COLUMN ONE: A Time of Testing for Virginity-- In a revival, boys and girls of South Africa's Zulu get exams certifying they have not had sex. Backers say it fights AIDS, but critics see a human rights abuse.

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ESSELTON, South Africa--For the boys, a piece of wire is extended three feet above the ground. They are instructed to pull down their trousers and, without using their hands, urinate above the marker.

For the girls, a straw mat is unraveled on the floor of a mud hut. They are required to undress, part their legs and submit to a vaginal exam by a female inspector.

"We repeat the tests every month," said the Rev. Johannes Mabaso, founder and pastor of the United Church of God in this poor farming community about 120 miles east of Johannesburg. "You can't let it go longer because you never know what can happen."

What can happen is sexual intercourse, something Mabaso is desperate to prevent among his young congregants. In the monthly exams, boys who clear the wire with a steady stream are declared virgins, as are girls whose hymens are deemed intact. The youths are feted with traditional Zulu songs and dances and awarded certificates of virginity, 38 of them on this crisp Saturday morning.

"Hallelujah for being pure!" a crowd of bare-breasted girls in beaded skirts shouted as inspectors kissed the cheek of the final examinee.

The boys and girls of Wesselton are among a growing roster of young people across South Africa--estimated in the tens of thousands--who have joined a controversial revival of the long-lost Zulu custom of virginity testing. The practice is being promoted as a back-to-basics remedy for some of the country's worst ills, including the growing...
AIDS epidemic.

Sexually active teenagers are the target, but infants as young as 4 months are being tested to guard against child abuse, and women well into their 50s also undergo inspections to demonstrate the growing social prestige of virginity.

"This is not the time to be sleeping with boys," said Carol Mpofu, 17, one of Wesselton's certified virgins. "We have isolated ourselves from those girls who sleep with boys. They are not our friends."

The resurgence of the age-old examinations, however, is also posing a serious quandary for many South Africans. Some parents and child advocates worry that youngsters are being roped into the virginity craze by adults looking for a quick fix to tough issues of sexuality. They fear that advocates are giving too little consideration to the destructive messages the exams may impart and to the potential danger they pose for girls in a country experiencing one of the world's highest reported incidences of rape.

"We are trying to teach our children, 'Your body is your body,' and then we send them to a woman who invades it," said Futhi Zikalala of the Gender Commission in KwaZulu-Natal province, the heartland of the Zulu people. "I certainly see the negative sides of colonialism, but the doing away with this tradition would be a positive one."

Since ridding the country of white-minority rule five years ago, South Africans of all ethnicities have been eagerly embracing customs forgotten or suppressed. The virginity tests are often performed during elaborate Zulu festivals that feature generations-old dances, songs and stories that are only now being dusted off.

At the same time, however, many South Africans--particularly those who fought in the struggle against apartheid--are striving to instill a newfound respect for human rights. The virginity tests have them asking: How can a ritual involving the private parts of children, grounded in cultural and medical norms from a bygone era, be reconciled with a modern, democratic South Africa?

"These young people being tested are human rights illiterate," said Zikalala, who has kept her 7-year-old daughter away from the inspectors. "They are the future leaders of our country, but . . . they don't even have the experience of fighting for something that is theirs--the right to privacy."

Human rights concerns are only one objection. In some cases, the exams have tragic consequences.

A 15-year-old girl recently disclosed to her classmates that she had become infected with HIV, the virus that causes AIDS, when she was raped a week after undergoing an inspection, said Dennis Bailey of the KwaZulu-Natal branch of the Planned Parenthood Assn.

For the rapist, the girl's widely proclaimed virginity was her appeal, Bailey said, because desperate men in many poor communities across South Africa believe that sex with a virgin can cure AIDS and other maladies. Thus, newly branded virgins--many of whom wear colorful dots on their foreheads to mark their purity--have become walking advertisements to the worst elements in society.

Philisiwe Hlatshwayo, a 25-year-old science teacher who keeps her framed virginity certificate on her living room wall, said she was terrified when a local television station featured her in a broadcast about virginity. Hlatshwayo said she has been tested twice to set an example for her pupils.

Although she has not been threatened, Hlatshwayo said she suddenly realized that the tests "might put my life at stake." Even trips to the grocery store can cause her anxiety when a stranger suddenly fixes his gaze on her. She now advises her students to keep their participation to themselves.
Some virginity testers have come to acknowledge the dangers and are performing inspections more discreetly. In some cases, the exams are conducted the weekend before public festivals so that the virgins are not featured so prominently.

Generally, however, the cries of naysayers are being muffled by the thunderous public enthusiasm for the tradition. Even with the problems, proponents say the tests are saving lives by keeping AIDS in check, detecting child abuse among examinees and empowering girls to say no to sexually active boyfriends.

For boys too, the tests often come with a strong message not to force themselves on unwilling partners, something they seldom hear elsewhere.

"It is not just testing, it is also about talking to the children," said Glenrose Mpofu, who performs inspections on girls, including her daughter.

Provincial authorities in KwaZulu-Natal, where the revival is the strongest, have praised the tests as a long-overdue appreciation of Zulu culture. Zulus are South Africa's dominant ethnic group, with about one-quarter of the population speaking Zulu as its mother tongue.

Local education officials are so enamored of the custom that tests are sometimes conducted by teachers on school grounds. The most prolific inspector--Andile Gumede--has performed many of her 65,000 tests under the auspices of the provincial Department of Traditional and Environmental Affairs.

Gumede, who has popularized the inspections through radio promotions, says she got started in 1993 when her grandmother and several other elderly women appeared to her in a dream. They warned that a terrible disease would strike, killing thousands of people, mostly women.

The old ladies instructed her to revive the custom, which was originally intended to ensure a girl's purity at the time of marriage. Not only did men want a virgin wife, according to Zulu custom, but an untouched bride was worth more to her parents. If the bride-to-be failed the inspection, the traditional payment by the groom of 11 cows was cut to 10.

"When I got started with the tests, many people came out saying that we are barbarians," said Gumede, a courthouse clerk and single mother of three. "But now they realize we are helping these maidens."

The practice of testing boys is less well known and is disputed even among Zulus. Several inspectors said the inclusion of boys was an afterthought, coming in response to criticism that girls were being unfairly singled out.

"I've told them they must find another way of testing boys because what they are doing now is rubbish," said Gumede, who rejects similar objections about the validity of the hymen test, which many medical practitioners say is not a full-proof gauge of virginity. "For girls, the hymen is not something you can hide. It is there or it isn't there. It isn't the same for the boys."

The champion of male testing has been Sipho Malinga, a traditional healer and former boxer who also claims to have developed a natural medicine that makes human flesh deflect bullets. Malinga said there are three customary methods of testing boys.

In the case of the urine exam, it must be conducted when the bladder is full. Boys who are not pure, he said, usually spray when they urinate--rather than casting a single stream--and are unable to maintain the three-foot height.
In a second inspection, Malinga examines the front and back of the knees. If the boy is a virgin, Malinga says he is unable to press a finger in the soft spot of the kneecap. Also, the veins behind the knee will be light silver in color. The veins turn darker after intercourse, he said, because of the rush of blood.

Finally, Malinga also examines the skin of the genital area. If it is firm and tough, he says, the boy is pure.

"People who say testing boys is impossible are speaking out of ignorance," he said. "It is true that even if you are a scientist there are things you cannot know. These things have been passed down from a thousand years ago."

Malinga and other proponents of the male tests attribute the Zulus' reputation across Africa as fierce warriors to the custom of abstaining from sex.

"Children were kept in good condition before they encountered the issues of adulthood," said Malinga, who teaches science and math at a primary school in KwaZulu-Natal. "Now the same practice can keep them free of AIDS."

About 3.6 million of South Africa's 40.5 million people have HIV or AIDS, giving the country one of the world's worst rates of infection, according to the United Nations. Young people are particularly vulnerable. The latest government data show that the number of pregnant teenagers with HIV rose by 64% last year.

Coping with AIDS has not been easy in a culture in which having multiple sexual partners is common and condom use is not a regular practice. AIDS drugs available in the United States are also beyond the means of most ordinary people.

"If people want to go with virginity testing, we are encouraging it," said Bafana Msezane of the AIDS Foundation of South Africa. "I see it as a desperate measure, but we are in a crisis situation, and you never know what might work."

Some Christian and Muslim clergymen have also jumped on the virginity bandwagon to impart religious messages. When the virginity inspector for boys failed to show up at a recent session in this black township, Mabaso, the minister, filled the time with a sermon.

"You boys are the ones causing immorality in our schools," he said. "Boys are just raping. You stay away from that...Raise up your hands to show that you will never misbehave again! Please control your hormones!"

Like many advocates of virginity inspections, Mabaso, a pipe fitter by trade, also advises against youngsters using condoms because he believes that they encourage sexual promiscuity. At the recent virginity celebration, church leaders shouted slogans, and scores of young virgins hollered back.

"Long live morality and virginity!" "Down with condoms!" "Down with premarital sex!"

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