

- **Tia-Nicole Leak**, University of California Santa Cruz: *Born Free: Choosing virginity testing for the good of community, kin and nation.*
tleak@ucsc.edu

Born Free: Choosing Virginity Testing for the Good of Community, Kin and Nation

Today, I will address the issue of youth sexuality and the development of self and the nation through a close look at the revived cultural practice of Virginity Testing. In this paper, I am interested in how forms of education specific to the AIDS industry (i.e. workshops, counseling, confessional technologies, public disclosure) have been integrated with practices coded as ‘traditional’ to create new forms of discourse on morality, community, and nation building. The focus of this paper comes at a time when state legislation threatens to outlaw the practice of Virginity Testing altogether. Virginity Testing has numerous detractors, but in KwaZulu Natal its supporters number in the thousands. In the wake of state mandated bans on the practice of Virginity testing, its defense and appeal to young women (and increasingly young men) must be taken seriously. In June 2005, South Africa’s National Assembly passed the Children’s Rights Bill which if approved by the National Council of Provinces aimed to impose an outright ban on virginity testing – making anyone who participates in it guilty of an offense. Under a section on social, cultural and religious practices, the Bill condemns anyone who takes part in what it calls genital mutilation and calls for the prosecution of such people under criminal law. In December 2005, a more modest version of the Bill was approved by the National Council of Provinces which banned **some** forms of Virginity Testing, namely VT involving young women under the age of 16.

Today in South Africa an ideological war is brewing over the legitimacy of VirginitY Testing vs. more conventional approaches to HIV prevention like the peer-based, media-driven educational project of loveLife, South Africa's national prevention initiative. In this paper I attempt to employ Pierre Bourdieu's notions of habitus, field, and cultural capital to construct an analysis of the ways in which young South Africans maneuver in and out of the spaces created by the VirginitY Festivals in order to make claims of membership in local social networks and in the broader South African nation.

VirginitY Festivals like many HIV related initiatives are health interventions that require individuals to regulate their own behavior and reshape themselves in accordance with new medical knowledge (Foucault, 1991; Rose, 1996). Bourdieu was especially interested in processes of socialization – or in his words, how individuals developed a “feel for the game”, how individuals and institutions obtain recognition and how they maneuver in various fields of power. VirginitY Festivals, the actors and various institutions engaged in their production and curtailment are useful sites for understanding processes of socialization and contestation that Bourdieu was concerned with. It is not HIV education in itself that makes young people competent or incompetent in relation to HIV prevention strategies, but the whole embodied habitual experience of an institution(s) as cultural capital that can be converted into symbolic capital or symbolic violence in relation to health.

In KwaZulu Natal, the iconic images of the VirginitY Testing Festivals have become all too familiar: throngs of young women assemble in a park, stadium or school ground and queue up for her test. When it is her turn in line, she is instructed by an elder woman to remove her underpants, lie down face up on a mat and spread her legs. After just a few moments, if she passes the test, white clay is placed on her forehead and she is presented with a certificate indicating that she is still a virgin. On the

occasions when a passing score is deemed inappropriate, she is taken off to the side, counseled by three or four women and given a referral for rape counseling or medical checkups. This is a scene that is repeated monthly throughout the province of KwaZulu Natal and culminates in the annual Umkhosi woMhlanga (the Royal Reed Dance Ceremony).

Proponents of virginity testing say the program promotes abstinence, while empowering young people to talk about sex with appropriate elders. Virginity Testing reportedly raises the young women's self-esteem through teaching them to respect their bodies. Critics however, say that the tests only serve to stigmatize and marginalize young women who do not pass the tests and are an affront to young women's dignity and bodily integrity. Moreover, critics charge that it also fails to place sexual responsibility on young men.

The Virginity Testing festivals can be understood as a field of social relations that cut across social categories. In this revived cultural practice, virginity testing has become a public performance, a point that historians and anthropologists have argued removes the authority of the test out of the realm of kinship relationships. But I want to call attention to the deliberate removal of virginity testing from the realm of the private to its conscious construction as a public performance in the form of a festival. In 1993, Nomagugu Ngobese, a teacher by profession and practicing sangoma (traditional Zulu doctor) began conducting Virginity Testing festivals throughout the province of KwaZulu Natal in an effort to "restore morality to the black community". When I interviewed Ngobese in 2004, she explained to me that her decision to revive the practice stemmed from a dream she had had in which the ancestors told her she needed to revive the practice in order to make up for nearly 2000 years of neglect. The process of reviving the practice involved conducting numerous interviews with elder Zulu women including her own mother and a few aunts, library research of ethnographic accounts of the practice and finally consultation and permission from the Zulu chiefs. It was during this same time, that Ngobese, was also

a student at the University of Natal completing her master's thesis. While there she became friends with a white woman from Australia who was an exchange student with an interest in using theatre for HIV/AIDS education. Although Ngobese is not clear about the extent to which this friendship informed the eventual structure of the Virginité Festivals, the two did later collaborate on the first Virginité Festival of which a documentary film was produced.

So you see there are a number of webs that I am interested in untangling when I return to the field, but for now I'm interested in how we might try to make sense of what's happening on the ground of these Virginité Festivals. The ethnographic record tells us that the conduct of virginité was about establishing a set of social relationships between kin groups and about educating young women (men) about sexuality in controlled, yet sexually charged environments. These were both achieved in the private realm of the home or in secluded environments involving age-mates. The notion of field is useful because it is dynamic and allows for examination of social relationships outside of isolated institutions like kinship. But the notion of field also allows us to capture the ways in which traditional and modern practices are infused in the Virginité Testing Festivals. We are able to see the creativity of women like Ngobese who use technologies and strategies drawn from different social domains like academia, public health, traditional medicine.

Finally, the notion of field captures the political arena in which virginité testing emerged. In area, the province of KwaZulu Natal(KZN) has the largest population of any province in South Africa, approximately 9.3 million (about 20% of South Africa's total population). KwaZulu Natal is the country's third smallest province (representing less than one tenth of South Africa's land surface), but one of the most densely populated areas in the country. Forty-three percent of the population of KZN lives in urban areas while the remainder lives in rural areas. Regarding HIV, approximately one third of the population of KZN is HIV positive and HIV

prevalence among women in the region have more than doubled since 1994 (National Department of Health, 2001). Finally, the rural communities of KwaZulu Natal more than any other province continue to be strongly influenced by tribal authority structures. Despite the 1994 elections which aimed to reintegrate the ten homelands which were the foundation of the apartheid system with the rest of South Africa, the tribal authority remains largely unreformed¹.

On a crisp, July afternoon, a VT festival is taking place in the Mbumbulu district. An audience of approximately 2000 young women is seated on the ground, crossed legged and many have what remains of their mark of virginity smeared across their foreheads. Some are waving banners that read, “The children must lead the fight against AIDS” and “Viva the spirit of Democracy”. Thembi Sibisi, one of the women who perform the test, steps up to the podium. Sibisi encourages the young women she tutors to think of men as asses. "In a pumpkin field, she says, donkeys take a single bite from each pumpkin and if they are not happy with the taste, move on to the next. They don't care if hundreds are left to rot. Men do the same. They 'taste' women until they find one they want to marry”. Sibisi concludes her remarks with a reminder of the danger of AIDS, the importance of youth to the African community and a final take home message of “abstain, abstain, abstain!!”

Virginity Testers position themselves as defenders of cultural rights and as active participants in the fight against HIV/AIDS. Several virginity testers including Sibisi and

¹ One is reminded of the decisive role that forms of Zulu nationalism played in the move towards democratic South Africa. The recent claim of former Deputy President Jacob Zuma, accused of rape, that he was acting according to Zulu custom highlights the disjuncture between traditional values and the rights of women and girls.

At the same time, the highly vocal and visible support of Mr. Zuma (mostly women), the overt chastising of his accuser (use of the word *nondindwa*, bitch, burning an effigy of the accuser etc) demonstrates the ways in which respect and obedience to elders and the acknowledgement of patriarchal power are valued in Zulu tradition.

Ngobese (who I mentioned earlier) have formed non-government organizations, and have participated in various HIV/AIDS workshops and trainings and the evidence of such participation is recognizable in the forms of HIV education (primarily encouraging abstinence) disseminated during the festivals, the use of referrals to other NGO's for further counseling and the awarding of certificates. Thus, Virginty Testing Festivals exist in a political field dominated by what has been called the AIDS Industry (Nguyen: 2001), a global assemblage of policy makers, non-governmental organizations, discourses and technologies of all kinds.

Fluency with technologies and discourses of the AIDS industry has become a form of capital in an arena of intense competition for authority. Bourdieu reminds us that positions in a field are thus dependent on the kinds and strengths of capital possessed. But in the post-apartheid context capital is also informed by ideas about the nation and belonging and expressed through the idiom of human rights. The most vocal and politically savvy opposition to VT are gender and human rights advocates. Kubi Rama, deputy director of Gender Links says of VT, "The constitution guarantees the right to bodily integrity and any act that violates this right has no place in democracy". In response to Rama and others like her, proponents of virginty testing have assembled their own arsenal of rights talk from the margins. Andile Hlengwa, the mother of a 16 year old who she has been getting tested for four years now, says, "The constitution says all of us have a right to our culture. Parents have a right to bring up their daughters in a way that will minimize the pain of being girl". To this, there are also the voices of young Dlamini who says, "We go through the virginty test because we want to. After all, it is my body to do with what want...Why should the government dictate to me what I should not do with my own body? They are violating our rights to practice our culture". In this political field one's ability to speak in different registers has value within this rapidly changing political landscape.

Finally, in the Virginitiy Testing context nationalist discourses expressing Zulu values and mores around sexuality, the need to preserve Zulu culture and participate in the defining of democratic South Africa, exist alongside of discourses dominant in public health that focus on individual responsibility and self care. I end this paper with a brief discussion of how Bourdieu's notion of *habitus* finds expression in and outside of the context of VTF's. Nozipho, an articulate and stunning 17 year old stood during the Festival to give her testimonial. "It is possible to live in the city and still be a virgin. I attend a model c (multicultural) school, speak English, I like fun and have a boyfriend, but I can still respect my culture". I met many young women like Nozipho who straddle the worlds of tradition and modern. Post-apartheid South Africa has ushered in increased mobility and visibility for girls and women to seek work and educational opportunities outside of their communities. Returning home to participate in the virginitiy testing festivals is one way of maintaining status in one's community. In private conversations these young women were demure in dress and demeanor. But there was also a kind of quiet assertiveness, a way in which these young women prided themselves on being able to represent themselves through words and integrity. Thus, Nozipho's character was demonstrated through the maintenance of her virginitiy in sexually charged situations and environments (and schools are thought to be an example of a sexually charge environment). This "achievement of virginitiy (Martin Shaw: 1995)" are a set of skills taught through virginitiy testing.

In KZN, VT is an interactional field that reveals disparate ideas, resources, rules, persons and institutions involved in constituting the field, defining the elements of the field, the range of accepted behavior as well as modes of resistance (Martin Shaw, 1995). Individuals who participate in this interactional field have a *habitus* that involves styles of dress and gestures and

forms of capital that vary from familiarity with traditional practices, use of English, HIV/AIDS specific knowledge technologies and human rights discourses. VT reveals the complex intersection of power and knowledge in the constitution of the person, society and culture.