

Virginity Testing and the Reed Dance Ceremony in the Zulu Kingdom, South Africa: An Overview

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ABSTRACT

The Reed Ceremony, a traditional practice celebrated in various African communities, has garnered both admiration and criticism for its impact on the rights of women. While the ceremony is deeply entrenched in national customs, its current manifestation has raised concerns about the infringement on women's legal and human rights. This article examines how the Reed Ceremony, though a significant cultural ritual, can undermine women's autonomy, bodily rights, and legal equality. Specifically, it explores how elements of the ceremony may perpetuate gender-based discrimination, reinforce societal structures that limit women's power, and restrict their rights to make informed choices regarding consent, education, and personal freedom. The article also discusses the complex balancing act between idolization cultural traditions and upholding international human rights standards. By critically assessing the ceremony's role in modern African societies, the article calls for reforms that respect cultural identity while ensuring women's legal protection and empowerment. The goal is to find a way to honour tradition without negotiating women's fundamental rights.

1. Introduction

Virginity testing, particularly in the Zulu Kingdom and other parts of South Africa, has a long-standing history as a cultural practice allied with rites of passage, purity, and sexual ethics. One of the most notable events where virginity testing takes place is the **Reed Dance** or **Umkhosi Womhlanga**, an annual ceremony held to celebrate virginity, womanhood, and cultural identity. While deeply rooted in tradition, the practice has attracted considerable debate, particularly concerning its implications for women's rights and bodily autonomy. This article explores the legal and cultural dimensions of virginity testing in South Africa, examining the tension between preserving cultural heritage and protecting individual rights, especially in light of international and domestic legal standards.

2. The Reed Dance Cultural Practice.

The **Reed Dance**, or **Umkhosi Womhlanga**, is one of the most significant cultural events in South Africa, particularly for the Zulu people. Traditionally held in **KwaZulu-Natal**, the Reed Dance gathers young unmarried women from various communities, allowing them to celebrate their virginity and womanhood. The ceremony is also viewed as an opportunity for young women to demonstrate their commitment to cultural values, including sexual purity before marriage.

Virginty testing is traditionally incorporated into the Reed Dance, where young women undergo an examination to confirm their virginity. This practice has historically been carried out by community elders, leaders, or medical professionals, with the intention of ensuring that women maintain their "chastity" before marriage. Beyond being a ceremonial rite of passage, the Reed Dance and its accompanying virginity test serve as a way to uphold and reinforce traditional gender norms, placing a high value on a woman's sexual purity within the community.

While the ceremony is regarded by some as a means of preserving cultural heritage and encouraging abstinence, it has also drawn criticism, especially concerning its effects on women's rights and well-being. Over time, the Reed Dance grew to symbolize not only virginity and sexual purity but also community unity and identity. Initially a private and localized ceremony, it eventually expanded into a large-scale public event attended by both Zulu citizens and other visitors from different parts of Southern Africa. The Reed Dance became more formalized as it grew in importance, especially during the reign of King **Goodwill Zwelithini**, who used it to promote national pride and cultural preservation.

During the event, the women involved in the Reed Dance would gather at the royal residence, often in the **KwaZulu-Natal** region, and undergo a virginity test to ensure their purity. The test is usually conducted by community elders, often medical professionals, or health practitioners. The participants are then celebrated for their chastity, with some women receiving blessings and gifts from the king. Afterward, they dance and perform traditional rituals to mark their passage into adulthood.

The Reed Dance also serves as a means for the Zulu king to publicly affirm his role as a protector of women's virtue, health, and well-being. Historically, it was a significant moment in the Zulu monarchy, with the king personally overseeing the celebration of the young women's virginity and ensuring that cultural customs were upheld.

In recent decades, the Reed Dance has expanded in scale and significance. What was once a local and intimate practice has become an annual event, drawing thousands of participants and viewers? Today, it is a national event, with participants traveling from various parts of Southern Africa to take part in the celebration.

In the 21st century, the Reed Dance remains a significant part of South Africa's cultural heritage, particularly among the Zulu people. The ceremony continues to be celebrated annually at the **Royal Palace of KwaZulu-Natal**, attracting not only Zulu people but also tourists and international visitors. The ceremony is sometimes broadcast on national television, allowing a broader audience to witness the cultural tradition.

However, the Reed Dance has faced increasing scrutiny in recent years, especially from women's rights groups and international human rights organizations. Critics argue that the practice of **virginity testing**—a core element of the Reed Dance—violates women's rights, particularly their **bodily autonomy**, and **dignity**. There are concerns about the psychological and physical effects of such tests, as well as the pressure it places on young women to conform to societal norms regarding sexual purity.

Despite these criticisms, proponents of the Reed Dance argue that it serves an important function in preserving cultural values, promoting abstinence, and celebrating the identity of young women in Zulu society. Supporters maintain that the ceremony promotes respect for women and reinforces moral behavior within the community. The Reed Dance, for many, remains a valuable cultural tradition that represents the strength, purity, and beauty of young women.

3. Legal Perspectives on Virginity Testing.

Virginity testing, particularly when performed in public events like the Reed Dance, has raised significant legal and ethical concerns in South Africa. The practice, which involves examining young women to confirm their virginity, has come under intense scrutiny from human rights organizations, medical professionals, and legal experts. These critics argue that virginity testing not only violates women's bodily autonomy but also undermines their dignity, reinforcing gender stereotypes and contributing to the oppression of women. At the core of the debate is the question of whether cultural practices that violate personal privacy can coexist with constitutional rights and the principles of gender equality guaranteed by South Africa's legal framework.

3.1 Constitutional Protections in South Africa.

South Africa's **Constitution**, particularly the **Bill of Rights**, guarantees the fundamental rights of all individuals, including the right to **human dignity** Section 10, **bodily integrity** (Section 12(2)), and **freedom from discrimination** (Section 9). These constitutional protections are central to the legal arguments against virginity testing.

3.1.1 Right to Dignity: Section 10 of the Constitution guarantees every individual the right to dignity, which is arguably violated during virginity testing. The procedure is often public, invasive, and humiliating, which can cause lasting emotional and psychological harm. The exposure of a woman's sexual history or the invasive nature of the examination infringes upon her right to be treated with respect and to have her privacy maintained.

3.1.2 Right to Bodily Integrity: Section 12(2) of the Constitution provides that “everyone has the right to bodily and psychological integrity, which includes the right to make decisions concerning reproduction and security in and control over their body.” Virginity testing infringes upon this right, as it involves an invasive physical examination to assess a woman's virginity status, often without her consent or against her will. This violates the principle that individuals should have control over their own bodies, including their sexual and reproductive health.

3.1.3 Right to Equality: The practice of virginity testing has been criticized for its discriminatory nature, as it disproportionately targets women, reinforcing harmful gender stereotypes. The Constitution guarantees equality for all, yet virginity testing perpetuates a

gendered expectation that a woman's value is tied to her sexual purity. This expectation places an undue burden on women and denies them the freedom to make choices about their own sexuality.

4. International Human Rights Standards.

In addition to domestic legal protections, virginity testing also violates international human rights standards. The **United Nations** and various international human rights bodies have expressed concerns about the practice.

United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW): CEDAW has criticized practices like virginity testing that promotes gender-based discrimination. In **General Recommendation No. 33**, CEDAW emphasizes that such practices violate women's autonomy, dignity, and rights to privacy and bodily integrity. CEDAW urges states to eliminate harmful practices that infringe upon women's rights, including virginity testing.

World Health Organization (WHO): The WHO has also condemned virginity testing, calling it a “**violation of women's rights**” and a “**medically unfounded practice.**” The WHO asserts that there is no medical basis for testing virginity and that it is not a reliable indicator of a woman's sexual history. Furthermore, the WHO highlights the harmful psychological and physical consequences of such tests, particularly in vulnerable young women.

5. Legal and Medical Framework in South Africa.

In response to the growing concerns about the harmful effects of virginity testing, the South African government and legal institutions have taken steps to regulate and discourage the practice.

Health Professions Council of South Africa (HPCSA): In **2002**, the HPCSA issued guidelines condemning the practice of virginity testing. The Council stated that virginity testing has no medical or scientific basis and that medical professionals should not participate in such procedures. The HPCSA's position is grounded in the ethical principle that medical practitioners should uphold the dignity and rights of their patients, and virginity testing does the opposite by subjecting women to invasive, non-consensual procedures that cause harm. The South African government has moved toward legal regulation of virginity testing. In **2002**, the **Department of Health** banned virginity testing in schools, particularly in public schools, and sought to prevent its practice in educational settings. While the government's actions have been seen as a step toward safeguarding women's rights, critics argue that the practice persists in certain communities, particularly in rural areas, where it remains deeply embedded in cultural traditions. Some activists argue that the state has not done enough to enforce the prohibition of the practice and raise awareness about its harmful consequences.

6. Cultural Rights vs. Human Rights.

The issue of virginity testing presents a complex dilemma between **cultural rights** and **human rights**. On one hand, cultural practices like the Reed Dance are an important part of South Africa's rich heritage, particularly within the **Zulu Kingdom**. For many, the Reed

Dance and associated virginity testing are seen as essential ways of preserving cultural identity, promoting abstinence, and honouring traditional values.

On the other hand, human rights principles such as equality, bodily autonomy, and dignity cannot be ignored. Virginity testing, particularly when it is publicly conducted and administered without consent, infringes on the constitutional rights of women and violates the **right to privacy**. While cultural traditions should be respected, they must not come at the expense of women's rights. The challenge lies in finding a way to preserve cultural practices that do not infringe on the dignity, autonomy, and equality of individuals.

7. Legal Reforms and Education.

To address the tension between cultural practices and human rights, there is a growing need for education, awareness, and legal reform. The South African government must take further steps to enforce the ban on virginity testing and ensure that cultural traditions evolve in a way that respects the dignity and rights of all individuals, particularly women. Public education campaigns could help shift societal attitudes about women's sexuality, moving away from harmful cultural practices that perpetuate gender inequality and toward a more inclusive and respectful understanding of women's autonomy.

Additionally, cultural leaders and community members must be part of the conversation, helping to reframe traditional practices in a way that honors both cultural identity and human dignity.

8. Women's Role and Objectification.

While proponents of the Reed Dance argue that the ceremony is empowering and plays a vital role in preserving cultural heritage, critics point out the inherent objectification of women. The ceremony, often conducted with great fanfare and public attention, can reduce the value of women to their sexual purity. This emphasis on virginity as a symbol of worth ties a woman's identity to her sexual status, rather than her individual personality, intellect, or accomplishments.

In the modern context, many feel that the Reed Dance continues patriarchal norms that limit the freedom and agency of women. The ritual publicly displays the young women's bodies, reducing their value to their sexual status and making them subject to public inspection. This can contribute to feelings of shame or discomfort, especially for those who may not want to participate or feel coerced into conforming to societal expectations. An additional concern is the potential for exploitation during the Reed Dance. The presence of men, counting high-ranking political figures, may give rise to the possibility of abuse, both physical and emotional. The public nature of the ceremony also opens the door for objectification, where the women's bodies are viewed as spectacles rather than respected participants in a cultural tradition. The focus on virginity as a measure of a woman's worth can create pressure for young women to conform, possibly leading to psychological distress or feelings of inadequacy for those who do not meet these standards.

Moreover, the Reed Dance is sometimes criticized for placing undue emphasis on the role of women as symbols of purity and for ignoring the agency and rights of the women involved. While some argue that the ceremony empowers women through cultural participation, others believe it reinforces harmful gender stereotypes that limit their personal autonomy.

9. Physical Risks of the Reed Dance Ceremony.

1. **Excessive Physical Draining** During the Reed Dance, thousands of young women participate in long walks and dances, often involving extensive physical effort. The ceremonial walk can take several hours, sometimes even days, and participants are required to carry long reeds as part of the ritual. The strenuous nature of this walk, combined with the intense heat of the day, can lead to dehydration, heatstroke, and exhaustion. For many young girls, especially those from rural areas who may not be accustomed to such physical challenges, the event poses serious physical strain.
2. **Injury from Sharp Reeds** One of the key elements of the Reed Dance is the use of reeds, which are carried by participants as a symbol of their purity and readiness for marriage. However, the reeds themselves can pose substantial risks. Harsh and sharp edges on the reeds can cause cuts and scrapes, which may lead to infections if not properly treated. Additionally, young girls are often required to perform elaborate movements that increase the likelihood of injury, especially if the ground is uneven or rocky.
3. **Infections and Hygiene Issues** The event takes place in rural areas where access to clean water and sanitary conditions may be limited. Given that participants are often barefoot and exposed to natural elements, there is a risk of acquiring infections or other health issues. Additionally, the shared nature of the event and the close proximity of participants upsurge the likelihood of spreading communicable diseases, such as respiratory infections or skin conditions. In this particular ceremony girls are exposed their body by wearing a short dresses this can be more difficult to walk with long reed in a harsh weather.

10. Psychological Impacts of the Reed Dance Ceremony.

1. **Pressure to Conform to Social Norms** While the Reed Dance celebrates womanhood, it can also impose significant psychological pressure on young girls to conform to societal expectations. The emphasis on chastity and purity, along with the participation in a public ceremony, can lead to anxiety for those who may not be ready or willing to take part in the ritual. Furthermore, the expectation that girls remain virgins until the ceremony can create feelings of shame or guilt among those who do not meet these standards, potentially leading to long-lasting psychological trauma.
2. **Sexualization and Objectification** In some instances, the Reed Dance has been criticized for its sexualized undertones, as the young women who participate are often paraded before the public. While the intent behind the ceremony is to celebrate purity, the public display of young girls in scant clothing can open the door to objectification and unwanted attention. This can lead to feelings of discomfort or even victimization for the participants, particularly those who are not mentally prepared for such exposure.
3. **Family and Social Pressure** Participants in the Reed Dance are often expected to adhere to family and community pressures. In some cases, families may push their daughters to take part in the event, even if they are not emotionally or physically prepared. This can create a sense of inadequacy or resentment, especially for young girls who may not share the same cultural enthusiasm or who feel coerced into taking part in the ceremony.
4. **Mental Health Struggles** The combination of social pressures, physical demands, and the emotional toll of the Reed Dance can lead to mental health struggles for some

participants. Anxiety, depression, and feelings of isolation can arise as a result of the expectations placed upon young girls. Moreover, the psychological effects of enduring public scrutiny and the potential for physical injury can have long-lasting effects on an individual's self-esteem and overall mental health.

11. Conclusion.

Virginit y testing, particularly in the context of the **Reed Dance** in the Zulu Kingdom and other South African communities, is a practice steeped in tradition but fraught with legal and ethical challenges. While some view the practice as an important cultural rite, it raises significant concerns regarding women's rights, bodily integrity, and dignity. The legal framework in South Africa, along with international human rights standards, provides a clear mandate for the protection of women's autonomy and freedom from harmful practices. Moving forward, it is crucial to find a way to honor cultural traditions while ensuring that the rights and well-being of women are safeguarded.

Virginit y testing remains a deeply controversial issue in South Africa, especially when conducted during public events such as the Reed Dance. The practice raises important legal questions regarding women's rights, dignity, and bodily autonomy. While some view virginit y testing as an essential cultural tradition, the practice clearly violates constitutional protections and international human rights standards. Legal reforms, public education, and ongoing dialogue between cultural, legal, and human rights advocates are essential to protect the rights of women while allowing cultural traditions to evolve in a way that respects dignity and gender equality. Virginit y testing, particularly in the context of the Reed Dance in the Zulu Kingdom and other parts of South Africa, presents a complex challenge that sits at the intersection of cultural heritage and human rights. While the practice is deeply embedded in tradition, it raises significant concerns regarding the rights and dignity of women. South Africa's progressive constitutional framework, along with international human rights standards, provides a strong basis for challenging the practice and advocating for the protection of women's rights.

The ongoing debate highlights the need for continued dialogue between cultural leaders, legal experts, and human rights advocates to ensure that cultural practices evolve in a manner that respects the autonomy and dignity of women, without compromising traditional values. Moving forward, efforts must be made to balance the preservation of cultural heritage with the advancement of gender equality and the protection of fundamental human rights.

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