

# Decolonising HIV Prevention: A Critical Examination of *Ukusoma* and Virginity Testing

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## Abstract

A question that the Southern African region has been struggling with for some time is that, despite the efforts at preventing HIV through various methods, the region is still experiencing new HIV infections. Although this happens at a low rate, it still raises an alarm. Some, if not most, of the traditional HIV prevention methods from Africa have been criticised and rejected as human rights violations and as 'sinful'. For this reason, this study is a critical examination of two African traditional practices namely *ukusoma* and virginity testing. These are two of the traditional methods of HIV prevention, particularly in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. Adopting African feminists' critical hermeneutics, this paper explains the different and complex implications of both *ukusoma* and virginity testing on the lives of girls and on the prevention of HIV. The study argues that generally it would be an oversimplification to claim that *ukusoma* and virginity testing are unequivocally either good or bad for girls, without a critical analysis of these practices while taking into account the shadow cast by HIV on *ukusoma*. I discuss how these traditional indigenous practices can, on one hand, be limiting and on the other hand, be a source of female power in a context of patriarchy, particularly taking into account the HIV epidemic.

**Keywords:** HIV and AIDS, *ukusoma*, virginity testing, African feminist critical hermeneutics

## Introduction

A number of African cultures and traditions considered to be violations of the rights of women, children and men became widely known due to HIV and

AIDS. At the peak of HIV in Africa, traditional cultural practices were criticised for increasing the exposure of women and girls to HIV (Chisale 2014:75). Among the traditional cultural practices under close observation and often criticised is virginity testing. Virginity testing is currently causing a public outcry because a mayor in KwaZulu-Natal recently gave bursaries nicknamed 'virginity bursaries' to girls who passed the virginity test. The loudest protests have mainly been from feminist movements and human rights organisations that are challenging this move as a violation of young women's sexuality. Efforts to explain the municipality's point of view are in vain, as opposition political parties such as the Democratic Alliance (DA), human rights and feminists' movements demonstrate lack of insight.

In this study issues about African women's sexuality are criticised from a human rights perspective. Interestingly, these critiques of cultural customs surrounding the sexuality of women from the African continent have ignored the call by the African Renaissance and other theorists such as African feminists to extract what is liberating from culture and religion (Dreyer 2011:7; cf. Oduyoye 2001:11). Despite efforts by scholars from the African continent to explain African people's cultural customs, critics continue to label African pedagogies of sexuality as human rights violations.

Written from an African feminist's critical hermeneutics perspective, this paper is a critical examination of two traditional African practices, *Ukusoma* and virginity testing. These practices are selected from among other traditional methods of HIV prevention, particularly in South Africa's KwaZulu-Natal province, as they are often criticised as violations of young women's human rights. The paper examines how the two traditional practices are accepted by the Zulus as crucial HIV prevention methods. The Zulu is a large, ethnically South African group of people with its origins in KwaZulu-Natal. Their way of life is commonly guided by indigenous African culture and religion. In Africa, different stages of sexual development of children, such as puberty, are marked by different rites of passage. Because virginity is valued among the Zulu, virginity testing has become important. The Zulus and other Nguni tribes regard reaching sexual maturity as central in the development of a child; as a result they have put structures in place that are aimed at protecting the sexuality of their children (Bennet 2004: 295). Virginity, which is the core of a child's sexuality, is valued in African contexts and is a source of pride for the girl as well as her family during marriage negotiations (Chisale 2014: 75). In order to make sure that girls jealously guard their virginity, African

traditional societies collectively mentor girls about issues of sexuality (Wickström 2010: 543).

As soon as children reach puberty, women and men among the Zulu such as aunts and uncles mentor young girls and boys about sexual issues and usher them into adulthood. The guarding of virginity is central in mentorship. Thus, virginity testing is not a new cultural practice among the Zulu and other African indigenous cultures. The guarding of virginity has a long history, since the value of virginity is not only in Africa as part of African culture, but also has a religious background and is valued in Western traditions as well (Denmark, Rabinowitz & Sechzer 2005).

Suspensions about and criticism of virginity testing increased during the HIV and AIDS era, particularly in Africa. Scholars and human rights movements have examined this phenomenon and criticised it as a practice with patriarchal roots. Feminists have particularly observed, in their critiques of virginity testing that putting a value on virginity in marriage initiations is patriarchal (Tamale 2014). Human rights movements and feminist movements have challenged this cultural practice as unhygienic and a health hazard (de Wet 2012). Fears are that the use of one glove by the tester increases girls' vulnerability to HIV (Phiri 2003: 74). It is also assumed that young women are forced by tradition and by their parents to undertake virginity testing (Chisale & Buffel 2014:291). Questions about ethical obligations, such as consent by the girl being tested, are constantly asked by human rights and feminist movements. African feminists such as Phiri (2003) argue that those influenced by a Western worldview are the ones who observe virginity testing as a patriarchal tool. They also see virginity testing as a human rights issue because the rights of young women are perceived to be violated (Chisale & Buffel 2014; Ntuli 2002). Rather than a violation of human rights, Chisale & Buffel (2014:292) see virginity testing as a strategy that is used by African communities that practise it to enforce 'good' or 'cautious' sexual behaviour among adolescents.

*Ukusoma* on the other hand, is not as widely researched as virginity testing. This practice is used to encourage a sexual debut among young women and men. *Ukusoma* and virginity are connected as they are both in the category of sexuality in an African context. *Ukusoma*, *Ukuhlobonga* or *Ukumentsha* are Nguni words that refer to non-penetrative sexual acts that may be compared to masturbation. The difference between the two is that the former does not involve self-satisfaction, but two people satisfying each other in the absence of

penetration. *Ukusoma* has not been attacked like virginity testing; instead *ukusoma* is identified by previous research in the context of the prevention of HIV and pregnancy (Sighal & Rogers 2003: 219) as good sexual conduct that discourages penetrative sex. Missionaries objected against this form of sex as it was inappropriate for the purpose of procreation (Harrison 2008: 177). Christian missionaries found African forms of sexuality evil and old-fashioned. However, research identifies *ukusoma* as a strategy that helps young people understand the changes in their sexually developing bodies while satisfying their needs without risking their lives due to sexually transmitted infections (STIs), particularly HIV, or unwanted pregnancies (Buthelezi 2006:3).

## **Methodology**

In this paper I used participant observation and literature review. I have been observing the developments of the debate on HIV prevention using African traditional approaches especial the use of virginity testing. In KwaZulu-Natal there is media talk about the use of virginity testing to curb early sexual intercourse debut by young people. This approach is more practicable amongst girls as it is a bit difficult to test the virginity of boys. As a South African resident exposed to the news and socio-academic life I have observed that the debate on virginity testing especial scholarship incentives on virgins has divided society on racial lines. Whites are in the majority against virginity testing while blacks are equally in the majority for virginity testing.

I have also used literature review to check on the meaning, history, practices and effectiveness of virginity testing. What does literature have to say on the different views about virginity testing? Why is virginity testing a racialised issue in South Africa in particular and Africa in general? Is it possible to use virginity testing as a form of prevention of the spread of HIV?

## **HIV Prevention in South Africa**

The questions addressed in the following sections are about whose human rights critics actually refer to and in what ways are *ukusoma* and virginity testing forms of feminine power in the context of HIV prevention. In as much as it is observable that the African continent is still considered a 'dark continent', it is to be noted that the metaphor 'dark continent' is a key term in

Euro-American discourses that describe Africa in dualistic terms: ‘places and peoples appear as quintessential objects, historically frozen within a web of dualities such as light/ dark, found/lost, life/death, civilized/savage, known/mysterious, tame/wild, and so on’ (Jarosz1992:106). Africa, as a dark continent, is associated with disease and death and the continent is typified as belonging to the ‘other’ and as such is negatively interpreted and reinterpreted by those from outside Africa (Jarosz1992:106). Thus, human rights movements, particularly those that are guarded and funded from outside Africa, are still influenced by the metaphor that Africa is a ‘dark continent’ that needs to be put under constant surveillance. Flint & Hewitt (2015: 296) argue that ‘Africa, in European discourse, has remained ‘ungovernable’ in as much as it is ‘enigmatic’, ‘unhealthy’ and, more often than not, ‘irrational’”.

There was a time when HIV was considered a disease from Africa, when it was linked to Kinshasa in the Democratic Republic of Congo where it was believed that around 1920 HIV crossed species from chimpanzees to humans (Moyo 2005). The debates about the origins of HIV were due to denialism and confusion about this epidemic. Being considered the darkest continent, any deadly disease was assumed to be from Africa. The colonial perceptions of Africa as an unhealthy (Flint & Hewitt 2015: 297) and ‘dark continent’ (Jarosz 1992) influence the views of people from Euro-America about Africa even today. Critiques of the continent hide behind human rights tools and use academic discourses to portray African sexual practices as abnormal, untamed, and dangerous (Phiri 2003).

Human rights movements seem to target Africa because for them Africa is a ‘backward continent’ (Museveni 2000). Contemporary Africa still struggles to have indigenous traditional practices accepted as valuable. As a result, the HIV prevention strategies that are used by Africans are considered ‘backward’ and inhumane because they are linked to traditional indigenous practices. There is evidence, provided mostly by the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians; that Africans prefer to incorporate their indigenous traditional practices into HIV prevention strategies (Phiri 2003; cf. Siwila 2015, Moyo 2005). African traditional indigenous practices include a combination of mainly behavioural and structural interventions (Chisale 2014). UNAIDS defines programmes that aim for a combination in ways of prevention as ‘rights-based, evidence-informed, and community-owned programmes that use a mix of biomedical, behavioural, and structural interventions, prioritized to meet the current HIV prevention needs of

particular individuals and communities, so as to have the greatest sustained impact on reducing new infection ...' (UNAIDS 2010:8).

Biomedical interventions use medical, clinical, and public health approaches (UNAIDS 2010). Biomedical interventions that were proposed by South Africans, like *Ubhejane* 'black rhinoceros', African Potato and *Umbimbi*, were marketed under the government of Thabo Mbeki, who denied the link between these and HIV and AIDS and was supported in this by Herbert Vilakazi (Specter 2007: 36). When Mbeki took office as president in 1999, it is believed that Mbeki's stand on questioning the link between HIV and AIDS and withholding the distribution of antiretroviral (ARV) drugs to public hospitals was due to his 'anti-colonial, Africanist ideology and his desire not to see Africa 'blamed' for a sexually driven epidemic' (Natrass 2008:164; Mbali 2004).

Despite substantial criticism from a scientific perspective, South Africans, particularly black indigenous people, resist biomedical intervention, particularly the use of antiretroviral drugs and resort to behavioural and structural strategies. Structural interventions include social and cultural strategies while behavioural interventions target the human behaviour by addressing risky behaviours that increase vulnerability to HIV (Coates, Richter & Caceres 2008: 669). Virginity testing and *ukusoma* fall under structural and behavioural interventions for the purpose of the prevention of HIV in South Africa. *Ukusoma*, which is not criticised as a human rights violation like virginity testing, is under-researched.

Previous research on HIV prevention in South Africa addresses *ukusoma* in combination with virginity testing with the result that virginity testing ends up taking precedence over *ukusoma*. Mchunu's (2005) study entitled, *Zulu Fathers and Their Sons: Sexual Taboos, Respect, and their Relationship to the HIV/AIDS Pandemic* clearly explains the significance of *ukusoma* among Africans, particularly the Zulu. He states that '...in all African countries, boys and girls were not expected to abstain from all sexual contact. They were discouraged from indulging in full sexual penetration but were allowed to engage in *ukusoma* or sex 'between thighs', which would technically maintain a woman's virginity' (Mchunu 2005). Mchunu's findings indicate that young males see *ukusoma* as a good male practice that displays that a boy has respect for his girlfriend. Penetrative sex among courting young men and women, according to Mchunu's participants, is contrary to Zulu culture (Mchunu 2005). Young men avoid penetrative sex to respect their

father's dignity and protect the whole family's good image (Mchunu 2005). It is assumed that a boy learns his behaviour from his father, therefore random sex with girls or penetrative sex with a girl out of wedlock displays the character of the father through the son. Non-penetrative sex is encouraged by some communities in Africa for HIV prevention purposes. This strategy has a three-fold purpose: that of protecting the girl's virginity, pregnancy prevention and preventing HIV or other Sexually Transmitted Infections (STIs).

Feminists and human rights movements are mute about *ukusoma*, but have spoken against virginity testing. The challenge of human rights is that their agenda is not clear when it comes to African traditional practices. It seems they disguise themselves as rights protectors while they are pushing the colonialist agenda in Africa.

### **Decolonising Sexuality and Human Rights in Africa**

The Human Rights Watch seems to be abusing the human rights treaties by attempting to control the African continent, particularly African women's sexuality by hiding behind the mask of human rights. A critical question that we need to ask is: whose rights are being violated? Who is the victim in this case, is it the young woman or the human rights organisation? The 1995 Fourth World Conference on Women (FWCW) in Beijing endorsed that 'human rights of women include their right to have control over and decide freely and responsibly on matters related to their sexuality, including sexual and reproductive health, free of coercion, discrimination and violence' (FWCW 1995: Para 96).

From an African perspective, the dispute on sexuality highlights the tension and resistance that exists between human rights discourses and those Africans who conform to their indigenous theories of knowledge about sexuality. This argument between human rights and African discourses demonstrates a symbolic example of a continuous human rights narrative that implicitly controls the African female's sexuality by constantly putting it under surveillance. In this way women's resistance against oppressive African narratives of sexuality is complexified. The constant surveillance by human rights organisations and the guardians of African culture subverts the power of women (Tamale 2004). The constant surveillance by the Human Rights Watch, I believe, disempowers women by objectifying them and reducing them to victims.

Tamale (2007) calls the tension that exists between rights and culture absurd, because according to her the two should not be seen as ‘polar opposites with no possibility for locating common ground where new synergies can be developed for social transformation’ (2007: 149). As much as both instruments may have weaknesses, they also both have strengths and a strong possibility of empowering and liberating women if applied critically. At the moment the two are seen as opposites and are regarded as threats to each other. The threats exist, because the origin of culture is in dispute.

### **An African Feminist Critical Hermeneutics Perspective**

Written from an African feminist critical hermeneutics perspective, this article sees culture as offering both liberation and oppression. According to Kanyoro (2002), the proponents of African feminist critical hermeneutics argue that by using cultural hermeneutics one should be able to reflect by questioning, scrutinising and examining cultural practices and narrative scripts for their oppressive as well as liberating potential in women’s lives. In agreement, Tamale (2014: 150) observes that ‘culture’ as a twofold tool ‘can be as oppressed, colonized, exploited, submerged and depreciated as [it] may be liberating and empowering’.

An African feminist critical hermeneutics enables one to understand the context of virginity testing and *ukusoma* as perpetrated by women themselves in their efforts at liberating themselves. As a result, proponents of African feminist critical hermeneutics acknowledge that culture in Africa is not homogenous; however, there are some characteristics that are ‘widely shared among Africans (e.g., the communitarian, solidaritarian and *Ubuntu* & ethos)’ (Tamale 2007:151; cf. Kasomo & Maseno 2011). Female sexuality in Africa is treated as homogenous and is usually portrayed in negative terms (Tamale 2007: 153). A call by African feminist theologians, such as Kanyoro (2001), challenges African women to learn to defend their good heritage that is liberating, rather than accepting and allowing criticism from outside which attempts to demonise it. A critical feminist hermeneutics allows one ‘to sift usable from unusable culture while acknowledging the fact that all cultures are not free from negative practices nor are they immune to external changes’ (Kamaara & Wangila 2010: 132; cf. Kanyoro 2001).

Positioning culture against rights in Africa hides an agenda for destroying morals as practised in African culture. Tamale (2007) discusses this



and argues that since women are the custodians of culture and morality, the conflict that exists between gender, culture and rights is unclear, since culture and women are two sides of the same coin. For women to enjoy rights, according to critics from outside, they are required to first separate themselves from culture.

Virginty testing and *ukusoma* are cultural practices that are practiced in the context of the preservation of virginty and the prevention of HIV. The former is widely criticised for violating young women's sexual rights, while the latter is criticised mainly by religious groups as immoral because it obstructs procreation. My aim of using African feminist critical hermeneutics is to discuss how the two Zulu traditional practices can be limiting but on the other hand can also be a source of feminine power over patriarchy, particularly in the context of the prevention of HIV.

## **Virginty Testing and Feminine Power in the Context of HIV Prevention**

The virginty ideology is constantly associated with females. It is about girls who lose their virginty and girls whose virginty is to be protected. There is power behind this practice, the power of females. Due to the fact that HIV is a life-threatening epidemic, prevention is prioritised among African communities who fall back on cultural practices that can shape and inform human behaviour. Protecting and nurturing life is a woman's traditional role that begins from when the child is conceived through to the child's birth and through the stages of life up to death. Using African feminist cultural hermeneutics, I see virginty testing as one of the strategies African women from KwaZulu-Natal use to protect and nurture their daughters. Phiri's (2003) study conducted in KwaZulu-Natal indicates that virginty testing is nurtured by women and girls. A recent study by Chisale & Buffel (2014), conducted in a refugee community in Johannesburg, also indicates that women and girls are the custodians of virginty testing. It is, however, contested whether the insistence on virginty is patriarchal or whether it is a feminine concept used by women to resist patriarchy. I regard virginty as a hidden patriarchal tool of power but also as a hidden feminine tool used by women to claim authority to their sexual bodies. The dynamics are complex.

From a feminine perspective there are critical and hidden pedagogies

that underlie virginity testing. Adult women, who are the primary guardians of virginity testing, use this tool to raise awareness among young women about how to use their virginity to exercise their sexual power (Chisale & Buffel 2014). Virginity is symbolic of female sexuality; therefore virginity testing makes young women and men aware of women's control over their sexuality. Women's jealous protection of virginity proves that they use their virginity to control and detect their destinies in the patriarchal order (Chisale & Buffel 2014). This power in real terms may seem to be worthless, but from an African feminist critical hermeneutics point of view, this power is worth being preserved in the context of rape, unwanted pregnancies and HIV. It is clear that virginity testing is not only a cultural practice related to sexuality, but that this practice goes hand in hand with schooling that liberates young women.

Chisale & Buffel's (2014) findings indicate that adult women transfer their knowledge of sexuality to younger women and that they see that knowledge as a source of feminine power. Research by African women theologians acknowledges the liberation virginity testing offers to young women (Chisale & Buffel 2014; cf. Phiri 2003). That women feel so possessive of their virginity confirms that they use this to control male sexuality as well; they do this by managing the timeframes for sex. The defence of virginity testing by women and young girls, who participate in the process, proves that virginity has sexual politics related to it. That young women treasure their virginity and that older women act as the proud custodians of virginity presents a challenge to researchers and human rights activists. What this seems to point at is that they need to change their lens of analysis and look at the matter from the viewpoint of women's understanding of their hidden power over their sexuality.

Kanyoro (2002) rightly argues that attempts towards transforming cultural practices should take into account the value attached to that practice by the custodians of that culture. Virginity testing might be unjustly assessed just because it has its origins on the so-called 'dark continent'. Is there anything good that has ever come out of Africa anyway? This is a question that some researchers and human rights activists, who are influenced by Western world views, ask behind closed doors. According to Siwila (2015) communities have some cultural traditions that they preserve because they have elements that they value in the nurturing of their people. Virginity testing is cherished by those who preserve it as having major elements offering liberation (Chisale & Buffel 2014; cf. Phiri 2003). The guardians of virginity testing insist that it is an

effective method of HIV prevention particularly for young girls and women.

The current controversial ‘virginity bursaries’ were defended by the African National Congress (ANC) Mayor, Dudu Mazibuko (2016), as an incentive to encourage girls to abstain from sex. According to Mazibuko (2016), girls are targeted by sugar daddies that infect them with diseases and STIs including HIV and they are critically vulnerable to unwanted pregnancies. Research indicates that those who pass virginity testing have always been awarded printed certificates, a sticker or a smear of white clay on the forehead which they proudly wear or show to the community (Scorgie 2002: 58; cf. Gundani 2004; Phiri 2003). The awarding of bursaries, which has caused so much commotion among human rights activists and some gender scholars, is not a human rights issue at all.

One may argue that this issue was politicised by political parties like the Democratic Alliance (DA) for their own good. The DA questioned this because it was rolled out by the ANC. What seems to be the problem for the DA is not the idea, but who came up with the idea. The argument of the DA is linked to the metaphor of the ‘dark continent’ that I discussed above. Because virginity testing has been politicised, it would be unjust of me not to speak about how the issue of virginity may be unjustly used in party politics. The ANC has control of KwaZulu-Natal (KZN) and the DA has aspirations to win control of this province as well; the awarding of virginity bursaries by the ANC that could have stabilized and sealed the ANC’s power in KZN was a threat to the DA’s agenda. The DA, because it is a white-dominated party, is believed to be influenced by Western world views. This then weakens the party’s judgement of African indigenous cultural practices. As a result, it is possible that the party’s resistance against ‘virginity bursaries’ being awarded, to the extent of getting human rights monitors involved, discreetly protects the Western world view and political agenda. The outcomes that confirm that ‘virginity bursaries’ are a violation of young women’s rights by discriminating against those who are no longer virgins is not clearly justified by the human rights investigators. The preconceptions of human rights movements are clouding their vision. In an era of the empowerment and liberation of women, the judgment seems to be leaning more towards the Western views on traditional African indigenous pedagogies. Human rights movements want to dictate to African women what is right or wrong for them without consulting them.

The issuing of ‘virginity bursaries’ is in line with how previously certi-

ificates were awarded or a white dot was painted on the forehead. This move values both the body and mind. Surely, the issues surrounding ‘virginity bursaries’ confirm the observation that human rights activists are in a power struggle with African traditions in policing African women’s sexuality and their reproductive roles. This power struggle then blinds both parties, although they both do what they do for a good cause. It is confirmed by research that virginity testing helps in identifying those girls who have been sexually abused because the *abahloli* (the testers) question them to find out if they lost the virginity willingly or if they were forced and if so, the perpetrator will be brought to book to seek justice for the girl (Scorgie 2002: 58). This way the growing concern about the incestuous abuse of young girls can be partly resolved through early detection. By this the *abahloli* acknowledges that some girls do not consent to losing their virginity. The rape of women is an injustice and if virginity testing exposes it, why should the process be criticised? Virginity testing is a tool that is used to protect young women from the sexual exploitation they could face (Chisale & Buffel 2014). According to Phiri, virginity testing is not an injustice but what is unfair are unwanted pregnancies and HIV (Phiri 2003:74). Those who criticise virginity testing are the promoters and nurturers of patriarchy. Virginity testing is a tool that can be used to expose the evils of patriarchy.

Using African feminist critical hermeneutics confirms that the means to an end may be problematic but the end is crucial in the context of HIV prevention, sexual abuse of children, rape and incest. The defence of African traditions is complex, because for some, defence of these traditions is influenced by the fear of breaking cultural norms (Kanyoro 2002:56). On the other hand some are influenced by the need to keep young women safe (Chisale & Buffel 2014). Unlike other cultural practices that lose momentum after outside criticism, virginity testing seems to be gaining momentum, particularly because it is supported by young women who consistently show up to be tested in numbers. The power virginity testing lends females is downplayed, which threatens African heritage and the dignity of good, life-affirming cultural traditions. The link of sexuality to religion and tradition justifies the means to an end for Africans, particularly African women, who are the custodians of morals and traditional values (Tamale 2007:157).

Through the use of African feminist critical hermeneutics, one reaches the conclusion that not all culture or religion is dehumanising. It is argued that we must extract what is liberating and reject what is dehumanising (Oduyoye

2001:11). African feminist critical hermeneutics stress the significance of time and context in every theory of interpretation. The stress on time and context positions virginity testing as an acceptable HIV prevention strategy. This is because virginity testing targets the sexual behaviour of both the girl and the boy. HIV prevention initiatives for young people target their sexual behaviour; hence research confirms that behavioural initiatives seem to be working positively (Pettifor, *et al.* 2013).

The constant surveillance of young women's sexuality contributes to the surveillance of young men's sexuality. Young men are encouraged to delay their sexual debut in the absence of sexual partners. There is, however, the danger that young men may resort to having sexual intercourse with older women, which may increase their exposure to HIV. This is noticeable with a development of Ben 10s<sup>1</sup> and sugar mommy relationships; hence behavioural cultural teaching that discourages such relationships should be re-introduced. HIV intervention prioritises a combination of behavioural, biomedical and structural methods (Pettifor *et al.* 2013). In most cases behavioural interventions are prioritised with the aim of reducing the risk of HIV infection. This is why a delay in a person's sexual debut is encouraged, the use of condoms is advocated and concurrently, partner change and substance abuse are discouraged (Pettifor *et al.* 2013). According to research, 'numerous behavioral interventions have been evaluated; however, few have HIV end points and those that have, have not shown a reduction in HIV incidence' (Pettifor *et al.* 2013: S155). It is argued that in order to understand the success of behavioural intervention one has to understand the broader context (Mathews, Aarø, Grimsrud *et al.* 2012:114). It may be true that virginity testing is implemented in a patriarchal society and it may be assumed that this affects the success of the intervention; however, guardians believe that the intervention is successful in preventing HIV and unwanted pregnancies among young women (Chisale & Buffel 2014; cf. Phiri 2003).

Like other behavioural interventions, virginity testing targets the behaviour of a large number of young women. Young women influence each

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<sup>1</sup> A Ben 10 is a young boy who dates or marries an old woman. This idea comes from an American animated television series where a 10 year old, Ben Tennyson, finds a magical wristwatch that can turn him into 10 different alien heroes, each with its own unique abilities. This cartoon series is mainly played on the DSTV cartoon network.

other to participate in virginity testing (Sourgie 2002: 58). Research confirms that young women are not forced as claimed, but encourage each other and volunteer to participate in the process (Phiri 2003). In an effort to protect their virginity and prevent HIV and unwanted pregnancies, young women and men use *Ukusoma* to satisfy their sexual desires.

## ***Ukusoma* and Feminine Power in the Context of HIV Prevention**

*Ukusoma* is labelled a male sexual activity by literature and is common in KwaZulu-Natal and among other African traditions throughout Africa (Mchunu 2005). Young women and men use *Ukusoma* to protect the virginity of young women. This sexual practice is also identified by traditionalist as an HIV prevention strategy. *Ukusoma* is a non-penetrative sexual practice during which both a woman and a man enjoy a sexual encounter without any penetration. The absence of sexual penetration decreases the chances of HIV infection (Chisale & Buffel 2014).

Mchunu's (2005) findings on *ukusoma* identify this practice as a male practice used by a young man to show his respect for his virgin girlfriend and to display that his father taught him to be respectful. In an African traditional context, particularly among the Nguni, a boy's behaviour mirrors that of his father (Mchunu 2005). Thus, sons in traditional African contexts try to preserve their father's dignity through their behaviour (Mchunu 2005). It is assumed that good behaviour indicates that the father of that young man is a dignified man, likewise bad behaviour indicates that the father has failed to mentor his son. Similarly, a daughter's behaviour is connected to her mother's behaviour. This understanding challenges those who construct masculinity and femininity from an essentialist approach. Mchunu's (2005) findings present African Zulu masculinity from a social constructionist approach, where behaviour is learned rather than inherent. The good part of learned behaviour is that it can be unlearned.

*Ukusoma* seems to be not only a behaviour acquired by males, but by both males and females. It is a mutual form of respect where the respect a young man has for his father contributes to the respect the shows for a young woman's sexuality and her family. The fact that there is no penetration, which is a form of power exercised by a men over women, means that *ukusoma* gives young women power over their bodies because they decide when and how to

allow penetrative sex. *Ukusoma* is not widely researched in gender studies and HIV studies but those who research virginity and HIV argue that some adults encourage young people to use this practice as an HIV prevention strategy (Chisale & Buffel 2014). The aim of *ukusoma* is beneficial to both parties.

The interconnectedness of virginity testing and *ukusoma* demonstrates the political dynamics of African sexuality. Scholars taking the position of African feminist cultural hermeneutics have provided a clear understanding on the links between HIV, culture and gender. An African feminist hermeneutics of *ukusoma* positions this sexual practice among life-affirming cultural practices. However, this sexual act reveals a broken link between sexuality and reproduction. If sex is primarily for reproductive purposes, *ukusoma* stands in opposition to it. It affects the continuity of life since there is absence of penetration that may lead to the process of conception. Since *ukusoma* is encouraged among young couples who are still in the process of shaping their futures, it is a positive life-affirming sexual encounter that needs to be promoted particularly in the context of HIV and AIDS.

When it comes to the degree in which women's sexuality is controlled, particularly in African spheres, an African feminist cultural hermeneutics of *ukusoma* is able to evaluate culture and its belief systems in the process of seeking liberation (Kamaara & Wangila 2009). The evaluation of African cultural practices such as *ukusoma* and virginity testing is a significant step towards the decolonisation of HIV prevention strategies in Africa.

Calling African cultural practices inhumane invites resistance among Africans, leading to an increase in new HIV infections. The constant surveillance of the sexuality of African women by human rights movements and gender activists complicates HIV prevention, particularly as might be effected by behavioural interventions. This raises the suspicion that the constant surveillance of African sexualities and HIV prevention strategies is a colonial agenda, by those who want to protect colonial legacies in Africa. African indigenous pedagogies are threatened by the expansion of the market for technological products from the West. Virginity testing and *ukusoma* are natural practices that do not use man-made products; therefore promoting these practices impacts negatively on the profits of the manufacturers of contraceptives and related products. The economic colonisation of Africa is perpetuated if traditional strategies are ignored. Human rights organisations have become the protectors of colonial legacies in Africa. They overlook that Africans had rights before the declaration of human rights.

## Conclusion

This study, written from the perspective of African feminist cultural hermeneutics, argues that HIV prevention in Africa has been overpowered by Western ideology leading to resistance by African people who reject the use of Western HIV prevention strategies, which seek to replace theirs. Virginity testing and *ukusoma* are life-affirming cultural practices; however, they are rejected by human rights activists and some gender activists. Virginity testing, which is heavily criticised as a violation of young women's sexuality, has caused a lot of tension between the custodians of virginity testing and human rights activists. An African feminist cultural hermeneutics of this cultural practice confirms that it is liberating and life-affirming. To conclude, those who criticise these practices are influenced by the Western world view that perceives Africa as a 'dark continent' that needs to be put under constant surveillance. In addition the study confirms that 'virginity bursaries' are in line with the certification process or 'white dot on the forehead' that has always been part of virginity testing in the history of Africa. Those who criticised virginity testing politicise this because the initiator of the idea (virginity bursaries) is aligned to a political party. *Ukusoma* on the other hand, has not been criticised like virginity testing, thus the significance of *ukusoma* as an HIV prevention strategy has remained concealed. Those who criticise African sexual practices are protecting the colonial legacies in Africa. The debate of sexuality as a human rights issue is pivotal; however, justice will only prevail if human rights are defined and owned by Africans.

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