Ukuhlolwa kwezintombi practice in Crisis: Same-Sex Sexualities in traditional spaces.

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SHORT BIO

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ABSTRACT

The practice of virginity testing in various African societies, particularly among the Zulu nation, is perceived as a means to prevent sexually transmitted diseases and early pregnancies. It promotes abstinence among girls and involves assessing the integrity of the hymen. However, findings of this paper reveal that some girls engage in same-sex sexual activity during testing camps, violating the purpose of this tradition.
This paper highlights a significant gap at the intersection of human rights approaches to sex, gender, and sexuality with cultural practices. This calls for clarification within the Human Rights Bill regarding how practices, such as virginity testing, relate to same-sex relationships. By critically examining this issue, the paper aims to find meaningful solutions to the identified challenges, developing a virginity testing practice that is gender-diverse and inclusive of all, regardless of sexual identity.
This research emerges from the author's project conducted between August 2024 and July 2025. Several issues emerged from this research, but this paper focuses on the experiences of Onomehlo, who observed same-sex practices within the context of virginity testing. The study employed qualitative methods to collect data and utilised indigenous knowledge systems through an African feminist perspective to enrich the analysis of these findings.

KEYWORDS
virginity testing, Onomehlo, same-sex, cultural practices, indigenous knowledge system, human rights

Introduction

This article is based on a research project titled "Breaking Barriers: Understanding and Supporting Same-Sex Identities in South African Schools".[1] The study aimed to explore teachers' understanding of diverse sexualities and how they navigate daily challenges related to same-sex identifying learners in KwaZulu-Natal (KZN) schools. Since the participants were drawn from diverse sectors, different challenges emerged within each group.

[1] This research was conducted at the University of South Africa between September 2024 and July 2025.

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Participating groups included teachers (the primary focus), traditional leaders, traditional healers, individuals who identify as having same-sex sexual orientation, and other community members. Including broader community voices was important for the interrogation of sexual diversity as such identities exist in every part of society. Given that learners are embedded within and influenced by their communities, it is expected that teachers would not perceive the issues raised by Onomehlo as unrelated to them. Especially because some of the teachers believe in this tradition and their children participate. Onomehlo are responsible for conducting virginity testing and are seen as custodians of culture, therefore, they are not expected to accommodate behaviors that fall outside of heterosexuality.[2] Their role is to ensure that the hymen is still intact and that the girls are taught to abstain from sexual activities until they marry.[3] The problem that was raised by Onomehlo is that this practice of virginity testing is traditionally designed to prepare women for heterosexual marriage.[4] This context reflects patriarchal values whereby sexual diversity is not included in teachings regarding how girls should behave in matters of sex and sexuality.

This emerging issue highlights a gap that needs to be addressed in relation to gender, sexuality, and culture. This could have been identified early to prevent it from happening if same sex rights were discussed within a cultural context and all related parties involved. Currently, there is no clear guidance on how to respond to this situation and oNomehlo are not equipped to work with sexually diverse individuals. There is a clear need for clarification within the human rights framework regarding how practices, such as virginity testing, relate to same-sex sexual identities.

This paper aims to interrogate the relevance of virginity testing in contemporary society, where understandings of gender, sexuality, and marriage are increasingly diverse. It explores whether the cultural teachings

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2 Olawale R. Olaopa and Saheed Ogundare, "Traditional leadership, indigenous knowledge, and local governance: implications for good governance and sustainable development agenda," in *Indigenous People - Traditional Practices and Modern Development*, eds. Sanjeet Kumar and Manjula Bangalore Lakshminarayana (IntechOpen, 2024), 3.

3 Mehri Robatjazi et al, "Virginity and Virginity Testing: Then and Now." *International journal of medical toxicology and forensic medicine* 6 (2016): 36-43.2.

4 B. B. Wagner, "The shocking history of virgin tests and cures," *Ancient Origins*, September 21, 2019. https://www.ancient-origins.net/history-ancient-traditions/virginity-0012610.

associated with virginity testing can be reinterpreted in more inclusive and equitable ways. This work contributes to ongoing debates about gender, sexuality, and cultural practices by encouraging communities, cultural leaders, and policymakers to reconsider the objectives and teachings of virginity testing.

Moreover, it further advocates for an inclusive approach that acknowledges sexual diversity, promotes gender equality, and alleviates the pressure on young women to conform to heterosexual norms and compulsory heterosexuality.[5] In doing so, the research aims to foster cultural transformation while preserving positive values that support self-respect, dignity, and responsible sexual conduct. The paper proposes a reconceptualization of the teachings associated with virginity testing, shifting the focus from regulating female sexuality for the benefit of others to promoting self-respect, personal responsibility, and cultural values.

Theoretical Framework

In recent years, African Indigenous knowledge systems (AIKS) have gained increasing attention in scholarly discourse, challenging long-standing Western attempts to marginalise and undervalue African epistemologies. The growing recognition of indigenous African knowledge has opened new avenues for dialogue and reflection. On social media platforms, traditional leaders and spiritually-gifted individuals share indigenous wisdom, reaffirming its continued relevance. This is confirmed by Mkhize, who states,

> indigenous knowledge-sharing platforms such as the *imbizo* (a forum for discussion of traditional laws and policies usually called by a traditional leader), ***stokvel***[6] and storytelling around the fireplace, have largely been abandoned in society as a whole, in favour of electronic technology platforms.[7]

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5 Richard Parker and Peter Aggleton, *Culture, Society and Sexuality: A Reader*, (University College London Press, 1999), 228, https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203966105.

6 Stokvel is a group invited to form a team or club, starting with 5 members and potentially growing to 20 or more. Some collect money monthly to rotate funds among members, while others distribute collected funds at year's end. Other types include supporting each other with groceries or household needs.

7 Peter L. Mkhize, "The role of social trust in social media and indigenous knowledge sharing," *Indilinga African Journal of Indigenous Knowledge Systems* 13, no. 2 (2014): 2, https://hdl.handle.net/10520/EJC166454

Indigenous knowledge is profound. Despite its oral tradition, it has never lost its value and serves to be what a person is taught as they grow up that they use throughout their lives. The difference is that it is not recognized as knowledge that can be used in educational institutions. Unlike Western knowledge systems, which are often confined to academic institutions and commodified through formal education, indigenous knowledge is freely shared and accessible from birth to those who live within the community and are willing to receive it. It is easily accessible and free because it is the knowledge you are nurtured with from a young age. You acquire it at home, not through qualifications that require tuition fees, as is the case in universities, where the information provided costs a fortune and the grading system determines perceived cognitive capabilities and standards of achievement.[8] The broader acknowledgement of African Indigenous knowledge systems has prompted a renewed openness among people to embrace traditional wisdom. However, South Africa has lagged in comparison to other countries, such as Canada, Australia, and New Zealand, that have integrated some aspects of indigenous knowledge into national systems.[9] These countries have successfully adopted Indigenous knowledge frameworks to promote health and well-being in environmentally and cosmologically sustainable ways. For example, it is noted in Fisher and Parsons that the Treaty between the government and Māori was established to ensure that rivers are treated with respect, as they are not only physical resources but also hold spiritual and cultural significance.[10]

Although colonial legacies once sought to erase or devalue such knowledge, academic and research institutions are increasingly recognising its

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8 Achille Mbembe, "Decolonising Knowledge and the Question of the Archive," Transcription of talk series, (Wits University, 2015), 8, https://wiser.wits.ac.za/system/files/Achille%20Mbembe%20-%20Decolonizing%20Knowledge%20and%20the%20Question%20of%20the%20Archive.pdf.

9 Gordon Robert Boot and Anne Lowell, "Acknowledging and Promoting Indigenous Knowledges, Paradigms, and Practices Within Health Literacy-Related Policy and Practice Documents Across Australia, Canada, and New Zealand." *International Indigenous Policy Journal* 10, no. 3 (2019): 2. https://www.jstor.org/stable/48767600.

10 Karen Fisher and Meg Parsons, "River Co-governance and Co-management in Aotearoa New Zealand: Enabling Indigenous Ways of Knowing and Being*," Transnational Environmental* Law 9, no. 3 (2020): 476.

contributions, particularly within the healthcare sector.[11] Indigenous knowledge systems are deeply embedded within individuals and are primarily transmitted orally from one generation to the next, rather than through formal education or institutional training. According to Ugboma, the custodians of this knowledge transmit it orally from older generations to younger ones.[12] Indeed, African storytelling traditions exemplify the strength and effectiveness of this mode of knowledge sharing. This framework is particularly appropriate for engaging traditional communities, as it encourages researchers to be culturally sensitive and respectful of local customs and practices. Thus, this framework is appropriate for understanding what Onomehlo are experiencing in their line of work. Particularly because, it prioritises the values, beliefs, and traditions of the community, ensuring that research is conducted ethically and honors indigenous voices. Importantly, it positions the researcher alongside participants as a listener and learner, rather than as an outsider imposing foreign frameworks. Scholars such as Chilisa and Smith advocate for the decolonisation of Western research paradigms, arguing for the incorporation of indigenous frameworks that better reflect the lived experiences and cultural contexts of historically marginalised communities.[13] As Smith asserts, the primary beneficiaries of indigenous knowledge should be the communities from which it originates.[14]

This research framework further emphasises the use of African languages, particularly Zulu language, given the study's geographical location of KwaZulu-Natal. Language is a critical tool for conveying nuance, meaning, and cultural depth elements that are often lost when African knowledge is translated into colonial languages. Hoppers further agrees by saying "(a) language represents a specific worldview and ontology. There are words

11 Luis Cordeiro-Rodrigues and Thaddeus Metz, "Afro-communitarianism and the role of traditional African healers in the COVID-19 pandemic," *Public Health Ethics* 14, no. 1 (2021): 9, https://doi.org/10.1093/phe/phab006.

12 Margaret Uyouyou Ugboma, "Availability and use of indigenous knowledge amongst rural women in Nigeria," *Library Philosophy and Practice* (2014): 2.

13 Linda Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples* (New York: University of Otago Press, 1999); Bagele Chilisa, *Indigenous Research Methodologies* (United State of America: Sage Publications, 2012)

14 Linda Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*, (New York: University of Otago Press, 1999), 118.

and concepts that elude translation".[15] Contemporary African scholars increasingly recognize that indigenous perspectives are underrepresented in academic literature, often overshadowed by dominant Western ideologies. Attempts to present African culture and traditional experiences positively are sometimes dismissed as lacking modernity due to the pervasive critique of African traditions within mainstream academic frameworks. This raises an important question: how can one address African issues using tools that are foreign to the African context? Hoppers argue that "Africa has to find her own indigenous ways to define, identify and address her challenges".[16]

Scholars such as Durojaye and Leclerc-Madlala frequently refer to virginity testing as a tool that perpetuates patriarchy, gender inequality, and violence against women.[17] Often such perspectives come from a human rights perspective.[18] While such critiques are valid in some contexts, they seldom consider the cultural value and meaning the practice holds for its custodians. As a result, the tradition is often misunderstood or misrepresented as harmful.[19] External critiques may lack the cultural sensitivity needed for a nuanced understanding. Therefore, research conducted within African communities must draw on African Indigenous knowledge systems as they provide appropriate conceptual tools to engage, respectfully and meaningfully, with indigenous traditions. The next section reviews relevant literature on virginity testing and sexual diversity, highlighting the contributions of other scholars to these intersecting debates.

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15 Catherine A. Odora Hoppers, *Indigenous Knowledge and the Integration of Knowledge Systems: Towards a Philosophy of Articulation*, (New Africa Books, 2002), 55.

16 Hoppers, *Indigenous Knowledge and the Integration of Knowledge Systems: Towards a Philosophy of Articulation*, 66.

17 Durojaye, Ebenezer. "The Human Rights Implications of Virginity Testing in South Africa." *International Journal of Discrimination and the Law* 16, no. 4 (2016): 228-246. Accessed July 29, 2025. https://doi.org/10.1177/1358229116641242 , Leclerc-Madlala, Suzanne. "Virginity Testing: Managing Sexuality in a Maturing HIV/AIDS Epidemic." *Medical Anthropology Quarterly* 15, no. 4 (2001): 533-552. Accessed July 29, 2025. https://doi.org/10.1525/maq.2001.15.4.533

18 Robatjazi et el., "Virginity and Virginity Testing: Then and Now," 36-43.

19 UNICEF, *Protecting Children from Harmful Practices in Plural Legal Systems with a Special Emphasis on Africa* (New York: UNICEF, 2021), page 12

Literature Review

Virginity Testing, Human Rights, and feminist voice

Virginity testing is a cultural practice known across the African continent particularly prevalent in South Africa among the Nguni ethnic groups, with the Zulu people in KwaZulu-Natal being the most recognised practitioners. This practice typically involves assessing the integrity of the hymen.[20] Among the Zulu, it is expected that girls should preserve their virginity until marriage. Although this tradition diminished under colonial suppression, it experienced a revival after the advent of democracy in 1994. The resurgence coincided with the HIV/AIDS pandemic, positioning virginity testing as a perceived, preventative measure against early sexual activity and teenage pregnancy.[21] While other countries, such as India, Turkey, Swaziland, and Zimbabwe, also practice forms of virginity testing, the reasons differ across cultures.[22]

The revival of virginity testing has faced strong criticism from various scholars and organizations, including the World Health Organization, Olson,[23] Christianson and Eriksson,[24] Leclerc-Madlala,[25] as well as human rights advocates. Child rights activists argue that virginity testing is a "harmful traditional practice" infringing on girls' rights and dignity",[26] while organisations such as the Resources Aimed at the Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect (RAPCAN) have called for its ban based on Sections 9,

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20 Sinenhlanhla S. Chisale, "Decolonising HIV Prevention: A Critical Examination of *Ukusoma* and Virginity Testing," *Alternation* 23, no. 2 (2016): 231.

21 Sibusiso Masondo, "African Traditional Religion in the Face of Secularism in South Africa," *Focus* 62 (2011): 36.

22 Sheila Mokoboto-Zwane, "Virginity Testing Practices: The Best of Both Worlds," *Southern African Journal for Folklore Studies* 26, no. 1 (2016): 36.

23 Olson, Rose McKeon, and Claudia García-Moreno. "Virginity testing: a systematic review." *Reproductive Health* 14, no. 1 (2017): 61

24 Christianson, Monica., and Carola Eriksson. "A Girl Thing: Perceptions Concerning the Word 'Hymen' Among Young Swedish Women and Men." *Journal of Midwifery & Women's Health* 56, no. 2 (2011): 167-172.https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1542-2011.2011.00027.x

25 Suzanne Leclerc-Madlala, "Virginity Testing: Managing Sexuality in a Maturing HIV/AIDS Epidemic," Medical Anthropology Quarterly 15, no. 4 (2001): 533-552.

26 Elizabeth Thornberry, "Virginity Testing, History, and the Nostalgia For Custom in Contemporary South Africa," *African Studies Review* 58, no. 3 (2015): 130.

10, 12, and 14 of the South African Constitution.[27] These critics, such as Christianson and Eriksson[28] Leclerc-Madlala[29] argue that the practice is patriarchal, harmful and gender discriminating as it focuses solely on regulating girls' sexual behavior, reinforcing gender inequality. Durojaye further describes virginity testing as "an invasion of privacy".[30] Leclerc-Madlala similarly notes, “[t]he essence of this practice is to guard a girl’s virginity and prepare her for marriage,” emphasising its gendered bias and discrimination.[31] Regardless of all the criticism, the girls are not forced to participate, and the constitution states:

> Persons belonging to a cultural, religious or linguistic community may not be denied the right, with other members of that community, (a) to enjoy their culture, practise their religion and use their language; and (b) to form, join and maintain cultural, religious and linguistic associations and other organs of civil society.[32]

The argument about virginity testing as a harmful practice is debatable, as it is not perceived as such by the practitioners.[33] Indeed, Vincent argues that calls to ban virginity testing are inconsistent when male circumcision, a similarly invasive traditional practice with higher health risks, is not equally questioned. She reports that in the Eastern Cape, over 300 boys have died and more than 6,000 have been hospitalised from traditional circumcision since 1995. She further questions, “Why an outright ban on virginity testing but not on male circumcision?”. [34] Importantly, the South African Constitution (Act No. 19 of 2002) supports the right to participate in cultural and religious practices. Virginity testing is not necessarily forced upon girls; many undergo it voluntarily. However, we cannot guarantee that there are not parents who may compel their children for various reasons. This pressure may stem from

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27 Mokoboto-Zwane, “Virginity Testing Practices: The Best of Both Worlds,” 38.

28 (2025),

29 Leclerc-Madlala, “Virginity Testing”

30 Ebenezer Durojaye, “The Human Rights Implications of Virginity Testing in South Africa,” *International Journal of Discrimination and the Law* 16, no. 4 (2016): 237, https://doi.org/10.1177/1358229116641242

31 Leclerc-Madlala, “Virginity Testing,” 543.

32 Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996 s 31(1)(a)–(b)

33 Maluleke (2012); Mswela (2009), Bruce (2004).

34 Louise Vincent, “Virginity Testing in South Africa: Re-Traditioning the Postcolony,” *Culture, Health & Sexuality* 8, no. 1 (2006): 6.

religious obligations, roles within the Church, or traditional expectations in their communities.[35]

Virginity, Marriage, and Traditional Ceremonies

Virginity testing is deeply connected to the concept of *ilobolo*, often referred to as "bride wealth or bride price". This term can be misleading as it suggests that one can put a price on a woman's life. Thornberry explains that families historically linked virginity to *ilobolo* as a symbol of a girl's value.[36] However, the original purpose of *ilobolo* was to build relationships between families and not for monetary gain. Viewing *ilobolo* merely as "bride wealth" undervalues its significance, as there is no price for a human being. However, when examining how *ilobolo* proceedings take place in a contemporary society, it is clear to see how women are looked at as commodities where virgin girls cost more than non-virgin girls.[37] This difference is based on the fact that a virgin girl has no sexual experience, and are, therefore, considered to be pure and never touched; her first sexual experience will be with her husband. In contrast, a non-virgin girl has sexual experience, which means that the two girls are not the same. Within a Zulu context, the virgin girl holds a higher status than the non-virgin and result in the two girls to be assigned different responsibilities in society. For instance, virgin girls are able to participate in certain rituals that non-virgin girls are not allowed to participate in, such as Nomkhubulwane amongst amaZulu, a high valued practice that requires purity.[38] Thus, the *ilobolo* for virgin girls is higher than for non-virgin girls. In respect of what this paper is presenting as a problem, the same-sex practice within the virginity testing space, this further questions the purity of the virgin girls.

Another overlooked aspect of virginity testing is its role in ensuring the legitimacy of children. In many African traditions, especially among royals, marrying a virgin woman symbolises paternity assurance. An important

35 Sinenhlanhla Sithulisiwe Chisale and Deirdre Cassandra Byrne, "Feminism at the margins: the case of the virginity bursaries in South Africa," *African Identities* 16, no. 4 (2018): 8.

36 Thornberry, "Virginity Testing, History, and the Nostalgia for Custom in Contemporary South Africa," 135.

37 Carly Matas, "Modern American Evangelical Conceptions of Girls' Virginity: Their Origins in Patriarchal Property Discourse of Deuteronomic Family Laws," *Denison Journal of Religion* 12, no. 4 (2013): 36.

38 Masondo, "African Traditional Religion in the Face of Secularism in South Africa," 35.

national ceremony, the *Umkhosi Womhlanga*, is known as the Reed Dance Festival amongst the Zulu ethnic group. Events like the Umkhosi Womhlanga festival are spaces where Zulu kings may choose virgin wives, underlining the importance of discipline and dignity in lineage.[39] In this ceremony, girls showcase their pride in who they are and their cultural identity. Ntuli states, "The majority of *izintombi* from cultural sites, viewed *ubuntombi* as the source of their pride, worth, dignity, increased self-esteem and identity as treasured in their bodies".[40] Girls who undergo virginity testing often participate in the annual Umhlanga held at the Zulu royal palace. Before the festival, girls stay in camps and are tested monthly by elder women known as *Onomehlo*. Only those who pass the testing receive a certificate and may participate in the ceremony.[41] Nomagugu Ngobese played a key role in reviving the Umhlanga festival to promote healthy sexual behaviour and cultural pride among young women.[42] Moreover, she was significant in the revival of Nomkhubulwane culture and virginity testing practice.[43] The late King Goodwill Zwelithini supported the tradition and opposed efforts to ban virginity testing, declaring it was "at the core of our pride".[44] Although allegations have emerged about *Onomehlo* allowing non-virgins to participate, these are not representative of the broader tradition. The Reed Dance remains a respected cultural event celebrating virginity as a symbol of discipline and dignity.

Furthermore, virginity is valued not only in traditional African contexts but also in Abrahamic religious teachings. This is confirmed by Chisale and Moyo when they argue that "(t)he church does not practically and openly test adolescent girls for virginity but it practices this tradition through its church teachings and emphasis on sexual purity".[45] Christianity and Islam, both widely practised in South Africa, also advocate for abstinence before marriage. Indeed, Robatjazi et al. argue that sexual abstinence is regarded

39 Matas, "Modern American Evangelical Conceptions of Girls' Virginity," 36.

40 G. T, Ntuli, "Whose Human Rights Anyway?' Post-colonial Perspectives of Being Intombi (Virgin) in Contemporary South Africa," *Critical Arts* 36, no. 3-4 (2022): 66.

41 Vincent, "Virginity Testing in South Africa: Re-Traditioning the Postcolony," 18.

42 Thornberry, "Virginity Testing, History, and the Nostalgia for Custom in Contemporary South Africa," 132.

43 Masondo, "African Traditional Religion in the Face of Secularism in South Africa," 36.

44 Vincent, "Virginity Testing in South Africa: Re-Traditioning the Postcolony," 6.

45 Sinenhlanhla Sithulisiwe Chisale and Herbert Moyo, "Church Discipline as Virginity Testing: Shaping Adolescent Girls' Sexuality in the Evangelical Lutheran Churches in Africa," *Alternation* 23, no. 2 (2016): 7

as a moral value across many religions.[46] However, there's a gender imbalance whereby girls are expected to remain virgins and boys often face no such expectation and may engage in sexual activity without scrutiny.[47]

Questioning the reliability of virginity testing methods

The reliability of hymen inspection as a method of verifying virginity is being increasingly questioned. Some girls may engage in alternative sexual practices, such as oral or anal sex, to preserve the hymen and avoid social shame.[48] These behaviours highlight the psychological and social pressures placed on young women. Additionally, increased exposure to sexual content through social media has influenced children's understanding of intimacy. Pornographic films are not as restricted as before, resulting in the exposure of all sorts of sexual behaviours to underage children. Whether they are in places that are considered dangerous or preserved for adults only, is irrelevant, as pornography through almost all digital devices, including cell phones, enables sexual communication, complicating traditional notions of virginity.[49]

Research Methodology

This article emerges from a broader project aimed at understanding the challenges faced by teachers in addressing sexual diversity in schools. The study was conducted in KwaZulu-Natal, encompassing both rural and urban areas, specifically in Durban and Pietermaritzburg. A total of eight schools participated, including four primary and four high schools, located in both urban and rural settings, such as Newlands West, Umlazi, Ntuzuma, Ngcolosi, Inanda, and Stanger.

The project received ethical clearance from the School of Humanities and involved a diverse group of participants, including teachers, traditional leaders, traditional healers, individuals identifying with same-sex sexual orientations, and other community members. Engaging a broad array of

46 Chisale and Byrne, “Feminism at the margins”, 8.
47 Robatjazi et al., “Virginity and Virginity Testing: Then and Now,” 38.
48 Robatjazi et al., “Virginity and Virginity Testing: Then and Now,” 38.
49 Deevia Bhana et al., "Young People Becoming Intimate on Social Media: Digital Desires and Gender Dynamics," *Sexualities* 28, no. 4 (2025): 1654.

community voices was essential as learners are significantly influenced by their cultural contexts.

Utilizing a qualitative approach grounded in African feminist theories and indigenous knowledge, the research captured diverse perspectives and fostered open dialogue.[50] A multifaceted research design was employed that included individual interviews with open-ended questions to allow for in-depth discussions, along with group discussions and a workshop to facilitate the exchange of ideas and compare insights from the three methods of data collection.[51] The three methods were employed to verify the information gathered, ensuring a comprehensive understanding.

Individual interviews were conducted with 13 participants, with subsequent group discussions involving six participants and a workshop with 10 participants. The participants included teachers, educators, parents, traditional leaders, members of LGBTQIA organizations, and representatives from religious communities. All individual interviews, group discussions, and the workshop occurred between October 2024 and May 2025. Individual interviews took place in the participants' homes with appointments scheduled for each session. The individual interviews consisted of two LGBTQIA individuals, five teachers, three oNomehlo (traditional leaders), one traditional healer, and two NPO Directors. Most participants played multiple roles. For instance, some were parents of both heterosexual and homosexual-identifying individuals.

The focus group and workshop were held at Unisa Durban Main Campus between April and May 2025. Participants from the individual interviews also took part in both the group discussion and the workshop to validate the data collected. The focus group discussions and workshop were particularly dominated by two groups: teachers and oNomehlo.

From the 13 individual interviews, oNomehlo, who represent traditional leadership in their communities, ranged in age from 55 to 75. Three Onomehlo were from rural areas, while one was from an urban setting. Although the primary focus of the project was on school teachers, the researcher recognized the importance of sharing the concerns of oNomehlo,

50 Bagele Chilisa, *Indigenous research methodologies*, (Sage, 2012), 19.

51 Martyn Denscombe, *The Good Research Guide: For Small-Scale Social Research Projects*, (McGraw-Hill Education, 2017), 166.

given that their influence extends across various fields. Regardless of whether an intombi (a virgin) is at university, in school, or employed, they fall under the responsibility of oNomehlo as long as they participate in virginity testing.

All names used are pseudonyms, and any names you see do not reflect the real identities of the participants. The study received written approval from the Research Ethics Review Committee at the University of South Africa, with the research certificate number: Rec-240816-052.

Discussion

Virginity testing and same sex sexualities

The study reveals that virginity testing is a socially and communally significant practice that practitioners, along with defenders of this practice, work hard to uphold. During initial discussion with Onomehlo, it seemed that they are not challenged by cultural sexual practices such as *ukusoma* (non-penetrative sex). However, they are challenged by same-sex practices, and the virginity testing camps have yet to determine how to deal with this challenge. Further, the training of *oNomehlo* does not include same-sex practices, leaving them with few resources when faced with these challenges in the testing environment.

Ukusoma: While participants favour virginity testing and abstinence, they acknowledge that girls have sexual feelings and may wish to find alternative ways to satisfy them. Thus, the culture of *ukusoma* is accepted within the virginity testing practice, contrasting with modern influences that undermine traditional African customs. MaNxumalo, a female traditional healer from rural KwaNgcolosi, shared that *izintombi* can date but are expected to practice *ukusoma*. However, it is worth noted that *ukusoma* has its own challenges as it may also lead to conception.[52] MaNxumalo recounted an incident where her cousin became pregnant while participating in *ukusoma*. Despite having an intact hymen, the girl was six months pregnant, confirmed by a local doctor. The discovery was devastating for her, leading her to contemplate suicide, resulting in her family closely monitoring her actions. In

[52] Chisale, "Decolonising HIV Prevention: A Critical Examination of *Ukusoma* and Virginity Testing," 231.

the end, the Ndlovu family (the family of a man who impregnated her) did justice by making her their bride, softening the impact of stress. When one looks at how the groom's reaction, from an African perspective of doing things, this was the expected outcome given that this was a couple being intimate and both parties agreed to participate.

MaNxumalo further shared another story that involved her patient, Zinzi, who was engaged to be married and also practised *ukusoma.* Zinzi experienced vaginal wetness when cuddling with and kissing her future husband, something that did not occur in his absence. Since Zinzi was also part of *izintombi* (girls who participate in virginity testing), she was concerned that her future husband might leave her if she remained consistently wet when she was with him. MaNxumalo took it upon herself as a healer and a counsellor to explain to Zinzi what was happening to her body physiologically. Additionally, a similar case took place in a group of girls under *Nomehlo* Ntombi, who recounted a troubling incident where a girl who had participated in virginity testing later became pregnant, claiming she had not engaged in vaginal sex but had experienced anal sex. Despite identifying as a virgin, she still became pregnant and ultimately gave birth. *Nomehlo* Ntombi expressed profound concern over such incidents revealing that conversations among girls often included phrases like "my friend is fingering me" or "my friend is very fond of me," indicating a deeper level of sexual intimacy.

Same-sex behaviour: MaNxumalo further shared a story that shocked the community, where two girls were dating, which was discovered during *izintombi* camping. She knows the story because she heard it from her granddaughter who was also attending the local virginity testing led by *Nomehlo* Dolosi (see the section below). Although Dolosi did not elaborate on the incident, it was evident that the topic sat heavily on her, apparently as a result of her prior experiences with court cases, which she did not elaborate on.[53] MaNxumalo stated that one girl accused a Mahlobo girl (Lesbian) of taking her virginity. Despite the *Onomehlo* confirming that penetration had occurred, they did not agree with the victims' story, and demanded that she must tell the truth because, from what they saw, it was not the finger that did such damage. The accuser later admitted that her

[53] The mother of the accused girl was very angry about the accusation she took the matter to Court and Nomehlo MaNxumalo had to attend the court cases which disturber her deeply.

boyfriend had refused thigh sex and desired to penetrate her instead. The mother of the accused girl was furious and contemplated going to the media in defence of her daughter, who identifies as a lesbian and has never been with a man. Ultimately, a goat was paid to cleanse the falsely accused and another goat was paid to cleanse *izintombi (izi-plural)* to fulfil one of the principles of the practice. When *intombi (I-singula)* has crossed the line, she is required to cleanse the *izintombi*. After this incident, MaNxumalo decided to withdraw her granddaughter from the virginity testing practice entirely. Although MaNxumalo did not provide details regarding the court proceedings, this story closely parallels one narrated by Nomehlo Bhengu.

Bhengu reported observing issues with girls engaging in same-sex relations at testing camps, which was also discussed during parents' meetings. Bhengu, mentioned that she does not work alone, stating that there are other *Nomehlo* collaborating with her locally (referring to *Nomehlo* Dolosi who is leading virginity testing in the area) .Bhengu recounted an incident at the testing camp where she noticed unusual behavior among girls who were under a blanket and appeared to be doing something “suspicious”. One of the girls involved was a relative of *Nomehlo* Dolosi. *Nomehlo* Dolosi confronted the girls and warned them that the matter would be brought up at the next parents' meeting. She informed the mothers of both girls but the mother of the girl who is her relative was very upset about the accusation and led to legal action being taken against *Nomehlo* Dolosi, in response to the assumption that she was accusing the other girl of inappropriate behavior. The situation escalated and *Nomehlo* Dolosi had to attend the case concerning the girls. After the incident, the accused girl, though not being forced to go, chose to leave the testing camp. Despite efforts to handle the situation, only one parent showed understanding and agreed to speak to her daughter. *Nomehlo* Dolosi shared that the topic of girls dating and touching each other was also addressed during the parents' meeting, which included representatives from the Art and Culture department. Representatives from the departments acknowledged that they were aware of sexual diversity but did not provide feedback or guidance on how to address the issue. *Nomehlo* Dolosi further confirmed that there are girls with different sexualities undergoing virginity testing. She articulated that the situation is complex: “For some girls, same-sex behavior is a game; for others, it is part of their identity”.

Nomehlo Ntombi from Umlazi township further shared a similar incidents. During their annual year-end celebration at the beach, she noticed one girl with love bites prompting an inquiry with her daughter who replied, “Mah, you should know that there is a lot which might shock you”. This led *Nomehlo* to discover that dating among girls during camps had become prevalent, with both romantic and sexual behavior occurring, including kissing and relationship proposals. To address this, she organised a special meeting for girls aged 13 and older, excluding parents to create a safe space for open discussion. During the meeting, she confronted the girl in question, who initially denied involvement with a boy but later admitted to peer pressure and apologized.

Training, Mentorship and Organising: *Nomehlo* Ntombi hails from an urban background and embarked on her journey in cultural mentorship back in the 90s. She began mentoring girls to become *uNomehlo* around 1998 and was trained in conducting virginity testing. Ntombi had the guidance of her mother who played a crucial role in equipping her with the knowledge about the developmental stages of girls into womanhood. Her mother instilled in her the significance of mentoring young girls on proper conduct, respect, and cultural customs. Another pivotal figure in her journey was Mam Dube, a *uNomehlo* from KwaMashu Township, who greatly influenced Ntombi’s development through her mentorship and training. After a while of working with Mam Dube, feeling ready to work independently, Ntombi began taking the responsibility of testing the girls. This was a shift from her previous practice of taking the girls to KwaMashu to the Umlazi hall, known as TeHuise Hall. Ntombi articulated various challenges that accompanied her role as u*Nomehlo*. The responsibilities of organising and coordinating events such as the Umkhosi Womhlanga posed significant challenges, particularly due to issues with logistics and transportation. To address these obstacles, Nomehlo Ntombi formed a local organisation, named Zizamele, that operated independently due to a lack of external support where Nomehlo Ntombi participate in a number of activities. Ntombi recounted an incident where she personally contributed R18,300.00 to ensure the girls could attend the Umhlanga ceremony after they found themselves stranded. This experience took a toll on her mental health, leading to significant stress and depression. Even with claims of support from the Department of Arts and Culture, she noted a lack of tangible assistance. Zizamele also bears the financial burden of uniforms and all costs related to the girls' care and cultural development, placing this responsibility solely on the mentors or o*Nomehlo*.

Despite these hurdles, *Nomehlo* Ntombi remains passionate about nurturing well-groomed young women who can positively impact society.

Data Analysis

The literature indicates that virginity testing is a cultural practice with a long history, and continues to be practised worldwide. Wagner, in his article, starts by saying, "Virginity has been the obsession of men for thousands of years. It has driven the best people, like the virgin warrior Joan of Arc, to fight for just cause".[54] He draws on different perspectives to explain the main reason for the importance of virginity testing, drawing from religious and cultural traditions of different societies. He argues that "Marriage was a legally binding contract between two families to gain power, land, reputation, and peace. The total value of a woman depended on her virginity".[55] Even today, it remains important in many African countries where this practice is still observed, although its influence is gradually declining due to changing social conditions. Women have become more independent and are able to exercise their rights. Furthermore, the emergence and recognition of diverse sexual orientations and gender identities has contributed to a weakening of the traditional connection between heterosexual marriage and virginity testing.[56] In South Africa, although the for its revival was to prevent sexual disease and pregnancy, the practice is still connected to heterosexual marriage.

While each country has its own methods and motivations for practising virginity testing, a common tendency is that it focuses on women's, not men's, sexuality. This gendered focus is often at odds with the perspectives of human rights advocates and feminist scholars,[57] prompting the question of why the emphasis on abstinence is predominantly placed on women. This question is crucial as such a focus risks neglecting the sexual health responsibilities of men, many of whom still expect to marry virgin women.

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54 Wagner, "The shocking history of virgin tests and cures."

55 Wagner, "The shocking history of virgin tests and cures."

56 Chisale, Sinenhlanhla Sithulisiwe, and Deirdre Cassandra Byrne. "Feminism at the Margins: The Case of the Virginity Bursaries in South Africa." *African Identities,* Van Zyl, Mikki. "Are Same-Sex Marriages UnAfrican? Same-Sex Relationships and Belonging in Post-Apartheid South Africa." *Journal of Social Issues* 67, no. 2 (2011): 335-357.

57 Leclerc-Madlala, "Virginity Testing: Managing Sexuality in a Maturing HIV/AIDS Epidemic," 543.

This imbalance appears unjust as it suggests that women must abstain from sexual activity, while men are free to engage sexually without societal repercussions or expectations to wait until marriage. Feminist scholars argue that the tradition of virginity testing perpetuates the patriarchy, serving as a mechanism for grooming girls for heterosexual marriage.[58] In this framing, the practice benefits men more than women. Furthermore, feminists contend that, in patriarchal societies, women are often viewed as sexual objects or reproductive vessels with their roles defined by the desire to please or serve men.[59] This approach to the upbringing of the girl child is no longer relevant and no longer adequately responds to the challenges of today's changing society where sexuality and marriage are understood in more diverse ways than in the past. As this paper demonstrates, there are clear signs of same-sex practices within virginity testing camps, indicating that these cultural practices are influenced by wider social changes. Therefore, despite efforts to prepare girls for heterosexual marriage, parents can no longer assume that their daughters will automatically enter heterosexual unions, as was traditionally expected. The presence of diverse sexual orientations within these camps suggests that some girls may choose different forms of relationships, including same-sex unions. This challenges the original purpose of virginity testing, especially when its practices are still based on heteronormative assumptions.

Contrary to the views of feminist scholars, the African indigenous knowledge perspective of virginity testing may also offer cultural and social value to its practitioners. In this view, scholars such as Afisi and Mkasi argue that gender roles are not necessarily hierarchical but may carry different types of power and responsibilities, often seen as complementary. Afisi reports that, "Records of history have however shown that there existed no gender inequality in traditional African society rather; women's role was complimentary to that of men".[60] While Mkasi argues that, in patriarchal societies, gender roles are assigned based on physical ability, naturalness, and sensitivity rather than on explicitly oppressive roles or the subordination

58 Leclerc-Madlala, "Virginity Testing: Managing Sexuality in a Maturing HIV/AIDS Epidemic," 543.

59 Leclerc-Madlala, "Virginity Testing: Managing Sexuality in a Maturing HIV/AIDS Epidemic," 543.

60 Oseni Taiwo Afisi, "Power and Womanhood in Africa: An Introductory Evaluation." *The Journal of Pan African Studies* 3, no. 6 (2010): 5.

of women. Male gender roles are associated with the protection of the family, as men are perceived to have bodies built for this purpose, while female bodies are associated with childbirth. As a result, these biological differences are linked to specific gendered responsibilities. Mkasi warns that failing to argue against traditional gender roles may blur these responsibilities.[61] Hence, emphasis on virginity testing for girls is rooted in the belief that women have a crucial role in the continuity of the family, as they carry and give birth to children, thus, ensuring lineage. Marrying a virgin is seen to guarantee paternity and maintain family bloodlines, regarded as vital in many African communities.[62] Indeed, children born outside of marriage may threaten family stability and cohesion, particularly in royal families. As such, it can be argued that virginity testing is a traditional method of ensuring a child's paternity is known. If modern methods, such as paternity tests, exist to determine child paternity, why are traditional methods looked down upon, and even seen as illegal, when these methods have worked for centuries? Virginity testing is a low-cost way to assure paternity, whereas Western methods require money that poor families often cannot afford. Thus, it is essential to understand practices such as virginity testing within their specific African cultural context and recognise the significance they hold for practitioners.

As cited in the literature review, many efforts have been made to reject or abolish the tradition of virginity testing, yet these efforts have largely failed, and even state interventions have struggled to eliminate the practice.[63] This reflects the deep-rooted importance of culture and local knowledge in shaping behaviour and identity. To support their views, practitioners argue that virginity testing, when accompanied by other culturally approved practices, does not necessarily curtail sexuality or infringe upon girls' sexual rights. Within the practice, culturally appropriate methods are used to express sexual desire. One such method is the tradition of *ukusoma* that

61 Lindiwe P. Mkasi, "African same-sexualities and indigenous knowledge: Creating a space for dialogue within patriarchy," *Verbum et Ecclesia* 37, no. 2 (2016): 5.

62 Matas, "Modern American Evangelical Conceptions of Girls' Virginity," 36.

63 Leclerc-Madlala, "Virginity Testing: Managing Sexuality in a Maturing HIV/AIDS Epidemic," 543.

allows partners to satisfy sexual desires without engaging in penetrative sex before marriage.[64]

Ukusoma is a well-recognised practice in many African communities, particularly among virgin girls (maidens). Although it is not without risks as *ukusoma* can occasionally result in pregnancy, it is nevertheless culturally accepted as a legitimate way of navigating sexuality. As much as this practice is seen as an accepted way of dealing with sexual feeling, the cases presented above demonstrate that is also has challenges. The problem with the concept of *ukusoma* is that it threatens the purity emphasized in virginity testing. During *ukusoma*, intimacy occurs, which can heighten sexual feelings. When those feelings are heightened, anything is possible as in the case of Zinzi, who became pregnant during *ukusoma*. The story reveals that she became aroused while kissing and cuddling with her husband. If girls are expected to remain pure, the practice of *ukusoma* is a problem to the practice of virginity testing. Thus, it is important to revise any practices related to virginity testing.[65]

The study confirms that *ukusoma* is not completely safe against pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases. This calls for a re-evaluation of the practice as the two purposes it is meant to serve, pregnancy prevention and curbing sexual desire, are no longer being fulfilled. Furthermore, it suggests that the method is outdated and needs to be reconsidered in light of current knowledge about sex and sexualities.

Same-Sex Sexuality and Virginity Testing

It is increasingly evident that the tradition of virginity testing faces significant challenges, particularly due to the presence of girls within the practice who are in same-sex relationships. The issue is not their sexual orientation but, rather, the fact that these relationships occur within a tradition designed to uphold heterosexual norms, particularly the preparation of girls for heterosexual marriage. Virginity testing is a foundation of heterosexual

64 Mbalenhle Melodious Memela, "Gender Inequality in South African Nguni Cultures, as Portrayed in Selected Nguni Literary Text," (Master's Dissertation, University of Pretoria, 2022), 17.

65 Ntuli, "Whose Human Rights Anyway?' Post-colonial Perspectives of Being Intombi (Virgin) in Contemporary South Africa," 62.

marriage as it assures the legitimacy of children born within marriage.[66] This is a preventative approach used by indigenous people to ensure that all children are born under the same surname.

When examining the perspectives of *oNomehlo* (virginity testers), it becomes clear that there is confusion and uncertainty about how to address this emerging complexity. Parents of virgin girls are divided, whereby some choose to simply withdraw their daughters from the practice while others choose to escalate the issue through legal channels. These responses add further strain on the work of the *oNomehlo* who are often unequipped to manage matters relating to sexual diversity. Despite these growing tensions, government departments have been slow to intervene, even though South Africa's democratic framework recognises children's rights to sexual expression and orientation.[67] A critical gap exists where the *oNomehlo* often lack the knowledge and understanding of same-sex identities, whereas the young people involved are becoming increasingly aware of their rights.

However, while sexual freedom is acknowledged, it is equally important to guide young participants on appropriate contexts for sexual expression. The testing camps are traditionally intended as spaces to instil values of morality, self-discipline, and cultural identity and not as venues for dating or sexual activity. This is further emphasised in African indigenous knowledge systems where cultural respect is prioritised. Within these camps, discussions of sexuality, especially same-sex sexuality, remain largely absent, either due to cultural taboos or the historical assumption that all girls attending identify as heterosexual. As a result, engaging in sexual behaviour at these camps can lead to confusion and discomfort among other participants, particularly those who are still too young or unprepared to understand matters related to sex and sexuality. An emerging concern is that some girls who may not originally identify as lesbian or bisexual might engage in same-sex activity, including sexual experimentation with other girls as a way to preserve their virginity. Since *oNomehlo* focus their examinations on the hymen, some girls reportedly engage in anal sex or other non-vaginal sexual acts.[68] These

66 Ayodele S. Jegede and A. S. Fayemiwo, "Cultural and Ethical Challenges of Assisted Reproductive Technologies in the Management of Infertility Among the Yoruba of Southwestern Nigeria," *African Journal of Reproductive Health* 14, no. 2 (2010): 121.

67 Republic of South Africa*, Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996,* chap. 2, sec. 9(3).

68 Robatjazi et al., "Virginity and Virginity Testing: Then and Now," 38.

practices allow them to retain ubu*ntombi* (virginity) status while still exploring their sexuality. This raises a critical question of, if girls engage in sexual activity that does not involve the hymen, can they still be considered virgins?

When *Nomehlo* Ntombi discovered that one of her girls was pregnant despite still being a virgin, it clearly shows that Onomehlo are not keeping pace with the changing patterns of sexual behavior in contemporary society. Furthermore, when girls engage in anal sex, it poses greater health risks, as this practice can make them more susceptible to infections. These new developments in virginity testing practices require parents to be careful in how they discuss the subject with their children. Parents should give their children space to speak openly about it and decide whether or not to participate, thereby reducing parental pressure.

The findings of this study suggest that many girls undergoing virginity testing consciously participate in non-penetrative sexual practices as a strategy to maintain their virginity status. This highlights the complex ways in which young women navigate societal expectations, particularly the desire to please parents and uphold their community's moral standards. These practices may include kissing, mutual touching, and oral and anal sex, with careful avoidance of vaginal penetration to prevent rupturing the hymen. These behaviours lead to the discussion that traditionalists argue against, in which they see same-sex sexualities as polluting cultural practices.

The challenge of same-sex sexuality in virginity testing camps brings me to an observation made by Khuzwayo-Magwaza.[69] In her article, she argues that virginity testing could be used as a suitable practice to avoid heterosexual marriages, arguing that,

> Sometimes cultural practices such as virginity testing become a hideout for those who do not want to engage in heterosexual relationships. At times, virginity testing spaces could be considered as safe spaces since girls who decide to keep their virginity for a lifetime could participate in this practice for life.[70]

[69] Lindiwe P. Khuzwayo-Magwaza, "The 'Closet' and 'Out of the Closet' Versus 'Private Space' and 'Public Space': Indigenous Knowledge System as the Key to Understanding Same-Sex Sexualities in Rural Communities." *Religions* 12 (2021).

[70] Khuzwayo-Magwaza, "The 'Closet' and 'Out of the Closet' Versus 'Private Space' and 'Public Space'," 10.

The study further indicates that participation in virginity testing is not always voluntary, and unspoken factors often make it a private space for girls with diverse sexual orientations. This means that, no matter how openly or extensively sexual orientation or human rights are discussed to allow for the expression of sexuality, the dynamics of the "closet" and "coming out" will always persist.[71]

Conclusion

This study has shown that cultural practices such as *ukusoma* and virginity testing continue to play an important role in many African communities and are unlikely to disappear. However, the findings suggest that these practices no longer fully achieve their original objectives, particularly in a context of changing sexual behaviours and increasing recognition of sexual diversity. As a result, there is a need to reconsider and adapt the methods and teachings associated with virginity testing to ensure their continued relevance.

The study highlights the importance of providing *oNomehlo* (virginity testers) with updated knowledge and training on sexuality, sexual diversity, and contemporary social realities. Such efforts should involve the collaboration of traditional leaders, cultural experts, educators, scholars, parents, government stakeholders and policy makers. Drawing on African Indigenous knowledge systems, any adaptation of the practice should respect indigenous ways of knowing while responding to contemporary challenges.

The findings further demonstrate the need for dialogue on the meaning of *ubuntombi* (virginity or maidenhood) and how cultural practices can accommodate diverse sexual identities without losing their cultural significance.

Ultimately, the intersection between same-sex sexuality and virginity testing reveals tensions between cultural continuity and social change. The study, therefore, advocates for an inclusive approach that acknowledges sexual diversity, promotes gender equality, and respects cultural traditions. As

[71] Khuzwayo-Magwaza, "The 'Closet' and 'Out of the Closet' Versus 'Private Space' and 'Public Space'."

societies evolve, virginity testing should no longer be understood primarily in relation to heterosexual marriage or expectations centred on men's interests. Rather, it should be reconceptualised as a practice that promotes self-respect, personal responsibility, dignity, and cultural identity in contemporary society. Such a shift would enable the tradition to remain meaningful and relevant while more effectively responding to the realities of contemporary society.

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