere. There is also much more to be said about the cultural politics of this revival and how it is tapping into widely-held — but by no means unproblematised — notions of ethnicity, belonging and “cultural property”. That, too, falls outside of the scope of the article. Following a brief overview that traces the development of the revival and places it in a historical context, I then turn to a discussion of some of the more dominant meanings that participants in the movement attach to the notion of virginity and its importance in the broader constitution of sexuality. Finally, I consider how certain percep-
tions of sexual responsibility are embodied in the rhetoric and practice of the virginity testing movement, and what implications these might have for AIDS interventions in the region.

**Sketching the contours of a revival**

I wasn’t doing it [virginity testing] for people to know me, I wasn’t doing it for anyone to know me. I was doing it for my God. I was believing that one day when I die, and my God asks me ‘What did you do, that time you were alive?’ I’m going to say ‘God, there are the children — I looked after them’. … I’m working for God. To say to God ‘look, now she’s a woman — because of me. Now she’s still alive.’

Most commentators have traced the current revival of *ukuhlolwa kwezintombi* in KwaZulu-Natal — once common in Zulu households in pre-colonial times — to around 1994. Central to this process were the efforts of two local women who began to organise small-scale events in urban and peri-urban townships that brought teenage girls to public sites for testing. The women — Andile Gumede and Nomagugu Ngobese — initially worked independently of each other, but each had a similar vision: to encourage like-minded women to participate in a movement that would promote pre-marital chastity among young girls in the province, and to thereby reinstate female virginity *[ubuntombi]* with the symbolic importance it once had. The real revival of the practice, they claimed, would only be achieved with the eventual integration of testing into the corpus of household practices, rendering the need for mass, public ceremonies obsolete. Since the mid-1990s, the testing has spread across much of KwaZulu-Natal and beyond, with reports of its performance in places as far afield as the Mpumalanga province and Swaziland.

At times, the current revival of *ukuhlolwa kwezintombi* forms part of a three-day ritual of appeasement dedicated to *Nomkhubulwana*, a goddess once prominent in Zulu cosmology. Kendall (1998), who observed some of the early attempts to revive rituals to *Nomkhubulwana* in KwaZulu-Natal in the mid-1990s, describes the deity as “female principle, immortal virgin, mother and protector of all Zulu girls and source of growth and creation”. For Kendall, the positive attributes of the deity are emphasised as a potential source of healing in a context where violence and other social ills are rife. (For more on *Nomkhubulwana*, see also Krige 1968 and Lambert 1990.) The annual three-day rite culminates in a celebratory sowing of seeds in a garden set out for the neglected deity (she was, until recently, all but forgotten) and the fact that only virgin girls may perform this task is said to provide justification for the virginity tests. But the tests are also performed in other contexts where *Nomkhubulwana* is not invoked, where, for example, smaller numbers of girls gather for a brief, perfunctory inspection within the confines of an umhlozi’s home. More commonly, however, monthly testing takes places at various township venues (mainly community halls and sports grounds) where girls between the ages of
roughly eight and twenty-five gather to be tested by women who, in many cases, have themselves only recently learnt the technique. Numbers vary: depending on the occasion, anything between forty and three hundred girls may gather to be tested on a single day, while some ceremonies are considerably larger — the annual Nomkhubulwana rite in the town of Bulwer, for example, usually draws around a thousand participants. Men are banished from the testing area, although they tend to observe the dancing and singing items that follow, and in more recent ceremonies, their attendance appears to be growing. The ceremonies are festive and celebratory in mood, with the girls taking full advantage of the opportunity to perform carefully rehearsed dance steps in singing and dancing competitions that are, in many ways, the real highlights of these events. The public controversy surrounding the testing itself has tended to lead the attentions of both journalists and researchers away from this dimension of the ceremonies.

The testing procedure itself is always the same: the girls line up, then lie in a row on their backs on grass mats spread out on the ground. They part their legs, while the umhloni peers briefly at each girl’s exposed genitals before making her judgement (occasionally, the umhloni will use her hands to part a girl’s labia). With each confirmed virgin, the crowd of assembled women cheer and ululate to congratulate the girls. Those who “pass” the test are awarded a printed certificate and a sticker or smearing of white clay on the forehead that visibly confirms their success in the test. Those who “fail” are usually pulled aside to be spoken to briefly by the umhloni, who will try to establish what happened: which boy has taken her virginity? Was the girl willing? Was she abused? Advice on how to behave in the future — to abstain from sex, in other words — is also dispensed at this time. While the abahloli emphasise that no explicit attention is drawn to the girls who fail — conscious of the potential for stigmatisation — in practice this is difficult. For in many ways, the point of the testing is to render visible what has, until then, remained invisible: it is intended precisely to both confirm and display to others evidence of the girls’ (im)morality and (im)purity. Girls who fail the test cannot, therefore, escape notice. Every element of the procedure, then, from the setting up of criteria for passing or failing, to the issuing of certificates and other visual symbols of success, collectively adds to the creation of virgins as a distinct social and conceptual category. It is, in the most deliberate way, a reminder that virgins are made, not born (Hayes 1975; Hastrup 1993).

It is not difficult to establish what the abahloli are looking for when they test girls. They explain how it is the ihlo [eye] — sometimes translated as the hymen — that is inspected, and how this is said to be covered by a piece of flesh [the umhlumbi], the presence of which indicates that the girl is still a virgin. She is then described as being iyagcwele [full] — a reference to her father’s cattle byre, which will (on account of her proven virginity) now be filled by a higher number of bride-wealth cattle. But importantly, there are other ways in which the body is believed to signal virginity. A speaker at the virginity testing conference held
in Richard’s Bay (see below), for example, claimed that in a virgin, “the muscle tone ... is taut (not flabby), buttocks and breasts firm, and abdomen flat and taut”. *Izangoma* [diviners] in the Bulwer and Centocow area (who are usually involved in the movement as *abahloli*) have confirmed this point, stressing that they are able to identify whether a girl is a virgin or not simply by looking at her as she walks by. This emphasis on the muscle tone and general bodily physique of a virgin is a symbolic reference to youth as the ideal quality embodied by *izintombi*. This point has relevance when we consider how sex is believed to affect the physical constitution of a girl — a point to which I shall return.

Today it is possible to identify a network of women in KwaZulu-Natal who coordinate these events, perform inspections on the girls and — at other times outside of the testing itself — supervise various activities of groups of young girls in their neighbourhood. These women are mostly urban-based, either unemployed or working in semi-skilled labour (predominantly domestic work). In general, they have between five and eight years of formal education, although there are a handful of trained teachers in the movement who tend to take up leadership positions, taking charge of everything from organising transport to the events to coordinating the dance items during competitions after the testing. Communication between the women is tenuous; telephone networks are used where possible but messages passed by word of mouth are often the only way that notification of testing dates and venues is communicated. Connections between urban and rural women are generally weak but because the events are often focused in particular localities, what matters is that women are able to sustain links with others in their own neighbourhoods, rather than extending their networks further afield. It is the leaders — women like Gumede and Ngobese — who are, effectively, at the pinnacle of the organisational structure, and who are most concerned with drawing more women into the movement.¹⁰ In a development that mirrors the kind of record-keeping so typically prevalent in local schools and formal institutions of education, considerable energy has recently been devoted to the documentation of the testing. Girls’ names and results at testing are carefully recorded, along with the dates they were tested. Photographs and video-recordings of the girls in their beaded outfits, either posing in groups or dancing, are also eagerly sought after by the *abahloli*, the *izintombi*, and their parents.

But in the discourses of the movement, virginity — or rather, the loss thereof — is not regarded as a single moment in a girl’s life where she makes an unambiguous shift from virgin to non-virgin. In other words, it is not perceived to be a point of no return. Several examples serve to illustrate this point. Firstly, one may “redeem” oneself: girls who have been sexually active in the past may come to occupy the position of “secondary virgin” by choosing to abstain (even although they may not, strictly speaking, legitimately pass the test at first).
This enables them to regain a measure of the status attached to being a “real” intombi. Secondly, the case of rape introduces a note of ambivalence. As one of the abahloli explained:

“... like if you’ve been deflowered, it depends on that particular circumstances — there are some people, like if it’s a rape case, a rape case you can’t be deflowered at that time, you see? You can see that OK, this one, she was raped and this only happened once, you see? And this one, oh no, you’ve been doing this for quite a long time.”

What this suggests is that intent on the part of the girl is an important consideration in evaluating her status as virgin. It is evidence of the girl’s active desire which is the intended object of control here, a point that renders the test much more than the (deceptively simple) matter of detecting the presence or absence of a hymen. But even in this respect, while the “theory” of testing might appear to be generally agreed upon by the abahloli, the practice is anything but straightforward. In other words, the criteria for “passing” and “failing” the test are not undisputed. At several ukuhololwa events held at various sites in the Durban region in the past year, for example, the assembled girls were tested more than once. In one such incident, the umhloli overseeing the testing was not satisfied with the procedure being followed by three other lower-ranking abahloli. She chastised them for their shoddy technique, explaining how they should pull the girls’ buttocks in a particular way in order to see the ihlo more clearly. Her concern, in this case, was that if the testing was not thorough, word would get out that they had a tendency to pass girls when they were not, in fact, virgins. Clearly, the reputation of the abahloli was at stake. This kind of incident (by no means isolated) suggests that the performance of the test is intended not only to determine the sexual status of the girls and, in the long-term, to induce adherence to a new set of sexual norms, but also to display and confirm the expertise of the abahloli. Recently, there have been efforts within the movement to give formal recognition to their skills and knowledge, in the form of “graduation ceremonies” which involve a process of certification to acknowledge the specialised work performed by the abahloli.11 Such efforts to publicly recognise and validate their expertise serve, at the same time, to unify the movement in the face of fierce opposition.

In this respect, a distinct collective identity is developing among the abahloli, an identity that is becoming further cemented as they are forced, increasingly, on the defensive. External challenges to the validity of their cause have intensified in the last three or four years, and the response of the abahloli has often been an angry one — most unambiguously expressed, for example, in the protest march described at the start of this article. Since 1999 the CGE has initiated a series of interventions in an effort to challenge, curtail and ultimately stop the practice of virginity testing. Initially, this took the form of workshops intended to gather information on the practice and to draw stake-holders into a process of discussion about the merits of the practice and its apparent disregard for certain
clauses in the South African Bill of Rights. In June 2000 a consultative conference was hosted jointly by the CGE and the HRC in Richard’s Bay, northern KwaZulu-Natal, to bring these discussions closer to a resolution of sorts, to create a forum for debating “culturally acceptable practices and traditions which [are] in harmony with our constitutional framework” (Piliso-Seroko 2000). What was revealing was that much of this conference did not focus on the question of virginity testing as a form of AIDS prevention, or even on the matter of constitutional illegality, but rather, on the relevance of “culture” and “tradition” in contemporary South African society. Given that the virginity testing movement has generally framed its activity and purpose in a rhetoric that quite self-consciously urges the revival of near-defunct practices from the past, it would be worth taking a closer look at how this past is being imagined.

“Collecting the pieces”: Virginity Testing in Historical Perspective

Oral sources aside, there is substantial written documentation of the practice of female virginity inspection in Natal and Zululand in the early twentieth century — and probably long before this (see, for example, Kohler 1933; Gluckman 1935; Krige 1936; Van der Vliet 1974). Often, the testing of all girls of a particular area would be carried out at the behest of the local chief, who would call them to his homestead and appoint a local elderly woman to perform the testing. Alongside this, the girls would also be tested by their mothers and grandmothers in their own homes (Kohler 1933). Among isiZulu- and isiXhosa-speaking populations in the nineteenth and early twentieth century, the verification of a girl’s virginity enabled her family to demand a slightly larger than normal bride wealth at marriage (one additional cow to be given to the girl’s mother) (Hunter 1936; Krige 1968) — a practice that still continues in many parts of rural KwaZulu-Natal today. But the concern to ensure that girls were virgins had a much broader significance, for it signalled to others that she was morally pure and, perhaps more importantly, that the conventions of authority based on generation and gender were being observed and respected (I return to these points below).

Ethnographers of Zulu society are generally in agreement that the regulation of pre-marital sexual behaviour was a long-standing concern in this region of Southern Africa during pre-colonial and colonial times (Gluckman 1935, 1963; Krige 1936, 1968; Vilakazi 1962; Van der Vliet 1974; Preston-Whyte 1978, 1992; Varga 1997). These authors have further argued that the central rationale for this control was the need to regulate fertility so that children were born within the boundaries of the patriline. Sexual liaisons between pubescent girls and boys were permitted and even encouraged, providing they did not lead to pregnancy before marriage. In this respect, the practice of non-penetrative intercural sex, or ukusoma, exemplified the separation — both conceptually and
in practice — that was made between sexuality and fertility (Varga 1997). The latter was largely restricted to the conventional bounds of marriage. But this emphasis on pre-marital chastity among Zulu girls was accompanied by the provision of instruction in sexual matters from old women and female cohorts in the same age-set. Boys, likewise, were taught by older men during puberty rites how to interact with girls, and, especially, how to “propose love” [ukushela] to them (Krige 1936).

These descriptions of old Zulu courtship practices — somewhat idealised, perhaps — are almost a standard feature of dusty ethnographic texts and the writings of early missionaries, but they now find their mark in the rhetoric of the current virginity testing movement. Early twentieth century anthropologists in Africa laboured to document cultural customs before they disappeared under the modernising pressures of industrialisation and urbanisation. Similarly, the abahloli — as present-day cultural activists — couch their work in a narrative of salvation that seeks to resuscitate what is left of disappearing practices. When accounting for their decision to become involved in the movement, many abahloli voice concerns about the particular vulnerability of young girls to the “new disease” of AIDS. But these concerns dovetail with anxieties about fading moral standards (exemplified in the “loss of culture”) and desires to restore a measure of parental control over the youth. The solutions, unsurprisingly, are perceived to lie in the past, a point well made by a Durban-based umhloli:

“... Because the things they’re changing a lot. Even as they’re changing, we still see our culture — and some of the pieces of that culture were best. That’s why we wish our culture should not be finished... only a few pieces, nice pieces are left. We try to collect those pieces”.

Such references to the importance of “going back to our culture”, of holding on to traditions, are appeals that lend legitimacy to action in situations of change and instability (Spiegel and Boonzaier 1988; Goddard 2000). But in the context of the virginity testing movement, this nostalgia draws on a logic that is particularly difficult to challenge, precisely because of the language of “rights” in which it has become embedded. Indeed, claims about the right to assert one’s belonging to a particular “culture” are now familiar to scholars of South Africa; they have surfaced repeatedly in the general upsurge of identity construction dominating cultural politics of the early post-apartheid era (Spiegel 1997; Mamdani 2000). It is no accident that these claims have coincided both with a boom in cultural tourism in South Africa, and with the current emphasis on the delineation of individual and group rights in constitutional terms. The discursive construction of “culture” in terms of “rights” develops, then, as an almost inevitable outcome of the fusing of these two contexts.

While the demise of apartheid has brought with it numerous uncertainties about identity and cultural belonging, these anxieties are further compounded by the
crisis of AIDS, for the epidemic is forcing an urgent re-examination of social policy, health priorities, life-styles, and social relations in general. Chanock has argued that during times of social and political instability, “[p]ragmatic practices become ‘customs’ to be insisted on; styles of religious practice become beliefs and orthodoxies” (2000:21). But when everyday practices become rigidified into “customs”, these also become inscribed with meanings different to those originally intended. The same practice in a reinvented form inevitably takes shape against changing social contexts, so it is never simply a matter of calling up a forgotten practice from the past and re-implementing it, intact and unaltered. Importantly, the abahloli are conscious that their actions deliberately reconfigure this “everyday practice” anew in a context where different reference points have become relevant. For them, this is just as much about claiming a space for self-representation, for the assertion of an identity that is uniquely African (in most cases, specifically Zulu), as it is an opportunity to take action against the scourge of AIDS. It is also, quite centrally, about the contested nature of contemporary Zulu kinship practices — evident, for example, in the way that some abahloli have made reference to the apparent “absence of families” in Zulu communities. It is no accident that many women explain their motives for learning how to perform tests and for joining the movement as abahloli, by citing the high incidence of pre-marital pregnancy in their respective communities. This indicates that there are important continuities between old and new circumstances and practices — an observation that is sometimes obscured by the theoretical emphasis on tradition invented (à la Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983). Concerns about a need for fertility control are accorded at least as much importance — in terms of providing a rationale for the revival — as are concerns about AIDS. Frequent references are made to the fact that family arrangements created for the support and care of children born to unmarried women often disadvantage older women — who, as primary care-givers of these children (their grandchildren), are thus burdened by the consequences of their daughters’ “indiscretions”. The certificate (for girls who pass the test) from a Nomkhubulwana ceremony held in 1998, for example, includes not only the phrase: “…phansi ngengculezi” [“… down with AIDS”], but also “phansi ukuza lela ekhaya” [“down with giving birth at home”].

Both abahloli and izintombi tend to come from households which are generally female-headed and multi-generational, usually with several young, unmarried girls with children of their own, living in a household where the grandmother’s pension is the main source of income. On one level, the emphasis that older women place on the importance of pre-marital virginity has much to do with a practical concern about their own economic survival. This concern then finds its expression in attempts to control fertility and household reproduction while simultaneously protecting and enhancing the marriageability of daughters and granddaughters. While such aspects of Zulu kinship have been examined by anthropologists in the past (Preston-Whyte, 1978; 1992; Preston-Whyte and
Zondi, 1989), more recent developments in this area demand closer attention, particularly in view of the radical shifts in household and family composition that are beginning to take shape as AIDS deaths escalate. The point for the moment, however, is that the virginity testing movement is about much more than AIDS intervention.

**Emic understandings of virginity: constructing the parameters of sexual responsibility**

The association of female virginity with notions of *ukuqhenya* [pride] and *isithunzi* [dignity] are commonplace in the discourses of the movement, and indeed central to understanding what is at stake for the *abahloli*. Women in the Centocow area have described how, in their youth, a girl who became pregnant before marriage would be ostracised by other *izintombi*, for she had brought shame and disgrace both upon herself and her peers. An elderly Centocow woman explained to me that

“It was nice then, a pride, knowing you are *intombi*. There is nothing better than this. Do you know how brave you feel, walking down the street, knowing you are *intombi*?”

While today the dignity and pride that virginity is believed to bestow on the individual girl continues to be linked with the avoidance of pre-marital motherhood, it is also true that the act of resisting sexual intercourse is itself associated more specifically with the preservation of what might be termed “embodied integrity”. Sexual abstinence is thus constructed as an end in itself, quite separate from its role in enabling fertility control and the prevention of STD and HIV transmission. In the Centocow area, it is common to hear women and men alike assert that when a young girl has sex, she loses the vitality of youth and “becomes old” before her time.13 This helps to explain what Andile Gumede, one of the initiators of the revival, means when she says: “We must fight against sex”. During her presentation at the Richard’s Bay conference, Gumede made further reference to one of the aims of the virginity testing movement as being “… to encourage women to preserve themselves”. In a dismissive reference to other AIDS prevention methods she added: “… the condom is not to prevent one from losing one’s virginity, but to protect against STD’s and pregnancy”.

These points may help to explain why much of the movement’s energy is devoted to activities that unfold off-stage, so to speak, of the actual testing (an observation that is often overlooked in current disputes over the merits of the practice). For these activities are organised in an effort to occupy the time and energy of the girls, to deflect their attentions away from forming sexual liaisons with boys. In townships like Imbali and Edendale (near Pietermaritzburg), organised groups of *izintombi* (numbering between ten and fifty) meet on a regular basis to practice dance steps, learn new songs, and create beadwork to be worn at ceremonies. Occasionally, the groups fulfil a more explicit educa-
tional function, with meetings arranged for the discussion of a range of issues relating to sex, abstinence, AIDS and pregnancy. Additional activities include the formation of drum majorette squads, homework-groups, and prayer meetings, and, over time, the groups create names and uniforms for themselves, thus developing distinct identities. In many ways, it is membership to these groups which offers township girls the incentive to become involved in the virginity testing movement in the first place. The groups, which appear to be sustainable in the long term — although actual membership may be fluid — offer collectivities which serve to place the stated objectives of the testing in a broader framework.

In rural areas — more so than in urban townships — the ability to control the embodied self elicits genuine admiration from, and recognition by others. But it also indicates one’s respect for a traditional ordering of (gendered) relations between generations. As one of the amakosi [chiefs] in the Centocow region explained:

“… when it comes to human dignity, maybe we are different in cultures. In our culture, it is the dignity to be known that you are insizwa [young man] or you are intombi [girl/virgin], until you get married. And from there you get to another stage: you are inkosikazi [wife] or you are indoda [man]. So I fail to understand if there can be Africans, or Zulu’s — let me put it like that — who can say that we are abusing human rights if we are practicing this virginity testing.”

Deliberations over the meaning of “pride” and “dignity” have surfaced elsewhere, most notably in discussions at the consultative conference hosted by the CGE and HRC in Richard’s Bay in June 2000. At this conference, opponents of virginity testing argued that respect for personal dignity was a right enshrined in the South African Constitution. They went on to suggest that the way in which the ceremony requires girls to expose their genitals in public violated this right — a violation made all the more serious in cases where girls did not willingly choose to be tested. By contrast, abahloli and other supporters of the practice emphasised that the testing offered communities a long-overdue way to restore their lost dignity and self-respect. Arguably, the logic of each position was drawn from divergent moral discourses about the nature of personhood and its social basis. Herein lies the essence of the debate. What fuels much of the public dispute about virginity testing are conflicting ideas about parental custodianship and the autonomy of the child and how, ideally, these are to be mediated by existing social relations. As mentioned above, most, if not all, abahloli are involved in this movement largely in their capacity as mothers and grandmothers. The point, for these women, is that their children need to be guided into adulthood, they need to be “looked after”, and this entails ensuring that they do not become sexually active before they are “old enough”. One could even interpret this viewpoint as a desire to prolong childhood, where sex is the one activity that is unambiguously linked to the status of being an adult — and many parents would like to believe this conceptual connection is also true in practice.
(This is partly the reason why such a pervasive silence continues to surround the matter of parental guidance in sex education.) The preservation of this sexual innocence is therefore regarded as an obvious way to care for children. And where this innocence translates into protection from HIV infection and ultimately an untimely death, the act of caring takes on further significance and urgency. That opponents of virginity testing should dare to suggest that the abahloli are, effectively, abusing their children is therefore interpreted as insulting in the extreme.

But perhaps the most relevant issue as far as AIDS intervention is concerned relates to the understandings of “sexual responsibility” which guide the movement and, indeed, account for its very existence. These understandings implicitly underpin some of the notions of dignity and pride discussed above and, in practice, make provision for particular gendered capacities in the context of love relationships among young people. To a large extent, the logic of the practice of virginity testing rests on the assumption that the responsibility for averting sex rests with girls alone. The counterpart to this idea constructs sexual initiative as the preserve of males alone. In these communities, it is men (and boys) who “propose love” to girls — commonly several at a time — and seldom the reverse.16 Girls are, of course, not passive in the process of negotiating, or even initiating love relationships, and there are probably innumerable instances in practice where such neatly divided gender categorisations are blurred.17

What the term “initiative” includes, in the context of sexuality, is also a complex matter and cannot be fully explored here. But the virginity testing movement continues to operate on the assumption that to effectively alter patterns of sexual behaviour, one needs to target girls in the main. This assumption sits uncomfortably, and somewhat paradoxically, alongside ideas about girls’ sexual innocence and (presumed) ignorance about sexual matters. Amidst all the reinventions characterising the revival, what has not changed is the idea that it is girls rather than boys who must carry the responsibility for avoiding penetrative sex.18 In disseminating the abstinence message, it is ultimately believed that boys may only be reached through the refusals of girls. During a recent Nomkhubulwana ceremony performed in Willowfontein, near Pietermaritzburg, for example, a guest speaker from the Department of Health gave the following advice to a crowd of around four hundred izintombi:

Boys can’t stop proposing to you — it’s you who need to be firm in your beliefs. You must know how to behave as amatshitshi [young girls] — how to sit, and so on. Don’t look at your feet and blush when a boy is proposing to you. Look the boys straight in the face and tell them that you don’t want it.

The dynamics of negotiating “love proposals” tell us much about the gendered power relations between young people and, in turn, have implications for the
development of effective AIDS interventions for this target group. Some insight into these dynamics (from a female point of view) is provided from comments made by girls attending the Bulwer Nomkhubulwana ceremony in September 2001. Here, in answer to a survey question that asked them to list the “best” and “worst” things about being in love, their remarks spoke volumes about the kind of sexual pressures faced by teenage girls and how they respond to them:

Boys deceive us. They say they love us but they want our virginity.

They want sex and they are rubbish.

He is going to leave you with AIDS and you get pregnant.

There are no best things about love because boys are devastating the nation [bacekela phansi isizwe].

Revealingly, their list of the “best” things about being in love was comparatively thin, with many girls simply writing “there is nothing”. Such comments take on added pathos when considered alongside the hopes of abahloli that girls will somehow manage to convince boys not to pressurise them into having penetrative sex. Critics in the CGE have rightly pointed out that such attitudes shift even greater burdens of responsibility on girls, when their ability to control these situations is often restricted to begin with. Leclerc-Madlala (2000:3) has captured the implications of this point well when she argues that “the current popular support for virginity testing can be understood as a ‘gendered’ response to a disease experience that is fundamentally ‘gendered’ … [it] is the latest clause in the on-going gendered narrative of HIV/AIDS in KwaZulu-Natal”. Indeed, it is difficult to ignore the sexual double standards that appear to be reinforced by the practice of virginity testing. In this context, discourses of blame and accusation — so powerful in shaping social responses to AIDS the world over — are being fixed along the “fault lines” (Farmer 1992) of local understandings of sexuality, gender and morality. Where responsibility for sexual abstinence is placed so unambiguously on the shoulders of young girls, the implication that they are therefore also responsible for the spread of the disease is only a short step away.

And yet one wonders how it will ever be possible to assist young girls to develop sexual assertiveness without, at some point, conveying to them the message that to say “no” is not only their right, but also an exercise in learning to set their own boundaries to sexual expression and freedom. Girls attending ukuhlolwa events are often quite outspoken about their decision to join the movement and their explanations of why they are there at all illuminate quite precisely what is at stake in saying “no”:

*I’m proud of myself, because no one can destroy my future. I want to have a good goal for myself.*
It is important to me [to be an intombi] because I want to preserve myself, preserve my body.

I want a good future and to make my parents happy about me.

I’m proud of being an intombi and Nomkhubulwana protects me from viruses.

It is important because then I am safe from diseases.

While the act of refusing sex and of asserting the desire to abstain may indeed be difficult (owing to immense peer pressure to become sexually active and to the general persistence of boys in their ‘love proposals’) it is also a potentially self-affirming exercise of agency. For teenage girls, faced with the challenges, rewards and dangers of impending adulthood — at a time when the very chances of arriving at that stage appear to be increasingly precarious — this act may be one of the few ways in which they are able to extend a measure of control over their lives.

Looking Ahead: Implications for AIDS Intervention

It should now be apparent that, in the context of AIDS intervention efforts, the virginity testing movement is somewhat ambiguous. Firstly, while it advocates that girls actively choose to protect themselves from infection by opting to abstain (and asserts this option as a matter of self-affirmation and dignity), it simultaneously narrows down alternatives to that choice. The need for such alternatives is surely something that needs to be recognised, given the local realities of early teenage sexual experimentation and the extent to which sexual debut is frequently a matter of coercion rather than choice (Leclerc-Madlala 1997; Varga 1997, 1999). Furthermore, when the movement construes any active expression of female sexuality — particularly for this age group — as transgressive, one wonders how the recognition of sexual pleasure and desire is to be openly dealt with, if at all.

Secondly, some of the more urgent, but often overlooked, challenges raised by virginity testing relate to the “silences” which have been created in the wake of its revival. These include the (still) largely ignored matter of the sexuality of boys and young men, which risks being further neglected by the movement’s exclusive focus on girls’ responsibilities for changing sexual mores. Another “silence” emerges with the construction of marriage both as inevitable and as a period of relative safety as far as HIV risk is concerned. This idea obscures recognition of the particular vulnerabilities to infection arising within local marriage situations, in which it is common for partners to live apart from each other for long periods of time.

Thirdly, it is no surprise that the use of condoms is actively discouraged by abahloli — and this has been true of both urban and rural components of the movement. As one umhloli put it,
... the Department of Health must help, by means of finance to support Nomkhubul-wana, rather than to bring condoms and the AIDS booklets — yes, that [the booklets] is also something important, but the condoms I don’t see — what for? Because here we are speaking about virgins.

Others have insisted, during event speeches and interviews, that “condoms are for married people only”, while songs sung by the izintombi at the testing events give expression to this idea in other forms. One popular song discourages the use of contraception, which, in this context, would include not only condoms, but all other forms of fertility control that allow for penetrative intercourse.

| Wematshishi hlohwani         | Untouched girls must be tested |
| Akenyeke ubufebe            | Do not have many lovers       |
| Intombi ayipreventi         | Girls, do not use contraception |
| Incane kangaka              | when you are so young         |

| Wolala intshithi         | Girls, lie down               |
| lamisa amadolo           | and lift up your knees        |
| intombi ayipreventi     | Girls, do not use contraception |
| incane kangaka          | when you are so young         |

| Sabuka isalukazi       | The old woman looks          |
| Sanikina ikhanda      | and shakes her head          |

But despite the “official” antipathy towards the use of condoms, there appears to be widespread awareness — and acceptance — of this option among the girls themselves. When questioned about how they would protect themselves from HIV infection, both now and in the future, girls attending various Nomkhubul-wana ceremonies responded that if total abstinence is not possible, condoms are the next best thing. They do not appear to share the inflexible attitude towards safe sex options that their mentors in the movement promote. While this raises the inevitable question of the extent to which knowledge and awareness translate into action, importantly, it does serve as a reminder that the efforts of the abahloli to extend control over the izintombi’s sexual behaviour are far from absolute.

It is difficult, and perhaps too soon, to determine what impact the movement is having on the lives of girls who do participate, much less on the sexual practices and lifestyles of young people in general. Most abahloli would claim that their work is succeeding:

Boys have stopped all their nonsense! Because now they know that these girls [at Nomkhubulwana] must not be touched. They are pure, they are virgins, they are special. They [the boys] know that they will get into trouble if they touch them. They know that they must leave them alone.

However, this would seem to be a highly optimistic viewpoint, and one which stands in stark contrast to the above-mentioned comments of the izintombi, about boys’ “deceptions” and insistence upon penetrative sex. It is also a viewpoint seldom shared by parents of the izintombi: they have cited cases where “virgins”
are discovered to be pregnant not long after attending Nomkhubulwana events (and passing the test), leading them, more recently, to express doubt about the tests’ validity and effectiveness. What is apparent is that the movement of girls in and out of the izintombi groups described above is quite fluid, with a number of girls participating actively for only a year or two before dropping out. Closer inspection of the state of the virginity testing movement as a whole reveals a number of emerging tensions, which — if not properly managed — could fracture the unity of the abahloli altogether. For example, there is increasing dissatisfaction with leadership styles, organisational hierarchies and the difficulty of securing funding for events. Some abahloli have left the movement altogether in the past year, after being actively involved since the start of the revival because, like the parents who point to the existence of “pregnant virgins”, they have lost faith in the long-term effectiveness of the testing.

In Centocow, virginity testing continues to be performed in a few individual households, and many girls from the area can still be seen at the annual Nomkhubulwana ceremonies in nearby Bulwer. Where Nomkhubulwana and virginity testing activities are discussed in community meetings and similar gatherings, the focus has shifted to the question of what needs to accompany the testing. Increasingly, there is a recognition that unless more discussion and greater openness about matters concerning adolescent sexuality is encouraged, testing alone is not going to yield the required behaviour changes, nor will these changes be sustainable in the long term. And in urban contexts, this sentiment is growing too, as some abahloli are beginning to rethink the messages conveyed to izintombi during speeches at the events they organise. If the virginity testing movement is ever to be seriously considered as a basis for AIDS intervention, then the content and context of these messages are matters that demand urgent attention. A Department of Health official interviewed not long after a recent Nomkhubulwana ceremony in Pietermaritzburg captured the point well:

Virginity testing is a cherry on top, and not the foundation of the cake. Ya, it’s the cherry on top, because you can’t test for something that you have not built up. But people are looking at the cherry and not the whole cake. This is the problem for us [the Department of Health]. And we’re looking for people to say ‘wait, we think you’re missing some ingredient in the recipe. This is why the cake is not coming out right’. But they’re not saying so. They’re simply saying ‘the cherry shouldn’t be there’. OK, but we need to set up the cake and get people to say ‘this is what we would like to see being put in’ — when we talk about educating young people in general, about themselves, about how they behave, how they respond to the challenges out there, how they protect themselves from contracting the virus, you know, how they care for one another, when their friend has the virus. So the question must be posed: what exactly is being “built up”? And can this process be initiated and sustained within ongoing virginity testing activities? A positive start in this direction has already been made in the form of greater participation by the provincial Department of Health at recent testing events.
Representatives from the Department are beginning to tap into the network of women working in the movement, meeting them on their own territory, so to speak, and taking advantage of their organisational energy to promote existing AIDS-awareness programmes. Arguably, the organised groups of izintombi offer an as-yet untapped potential for being drawn into existing peer-group education programmes. The fact that these groups have been organically formed in local neighbourhoods, rather than being deliberately set up for the purposes of short-term programmes, suggests that they would be sustainable in the long run and responsive to more directed interventions.

It has been my intention in this article to demonstrate something of the complexity of the virginity testing revival, and to illuminate the kind of cultural-political processes at work in local communities’ attempts to engage with the devastating implications of the HIV/AIDS pandemic. Understanding the motivations that drive women to form such a movement, to devote energy, time and other resources to this activity, tells us what is at stake for them, and how the threat of AIDS cannot be separated from the challenges raised by other social problems in their communities. While the practice of virginity testing is not without its problems — legal, ethical, moral or otherwise — perhaps it is time for health workers, researchers and community activists to begin exploring areas of potential benefit for AIDS intervention rather than being content with outright condemnation. What is required now is for critics to move beyond a narrow focus on whether or not the testing alone is able to keep girls “AIDS free” and instead to consider what may usefully be done with the broader organisational forms which have grown out of the revival and which continue to shape its practices. The movement has, at the very least, opened up a space in which the particular vulnerabilities of young girls to HIV infection may begin to be addressed. And the fact that the moral symbolism of the female body which is currently the focus of the movement is — even within the terms of its own discourses — a disputed one, suggests that a more radical engagement with the practical ramifications of that symbolism may eventually be possible.

Notes
2. I use the term “movement” quite loosely here, to refer to the collective efforts of a group of women who are striving to promote sexual abstinence both as a value and as a practice, and, in this instance, have chosen public virginity inspection of girls and young women as the means to do so. Discussion of the organisational dynamics of the movement follows below.
3. I am grateful to the people of Centocow for hosting me so generously during my fieldwork, and for providing advice, friendship and answers to my never-ending stream of questions. During this time, I benefited enormously from discussions with Lotsholive Magwaza, Buhle Mkhize, Sibongile Hadebe, Teresa Hadebe, Gabi Mzobe, Julie Parle, Nhlanhla Msomi, Gisela Geisler, Marilyn Strathern, and others. Thanks also to Peter Delius and Clive Glaser for comments on an earlier draft of the article. Responsibility for interpretation remains, of course, my own. The research upon which this article is based has been funded by grants received from the Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research, the Association of Commonwealth Universities, and the Royal Anthropological Institute.

4. Interview with a Durban-based umhloli, 2 June 2000. Many abahloli requested anonymity in the interviews I conducted with them; for this reason I have omitted their names here.

5. Some would date this revival earlier — to around 1984, when the Reed Ceremony at Nongoma was first practiced after a long period of discontinuance. Virginity testing has been an essential part of that ceremony, which is still performed annually at springtime.

6. It appears that the public ceremonies have indeed taken on a life of their own and it is difficult, now, to imagine that the organisers of these events would want to phase them out entirely.

7. For scholars of Zulu ethnography, Nomkhubulwana is probably most well-known through the work of Max Gluckman, in his 1935 publication on rituals of rebellion. Here, he uses the Zulu case of Nomkhubulwana rites — but extended to cover similar rites elsewhere — to argue that rituals embodying elements of rebellion are essentially conservative, for they provide a space for the open expression of social tensions, but in so doing, merely renew the unity and resilience of the system.

8. The issue of whether or not the abahloli should actually touch the girls during testing appears to be an unresolved, yet still controversial, one. The provincial Department of Health has begun to supply latex gloves to the abahloli in an effort to encourage improved standards of hygiene. Training in the identification of sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) has also been provided by the Health Department, a step that has apparently resulted in an increase in the numbers of referrals to STD clinics (CGE Report: Consultative Conference on Virginity Testing, 12–14 June 2000, pg. 18).

9. On one level, a pre-occupation with the accuracy of the virginity tests (evident, for example, in the appeal to Western biomedically-trained physicians to demonstrate the impossibility of determining whether or not a girl has been sexually active through examination of the hymen) misses the point. What is anthropologically more interesting is the fact that the sexuality and fertility of young unmarried girls — here reduced to a biological marker of chastity — is laden with such meaning and comes to symbolise the moral state of an entire (ethnic) community. Debates over whether the tests are scientifically accurate overlooks this important observation.

10. Gumede claims to have twenty branches in Kwa Mashu, and another fifty in Umlazi.

11. One such ceremony, held in August 2000 in a small community hall in the centre of Pietermaritzburg, deliberately mimicked both the format and symbolic content of local university graduation ceremonies. The abahloli wore black academic gowns, hoods and mortar boards, and received their “diplomas” from Ngobese — a leading umhloli in the movement — who appeared in this context to occupy the role of “vice-chancellor”. A “keynote speaker” from the Department of Health delivered a speech (about teaching life skills to youth in the fight against AIDS) while the izintombi provided entertainment, filling breaks in the programme with dancing and singing. Two such ceremonies have been performed in the Pietermaritzburg region in the past year.

12. This is a reference to the undesirability of children being born in a women’s natal (as opposed to affinal) home.

13. This connection between sex and the preservation/loss of youth is also extended to boys although, in all probability, the form and implications of this association would be quite different.
14. It is tempting to draw comparisons between these organised groupings of girls and the older phenomenon of age-sets, or izintanga, which Krige writes about (1936:36). For there appear to be a number of similarities between the two structures, the most striking of which is the presence — in both cases — of the iqhikiza, or leader. In pre-colonial Natal and Zululand, the iqhikiza took responsibility for the instruction of girls in her age-set and controlled their courtship behaviour. Today, the leaders of the izintombi groups — also known as amaqhikiza — appear to play a symbolic rather than strictly functional role.


16. Related to this is the Zulu concept of isoka — a term of admiration (often used humourously) to describe a man who has many sexual partners. There is, to my knowledge, no female equivalent, aside from the derogatory isifebe, which roughly translates as prostitute or whore.

17. For example, young men in the Centocow region have, in conversation, lamented the fact that girls take their time to respond to “love proposals”, and often end up rejecting the men eventually. Teenage boys at the local high school insist that girls visit them at night in their rooms and demand sex. Many girls themselves confirm these points as true.

18. The prospect of encouraging boys to practice sexual abstinence remains an unlikely one and this has been an obvious criticism of the virginity testing movement from the start. While abahloli make repeated statements of intent to include boys in their activity, this seldom happens in reality. Indeed, within the ideological framework adopted by the movement, it is not really possible. What this movement has created — albeit indirectly — is a female space where the management of adolescent female sexuality may be addressed. If the sexual responsibilities of young boys need to be similarly addressed — which they undoubtedly do — then perhaps their own, targeted interventions are the answer. What form such interventions would take is another question altogether.

19. Added to this are the implications of the prevailing “virgin cure” myth (where sex with a young virgin girl is believed to remove the HIV virus from a man’s body). Although difficult to establish how widely this myth is accepted, it has, nonetheless, been cited as a factor contributing to high rates of child rape in South Africa (Smith 2000).


References


