PRAXIS

Virginity Inspection Past and Present: Reflections of a Xhosa Traditional Practitioner

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SHORT BIO

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ABSTRACT

In South Africa, the practice of virginity inspection *(ukuhlolwa kobuntombi)* remains an arena of intense debate. Traditional practitioners, civil society organizations, and statutory bodies frequently occupy opposing positions. While legislative instruments seek to regulate the practice on human rights grounds, many rural parents and cultural custodians continue to implement it, viewing state intervention as an intrusion into indigenous custom. Proponents argue that *ukuhlolwa kobuntombi* plays a significant role in mitigating gender-based violence (GBV), reducing sexually transmitted infections (STIs), and preventing teenage pregnancies. Consequently, the number of community-based non-governmental organizations (NGOs) focused on female virginity inspection have expanded, irrespective of the age or vision of their founders.

A significant proportion of the scholarship on *ukuhlolwa kobuntombi* in South Africa has focused on Zulu practices, particularly the Reed Dance, while comparatively little attention has been paid to Xhosa communities in the Eastern Cape (Thornberry 2015). Addressing this gap, this paper reflects on the shift of *ukuhlolwa kobuntombi* from its historical origins, as a private, family-based custom among Xhosa-speaking communities of the Eastern Cape, to its contemporary manifestation, as a public, commercialised practice or event. It interrogates the modern practice for its use of age cohorts, naming of events, and communal ownership of events. Finally, the paper argues that contemporary organizational dynamics do not allow these public events to serve the empowerment of women within traditional cultures when they also cater to commercial and patriarchal interests.

KEYWORDS
Virginity inspection; AmaXhosa; Indigenous Knowledge Systems; African spirituality; Gender; Cultural heritage

Introduction

This study is written from the perspective of both a scholar and a traditional practitioner. As an elderly Xhosa woman, actively involved in cultural and religious practices within rural communities of the Eastern Cape, I have participated in and observed numerous traditional ceremonies including

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discussions surrounding *ukuhlolwa kwentombi*. The study draws on participant observation, informal and formal interviews, and long-term engagement with traditional leaders, cultural practitioners, and community members. This insider position provides access to cultural meanings and interpretations that may not be readily accessible to researchers working from outside the communities being studied. At the same time, I remain aware of the need to critically reflect on these experiences and situate them within broader academic debates concerning culture, gender, and tradition.

Accordingly, the following offers reflections on virginity inspection from the perspective of a traditional practitioner reflecting the origins and early practices and considering how these are lived out in present day South Africa in local ritual spaces in the Eastern Cape. What follows is my personal analysis of the practice. I have, as an elderly, rural woman myself, been involved in participant observation in certain ritual performances and customs in the locality. In addition, I frequently have formal and informal interviews with other rural women from the organizations of virginity inspections and those from traditional leadership. My analysis, here, is also supported by conversations with key individuals whose permission to participate in this study was obtained, including Queen Nonzuzo Sigcawu of Nqadu Great Place and Mr Sinoyolo Nokhutywa, a lecturer at iYuniversity Walter Sisulu in Mthatha.

The paper will first provide a historical and cultural background of virginity inspections among the indigenous Xhosa speaking of the Eastern Cape, specifically during the times when it was based on family values and customs. The discussion will then highlight the activities of the present organizations to discuss how these practically function, whether for the betterment of the women or for the fulfilment of the interests of patriarchy.

While previous studies have explored virginity inspection from legal, public health, and human rights perspectives, little attention has been given to the perspectives of Xhosa traditional practitioners themselves. Furthermore, there is limited research on how contemporary organisations have transformed a historically private family centered practice into public organizational events in the Eastern Cape. In contemporary Xhosa revitalisations of *ukuhlolwa kwentombi*, certain ceremonial elements appear to have been adopted from AmaZulu practices, including songs, dance performances, reed gathering rituals, and aspects of ceremonial attire. While

such cultural exchanges may reflect broader processes of adaptation and revitalisation, they can also obscure historically distinct Xhosa understandings and purposes associated with the practice. Furthermore, relatively few Xhosa women have published scholarly reflections on these traditions, resulting in interpretations that are often framed through perspectives derived from other cultural contexts. This article seeks to address these gaps.

Before getting into the literature review, it is important to define some Xhosa terms to ensure that the reader does not get lost along the way. The following are some of the terms that will be used in this article; thus, it is important to provide the meaning of each as follows:

- *Ukudlala emathangeni*: Thigh play or sex (non-penetrative sexual intercourse)
- *Inkciyo*: A garment to cover the female genitalia
- *Umtshotsho*: A social organization for boys and girls
- *Inkomo yenquthu*: A cow given to thank the mother of a virgin
- *Ukudlala qatha*: Heavy play or sexual penetration
- *Isihewula*: Punishment given by the father when his son sexually penetrates a girl

Literature Review

A significant proportion of research on *ukuhlolwa kwentombi* in South Africa has been dominated by, and focused on, the Zulu practices of the Reed Dance, as well as on other organizations like uNomkhubulwana, led by Dr Nomagugu Ngobese of KwaZulu/Natal. Comparatively, little scholarship has focused on Xhosa communities in the Eastern Cape. Moreover, little has been written about the field of *ukuhlolwa* among AmaXhosa. I have examined various fields associated with the topic, like in the field of customary law and in discussions with anthropologists. Nevertheless, existing scholarship on *ukuhlolwa kwentombi* among AmaXhosa remains limited.

Soga[1] and Van Tromp[2] provide some of the earliest descriptions of virginity inspection and its relationship to family morality and marriage. More recent studies by Swaartbooi-Xabadiya[3] examine the revival of virginity inspection and the debates surrounding culture, gender, and rights in contemporary South Africa. Thornberry[4] correctly argues that in "Xhosaland, virginity testing is usually performed in more private contexts, carried out by family members of the young women".

Before getting into details of *ukuhlolwa kwentombi*, it is important to note that in African culture generally, the family plays an important role in all activities regarding the unity of the community. It is within the family structures that certain rites and customs are performed for the children and these do not only involve the family but the whole community. Mbiti,[5] a Kenyan theologian, summarises the centrality of each member of the family as undertaking a journey from conception to death, articulating it as follows:

> In Africa, we have seen that birth is the first rhythm of a new generation, and the rites of birth are performed in order to make the child a corporate and social being. Initiation rites continue that process, and make him a mature, responsible and active member of the society. Marriage makes him a creative and reproductive being, linking him with both the departed and the generations to come. Finally comes death. Death stands between the world of human beings and the world of the spirits, between the visible and the invisible.

Some cultural activities, though practised within family communal structures, are gender specific. According to indigenous norms, there are also some

1 John Henderson Soga, *The AmaXhosa: Life and Customs,* (Lovedale Press, 1932; Cambridge University Press, 2014).

2 J. Van Tromp, *Xhosa Law of Persons: A Treatise on the Legal Principles of Family Relations among the AmaXhosa*. (Juta and Company, 1947).

3 Zolisa Cynthia Swaartbooi-Xabadiya. "Attitudes and Perceptions of Girls in St John's College about the Practice of Virginity Testing," (Master's thesis, University of Limpop, 2010), http://hdl.handle.net/10386/252.

4 Thornberry, "Virginity Testing, History, and the Nostalgia for Custom in Contemporary South Africa," 131.

5 John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, (Heinemann, 1969), 105.

clear gender role clarifications according to age and birth right. Indeed, Byaruhanga[6] argues that:

> In precolonial Africa, in order to enforce stability, peace, and harmony, Africans evolved a system of defining what a man was and could do and what a woman was and could do. In order to justify its customs, each society had to invoke the sanction of divine powers.

It is also important to note that there was a time when gender was not a weapon used to discriminate and oppress the other, but rather a protective mechanism. As Thornberry observes,

> "While the rhetoric that justified virginity testing in the precolonial and early colonial era was deeply patriarchal, the practice itself protected female sexual autonomy and provided protections that were undermined by the colonial legal regime and have yet to be effectively replaced."[7]

In many cases, these protections were undermined by the colonial and apartheid states and have not been effectively replaced in the democratic era.[8] Moreover, these protections were especially undermined amongst Xhosa women by the colonial and apartheid powers.[i]

One example is the practice of female initiation known as *intonjane* that was demonised by colonization through the introduction of Christianity.[9] *Intonjane* is the traditional Xhosa female initiation rite that marks the transition from girlhood to womanhood. The rite involves instruction on social responsibilities, morality, marriage, sexuality, and community values and historically occupied an important position within Xhosa family structures.[10] From the perspective of some cultural practitioners, these traditions have not

6 A. B. T. Byaruhanga-Akiki, “Culture as a Source of Oppression of Women in Africa,” in *Culture, Religion, and Liberation*, ed. S. S. Maimela (Pretoria: EATWOT, 1994), 38

7 Elizabeth Thornberry, "Virginity Testing, History, and the Nostalgia for Custom in Contemporary South Africa," *African Studies Review* 58, no. 3 (2015): 129–148.

8 Thornberry, “Virginity Testing, History, and the Nostalgia for Custom in Contemporary South Africa,” 130.

9 Van Tromp, *Xhosa Law of Persons,* 21

10 Soga, *The AmaXhosa: Life and Customs* pp. 203 - 224

been adequately protected in the democratic era and are increasingly challenged by contemporary gender and human rights discourses.[11]

South African Debates

A lot of literature in academic circles and from some organizations, organisations like the Commission on Gender Equality, Human Rights Commission, UN Human Rights, UN Women and the World Health Organisation, speak of virginity testing in ways that is interpreted as being harmful to girls.[12] Arguments about virginity testing have revealed that there are misunderstanding on how the practice is understood and represented in government, academia, in print, and electronic media. Swaartbooi-Xabadiya[13] states that,

> arguments against virginity testing seem to be based on the perspective of the Westernized, feminist and individualistic notions of humanity disregarding the social construction of traditional cultural practices. Socialization and moral standards of people from a particularly Western orientation dominate the debate against virginity testing with no basis that is supported by research.

The practice of virginity inspection in South Africa had been a highly contested space by the various government departments, human rights organisations and some gender activists.[14] They consider the privacy of the young girls to have been violated and advocate for the practice to be completely abolished.[15] Though the practice is contested by many, the South African Children's Act 38 of 2005[16] partially legalised virginity testing

11 Hlako Choma and Tshegofatso Kgarabjang. 2019. "The Constitutionality of *Ukuhlola*: A South African Cultural Practice," *AFFRIKA Journal of Politics, Economics and Society* 9, no.2 (2019): 153-177.

12 South African Human Rights Commission. *Position Statement on Virginity Testing*. 2015.; World Health Organization, United Nations Human Rights Office, and UN Women.. *Eliminating Virginity Testing: An Interagency Statement,* 2018.

13 Swaartbooi-Xabadiya. "Attitudes and Perceptions of Girls in St John's College about the Practice of Virginity Testing," 4.

14 Swaartbooi-Xabadiya. "Attitudes and Perceptions of Girls in St John's College about the Practice of Virginity Testing,".

15 Commission for Gender Equality. *Virginity Testing in South Africa: A Cultural Practice in Perspective*. (Johannesburg: Commission for Gender Equality, 2016).

16 *South Africa: Act no. 38 of 2005, Children's Act.* Vol.492 Cape Town, no. 28944, 19 June 2006.

under specific conditions. Section 12 provides that the practice may only be conducted on girls older than sixteen years and with informed consent.

Irrespective of the opposition by the government and some international organizations, who assume they are protecting young girls, some of the *iinkosi* (traditional leaders) and women responsible for virginity inspections, and even the virgins themselves (the inspected), all publicly declare that they will not comply with the requirements dictated by those against the practice. They claim that they will continue with the practice as it is part of their tradition and culture and they further claim that it promotes the moral values taught by the elderly women to keep families intact. In an event held at Nqadu Great Place in Willowvale, Eastern Cape on 19 September, 2025[17] that I also attended, the virgins of the practice declared that the government must not interfere as they themselves are happy to be inspected, insisting that their rights are not being violated. They even declare that they came to *ukuhlolwa* willingly, with nobody forcing them. Furthermore, they claim, through poetry, that "wherever they go they make sure that they have their brains and two eyes open, and they make sure that the third eye (hymen) is always closed".

Similarly, as South Africa faces high levels of gender-based violence, femicide, teenage pregnancy, and sexually transmitted infections, some organizations promoting *ukuhlolwa kwentombi* argue that the practice encourages sexual responsibility and abstinence among young girls.[18]

Lost in Translation: Coloniality Religion and Mistrust

Studying an indigenous custom in a foreign language outside its own is, in most cases, problematic as, sometimes, the meaning of terms is lost in translation. The same has happened with this custom of *ukuhlolwa kwentombi*, that has been translated as virginity inspection. However, from

17 Inkciyo KaXhosa. 3rd Annual Inkciyo KaXhosa. Event poster. Nqadu Great Place, Eastern Cape, September 19, 2025.

18 Swaartbooi-Xabadiya. "Attitudes and Perceptions of Girls in St John's College about the Practice of Virginity Testing,"; Mzikazi Nduna, "Virginity Testing: Perceptions of Adolescent Girls in the Eastern Cape, South Africa." *New Voices in Psychology* 10, no. 1 (2014): 16-34.

informal discussions with the rural women in Willowvale and Dutywa in the Eastern Cape, it has been argued that the term “virginity testing” is misleading to the people who are not knowledgeable on the practice, contributing to the negative perceptions of virginity inspections. Swaartbooi-Xabadiya [19] explain that virginity “testing” translates in isiXhosa as,

> “*ukuvavanywa kobuntombi*" which implies that there is some “fiddling" with the girls’ genitals whereas the reality of the matter is that girls are inspected and therefore the practice should be called virginity inspection, which is directly translated to “*ukuhlolwa kobuntombi*".

Doing research on these sensitive, sacred, and often secret, topics in Xhosa customs proves how challenging it is to follow some academic prescripts due to the mistrust of AmaXhosa between Amaqaba (traditionalists or *abantu ababomvu*, "Red people") and *Amagqobhoka* (Christian converts and mission-educated Xhosa, also known as *abantu basesikolweni* or "School people") who were regarded as those who have abandoned indigenous customs by embracing Christianity and Western Culture.[20]

Participant observation undertaken at the *3rd Annual Inkciyo KaXhosa* event held at Nqadu Great Place on 19 September 2025 revealed that proceedings commenced with Christian prayers and hymns before traditional songs and dances were performed. Indeed, there are generally more Christians than practitioners of African Traditional Religion, if any, observed attending the event. The event was publicly advertised during Heritage Month 2025, illustrating the increasingly public and institutionalized character of contemporary *ukuhlolwa kwentombi* gatherings.[21]The mistrust between the two groups is emphasized by the. way they are distinguished as either traditional *amaqaba* or *abantu ababomvu.* That is those who smear red

19 Swaartbooi-Xabadiya. “Attitudes and Perceptions of Girls in St John's College about the Practice of Virginity Testing”,19.

20 Philip Mayer, *Townsmen or Tribesmen: Conservatism and the Process of Urbanisation in a South African City*, (Oxford University Press, 1961), 48; Berthold Adolf Pauw, “Universalism and Particularism in the Beliefs of Xhosa-Speaking Christians,” in *Religion and Social Change in Southern Africa,* eds. Michael G Whisson and Martin West, (Cape Town: David Philip, 1975).; Patrick McAllister, “Using Ritual to Resist Domination in the Transkei,” in *Tradition and Transition in Southern Africa*, eds. Andrew Spiegel and Patrick A, McAllister. (Wits University Press, 1991), 129-144.

21 Inkciyo KaXhosa. 2025. *3rd Annual Inkciyo KaXhosa.*

ochre and the western schooled Xhosas (*abantu basesikolweni*) and Christian converts (*amagqobhoka*, literally translating to "people with a hole"), terms that arose during the colonial and the missionary era. One may be tempted to claim that the distinguishment no longer exists but, in reality, it still bears weight mentally between these two groups, especially in the rural areas. The two groups are briefly cited below.

Mayer[22], in his explanation of the differences explains how "A Xhosa asked about the basic difference between Red and School People will often put the acceptance or rejection of Christianity first of all." He goes on to articulate the meaning of *"gqobhoka"*:

> The converts to Christianity are called *amagqobhoka* (people with a hole), which means that the converts were the quislings who originally 'opened a hole' in the Xhosa nation and let in the white-skinned enemy.[23]

Mafeje [24] further reveals that in this context, school education is equated with Christian civilization, saying, "This is also revealed by the way School people describe a civilized person, they would say '*akaloqaba'* (is not one who smears ochre)".[25] The Red People are also described as ancestor worshippers,[26] or as pagans.[27] Pauw[28] describes the group as non-Christians, and mostly illiterates. Mayer in his research quotes a Xhosa traditionalist saying:

> We Red People are suspicious of the educated people because they are betrayers of their people, they betray other natives to gain advantage from the white men.

Mayer also cites the difficulties he came across in his research work among the Xhosa, explaining,

22 Mayer, *Townsmen or Tribesmen,* 29
23 Mayer, *Townsmen or Tribesmen*, 30
24 Mafeje, "Religion, Class and Ideology in South Africa,"
25 Archie Mafeje, "Religion, class and ideology in South Africa", in *Religion and Social Change in Southern Africa*, eds. Michael G Whisson and Martin West, (Cape Town: David Philip, 1975), 168.
26 McAllister, "Using Ritual to Resist Domination in the Transkei, 131.
27 Mafeje, "Religion, class and ideology in South Africa".
28 Pauw, "Universalism and Particularism",154

> To ask people to write down their responses may be interpreted as a sign of aligning oneself with the government whose laws they make for us that they want to keep us down forever.[29]

This suggests it is better not to be formal in your research, rather engender an informal discussion in their environment and in their language to arrive at insider insights. Based on my observations among the AmaXhosa, *Abantu basesikolweni* (School People) are not trusted by the traditional rural women due to suspicions that they want to betray them to the white community. As someone living in both worlds (traditional and Western), it is important to be cautious as most scholars, even today, are quick to impose ideas on rural communities due to their education. This context is important for the present study as many contemporary debates surrounding *ukuhlolwa* kwentombi are shaped by differing understandings of culture, religion and modernity. The mistrust between *abantu basesikolweni* and *abantu ababomvu* continues to influence how indigenous customs are interpreted, defended, or criticised. Understanding this historical tension assists in explaining contemporary disagreements regarding the value and legitimacy of virginity inspection.

Furthermore, the analysis must also consider how Christian beliefs and western ideas about gender are used to think about virginity inspection, which is not part of the indigenous practices. As explained above, virginity inspection had been, and still is in some communities, a mostly private affair.

Virginity Inspection among AmaXhosa

As explained above, African culture carries customs associated with the rites of passage. The same happens with the gender social groups of the young ones as they grow. In Xhosa culture it is considered important that each gender associates himself/herself with his/her age group, hence there are life stages associated with these events, such as *iintombi zamakhwenkwe* (girls attending events for boys), and *iintombi zabafana* (girls associated with young, initiated men). In these circumstances, parents would be aware that their children would try and respond to their sexualities. While international research indicates that many modern parents actively plan to discuss sexuality with their young children but often delay or struggle with these

29 Mayer, *Townsmen or Tribesmen*, 48

conversations due to cultural anxieties or perceived age appropriateness,[30] traditional African family approach this milestone through collective vigilance. Within this context, women, considered to be the ones with sharp eyes, observe the changes in a child irrespective of gender and may take it upon themselves to educate them about the changes in their bodies. Indeed, abstinence, according to Xhosa culture, may not refer to staying away from sexual play totally, but rather the main concern and taboo at this stage is penetration, which will further be discussed below.

Though these virginity inspections are normally randomly performed in certain communities, or depending on the particular organization, at any time of the year, it has now become a norm that they are commonly dealt with as public events in September, which is also Heritage month in South Africa.[31] This is a common practice in the Eastern Cape that traditional organizations, like The House of Traditional Leaders, some kingdoms, and organizations equate heritage with events on virginity inspections, amongst other celebrations.

Based on participant observation, some organisations treat these events as a type of performance and rely on high attendance to get sponsorships and organisational visibility. Additionally, attendance to the events has changed from being gender-specific, whereby men will also attend now, except for when the girls are inspected near the river. The question I raise, here, is who benefits from these events? Why, in this era of gender equality, are there are no public events for boys, or *abafana* (initiated young males), applying the same moral concerns to male?

The public nature of the events illustrates that virginity inspection amongst Xhosa girls has evolved from being a morally-based, private, family affair, which was exclusively controlled by elderly women during specific periods, to a commercialized public practice. Thus, it is important to question why the traditional female leaders claim ownership of *ukuhlolwa kwentombi* when, historically, the practice was a private family or community affair.

30 Muna El-Shaieb and Sandy K. Wurtele, “Parents’ Plans to Discuss Sexuality with Their Young Children,” *American Journal of Sexuality Education* 4, no 2(2009): 103-115.

31 Chisale, and Moyo. Church Discipline as Virginity Testing: Shaping Adolescent Girls’ Sexuality in the Evangelical Lutheran Churches in Africa 9. 3.

Traditionally, virginity inspections were conducted only when families or community elders suspected that girls might have engaged in sexual activity following social gatherings involving young men and women, such as *umtshotsho*.

There are special women with expertise in virginity inspection, known as *oNomehlo*. The name *uNomehlo* (those with sharp eyes) is derived from their method of inspection that only uses sight and not physical methods. In addition to conduction the inspection, these women teach the young girls about good morals and how to respect their bodies. These virginity inspectors are normally elderly experienced women within the communities, sometimes women from within the family. Van Tromp[32] states:

> The supervision of girls is stricter. After every feast, dance or ceremony, or otherwise at regular intervals if there are no such ceremonies, the girls of the *umzi* are examined by old and experienced women, to see whether they are still virgins.

Umzi, here, refers to family. *Ukuhlolwa* (inspection) was also used as an investigative method when the mother notices a behavioural change in her child, such as in potentially cases of rape where the child had become withdrawn.

Ukudlala emathangeni ("Thigh Play" or Non-Penetrative Sex)

In Xhosa communities, although sex before marriage was prohibited, a limited form of premarital intimacy, known as *ukudlala* (to play) or, what van Tromp[33] calls *ukumetsha,* was socially permitted. For young women, the experience of premarital *ukudlala emathangeni* (non-penetrative sex, technically thigh or lap play but colloquially now called thigh sex) relationships provided instruction in the pleasures of sexual and romantic desire.

Among traditionalists, however, such relationships continued to allow great latitude for a wide range of sexual exploration between young men and

32 Van Tromp, *Xhosa Law of Persons,* 29
33 Van Tromp, *Xhosa Law of Persons,* 17

women. Boys and girls began to experiment with *ukudlala* or *ukumetsha* relationships early in life. It must also be remembered that some researchers, as explained earlier, did not speak the language of the people they wrote about, like Van Tromp, consequently resulting in a seeming misunderstanding of the broader meaning of *ukumetsha*. While Van Tromp reduces it to *ukudlala,* its proper meaning is to have an affair with someone, what is today called it *ukujola*. A boyfriend, for instance, was called the *imetsha* of a girl he was dating.

This contributed to additional reasons for why girls are randomly inspected among the Xhosa, including occurrences during the season of *imitshotsho* (boys' and girls' social gatherings). During the preparations of the male's initiation rituals, girls are given permission to attend the dances prior to the initiation. Boys would visit the girls' families to ask them to be part of the ceremony. These boys would be given permission for the girls to attend and are instructed to bring each girl home the following day, as they sing and dance for the whole night. During this period girls may be randomly inspected by the family by an experienced elderly woman to ensure there was no mischief. A boy who has broken the virginity of a girl is punished by the community and is regarded as having disgraced his family. Sometimes it is a girl who reports the boy by telling the mother that he has played "heavily" (*udlale qatha*), meaning that he went beyond the thighs and has penetrated.

A custom of punishment called *isihewula* is carried out on his father and the family in various humiliating forms. If the boy has penetrated the girl, they will both be punished. Women of the community would go to the boy's home and choose any ox they want and slaughter it themselves and consume it. The girl will be humiliated by no longer being allowed to socialise with her age group of virgins and will socialise with older girls instead. As a result, the boy's father may even go so far as to 'excommunicate' his son as he believes that *ubuvule ngezantsi ubuhlanti bakhe*, a term used when the father is being fined. The expression translates to the opening of his father's kraal at the back resulting in the loss of some livestock because of the actions of his son. Some fathers would even send their sons to go and work to pay the damages himself.

Another time a girl is inspected is when she is getting married. In discussion on *ikhazi* or the cows to be paid during the *lobola* negotiations, there is a

special cow called *inkomo yenquthu* given to the mother of the girl as a token of regard for the mother who brought up the girl that she gives to be married as a virgin. By remaining a virgin, the girl demonstrates that she has upheld the expectations of proper conduct and has maintained the dignity of her family.[34] Although there is limited scholarship specifically addressing *inkomo yenquthu* among AmaXhosa, comparable Nguni practices have been documented among the AmaZulu where premarital chastity and age-based sexual regulation formed an important part of the socialisation and reproduction of gendered expectations.[35] My understandings are further informed by participant observation and discussions with elderly women in rural Eastern Cape communities.

Finally, in the Xhosa custom, both historically and currently, there is no physical contact at all between the inspector and the inspected during *ukuhlolwa*. Reference to the inspector as *uNomehlo* with *mehlo* referring to an eye is two-fold. First, as stated earlier, the term links to the cultural reference to a hymen as *imehlo* (eye). Second, the inspector does not touch any part of the girl physically, using sight alone by having the girl lie on her back on a mat with her knees up. Therefore, any claim that there is physical contact through the use of fingers is incorrect.

Assessing Contemporary *Ukuhlolwa Kwentombi* Events

Having reviewed the context and practice of virginity inspection through my observations and conversations, I have raised concerns about who benefits from these events, why there are no public events for *abafana* (initiated young males) applying the same moral concerns, and why female traditional leaders claim ownership over what was once a private affair or a community affair?

In the final section, I raise three significant concerns for analysing virginity inspection as it takes place in our current context. I offer an analysis on the

34 Soga, *The AmaXhosa;* Nokuzola Mndende, *African Spiritual Journey: Rites of Passage among the Xhosa-Speaking of South Africa*. Icamagu Heritage Institute, 2006.

35 Mkhwanazi, Nolwazi. "'An African Way of Doing Things': Reproducing Gender and Generation," *Anthropology Southern Africa* 37, no, 1-2 (2014): 107-118. https://doi.org/10.1080/23323256.2014.969531; Thornberry, "Virginity Testing, History, and the Nostalgia for Custom in Contemporary South Africa."

status and continuity of the practice, including the matter of the girls' age, the name used for the practice, ownership of the event, gender disparities, and the suggestion that in the Xhosa events there are imports of practices from other ethnic communities of South Africa.

Age Cohorts

The Children's Act 38 of 2005[36] (specifically under Section 12(4)), strictly prohibits virginity testing for children under the age of 16, and Section 12(5) permits it only with strict consent frameworks for those older than 16. There are several conflicting arguments regarding the purpose of the practice that must be addressed in comparison to the indigenous practice needs. While statutory frameworks seek to enforce rigid chronological age boundaries to protect minor children, traditional Xhosa customs historically tied readiness for cultural inspections and puberty rituals to physical, biological, and familial developmental milestones rather than strict legislative calendar years.

In Xhosa culture there is a difference of age between *intombazana* (a young girl) and *intombi* (a girl). A girl before puberty is an *intombazana* and considered to be still immature. This stage may also be characterised by *ukuvela kwamabele* (appearing of the breasts).[37] If the purpose of *ukuhlolwa* is to check virginity, there is no purpose to *hlola,* or test, a girl whose breasts have not even started showing unless the mother suspects foul play. *Ukuhlolwa* is traditionally related to girls who have reached puberty. However, the practices today include much younger girls too. One remains a girl provided she is not married. A girl of about thirty-five is one who is now ready for an, arranged if there is no male to propose, marriage. This stage is referred to as *ududelwe nguJambase*, referencing that the girl is getting beyond marriageable stage as it will be difficult to bear children. The question that, thus, arises is how virginity testing is now being applied, given that for a girl who has reached a certain age deemed beyond the marriageable age, about thirty-five, there is no need of *ukuhlolwa*.

36 Republic of South Africa. *Children's Act 38 of 2005.*
37 Soga, *The AmaXhosa: Life and Customs*. 228

Naming the Events

Virginity inspection gatherings among AmaXhosa are now commonly referred to as *Inkciyo*, a term derived from *inkciyo*, the traditional Xhosa garment, historically worn by young girls to cover the genital area and symbolise modesty, youthfulness, and virginity.[38] Traditionally, *inkciyo* was made from animal skin, beadwork, or cloth and was associated with a particular stage in a girl's social development. It was commonly worn by girls who had not yet undergone *intonjane* (female initiation), whereas older girls and young women would typically wear *umbhaco* a form of mature attire. *Inkciyo* may be nowadays be considered the equivalent of a panty. However, naming a gathering after a garment that carries age-specific meanings runs the risk of obscure its original significance and purpose. People may come to understand *ukuhlolwa kwentombi* simply as *Inkciyo*, thereby conflating the practice of virginity inspection with a particular item of dress. Attending a virginity inspection gathering has consequently become synonymous with "attending *Inkciyo*", which may constitute a significant misunderstanding.

Another source of confusion is the existence of other organisations that bear the same name but operate independently, each with its own founder claiming ownership of the practice. The origin and application of the name *Inkciyo* are, therefore, contested. Today, some women within the Provincial House of Traditional Leaders maintain that the practice should be overseen by *amakomkhulu*, that is the senior royal households or principal houses that embody the authority of the Traditional Royal Palace (*ikomkhulu*) and serve as custodians of customary law, ritual practices, and cultural heritage, rather than by individuals.[39] From this perspective, traditional leaders and royal households are regarded as the legitimate custodians of African culture. Arguably, the practice has, in some instances, lost the communal moral, social, and spiritual purposes that it historically served in binding communities together.

Gender concerns

Traditionally, virginity inspection was regarded as an exclusively female process, conducted and supervised by women, with men excluded from

38 Swaartbooi-Xabadiya. “Attitudes and Perceptions of Girls in St John's College about the Practice of Virginity Testing,”; Nduna, “Virginity Testing”, pp. 17.

39 Soga, *The AmaXhosa*; Mndende . *African Spiritual Journey*

participation. Similarly, men were expected to instruct boys on matters relating to sexuality, morality, and social conduct within male spaces, particularly during initiation periods. Such teachings were generally regarded as confidential and were safeguarded by norms of secrecy and respect between initiates and elders.[40] Consequently, it remains culturally inappropriate in many Xhosa communities for women to inquire openly about the teachings imparted to men during initiation. In contrast, contemporary public virginity inspection ceremonies have increasingly attracted male spectators and dignitaries, despite men typically being excluded from the riverside inspections themselves. This raises questions around whether secrecy is maintained and whether comparable spaces continue to exist for *abafana* (boys and young men) to receive guidance on sexual responsibility, particularly in the context of changing social and cultural practices.

In the Xhosa communities, a girl is taught by elderly women and paternal aunts that sex before marriage is taboo, as the girl is regarded as a flower by her family. To illustrate this special status, virgins among the Xhosa-speaking are believed to carry a form of pureness that enables them to be the best initiators of good harvest. For example, before the planting season, virgins are requested to go around their specific communities, visiting each homestead collecting seeds that are to be taken to a specific family to receive medicine for good harvest, a custom called *inqoloqho*. These virgins are first inspected by an experienced woman within their respective families. They then leave their homes accompanied by two young men (for security) and gather in one homestead with the specific family who has the medicine to mix with seeds. After the mixing of the seeds with the medicine, the girls are taken back to each of the communities' families and mix the seeds with other seeds to be planted. During *inqoloqho*, everybody will hear the girls singing a special song, indicating that they are collecting some seeds for that special homestead of a specific clan and they will be expected by the owner who will welcome them.

However, rather than functioning solely as communal rituals intended to safeguard and care for young women, some contemporary virginity inspection events have become increasingly public and institutionalized. In certain contexts, they appear to be influenced by commercial interests and

40 Soga, *The AmaXhosa;* Mndende, Nokuzola. 2006. *African Spiritual Journey*; McAllister, "Using Ritual to Resist Domination in the Transkei."

public spectacles, raising questions about whether they continue to fulfil their original moral, social, and spiritual objectives. The presence of male spectators and dignitaries at some events prompts reflection on the extent to which contemporary practices may reproduce gendered power relations in ways that differ from earlier community-centred forms of *ukuhlolwa kwentombi*.[41] These observations are informed by participant observation undertaken at contemporary *ukuhlolwa kwentombi* gatherings in the Eastern Cape.

Conclusion

To conclude, this article has demonstrated that historical and contemporary forms of *ukuhlolwa kwentombi* differ considerably in their orientation, purpose, and practice. Historically, virginity inspection formed part of broader system of moral education, socialisation, and communal responsibility embedded within family structures and guided by women, elders, and royal households. It functioned as a means of transmitting values related to sexuality, marriage, social responsibility, and communal identity.

The discussion has also shown that contemporary practices have undergone significant transformation. Processes of colonialism, Christianity, formal education, and urbanisation have contributed to changing perceptions of indigenous customs and generated mistrust between cultural practitioners *(amaqaba),* Christian converts, and those associated with mission schools (*amagqobhoka)*. These tensions continue to influence contemporary debates surrounding *ukuhlolwa kwentombi*, including disagreements regarding its meaning, ownership, organisation, and legitimacy.

Furthermore, the emergence of multiple organisations, public gatherings, and heritage-oriented events has altered the character of the practice. While these initiatives may contribute to the preservation and revitalisation of indigenous cultural knowledge, they have also introduced new questions concerning authority, custodianship, gender relations, and extent to which contemporary practices remain aligned with the moral, social, and spiritual lessons that historically underpinned the custom. The article, therefore,

41 Thornberry, "Virginity Testing, History, and the Nostalgia for Custom in Contemporary South Africa."; Mkhwanazi, "'An African Way of Doing Things': Reproducing Gender and Generation."

argues that efforts to preserve *ukuhlolwa kwentombi* should remain attentive to its historical meanings, communal foundations, and educational objectives, while recognising the realities of changing social contexts and contemporary debates on culture, gender, and human rights.

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