Courting behaviour among traditional young men is a very important part of their education; for a young man must achieve the distinction of being an isoka, ie a Don Juan or a Casanova. (Vilakazi, A Zulu Transformations 1962:47)

There are no longer amasoka (pl. isoka); people are scared to die of AIDS. (Sipho, 20 year old male, Sundumbili Township, 2001)

This paper examines one dominant element of masculinities worldwide – the high value placed on men’s ‘success’ with women. In southern Africa, where HIV infection rates are typically 1 in 4, sexual networks characterised by multiple concurrent sexual partners are said to be prominent agents driving the AIDS pandemic (for instance HSRC 2002). As this paper shows, masculinities that celebrate multiple sexual conquests are meeting with forceful opposition in African communities, those the worst hit by the AIDS pandemic and the subject of this paper. Examining these trends, researchers have tended to dwell mainly on the present day, perhaps hardly surprising given the rapid onset of the pandemic. Notwithstanding the many rich resultant commentaries, this inclination to see AIDS through contemporary sources can, without care, suggest a certain rigidity, even innateness, to African sexuality. That the media is so quick in seizing upon stories of multiple-partners, sex for money, and sugar daddies makes it imperative to challenge any static representations of ‘promiscuous’ African sexuality. This is especially important of late because, although government’s suspicion of mainstream HIV/AIDS views has many antecedents, such images provide a context for President Mbeki and other critics to downplay the significance of sexuality to AIDS and to portray...
studies of African sexuality as being intrinsically racist. Thus, instead of surveying the links between poverty, sexuality, and HIV infection, some in government look no further than ‘nutrition’ or similar phenomenon to explain the interconnections between African’s economic hardship and AIDS.2

A major exception to this contemporary focus has arisen from the work of social historians, many contributions clustered around the 2001 ‘Aids in Context’ conference at the University of Witwatersrand (see the special editions of South African Historical Journal, November 2001, and African Studies, July 2002). These studies have questioned the uniqueness of the contemporary AIDS pandemic and shown the many precedents for the social turmoil occasioned by the collapse of apartheid. Mining and migrancy labour, in particular, institutionalised multiple-partners over a century ago as evidenced by the long history of syphilis infection in urban and rural areas of South Africa. This article builds on these themes but tries to chart a path, however fraught, between stressing the historical precedents for, and the uniqueness of, the AIDS pandemic. A tentative periodisation is attempted whereby, reviewing changes to masculinities over the last century, persistent unemployment coupled with continued agrarian collapse is argued to have set the conditions for the substantial reworking of masculinities and sexual practices over the last two decades (I also believe that sex and money have become interlinked in important new ways over the last two decades, the subject of a future paper). What is unique about the current young generation of men, I would argue, is that they are experiencing a simultaneous collapse of agrarian and wage livelihoods: while, as oral testimonies show, men in the 50s were often precariously caught between an eroding rural economy and an apartheid structured labour market, most eventually secured marriage and umnumzana (head of household) status through work, a path foreclosed to many in the current economic climate.

Rooted in the social changes induced by colonialism, migrant labour, and apartheid, the AIDS pandemic then is exacerbated by contemporary unemployment and economic hardship.3 Tight government spending in a climate of austerity has been widely shown to have detrimental health repercussions in southern Africa, including affecting HIV infection (for an excellent political economy perspective on health and HIV, see Basu 2003). This article does not explore further the underlying racialised political economy of South African health; instead the seemingly extraneous topic of masculinities will be used to demonstrate the intimate and contingent
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relations between political economy, sexuality, and the HIV pandemic in a climate of growing inequalities. It does so by attempting to chart in KwaZulu-Natal the rise and fall of the *isoka* masculinity. Significantly reworked through the last two decades of incessant unemployment, in its contemporary form this masculinity draws from powerful symbols of ‘tradition’, notably polygamy, to associate manliness with multiple concurrent sexual partners.

The following discussion draws from ethnographic, archival and secondary sources for my ongoing PhD dissertation research based in Mandeni, a municipality 120 kms north of Durban on the North Coast of KwaZulu-Natal. The project is only partially completed and its analysis must therefore be seen as exploratory. The starting point for this narrative is the late nineteenth century, a time when certain forms of *non-penetrative* sexual relations encountered relatively modest control. There was also a reasonable degree of public acceptance at this time that unmarried women could enjoy sexual relations with more than one courting partner; multiple-partners were not solely the right of *isoka*, as they became later. By the 1950s, however, the *isoka* masculinity was being forcefully employed to differentiate between the ‘traditional’ rights of men, allowed to have multiple partners including increasingly concubines, and the limited rights of women (especially unmarried women), who by then, faced greater expectation to act with sexual propriety and remain monogamous. Yet particularly in rural areas unmarried men of this era were governed by an expectation that they would marry at least one of their courting partners and thus shouldn’t ‘waste’ women. Marriage, building an *umuzi* (by then an urban as well as rural household), and becoming *umnumzana* (household head) were still the most important signifiers of manhood. The high level of unemployment in recent decades, however, is now drastically impairing men’s ability to become *umnumzana*. Once a youthful phase, securing multiple-sexual took on an exaggerated role in denoting manliness. The article ends by noting how, under the frightening weight of contemporary AIDS deaths, the *isoka* masculinity is increasingly becoming fractured, though an alternative masculinity has yet to take its place.

**Late 19th century masculinities: polygamous men, women with multiple lovers**

At the turn of the twentieth century, Zulu society was emerging from a protracted period of military warfare and, consequently, bravery and fighting skills were celebrated as essential expressions of manliness. These
military masculinities jostled and overlapped with alternative meanings around manhood sourced in umuzi (the homestead), the economic centre of Zulu society. At the helm of umuzi was umnumzana (male household head) and great social weight was attached to an umnumzana’s ability to accumulate cattle, marry several wives, and expand his umuzi through childbirth.6 A masculinity that celebrated polygamy, cattle, and childbirth thus underpinned a man’s economic success: the more successful a man was the more wives he could take and the quicker the umuzi, and his umnumzana status, could grow (see Carton 2000 on masculinities at the turn of the century among isiZulu speakers).

As Jeff Guy and others point out, when studying this pre-colonial/early colonial period, an important distinction must be made between fertility and sexuality.7 It was the former, fertility, which faced the stiffest social control since reproduction was so important to the supply of agricultural labour. Court records, ethnographies and oral testimonies all suggest that, by later standards, certain sexual acts were seen as a legitimate source of pleasure, providing that pregnancy did not result. Ndukwana’s testimony to James Stuart includes accounts of how courting couples could engage relatively freely in the practice of non-penetrative, thigh sex (ukusoma or ukuhlobonga), the principle form of sexual release among unmarried lovers. Ndukwana also describes how unmarried women were engaging in relation with more than one soma partner, a point supported by court cases of this time.8 In her classic account of Mpondoland, albeit discussing a later period, Monica Hunter (1936:182) further says that unmarried women could engage in ukumetsha (ukusoma) relations with more than one partner: ‘The more skulls the better’. And although Zulu custom seems to have been somewhat of an exception in this regard, extra-marital affairs also appear to have been quite well accepted in southern Africa well before the onset of migrant labour (see Delius and Glaser 2003).

That some women had multiple sexual partners should not be taken to suggest that sex was somehow outside of gendered disciplining discourses, or was static and uncontested – Ndukwana himself notes how ‘loose’ women could be positioned as isifebe; moreover, practices such as ukushikilela (where men could ask passing women to show their buttocks, Bryant 1949:240), are reminders of dominant gendered rules defining male sexual aggression and female passivity. An institution of marriage that depended on cattle for ilobolo also made masculinities anything but fixed, as evidenced by the cases of elopement at the end of the nineteenth century following the decimation of cattle by rinderpest (on sexuality and rinderpest
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...see Carton 2000). It was, however, the control of fertility, not sexuality per se, that remained uppermost. Men were fined for breaking an unmarried woman’s virginity, and particularly for causing pregnancy, and *ilobolo* payments centred on the transfer of productive and reproductive rights – a wife ‘without issue’ could be replaced by her sister or have her *ilobolo* returned.  

The word *isoka* during this period appears primarily to have signified a man’s entry into the courting stage. To begin courting was to inaugurate a process of finding a wife and thus setting up one’s own *umuzi*. One possible root of the word *isoka* is *ukusoka* (circumcision), a practice abolished by Shaka though formally serving as a rite of passage for those leaving boyhood. Specifically, Colenso’s 1861 dictionary defines the noun *isoka* as: ‘Unmarried man; handsome young man; sweetheart; accepted lover; a young man liked by the girls’. As is evident from the last definition, an *isoka* was also defined as a man popular with girls. Bryant’s dictionary published in 1905 contains similar definitions. As the twentieth century progressed, the meanings and practices associate with *isoka* were to change fundamentally as I outline below.

**Oral Testimonies from Mandeni**

![Map of Mandeni](image)

Figure 1: Central Mandeni showing Sundumbili Township, Isithebe Industrial park and the surrounding rural areas where *Ekufundeni* is situated (the exact position of *Ekufundeni* is not shown to protect informants from this area).
The area of Mandeni, the subject of this article, lies to the north of the Thukela river, the former border between Natal and Zululand and the site of many historical battles. Dominated agriculturally by large white owned sugar cane farms, the region enjoyed industrial spurts at the beginning, middle and later part of the twentieth century. In 1908 the first sugar mill in Zululand was established at Matikulu. In 1954, SAPPI paper mill was established on the banks of the Thukela and many of its workers became housed at Sundumbili Township, built in 1964. The biggest growth surge, however, came in the 1970s and early 1980s. In 1971, the flat land of nearby Isithebe (Isithebe is a flat grass mat) was transformed into a thriving industrial park; within two decades it would become the most successful of all of South Africa’s 20 ‘decentralization zones’, employing 23000 workers at its peak. These developments created huge dislocation and inequalities in the area, ones that have been accentuated by the mobility of global capital in recent decades. The ending of industrial decentralization incentives at the beginning of the 1990s and the reduction of trade tariffs after 1994 forced many factories to close, relocate, or restructure. In contemporary South Africa, where government policy actively embraces the Darwinian instincts of the global market, the biggest employers are now Taiwanese clothing factories that can pay their predominantly female employees as little as R100 a week. In more unionised and traditionally higher paid industries such as metal, a small number of men can earn five times this figure. What has resulted through these changes in the labour market is a class/gender structure whereby a relatively small group of men earn comparatively high salaries, some women have access to jobs and economic independence, many women earn very poor salaries, and large number of men and women remain unemployed. The coming together in a single geographical area of very poor women, or those with few economic prospects, and some relatively rich men, has important consequences for sexual relations (I discuss the link between political economy, gender and ‘transactional sex’ in more detail in Hunter 2002). Certainly, Mandeni is famous for its high HIV rates. In 1997 Drum magazine described Sundumbili, the main township of Mandeni, as ‘Death City ... The AIDS capital of KwaZulu-Natal’.

This remaining part of the paper is divided into two main sections. The first centres on interviews with elderly people living in imizi (homesteads) in a semi-rural part of Mandeni, which is called here Ekufundeni. Most of these informants were born in the 1920s, 1930s, or 1940s. The second section is based on interviews with youth in Sundumbili Township most of
whom were born in the 1980s. Although my broader PhD project will stress the divergent spatial as well as historical dynamics of sexuality, I use the two groups here mainly to draw attention to how masculinities have changed over time. These oral statements are supplemented with court cases and other records from Eshowe and Mtunzini, the district in which most of present day Mandeni municipality is situated. Before turning attention to the interviews, recognition must be given to the constant and irresolvable tension between interpreting oral histories as representations of the past, focusing on their construction through contemporary discourses and emphasising the context of the interview, and positioning these accounts as repositories of facts. The forthcoming discussion recognizes and at times tries to stress the fluidity of memory and the performativity of interviews – the interview process is anything but the simple collection of ‘facts’. At the same time, it is acknowledged that much more space could have been dedicated to the complex processes through which this ‘data’ was collected and understood.

**Coming of age in the 1940s and 1950s: working to become umnumzana, women’s ‘purity’, and the limits to isoka**

Elderly *Ekufundeni* informants’ family trees which extend for three, sometimes four, generations make possible a rudimentary analysis of changing marriage patterns. At the outset it must be acknowledged that African marriage is difficult to quantify; betrothal refused to be converted into the single, simple, event, despite the attempts of those administering customary law. This notwithstanding, a discernible theme is the growing inability of men to secure marriage. Around one third of the elderly informants had a father who had married polygamously. These polygamists will probably have been born from the beginning of the century to the 1920s. All of the 13 men over 60 whom I spoke with had married one wife with the exception of one informant who remained unmarried. However, virtually none of the under-35 men for whom I collected data on in *Ekufundeni*, or knew personally in Mandeni, were married or substantially advanced in the process of marrying.

Most men of the generation born in the 1920s/30s/40s had undertaken wage labour, frequently at a great many employment sites. Leaving home and engaging in often dirty and dangerous work constantly under the duress of influx controls was an expected path, itself associated with manliness. Although a few lucky men secured *ilobolo* cattle from their fathers, marriage usually necessitated long periods of wage labour. Heavily
dependent on the vagaries of the apartheid labour market, men in the 1950s were marrying later than previous generations according to accounts of the time (Simons 1968). The metaphor, *wakha umuzi* (building a homestead), portrays the processual nature of building up a home, and encompassed within this figure of speech was the long and uncertain process of saving for a lover’s *ilobolo*.

To instigate courting, a man would *shela* (propose love to/burn for) a woman who, upon accepting his advances, would *goma* him (choose/choose a man). Elderly male informants graphically recounted the art of hiding by the river or in the forest to *shela* a beautiful girl over many months, even years, recollections related with equal enjoyment too by woman. Parents advised their sons not to *shela* relatives but it was largely left to ‘elder brothers’ to illicit more substantial guidance, including on *ukusoma*:

> They told us that it wasn’t allowed that we sleep up, they said sleep on your side, then do your thing … if you sleep up, there is going to be danger … they said don’t sleep with her … because then you’ll get a case against you.

The brothers are referring to the fine (*inhlawulo*) that the son’s father would have to pay for illicit pregnancies. Penetrative sex was disapproved of by elder brothers (at least when constituted in this role) though full sex was celebrated by some men as a sign of manliness. Vusimuzi said that ‘Boys used to talk to one another and say we don’t want to *hlobonga* [soma]…’ Someone who *hlobonga’d* might be derided as being un-masculine, or *isishimane* [see below].

My interviews suggest that by the 1940s/50s the concept of *isoka* was used more to describe and justify a man who had multiple-sexual partners and had become associated less with a man simply coming of sexual age. Support for this changing meaning of *isoka* can be found in Sikakana’s dictionary, compiled in the 1940s and 50s, which differentiates between an ‘original meaning’ of *isoka*, which is ‘a man old enough to commence courting’, and later meanings that include a ‘young man popular among girls’. Oral histories correspond with Doke et al.’s description of *isoka* as primarily being a ‘young man’, although they suggest that the notion of *isoka* could also be employed in a more general sense to describe and justify men’s sole right to have multiple partners, for instance when married men had concubines – an increasing practice as polygamy waned, according to Schapera (1940). Justified through evoking the tradition of
polygamy, for the majority of unmarried men who were non-Christians, being *isoka* was highly desired and it was contrasted to being *isishimane* or *isigwadi*, a man who can not get a single lover. Vilakazi (1962: 50-51) describes *isishimane* as:

> a social stigma … worse than an organic disease… if he does not get one after having been medically treated, he may break down and become a psychopath.

This *isoka* masculinity also figured prominently in *izibongo*, oral praise poems that described and celebrated the characteristics of successful men. Prominent courting rituals practiced in rural areas further institutionalised the *isoka* masculinity. Many informants born in the 1920s/30s/40s vividly described how *amaqhikiza* (older girls already with sweethearts) would act as go-betweens who publicly gave a *qoma’d* (chosen) man an *ucu*, a beaded necklace, as a symbolic gift to show that he was her girlfriend. The man could then raise a white flag outside his house and begin to *soma* with his girlfriend. While men could accept an *ucu* from, and thus engage in *soma* relations with, several girlfriends, women could not give more than one *ucu* without first breaking off an existing relationship. These ‘traditional’ courting practices are usually remembered enthusiastically and with great humour by informants and yet literacy and Christianity were subtly but powerfully undermining the public nature of courting. Some, although not all, Christians, preferred to court privately, including through letters. The seemingly mundane practice of penning a simple love letter could thus radically challenge the existing order.

The *isoka* masculinity was dominant but not universal. Preachers looked down on *isoka* preferring Zulu men to espouse respectable and civilised monogamous values. One male informant recalled that as a Christian he only had one girlfriend at a time, though he admits that many Christian men paid only lip service to this rule and, certainly, the church attracted a far larger female following. Heterosexual norms were further challenged by the existence of same-sex relations, the Zulu words for a gay man being *isitabane* or *ingqingili* (see Epprecht 1998 and Moodie 1994 on same-sex relations in Zimbabwe and in the Witwatersrand mines respectively). The anticipation of marriage also placed very important limitations on the *isoka* masculinity during this period. It was still necessary to marry and build an *umuzi* in order to become a respected *umnumzana* (homestead head). If a man’s ability to have multiple partners was enshrined in the word *isoka*, its limit was contained in the concept of *isoka lamanyala*. Amanyala means
dirt, or disgraceful act. *Isoka lamanyala* signified a masculinity gone too far; its connotation is usually negative, although some men did celebrate their *amanyala* status. Men with more than one girlfriend, including married men who courted younger single (and thus eligible) women, were called to account for their intention or financial ability to marry these women, particularly by parents with a heavy stake in their daughter’s future marriage; thus despite the bravado around *isoka* many men only in fact had one or two girlfriends. Underlining the importance of the expectation of marriage for unmarried men with several girlfriends, Mrs Buthelezi, 74, compares, *isoka lamanyala* to *isoka*:

> An *isoka lamanyala* is a person with a lot of girlfriends, a person who takes from every place, he is *qoma’d* here and *qoma’d* there and he will never get married … [an *isoka*] … he doesn’t destroy people’s children.

Several informants also associated *isoka lamanyala* with the spread of STDs, showing how, well before AIDS became prominent, disease worked to limit the rights of *amasoka*.17

This brings us to a second apparent contrast with the nineteenth century: an exaggerated asymmetry around multiple partners such that women with more than one lover, particularly unmarried women, faced heightened public censure. Among the unmarried, the level of public intolerance around women having multiple-sexual partners was on a much wider scale than court cases, ethnographies and oral testimonies discussing the nineteenth century suggest and is indicative of a wider change in the social values. Of great significance is how moral judgements had become profoundly altered by Christian prudery, summed up by the notion of the ‘body as the temple of God’ and discussed in greater detail below. If pre-colonial society differentiated between sex and fertility, seeing the former as a legitimate source of pleasure, missionaries viewed any sexual act outside of marriage as inherently ‘sinful’.

Christianity was an enormous force for change in African society, but it became interwoven with ‘tradition’ and not simply its replacement. In the early twentieth century certain prominent champions of Zulu culture also identified themselves with Christianity, perhaps the most famous being John Dube, the founder of *Ilanga lase Natal* newspaper, and Solomon kaDinizulu, the Zulu king. Yet despite the apparent confluence of tradition and Christianity encapsulated in such figures, Christianity and education could be powerfully employed to criticize ‘tradition’, just as ‘tradition’ could be used to censure modern influences. Particularly, *amakholwa*
The making and unmaking of *Isoka* in KwaZulu-Natal

... could look down on *amaqaba/amabhinca* (heathens or traditionalists) a fact that women, always the greatest church goers, could exploit. Men were sometimes caught in a contradictory position. Christian marriages, especially common in towns, were marks of ‘modernity’ and yet implicit in accepting God was a commitment to monogamy. More broadly, Christianisation and education, though promoting a passive ‘domesticated femininity’, stirred a certain rebellion among some women towards customs such as *ukungena* (the ‘entering’ of a deceased husband’s brother into marriage arrangements with the widow). So too could husbands’ double standards surrounding extra-marital affairs be challenged by more educated, Christian, or urban women. As a useful starting point to understanding gendered contestations over multiple-partners then, men’s embellishment of the ‘tradition’ of *isoka* must be seen against heightened criticism of customary rights. The concept of *isoka* provided powerful ballast for men’s right to have multiple partners and, more widely, the preservation of selected gender roles and expectations. This evoking of convention was buttressed by the Natal Code of Native Law that promoted a generally rigid interpretation of patriarchal customs, including the uneven rights of men and women to have multiple sexual partners.

In *isiZulu*, ‘tradition’ is embedded within the powerful concepts of *amasiko* (customs) and *umthetho* (law). During interviews, informants repeatedly positioned ‘tradition’ as being diametrically opposed to Christian, modern, ways; such extremes, as suggested, could provide ammunition for groups to extol the value of either modernity or tradition. Characters such as Dube and Solomon kaDinizulu challenge clear distinctions but, more broadly, Shula Marks (1989) demonstrates the coalescence of both Christian and traditional groups in the 1920s and 1930s around Zuluness and women’s ‘purity’. White missionaries, Zulu nationalists, African Christians, and the Department of Native Affairs all railed against the disintegration of ‘tribal discipline’ evidenced by the increasing ‘immorality’ of woman in urban and rural areas. According to Marks (1989:225): ‘It was in the position of African women that the forces of conservatism found a natural focus’.

The category of *amagxagxa* (the in betweens) demonstrates the sometimes uncomfortable embeddedness of these Christian/traditional unions in everyday practices. The word can be used to describe those who attend church but continued to wear Zulu dress of *ibheshu* (skin cloth for men) or *isidwaba* (leather skirt for women). This subtle but pervasive blend makes it necessary to eye closely how modern and traditional forces converged...
around women’s ‘purity’. Indeed, while most informants said that a woman’s restriction to have only one boyfriend was part of a timeless Zulu umthetho (law), tellingly some sourced the rule as coming from God. Similarly fashioned in the ambiguous domain spanning tradition and modernity, the meaning of isoka appears to have been re-assembled by the mid twentieth century so that implicit in the concept became men’s sole right to have multiple-partners.

Rural informants suggest that women born in the 1920s/30s were expected to act khutele (hardworking) and with inhlonipho (respect) towards men and the elderly. This was not simply a dominant gendered ideology, but a set of practices necessary for women to follow if they were to be seen as desirable for marriage. Though some unmarried women did leave for towns or have secret lovers, securing a husband was a prize that catapulted status and offered relative security. Pre-marital pregnancy, though becoming more common, brought shame on a woman and her family and for the unmarried could make future marriage difficult. Certainly, virginity was publicly celebrated in girl’s songs and through the practice of virginity testing.\(^{21}\) In this climate, woman who broke the codes of propriety, including having more than one boyfriend, ran the risk of being positioned as isifebe (a loose woman). So severe was the insult ‘isifebe’ that its calling could result in a defamation case.\(^{22}\)

The amaghikiza were very important to the regulation of young girls. These were a group of elder girls, elevated in status since they had already qoma’d (chosen) a man. They would advise and warn unmarried girls on matters of sexuality. Describing how she was taught about the practice of ukusoma by these elder girls, Tholakele, now in her 70s, said:

> The iqhikiza said that if you are told by your boyfriends not to cross your legs [a necessary part of ukusoma] nothing good will happen … you’ll now have a baby …

Discussion of amaghikiza evokes great humour and nostalgia among the elderly; they hold a profound metaphoric role signifying stability and adherence to custom. The symbolic side of amaghikiza is worth dwelling on since it opens up a critical window into oral histories as well as prominent ethnographies of the time. The most fascinating evidence about amaghikiza is ironically a silence around the group; elderly female informants virtually always recounted the control that amaghikiza exerted on them, never their own responsibilities as amaghikiza, a stage that all must have passed through before marriage. There were often surprised
looks when this information was requested. At the same time, a small number of informants, when probed, questioned whether amaqhikiza were quite the personification of chasteness usually suggested. Several of my male informants, for instance, recounted how some amaqhikiza indulged in full sexual relations with pre-pubescent boys as ways to enjoy intercourse while preserving the appearance of virginity. Both of these examples offer firm evidence that amaqhikiza served as powerful metaphors – and not simply institutions – for the chaste control of women. They fire a stern warning against taking at face value ethnographies of the era that, crafted through structural functionalism, had a penchant for assigning amaqhikiza to definite ‘roles’ and ‘structures’ in societies (for instance Krige 1936a).

There was no comparable institution to amaqhikiza regulating married women, practically or metaphorically, though mothers in law would be the closest. Extra-marital affairs for married women, though against umthetho (the law), were relatively common as demonstrated through numerous court cases of adultery. Explaining these, many of the older female informants smiled wryly when relating how they dubbed their secret lover isidikiselo, the top of a pot, while their first man, the ibhodwe, was the main pot. Informants distinguish between this metaphor of a pot, which is related with some humour, and the more judgemental word for secret lovers amashende, associated more with a ‘loose’ woman.

For married women adultery, on its own, was rarely sufficient grounds for a man to divorce a woman. However, unmarried women, whose boyfriends often had more than one lover, faced a much greater pressure to remain faithful; men recalled how they would closely watch their girlfriends’ behaviour to decide which one exhibited the most inhlonipho and would make the most khuthele (hardworking) wife. Descriptions of rural women in the 1950s earnestly biding their time while boyfriends moved back and forth from work can be contrasted with the apparent ease in the nineteenth century with which unmarried women picked and rejected boyfriends (an element of control embodied in the word qoma – for a woman to select a lover). Men were quick to use this leverage in the most intimate moments, ironically potentially damaging their girlfriend’s chasteness. Following Tholakele’s qoma’ing of her husband-to-be, who at that stage had another girlfriend, the couple began to soma. Soon, however, Tholakele was refusing the requests of her boyfriend to have penetrative sex: ‘I was scared of being hit by amaqikikiza’ (amaqhikiza probably once again playing a metaphoric role). One time he tried to force her, as she remembers:
MH: When he tried to persuade you what did you say?
INT: I said, no, the law doesn’t allow …
MH: Did he try and physically force you?
INT: Yes, we were fighting and I pushed him … my husband said if you are refusing like this I wonder whether you can marry me or not …

Although, as I have argued, discourses surrounding sexuality gave men and women unequal access to sexual relations, it is important to recognise that the language of sexuality was also evoked in other ways. Parents in particular, could position their daughters as being isifebe or ‘loose’ women in order to deny them the opportunity to worship or school, both practices associated with possible desertion to the towns. Though churches and schools did provide important sites for courting, and school people often did see ukusoma as ‘old fashioned’ and penetrative sex as ‘modern’, it was the challenge that these institutions posed to gendered and generational hierarchies that made them particularly objectionable to parents, principally fathers. Sexuality, as Jeffrey Weeks (1985:16) points out is ‘a transmission belt for wider social anxieties’ – contestations over sexuality are about much more than simply ‘sex’. I will return to this theme later in the next section which contrasts the pressures on rural men and women for sexual restraint in the 1950s with the very different environment of the 1980s.

The Changing Umnumzana
Note: All three of these images have been selected because they exhibit change and tensions within *umnumzana*. Fig 2 (previous page) An *umnumzana* at the helm of his *umuzi* probably around the turn of the century. Note the moustache and children in Western cloth, both evidence of how even rural *umnumzana* was shaped by modern trends (Source: Natal Archives, Pietermaritzburg, C 646). Fig 3 (above left) An advert in *Ilanga* in 1950 showing the importance of clothing to modern urban *abanumzana* (pl. *umnumzana*). By this time the word *umnumzana* denoted an urban gentleman as well as a rural head of household. As the image suggests, to be *phucukile* (civilised) was (and still is) frequently coded as to *zenza umlungu* (to make yourself like a white). (Source: *Ilanga*, March 11, 1950:16, Killie Campbell Africana Collection). Fig 4 (above right) Love Life, an organization aimed at stemming HIV infection among youth, promotes sporty, healthy bodies as an alternative to men having multiple-girlfriends. Love Life portrays itself as a new lifestyle brand, competing with consumer icons such as Coke. In an era when *umnumzana* status is denied to many men, sports are promoted as fashionable alternative expression of manliness (Source: *S’camtoPrint* Issue 53, August 17, 2003).
Sex and money, township style: the contemporary *isoka* and the challenge of AIDS

Sundumbili Township, built in the 1960s, was conceived as a ‘model township’ to house SAPPI’s married workforce. In the 1970s and 1980s it was extended to house employees from Isithebe industrial park. Though constructed on a wave of new employment opportunities, unemployment is now endemic in Sundumbili. As a measure of this, only seven out of 34 students who graduated from a class in a high school I visited in 2000 had found work two years later.24

The identity of residents, like all identities, are forged in relation to ‘what they are not’. Sundumbili is frequently positioned as *phucukile* (civilised) in comparison to the outlying areas of rural KwaZulu-Natal that are seen as *emakhaya* or *emafamu* (rural areas). It is a ‘modern’ space. Not as modern as Durban and yet more modern than the nearby rural areas that lack reticulated water and tarred roads. Signifying this, a very prominent topic of conversation in the township among youth is ‘rights’ which are usually seen as arriving in 1994 with the new democratic constitution. A 25 year old described rights as followed:

> [Rights] are to do whatever you want any time … no one can take it away from you…some are using them in the good way but … some they don’t use it good because they just go anywhere without telling their parents … when the parents ask, he says that it is my rights to do that.

Terrible political violence in the early 1990s divided the township into ANC and IFP areas, restricting residents’ movement; being in the wrong place at the wrong time could lead to a beating, or worse, death.25 Today, *ibheshi* (street parties or bashes) are celebrated by youth as being fashionable spaces for drinking, dancing, and romancing. A number of infamous shebeens also bustle loudly with young people on Friday and Saturday nights. Rocked by loud kwaito or house music, many young men pass the evenings drinking Black Label or brandy while women can indulge in designer drinks like Reds, the popular cider.

Ethnographies written about South African urban life from the 1930s describe how urban spaces – where co-habiting was relatively common, practices of *ukusoma* (thigh sex) seen as old fashioned, and ‘rural’ institutions of *amaqhikiza* (elder girls who advised younger girls) not replicated – were characterised by high rates of ‘illegitimate’ children, extra-marital relations, and ‘prostitution’.26 Reading against the grain, however, reveals how
township development also fostered a middle-class masculinity associated with marriage (increasingly Christian, monogamous) and the ownership of a four-room house. Images appearing in the Zulu newspaper *Ilanga* in the 1950s depict a modern urban *umnunzana* (man/head of household) who aspired to Western standards of education and clothing (see fig 3). Though many ‘marriages of convenience’ were concocted to access housing: ‘at its very core … [urban policy included] efforts to “build” stable African family units’ (Posel 1995: 237). Certainly, my informants in Sundumbili Township suggest that in the 1960s and 1970s marriage, whether to an urban or rural wife, was an important sign of manhood, even if many married men had affairs and drew from the *isoka* masculinity to justify these as ‘tradition’.

Throughout the last century, men increasingly turned to wage labour to buy cattle for *ilobolo* (bridewealth), or through which to save money in order to pay *ilobolo* in cash. From the 1970s, technological developments, slow growth, population rises, and, since 1994, tariff reductions, prompted an increase in unemployment and a greater casualisation of work. Though some African people have taken advantage of the post-apartheid deracialization of schooling and employment, for the great majority the prospects of steady work are very slim. Unlike funerals, weddings in Sundumbili are rare events. Indeed, according to the 2001 census, 80 per cent of African men in KwaZulu-Natal have ‘never married’, twice the figure for generally better off white men.28

Schoepf (1988) and Setel (1999) have skilfully recorded how economic decline can amplify connections between money and sex in East Africa. Similarly in South Africa, many women are now dependent on men, sometimes many men, for survival or for consumer items (Hunter 2002). Another significant trend, and one that rubs more strongly against the historical grain, is the dependence of less successful men on women. Addressing masculinities in East Africa, Silberschmidt (2001) recounts how high unemployment, low incomes, and some men’s new dependence on women, downgrade East African men’s self-esteem. This provides a setting, she argues, for men to seize on multiple partnered relations and violence against women to express their manliness. Similarly, for South Africa, in the void by men’s inability to work and become *umnunzana*, ‘success’ with multiple women has become a critical marker of manliness. Seventeen year old township resident Sipho describes the way some men position their quest for women: ‘If he has six, I want seven, then he wants
to have eight’. It is true that young South African men and women still use the term *isoka lamanyala* to denote an unacceptable masculinity but the concept has become partially delinked from marriage – it is no longer common to hear men being lambasted for having many girlfriends but having no intention of marrying them. My conversations suggest that while men like Sipho exert an exaggerated bravado, multiple partners are extremely common among many, but not all, youth, although one important check on men’s actions is money. Sitting in his shack on the outskirts of the township, Vusi, 16, explains how he approaches women:

> If I see a right cherry (girl) I tell my *impintshi* (mate), the next day I dress well, I go to her and ask her name, I tell her my name and then I tell her that I love her…

He is, however, frustrated at his lack of resources, which can provide material limits for the *isoka* masculinity:

> … all of the girls want things they don’t have. They want money. Me, I’m a schoolboy, they look down on us, their friends say don’t *qoma* a schoolboy, a person that doesn’t work, what are you going to get?

Gender-based violence has multiple roots but interviews reveal strong connections between violence and girlfriends’ apparent lack of ‘respect’. Men’s own feelings of inadequacy can be literally beaten onto women. Of course, we should be cautious about interpreting violence as somehow new or a simple reflection of recent socio-economic conditions. Right back to the nineteenth century, cases of rape, including of young children, appear prominently in court cases. Ann Mager (1999) has documented an increase in violence in 1950s Ciskei as men struggled to come to terms with their and women’s changing status. Certainly, there is no doubt that in the 1950s *Ekufundeni*’s married men had a sizeable degree of freedom to physically abuse their wives; indeed, this was underwritten by customary law. Nevertheless, oral histories suggest that in rural areas violence against a man’s *unmarried* girlfriend faced important social controls. Thus, the act of forcing a women into penetrative sex during *ukusoma*, although virtually never seen as rape, could be punished through civil procedures, especially if pregnancy ensued. Moreover, beating a girlfriend for being ‘disrespectful’ might evoke questions as to why the man was doing so when he hadn’t yet paid *ilobolo*. Although much more work needs to be done to historicise sexual violence, the many cases I have come across today of young women in violent relations often with boyfriends frustrated at their inability to work, marry, and secure economic independence suggests strong links
between contemporary unemployment, evolving masculinities, and violence (see also Wood and Jewkes 2001).

In comparing the modern *isoka* masculinity with masculinities in the 1940s and 1950s one must recognize that earlier masculinities are remembered and articulated through the present. Some elderly men clearly reconstruct the past in ways that allow them to criticize young men’s ‘irresponsibility’ in the era of AIDS; indeed, masculinities can be an important focal point for generational conflict. But even allowing for the way that memory is inevitably reworked through the present, research is suggestive of important changes to masculinities. In the 1950s, a rural *isoka* could spend several years engaging in the art of wooing potential girlfriends; he could be reproached for having more girlfriends than he ‘might’ marry, usually one, two or three; whether urban or rural, he might look forward to becoming *umnumzana* (head of *umuzi*/household) through hard work, thrifty living, and eventually marriage; and he did not always see penetrative sex as a necessary part of pre-marital relations. Today, men typically court for a short time before sexual relations begin; they aspire to have very many girlfriends and are rarely held to account for their intention to marry these women (men saying that they would like to have four or five girlfriends is not untypical); they are seldom able to make the step from being *isoka* to being an *umnumzana*, even if most still hope to marry; and they typically see penetrative sex as the only proof of love. My interviews suggest that these basic trends in masculinities are similar even in more rural areas, though important spatial differences do exist.

During my first stays in Mandeni in 2000 and 2001, I tended to focus on the dynamics of this aggressive, almost self-destructive, contemporary *isoka*. Today, I am now far more convinced that the *isoka* masculinity is fundamentally changing. Day by day, funeral by funeral, AIDS bears harder down on the *isoka* masculinity. The symptoms, recognised by even very young children in the township, couldn’t be more emasculating – and de-masculinizing: some of the most virile, popular, and independent, bodies are steadily transformed into diseased and dependent skeletons, shunned by friends and neighbours. Connell’s (2000) term ‘bodily reflexivity’ neatly captures how the body sits within, and not outside of, the social world. Indeed, it is at the many funerals, as mourners walk in a slow circle around the coffin, taking a shocked glance at the deceased’s diminutive body, where the contradictions of *isoka* are most tragically played out. Consequently, men and masculinities are under huge scrutiny and critique,
even if women are still commonly blamed for ‘promiscuity’ and AIDS. It is difficult to think that a decade ago one could see men wearing government-sponsored T-shirts, saying ‘Real men don’t abuse women and children’. *Isoka lamanyala* – the *isoka* gone too far – has become linked to a man who infringes women’s or children’s ‘rights’ or spreads disease, particularly HIV/AIDS. Writing about Alexandra township, Liz Walker (2003) has demonstrated how these male doubts can be institutionalized into male groups such as ‘men for change’.

Why then do many men perpetuate practices that are literally killing them? Sexual pleasure is an obvious first answer. But to further answer this question one must return to how sexuality is deeply embedded within the power-laden practices of everyday life. Women seeking education and other opportunities have long been scorned as *isifebe* (*loose* women); today the disciplining of rebellious women as ‘loose’ similarly serves to bolster male power. One only has to spend a short time in any home in Mandeni to observe that women, often the young, shoulder the greatest burden of domestic responsibilities. The insult of *isifebe* hovers over women who challenge gendered taken-for-granted’s in the home and elsewhere. With this in mind, it is easier to see how men can adhere to differential claims over multiple-partners embodied in concepts such as *isoka/isifebe* that, while threatening to their lives if enacted in multiple-partnered relationships, reiterate gendered power in broader spheres of everyday life.

The principal role models for *Ekufundeni*’s elderly generation were elder brothers, neighbours with many cattle, or, for the more educated, teachers. For the most cosmopolitan, the Zulu paper *Ilanga* provided eye-catching images of an African urbanity modelled on Western ways. Women, whom I focus on below, looked up to elderly married women or perhaps teachers or nurses. Today, the media, especially television, enjoys much wider coverage in townships. Magazines aimed at Africans, such as *Drum* and *Bona*, or the newer *Y-mag* or *True Love*, together with more explicit television pictures, bring to South Africans powerful images that can connect sex with power, freedom and pleasure. These images are employed in intricate and contingent ways. Some women can tie the ‘modern’ images of ‘girl power’ to discourses of ‘rights’ and to the threat of AIDS, to strongly assert the merits of monogamy. Bolstered by discourses of women’s ‘rights’ in the post-apartheid period, some women now oppose with new energy *isoka*’s right to secure more than one sexual partner. In doing so, a
29 year old woman suggested that a man and not just a woman can *feba* (be ‘loose’):

There is nothing that can be said about an *isoka* because he has a lot of girlfriends … that is *ubufeba*. It was a long time ago that there were *isoka* — now there are just players. A man, he can *feba*.

One 29 year old woman told me that many women no longer use the tradition-laden concept of *isoka lamanyala* to criticize men: ‘the young they just call [bad men] *izinja* (dogs)’.

Nevertheless, showing women’s role in the production, and not simply the contestation, of masculinities, many other women weave sex, power and ‘rights’ into an ensemble that challenges only the *exclusiveness* of men’s right to take multiple partners. Indeed, coming of age in an environment where the prospect of work and marriage is small and often aware of their own boyfriend’s unfaithfulness, many women are quick themselves to see the benefits of securing multiple partners. As one young recently man put it: ‘now women say that it is 50/50 – if we have other girlfriends, they have other boyfriends’, a sentiment with a long history but perhaps amplified in the post-apartheid period. The pleasure of sex is openly celebrated, but these liaisons can also be brazenly about money, especially relationships with ‘sugar daddies’. Although some unemployed men or schoolboys complain that they find it difficult to secure a single girlfriend, ‘sugar daddies’ are usually said to work at well paying firms in Mandeni. Thembi, 25, says that she has a sugar daddy, who is 54. About the sugar daddy:

He does everything for me … because the cellphone he bought for me … money I’m not short… and he dresses me.

Some youth have told me that a young woman might also have relationships with boys of her age in addition to sugar daddies. These young men might know, and indeed approve of, their girlfriend’s sugar daddy, since he keeps her financially satisfied – allowing her ‘love’ to be devoted to him.

As this paper has tried to suggest, there is a definite but complicated relationship between cultural performances and the changing sexual economy. Interviews in *Ekufundeni* among elderly women over 60, showed how this generation was pressurised to invest in certain ‘acquired dispositions’ that would position them as marriageable – being seen as a chaste, *khutele* (hard working), and respectful, for example. *Amaqhikiza* (elder girls) worked to ensure that ‘respect’ was upheld, even if, at times, women ignored their guidance and the *amaqhikiza* were recalled in an
overly static way. Though there is great variety in women’s responses to modern circumstances, in today’s political economy, it is attractive clothes and a sexy demeanour that are often the ‘acquired dispositions’ that can serve to attract men – and money. Similarly, in rural areas, men faced heavy censure if they had many girlfriends whom they could not or would not marry; with unnumzana status so difficult in the present day the penalty for having many relations is more limited. Without wanting to posit a simple connection between material interest and cultural performances, this framework helps to explain why the virtues of ‘positive living’, prominent in many anti-AIDS strategies – working hard at school, making sacrifices to aim for a middle-class career, and practicing ‘informed choice’ – may resonate among what lesser fortunate South Africans sometimes disparagingly call amaModelCs (African students in formerly white Model C schools) but have less meaning for the vast majority who attend schools where poor results are endemic. It is in this context, that some women make implicit or explicit investments in the sexual economy. Sibongile’s conversation with Nonhlanhla, my research assistant, in 2001, underlines these points, showing how even the ultimate insult of the past, isifebe, can now be justified:

Nonhlanhla: How many boyfriends do you have?
Sibongile: Three.
Nonhlanhla: Why do you have three boyfriends?
Sibongile: Because I have many needs.
Philiswe: What needs?
Sibongile: To dress, I don’t work, a cell-phone ... doing my hair so that I am beautiful for my boyfriends, they won’t love an ugly person.
Nonhlanhla: What do they give you?
Sibongile: One money… another Checkers groceries ... another buys me clothes.
Nonhlanhla: Does your mother know where the groceries come from?
Sibongile: She knows, she doesn’t say anything because of the situation of hunger at home.
Nonhlanhla: Do other people know that you have many boyfriends?
Sibongile: Yes they know, my neighbours they criticise me, but not in front of me, they gossip about me, they say that I am isifebe. But my friends they understand the situation, they say nothing...

And yet, these type of comments are, I believe, becoming less common today. More recent interviews suggest that, in the face of AIDS, many
women, like men, are reducing the number of sexual partners that they are having or seeking protection through condoms.

**Masculinities on the move**

Political economy approaches towards AIDS often downplay masculinities and issues of sexuality seeing them as peripheral to health concerns. Yet resting heavily on the symbolism of polygamy, and with a long, unsettled, history, this paper has argued that the *isoka* masculinity has been significantly reworked in the era of high unemployment. Men celebrating multiple sexual partners, widely seen as an ‘innate’ feature of Africa sexuality, are in their present form, a product of an economic crisis that has ripped the core out of previous expressions of manhood – working, marrying, and building an independent household. Today’s tragedy of AIDS cannot be separated from the crisis of development in contemporary South Africa.

**Notes**

1. Many thanks to Ben Carton, Gillian Hart and Robert Morrell for comments on previous versions of this paper. I also acknowledge the constructive criticism of participants at a University of Natal History seminar where a version of this paper was presented. For hosting me in Isithebe, gratitude is due to the Dlamini family and for their patience and generosity I wish to thank the many residents of Mandeni whom I spoke with. I owe Nonhlanhla Zunguthe the greatest debt, however, for facilitating and transcribing most of the interviews upon which this article is based. The research upon which this article is based was assisted financially by fellowships from the Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research and the International Dissertation Field Research Fellowship Program of the Social Science Research Council with funds provided by the Andrew W Mellon foundation.

2. See Mbali (2002 and in this issue) for a critical review of Mbeki’s stance on HIV/AIDS showing the importance of racist representations of African sexuality and disease to the President’s stance on the pandemic. Vaughan (1991) and McClintock (1995) describe in detail the sexualisation of colonial discourses and practices. Though focusing on masculinities in KwaZulu-Natal, generally thought to be the province worse affected with HIV, I should make it clear that I am not attempting to link a particular ‘Zulu masculinity’ to the severity of the pandemic in this area. Indeed, masculinities that draw from polygamy to celebrate multiple concurrent partners have a much wider geographical scope than KwaZulu-Natal, as demonstrated by writings from Lesotho (Spiegel 1991) and West Africa (Wa Karanja 1987). Furthermore, I am not endeavouring to give priority to masculinities over other historical factors that have affected the AIDS pandemic, for instance the racialised health system that fostered high rates of STIs and general poor health (including nutrition) in African areas; the historical promotion of Depo Provera and the pill as contraceptives for Africans rather than condoms; or, of course,
segregation and the migrant labour system.

3. The shift in South African economic policy away from the redistributive, employment creating priorities of the RDP towards the neo-liberal GEAR plan will not be explored here but have been rehearsed in this journal over a number of years (for example Adelzadeh 1996)

4. In 2001 Mandeni municipality was renamed eNdondakusuka municipality. I use the original name in this article since it is still widely used in the area. Beginning with a four month stay in 2000, I have so far lived in Mandeni for over a year in total, staying in Isithebe Informal Settlement with the Dlamini family. From the start of 2003, I have also worked part-time as a volunteer in a local youth centre. All of the names of people appearing in this paper are pseudonyms.


6. Although polygamy remained the domain of only the most wealthy men. Welsh (1971:95) charts how, in the wake of the colonial interventions in African marriage, and a declining rural economy, the number of second or subsequent marriages declined from 44 per cent in 1870 to 30 per cent in 1909.

7. See Guy (1987) for a materialist analysis of pre-colonial African society that makes this distinction. Caldwell et al (1989), from a demographic tradition, also come to a similar conclusion.

8. Ndukwana, in a long and complex testimony to Stuart, makes several references to unmarried women being allowed to have a number of *soma* partners, as long as she *soma’d* with only one per month so that pregnancy could be accounted for. Testimony of Ndukwana in Stuart Archive Vol 4:300,353. For an earlier period see Fynn’s diary, recorded in the first half of the nineteenth century, which describes how men who visited a kraal were allowed to *hlobonga* with available girls ‘The plan is repeated as often as strangers make their appearance, so that one girl may have 100 sweethearts, as also a man the same’, Stuart and Malcolm (1986:295). Accounts of courting contained in evidence for criminal court cases from this period also suggest that unmarried women had a significant degree of sexual freedom, see RSC II/1/42 Rex v Gumakwake (85/1887) and RSC II/1/44 Rex v Ulusawana (45/1888).

9. An interesting example of the lessening emphasis on fertility during the twentieth century is the relatively swift reduction of the practice of compensating a groom’s family if his wife was found to be barren. In the nineteenth and early twentieth century if the bride was childless, a woman’s family was required to return *ilobolo*, or to allow the bride’s sister to bear seed, but by the mid-twentieth most of my informants are not even aware that this practice had taken place. For return of cattle because a woman was ‘without issue’ see civil court case 1/ESH 2/1/1/2/1 Vanganye v Makanyezzi, 1907. On *ilobolo* as ‘child-price’ – the transfer of productive and reproductive rights – see Jeffreys (1951) and Guy (1979).

11. The interviews in Ekufundeni were conducted in 2002, while research in Sundumbili took place from 2000-2003. In Ekufundeni, I spoke to elderly informants with a research assistant conducting 100 interviews, involving 21 old people, returning up to five or six times in some cases. We also conducted approximately 100 interviews in Sundumbili Township crossing three generations. With only a few exceptions, all interviews were conducted and transcribed in Zulu. My own position as a white, male, researcher from overseas did, of course, fundamentally shape these interviews and indeed my entire stay in Isithebe. I was present at all of the interviews except some of those involving young women, where it was felt that my presence might hinder informants’ openness.

12. I find Hofmeyr’s (1993), Moore and Vaughan’s (1994) and Hamilton’s (1998) work to be invaluable guides in combining African social history and sensitivity to the discourses through which informants, ethnographers, and the archives, speak.

13. Much more could be said about the ambiguity of marriage, an enduring theme in testimonies as well as court cases. *Ilobolo* payments, for instance, were sometimes not fully completed and were frequently disputed. While economic restraints could, even in the 1940s when the eldest of informants married, make ilobolo payments difficult, at other times, the bride’s families could implicitly or explicitly approve the non-completion of *ilobolo*: a well-known Zulu saying is ‘intombi ayiqedwa’ (the girl’s *ilobolo* isn’t finished). One outstanding cow could leave the groom’s family with an almost indefinite ongoing obligation. For a useful guide to the changing legal framework of customary marriages see Simons (1958).

14. *Inhlawulo* is the payment of a fine in lieu of the daughter who had been ‘seduced’. When customary law was first codified in Natal, ‘seduction’ was taken to mean deflowering. The greater acceptance of penetrative sex (linked to the decline in virginity testing) increasingly led ‘seduction’ to be associated with ‘rendering pregnant’. See Dlamini (1984).

15. See Koopman (1987), Turner (1999), and Gunner and Gwala (1991). Koopman sees *Izibongo zokushela* (courting praises) as one of six important izibongo types. On women’s *izibongo*, which can often scorn at male machismo, see Gunner and Gwala (1991). Koopman collected the praises he analyses in the early 1980s, Gunner in the 1970s, though they are likely to have been composed before these periods.

16. Love letters, as Breckenridge (1999) recently noted, constituted a critical private sphere about which we know very little – one that sat in stark contrast to the public nature of courting described in this paragraph. The ability to enjoy the privacy of letters was often given by my informants as a great motivator for basic literacy.

17. District Surgeons’ reports from the 1940s and 1950s for Eshowe and the adjacent Mtunzini district show at first great concern at STIs, particularly syphilis, and the
lack of resources to cope with these. By the 1950s, however, returns were more optimistic reporting that a greater number of infected people came forward for treatment. See GES 48 56/1 C; GES 48 56/1/D; GES 126 143 1B; GES 127 56/1 C; GES 143/1 C; GES 143 1/D. Describing the effect of STIs on masculinity, a doctor’s assistant practicing in the area in the 1960s remembers the embarrassment attached to syphilis and suggests that, like AIDS, it could provide a check on male masculinity, although its curability of course contrasts strongly with AIDS today.

18. Showing how Christianity fostered great gendered conflicts in rural Mpondoland, Monica Hunter (1933: 274) notes how ‘In the relations between husband and wife the greatest change lies in the introduction of the ideal of a single standard of morality for men and women …’ But she also says, ‘There is a double standard of sexual morality, and most of the quarrels between husband and wife turn on this’ (266). On contestations over men’s use of the ‘idea’ of polygamy in urban areas to secure concubines see Longmore (1959) and Wilson and Mafeje (1963). Men’s objections to Christianity on the grounds that it would impose too heavy a duty on faithfulness are described well in Mbathe (1960) writing about the Botha’s Hill area.

19. In South Africa, customary law was codified only in Natal, in 1878. As well as sanctioning polygamy, native courts could be used to claim damages from any male who committed adultery with another’s wife, although unemancipated women, as ‘perpetual minors’, had no such claim. For vigorous critiques of the effects the Natal Code had on women see Simons (1958, 1968) and Horrel (1968).


21. Krige (1936a:106,157) says that the worse insult a woman could face is to be called a isihobo, a deflowered woman, and such woman would be sworn and spat at. A central theme in adolescent girls’ songs collected by Krige (1968) was the celebration of woman’s ability to deny men full sexual penetration.

22. Most of the small number of defamation cases that I have seen from this period are when a women has been called isifebe – a great offence for a Christian as well as a non-Christian woman. See Majozi v Khuzwayo (1/ESH uncatalogued Civil case, 65/63) for a rural setting and Buthelezi v Ntuli (1/ESH uncatalogued civil case, 66/66) for a more urban setting.

23. Mtiyeni Vilakazi v Matini Vilakazi (d/a M Gumede) is a typical case. Mr Vilakazi claimed dissolution of customary union saying that his wife bore two children when he was working in Durban. She denies this and claims that he wasn’t sending her money. See Eshowe civil cases (uncatalogued) case 50/54. For woman claiming lack of support, violence, or failure to render conjugal rights as grounds for dissolution of customary union, see Eshowe civil Cases (uncatalogued) 38/55; 65/55; 70/55.

24. In 2000 I visited a local school and stayed in contact with several students, including Simpiwe, now 22. Only four out of his class of 52 passed matric at the
end of that year. Two years later, in December 2002, I asked Simpiwe to try to obtain information on the whereabouts of his former classmates. Of the 34 whom he obtained reliable information about, two had left the area, only four were studying further, only seven were working, mostly in Isithebe, and the majority, 21, were unemployed.

25. In 1993 and 1994 alone 120 people died from political violence between the ANC and IFP in the Mandeni area, see de Haas (1994).

26. See Krige (1936b), Hellman (1948), Longmore (1959), and Mayer (1971), though Mayer also provides a fascinating account of how acts of apparent ‘immorality’ in towns, such as co-habiting, were championed by migrant men as a way to guard against the lure of having many sexual partners and thus undermining his commitment to a rural umuzi. For recent reviews of some of this literature see Delius and Glaser (2002) and Burns (2002).

27. See Mager, 1999 on the production of middle-class values in Zwelitsha; Edwards, 1996 for KwaMashu. In contrast to many urban ethnographies in South Africa that stressed the sexually degenerative forces of modernisation, the Rhodes-Livingstone institute based on Zambia’s copperbelt pioneered a series of studies emphasising ‘adaption’ and the production of modern urban men and women. See Epstein (1981).

28. In KwaZulu-Natal, the common ilobolo figure of ten cows (plus one beast, the ingqutu, for the mother) was set as a maximum payment by the colonial administration in 1869 and later incorporated in the Natal Code (Welsh 1971). Today in KZN it is ironically seen as one of the most timeless of all African ‘traditions’ (although not in other provinces where, unlike in Natal, customary law was not codified). It is, however, showing some flexibility, most notably through generous cash equivalents being granted for the 11 cattle, though even these changes still place marriage outside the scope of most men’s financial capacity. Census statistics were calculated from the Statistics South Africa web site <www.statssa.gov.za>.

29. Thanks to Catherine Burns for challenging me to consider sexual violence in this paper.

30. I have emphasised the explosion of sexual images in the post-apartheid period, particularly through TV, and the complex ways in which they can be drawn from. Nevertheless, from the 1950s magazines such as Drum contained bold and sexualised images, stories, and letters read by African women, particularly in towns.

31. The term ‘acquired dispositions’ is Bourdieu’s, see Bourdieu (1990). I give agents more of an ability to choose, or at least develop, dispositions, than Bourdieu does. See Moore (1994).

32. The importance of schooling to stratification – across and within ‘race’ – in post-apartheid South Africa, and its relationship to behavioural changes and AIDS, is an immensely important topic about which we know very little.
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