

## Cultural politics and masculinities: Multiple-partners in historical perspective in KwaZulu-Natal

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### Abstract

Drawing from ethnographic, archival and secondary research, this article examines multiple-sexual partners in historical perspective in KwaZulu-Natal, a South Africa province where one in three people are thought to be HIV positive. Research on masculinities, multiple-partners, and AIDS has been predominantly directed towards the present day. This paper stresses the importance of unraveling the antecedents of contemporary masculinities particularly the gendered cultural politics through which they have been produced. Arguing against dominant conceptions of African masculinity as being innate or static, it charts the rise and fall of the *isoka*, the Zulu man with multiple-sexual partners, over the last century. Showing how the *isoka* developed through changing conditions occasioned by capitalism, migrant labour and Christianity, it contends that an important turning point took place from the 1970s when high unemployment threatened previous expressions of manliness, notably marriage, setting up an independent household and becoming *umnumzana* (a household head). The high value placed on men seeking multiple-partners increasingly filled the void left by men's inability to become men through previous means. Turning to the contemporary period, the article argues that, shaken by the huge AIDS deaths, men are betraying increasing doubts about the *isoka* masculinity.

### Résumé

Cet article fait l'historique de la violence sexuelle comme enjeu public et politique en Afrique du Sud, depuis sa marginalisation et sa minimisation initiales durant l'apartheid, jusqu'à l'explosion d'angoisse et de colère qui a marqué l'ère post-apartheid, de manière particulièrement dramatique en 2001 et 2002. Il est particulièrement intéressant de se demander comment et pourquoi le problème de la violence sexuelle a fini par être perçu comme un scandale de la masculinité, plaçant la sexualité masculine sous le regard scrutateur de la société. L'article argumente que l'éruption soudaine et intense d'anxiété publique, et les débats sur la violence sexuelle qui ont marqué la période post-apartheid, avaient relativement peu à voir avec les analyses et les politiques féministes (influentes, bien que dans d'autres domaines). Cette politisation de la violence sexuelle se comprend plutôt grâce à ses résonances avec des angoisses politiques et idéologiques plus larges, à propos du sujet national et de la communauté morale de la démocratie naissante du pays.

### Resumen

En este documento se sigue la genealogía de la violencia sexual como un problema público y político en Sudáfrica, desde su marginación y minimización inicial durante la era del apartheid, hasta la explosión de angustia e indignación que ha marcado el momento del periodo postapartheid, y de manera más espectacular durante 2001 y 2002. Es especialmente interesante la cuestión de cómo y porqué el problema de la violencia sexual se ha convertido en un escándalo de la virilidad, situando a la sexualidad masculina bajo un decisivo escrutinio público. En este documento se arguye que la

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repentina e intensa aparición de ansiedad pública y las discusiones sobre la violencia sexual que marcaron el periodo tras el apartheid tenían poco que ver con los análisis feministas y políticos (que sin embargo han sido influyentes en otros campos). Sino que más bien la clave para entender esta politización de la violencia sexual radica en sus resonancias con un espectro más amplio de ansiedades políticas e ideológicas en cuanto a la actitud del sujeto nacional y la comunidad moral de una democracia en ciernes.

**Keywords:** *South Africa, HIV/AIDS, masculinities*

## Introduction

Seventy per cent of the total number of HIV positive people world-wide—28.5 million people—live in sub-Saharan Africa. Unlike North America and Europe, where HIV/AIDS predominates among men who have sex with men and injecting drug users, in Africa most transmissions take place through heterosexual sex (UNAIDS 2003). Although there is now considerable agreement that gender is central to any understanding of male-female transmission, the social values surrounding manhood have been less examined (Mane and Aggleton 2001). Yet studies have shown the benefits of such an approach. In South Africa, for instance, scholars have noted how dominant masculinities can shape men's sometimes violent control over women, demand for "flesh to flesh" sex, and celebration of multiple partners (Campbell 1997, Wood and Jewkes 2001, Hunter 2002).

From a somewhat different perspective, an important recent theme in HIV/AIDS research is that of "sexual networking". Epidemiologists have argued that multiple-partnered relationships may play an important part in driving the HIV pandemic; the same number of overall partners but organized within concurrent rather than serial relationships leads to a considerably more rapid advance of sexually transmitted diseases (Morris and Kretzschmar 1997, though also see Legarde *et al.* 2001). Positioning multiple-partnered relations as one element of what they call a "distinct and internally coherent African system of sexuality" the influential demographers Pat and John Caldwell and their collaborators have stressed the prevalence of such relationships patterns within African society and their embeddedness within its underlying social structure (Caldwell *et al.* 1989, pp.187). Drawing (somewhat uncritically) on early ethnographies, they view such relations in the context of African wives' sexual unavailability for long periods because of both high fertility rates and long periods of post-partum abstinence. Yet, in contrast to this somewhat static approach, I attempt to show how sexual networks have emerged and changed over time. Moreover, I adopt a masculinities framework to demonstrate how men's "tradition" of having multiple partners both result from and shape male power.<sup>1</sup>

This paper is situated geographically in KwaZulu-Natal (KZN), a province where one in three people are thought to be HIV positive (Department of Health 2002). Showing how masculinities emerge out of changing material conditions, it is influenced by the work of the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci who devoted his short life (he died in an Italian fascist prison cell in 1937) to interpreting and challenging the dominant political and cultural forces that shape a society's "common sense". Bob Connell's (1987, 1995) seminal writings on masculinities draw strongly on this Gramscian tradition, stressing how women, men, the gay and the straight, contest and produce a plurality of masculinities. Applied to Zulu society, this conception of culture rejects the search for some kind of static logic to Zulu sexuality that public health workers can easily "map" and then "modify" perhaps through "education". Instead, it posits an understanding of Zulu-ness as being constructed through contestations in everyday life where material and cultural change are inseparable

and co-determining and where “education” is but one of a number of shapers of “culture”.<sup>2</sup>

To contextualize and historicize masculinities is especially important because the frightening reality of HIV/AIDS causes much research to gravitate towards the present day.<sup>3</sup> Additionally, popular discourse tends to characterize African people as inherently “diseased” and “promiscuous”, making it imperative to problematize representations of static African masculinities (on racialized colonial representation of “promiscuous” Africa see Vaughan 1991 and McClintock 1995). At a time when gender is now correctly a taken-for-granted concept in the study of AIDS, there is value in stepping back and considering how male power has been assembled over time. What gendered battles took place to produce today’s taken-for-granted traditions? How are men’s social and ideological strengths maintained and what contradictions do they face?

Following a brief methodological note, this paper charts the rise and fall of *isoka*, broadly a man with multiple-sexual-partners, a powerful though fluid concept in *isiZulu*. The importance of the notion of *isoka* has been noted in KwaZulu-Natal (see for example Varga 1997), but the concept has not been historicized. This paper argues that colonial rule and capitalist penetration significantly altered paths to manhood and reworked the meanings and practices surrounding multiple partners. Evidence suggests that in nineteenth century KwaZulu-Natal multiple partners were not men’s sole prerogative and that unmarried women could also enjoy limited sexual relations with more than one boyfriend. In contrast, by the 1940s and 1950s, most oral testimonies suggest that *umthetho* (the law) allowed only men to have multiple sexual partners. An *isoka* was sharply juxtaposed to an *isifebe*, a loose woman engaging in plural relations. Men, however, did not enjoy unlimited freedom. An unmarried man who played with multiple-girls whom he wouldn’t or couldn’t marry was castigated as being *isoka lamanyala* (literally a dirty *isoka*). Men among men were expected to marry, establish an independent household, and oversee the enlargement of this domestic unit through childbirth.

This paper draws particular attention to the period from the 1980s when many informants recount tremendous difficulty securing affordable housing and stable, if any, employment. Consequently, most young men today are unable to marry because of the high cost of *ilobolo* (bridewealth) and find it difficult to establish an independent *umuzi* (homestead or home) and become *umnumzana* (homestead head). The expansion of women’s work opportunities in the last 50 years has also disrupted men’s position as the sole provider, although many women face harsh poverty particularly as unemployment has increased in the 1990s. In this context, once celebrated as a youthful pastime, securing multiple partners has taken on an exaggerated significance for men and, indeed, for some women desperate to secure money or gifts. The article ends by noting the rising doubts that men now harbor around the *isoka* masculinity in the era of AIDS.

## Context and method

The following analysis combines ethnographic, archival and secondary sources collected for the author’s doctoral dissertation based in Mandeni, a municipality 120 kilometres north of Durban on the North Coast of KwaZulu-Natal. The principal data that this paper draws from is approximately 300 interviews with informants aged between 16 and 80 (all of the names of people appearing in this paper are pseudonyms). Interviews were semi-structured and geared towards understanding informants’ life histories with a special emphasis on relationships. Some informants were questioned as many as five times. These interviews,

alongside 15 meetings with same-sex groups of three to four young people, were mined for clues as to how sexuality has transformed from the 1940s. Virtually all interviews were conducted and transcribed in *isiZulu*. Useful supplementary sources include the Zulu newspapers *Ilanga* and *Isolezwe* and the radio station *Ukhozi FM*.

These sources were interpreted in conjunction with numerous informal conversations and observations. Beginning with a 4 month stay in 2000, the author lived in Mandeni for 18 months in total, staying in Isithebe Informal Settlement with the Dlamini family. The contradictions inherent in the author's position as a White male born in the UK, studying in the USA, of course need to be acknowledged. Just a stone's throw away from this informal settlement where the author stayed in the Dlamini family's large *umuzi* is Isithebe Industrial Park; driving from the informal settlement on the dirt, often mud, roads, past the many *imijondolo* (rented one room accommodation) and into the adjacent factory complex quickly repositioned the author as a probable factory manager with power over hundreds of lives. This is just one example of the power-dynamics involved in conducting research in a country where so starkly the "racial becomes the spatial" (Pred 2000: 98).

### **Nineteenth century masculinities: The homestead economy and women with multiple-partners**

Zulu society emerged from a period of military warfare at the turn of the twentieth century and bravery and fighting skills were important attributes associated with manliness. The central economic focus for *isiZulu* speakers, however, was *umuzi* (the homestead) and, in turn, the physical and symbolical centre of this institution was *isibaya* (cattle kraal). Big men accumulated many cattle, took several wives, and thus built a successful homestead; the more wives a man had the more labor he was able to control and the richer and more esteemed an *umnumzana* (household head) he became (see Carton 2000 on masculinities at the turn of the century among *isiZulu* speakers). The commencement of courting was thus a significant step towards marriage and manhood and this is suggested by the fact that one meaning of the word *isoka* was unmarried man. More fully, Colenso's (1861) dictionary gives the nineteenth century meaning of the noun *isoka* as: "Unmarried man; handsome young man; sweetheart; accepted lover; a young man liked by the girls". With its emphasis in this era on denoting the courting stage it is perhaps not surprise that the noun *isoka* bears close similarity to the verb *ukusoka* (circumcision)—a prior rite of passage from boyhood abolished by Shaka. As is evident from the above definition, an *isoka* was also seen as a man popular with girls.

Controlling fertility was paramount in pre-colonial society since an *umuzi* could grow only through childbirth or the acquisition of additional wives (see Guy 1987). Nevertheless, sexual practices that avoided childbirth were relatively freely permitted. Evidence from court cases, oral testimonies collected by the colonial official and historian James Stuart at the turn of the twentieth century, and early ethnographies, all suggest that non-penetrative forms of sex (*ukusoma*, or thigh sex) were widely practiced among unmarried persons.<sup>4</sup> Somewhat surprisingly in light of future attitudes, records also indicate a certain level of acceptance around women having more than one *soma* partner, although it is true that those overstepping the mark could be chastised as being *izifebe* (pl. of *isifebe*, a loose woman). Hunter [Wilson] (1936), writing about Mpondolond albeit in the 1930s, describes the attitude of unmarried women having multiple-boyfriends as "the more skulls the better". Extra-marital affairs also appear to have been quite well accepted in southern Africa well before the onset of migrant labor (see Delius and Glaser 2003). Indeed, before

the introduction of Christian notions of “the body as the Temple of God” the essence of *ukugana* (a verb translated sometimes too quickly into “to marry”) was childbirth and building an *umuzi* and not sexual fidelity for its own sake. Such relatively open attitudes around certain forms of sexuality at certain times should not, however, be drawn upon to suggest that African society was in any way promiscuous. Virginity testing ceremonies institutionalized the enormous value placed on pre-marital virginity for young women and chaste demeanor was essential if a woman was to be seen as marriageable. In certain respects, African society could be extremely sexually conservative.

### **Multiple partners in rural areas in the 1940s and 1950s: Men being *isoka*, women behaving badly**

If nineteenth century Zulu society was structured around largely self-sufficient homesteads, by the 1950s most rural areas were dependent on migrant labour. Drawn first to the diamond and gold mines in the late-nineteenth century, men increasingly found work in the twentieth century in the mushrooming industries of large towns such as Johannesburg and Durban. A greater number of women too began to build livelihoods in urban areas, often as domestic workers or engaging in informal activities such as the brewing of beer. Wage labour gave men new powers but it also imparted on them fresh expectations; in assuming the position of breadwinner, men took on primary responsibility for supporting the *umuzi* (Silberschmidt 2001).

Interviews with elderly informants in rural areas suggest that, against this transforming terrain, accepted thinking on multiple-sexual partners in the 1940s/50s had transmuted significantly from the nineteenth century. Notably, men and women’s rights to have multiple partners had diverged sharply. Transformations are most evident in pre-marital sexuality where, in contrast to the nineteenth century, all informants are adamant that *umthetho* (the law) only allowed women to have a single lover; multiple-partners were the prerogative of *isoka* alone. That a growing asymmetry emerged between men and women’s rights to have multiple partners is suggested by an apparent change in the meaning of *isoka*. Doke *et al.*’s dictionary compiled in the 1940s and 1950s differentiates between an original meaning of *isoka* “a man old enough to commence courting” and later meanings that encompass a “young man popular among girls”. Vilakazi (1962: 47) describes in powerful terms the Don Juan or Casanova status of *isoka* in the mid-century, a strong theme in testimonies:

Courting behavior among traditional young men is a very important part of their education; for a young man must achieve the distinction of being an *isoka*, i.e., a Don Juan or a Casanova.

According to informants, being *isoka* and having several girlfriends was countered to the ignominy of life as an *isishimane*, a man too scared to talk with girls and without a single girlfriend. With its symbolic crutch as polygamy, the *isoka* concept was widely circulated, and at times challenged, in everyday discourse, as demonstrated by its prominent position in *izibongo* (oral praise poetry) (Koopman 1987, Gunner and Gwala 1991, Turner 1999). If the archetypal *isoka* figure in the 1950s was a single young man famous for his prowess in courting several women, the *isoka* masculinity had a much wider ambit, one example being its bolstering of husbands’ position that they alone should enjoy extra-marital liaisons, especially important at a time when polygamy had become extremely rare.

This *isoka* masculinity was dominant but not universal. Christianity sanctioned a single, monogamous, moral code that was endorsed, if not always strictly followed, by male

*amakholwa* (Christians/believers). Schooling and Christianity certainly seems to have influenced a more seditious attitude among women to their husband's extra-marital affairs (see Longmore 1959, Wilson and Mafeje 1963). The existence of same sex relations also suggested a further challenge to heterosexual norms, the Zulu words for a homosexual man being *isitabane* or *ingqingili* (see also Epprecht 1998 on same-sex relations in Zimbabwe). Moreover, being *isoka*, even in the 1950s, could lead to embarrassing illnesses. Especially for urban men, penetrative sex (as opposed to *ukusoma*) had become a mark of manliness, and yet the embarrassing symptoms of STIs such as syphilis reminded men of the hazards of a masculinity that celebrated multiple-sexual conquests.<sup>5</sup> The harsh reality of migrant labor also meant that, although women's sexuality was jealously guarded in some circumstances, a number of women did have extra-marital affairs with a certain level of implicit approval: many of my older female informants smiled wryly when relating how a secondary lover was dubbed *isidikiselo*, the top of a pot, while the first man, the *ibhodwe*, was the main pot; metaphors closely linked to women's need for sexual relations, and sometimes support, when her husband was working in the towns.

Moreover, the *isoka* masculinity faced restrictions precisely because other paths to manhood were ultimately more valued. While *isoka* could *ukusoma* (engage in thigh sex) with several partners, in order to become a respected *umnumzana* he had to have a wife and build an *umuzi*. The phrase *isoka lamanyala* (*amanyala* means dirt or a disgraceful act), used to rebuke men with too many girlfriends, signified an unseemly masculinity, a masculinity gone too far. Though some men did recall a certain status associated with being *isoka lamanyala* for most it was a reproach. Men with more than one girlfriend, including married men partaking in extra-marital relations, could be called to account for their intention to marry their girlfriends particularly by parents with a heavy stake in their daughter's future *ilobolo*. Indeed, most informants were adamant that an *isoka*'s ability to attract women was heavily dependent on his control over cattle and other resources necessary to marry; hence in the 1940s and 1950s, despite the bravado around the language of *isoka*, men who had not yet secured work found it difficult to be *qoma'd* (chosen) by even a single woman.

What forces mid-century consolidated this *isoka* masculinity and, compared to the nineteenth century, frowned on women who had multiple partners? A persistent theme in writings on colonial Africa is how African men and the colonial state looked towards customary law to solidify patriarchal traditions (on the detrimental effects of customary law on women in Natal see Simons 1968, and Horrel 1968). The control of women, and women's sexuality, was especially paramount given the expansion of opportunities for women in towns. It was mentioned above that Christianity could facilitate greater female assertion but church morals also placed enormous pressure on women to act with purity. Christian Africans played a significant role in re-asserting traditions that could stem women's revolt (Gaitskell 1982, Marks 1989). The apparent new tradition that limited women, particularly the unmarried, to only one boyfriend seemed to have emerged out of this subtle blend of Zulu and Christian values. Demonstrating this, while most informants said that a woman's restriction to only one boyfriend was part of a timeless Zulu *umthetho* (law), tellingly some sourced the rule as coming from God. Yet these struggles over tradition did not take place in a social or geographical vacuum. They were underpinned by shifts in bargaining power as a consequence of migrant labour and the erosion of agricultural capacity in rural society. Instead of being dependent on their fathers for bridewealth, young migrant workers, now able to save *ilobolo* themselves, were in a strong position to demand that their girlfriends adopt a chaste demeanor and refrain from having secondary partners.

Though some women, of course, did develop intimate relations with more than one man, those doing so, especially the unmarried, were chastised as being *izifebe* (loose women). So severe was this insult that it could result in a claim of defamation.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, in the eyes of many men the *ihlazo* (disgrace) of having a child before marriage or being seen as *isifebe* positioned women as lacking *inhlonipho* (respect) and therefore undesirable to marry—condemned to a low status in society or forced to escape derision by moving to towns. Young girls' chaste living was further supervised by *amaqhikiza* (girls who had already selected a boyfriend) and elder women who periodically tested girl's virginity. While parents set firm limits, notably against pregnancy, they were rarely involved in the day to day socialization of young men or women's sexuality (on changing forms of sexual socialization see Delius and Glaser 2002).

As is common in the telling of oral histories, many respondents tended to remember the 1940s/1950s with nostalgia—as a period of stability, opulence, and convention. The *umnumzana* figure that I have drawn attention to sometimes figured in these accounts as a marker of a static and romanticized manhood. Certainly, one can easily underestimate the extent that aspiring for manhood in the mid-century placed men in an extremely ambiguous position; building a rural home and family forced men to work in towns and yet the consequences of this separation often undermined the very institution men sought to construct. A final important point of ambiguity results from the need to see sexuality as closely connected to broader gendered patterns. 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 practises associated with possible desertion to the towns and the loss of labour and *ilobolo*. Sexuality, as Weeks (85: 16) points out is “a transmission belt for wider social anxieties”—contestations over sexuality are about much more than simply sex. Put another way, the cultural politics of multiple-partners overlapped with parallel contestations over the roles and duties of women in society.

In conclusion, the evidence suggests that multiple-partners were the subject of ongoing change and contestation in the 1950s. Tradition, rather than being simply passed down or lost, faced intense contestation at its every move. Although both men and women were engaging in multiple partnered relations, compared to the nineteenth century, women, particularly unmarried women, faced much more public censure for doing so; the notion of *isoka* saw to it that this right was coded as a male only, pivoting on the tradition of polygamy. The following section explores contestations over multiple-partners in the contemporary period.

### **Multiple-partners in the era of democracy and unemployment**

A persistent theme in oral accounts is the long and arduous investments men made in order to become *umnumzana* (a homestead head). In the colonial and apartheid era this was never an easy project. Indeed, as the twentieth century progressed, men became progressively dependent on wage labor to provide *ilobolo* (bridewealth). At work, in particular, African men faced the humiliation of being positioned as boys. Today, however, arguably two further forces threaten South Africa men's path to *umnumzana* status: the difficulty that men face in marrying and setting up an independent household and the greater participation of women in the labor market and thus their independence from men.

Population census data suggests that marital rates began to drop from the 1960s. This was probably as a response to increased co-habiting in towns, more educated women

gaining new work opportunities, and migrant labour biting deeper into the ability of men and women to form long-term relationships. From the 1970s, however, technological developments, slow growth, population rises, and, since 1994, tariff reductions, prompted a dramatic increase in unemployment and a greater casualization of work. Unemployment estimates today range from 30–42% depending on the methodology used (Altman 2003). Though some African people have taken advantage of the post-apartheid de-racialization of schooling and employment, for the great majority the prospects of steady work are very slim. Since the payment of *ilobolo* is so heavily dependent on a man's employment, weddings in many South African communities are infrequent events today. 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 of Native Law (Welsh 1971). Today in KwaZulu-Natal, eleven cows 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). For sure, marriage has always been a process rather than an event and the institution is demonstrating flexibility—most families today utilize generous cattle-cash exchange rates. Nonetheless, wedlock continues to remain outside the scope of most young men's financial capacity. According to the most recent population census, less than 30% of African men and women over 15 years of age in South Africa were in marital relations in 2001. Interlinked changes in women's status and roles also serve to undermine men's position as *umnumzana*. Many men are no longer the sole provider and some are even dependent on women for survival. This is the context in which marriage becomes not only undesirable but unnecessary from the perspective of women.

The seismic changes to the institution of African marriage in the twentieth century have long been noted in published work. Especially in urban areas, high levels of illegitimate children, extra-marital relations, and prostitution were seen as evidence for societal breakdown over half a century ago (see Krige 1936, Hellman 1948, Longmore 1959). Yet, although urban areas undoubtedly did rework sexuality, it must be recognized that urban growth also fashioned the emergence of an alternative urban masculinity. Throughout the colonial and apartheid eras, elements in the state and society debated the extent to which African urban dwellers should be stabilized. In the 1950s and 1960s, although influx controls were severely tightened formal township housing programs expanded at their fastest rate for those with urban residential rights. According to (Posel 95: 237) "This stabilization strategy included, at its very core, efforts to 'build' stable African family units". The advertisement below (Figure 1) appearing in the Zulu-language newspaper *Ilanga lase Natal* in the 1950s draws on the imagery of a modern urban *umnumzana*, a man who aspired to Western standards of education and fashion. The important point to stress is that urbanization, often seen as a process that led to immorality, could also lead to new notions of manhood, ones in which notions of marriage and building a home still played a central part.

For East Africa, Silberschmidt (2001) has argued that high unemployment and low incomes created a context in which men's self-esteem could be bolstered through multiple partnered relations and violence against women. South African society is perhaps even more divided than East Africa in terms of wealth and poverty both between and within races. At the bottom of the social hierarchy many unemployed or poorly paid women are forced to engage in transactional sex with men, often multiple men (see Hunter 2002). But another significant trend is men's frequent unemployment. The inability today of many men to achieve *umnumzana* status through work, marriage and fulfilling a "provider" role is



**U Griffiths Motsieloa**  
—omunye wabantu abaphambili eJohannesburg ethi:

**"NGIBHEMA I C TO C NGOBA IKAHLE, IPHOLILE FUTHI INAMBITHEKA KANCONO"**

UMnz. no Nkosk. Motsieloa ngabahlali babantu base Johannesburg ababukakayo. Yona nguMunguli we De Pitch Black Footballers kaenti uyilungu leKomidi yase Bantu Men's Social Centre. UMnz. Motsieloa futhi ukwiKomidi ye African Music Society futhi uyilungu le Johannesburg Bantu Music Festival Committee. UMnz. Motsieloa ethi: "C to C yimoya sikilidli uqhawwa ngabantu ababukakayo beMpilo yase Dolobheni."

*Bukeka, ubhema iC to C!*

10 NGO 6d. + 20 NGO 1/- + 50 NGO 2/6

**C to C**  
WEMPILO YASE DOLOBHENI!

**C to C**  
10

Figure 1. Griffiths Motsieloa, a well known musician in the 1940s, advertises C to C cigarettes, markers of urban life. The newspaper *Ilanga*, from which this advert is sourced, was widely read in rural and urban areas by educated men and it helped to foster a modern image of *umnumzana* (household head)—a man confidently in control of his destiny and firmly at the helm of a domestic household (*Ilanga lase Natal*, March 18 1950, Killie Campbell Africana Library).

the context in which expressions of manliness that celebrate numerous sexual conquests must be understood. Seventeen year-old township resident Siphso describes the way some men position their quest for women: "If he has six, I want seven, then he wants to have eight". The numbers are very often much higher than the one or two girlfriends mentioned by the elder generation and penetrative sex is invariably taken for granted; many youth, especially in urban areas, are unaware that the practice of *ukusoma* (thigh sex) ever existed.

Despite the diverse history of the *isoka* masculinity noted here, men generally present *isoka* as a part of a seamless Zulu custom. Zandi, a 22 year-old township woman, describes how men conflate polygamy with multiple partners, to justify the latter: "They say that it is their culture to have more than one girl. They say my grandfather had six wives, I want to be like him". To denote an unacceptable side of the *isoka* masculinity, young men and women, like their grandparents, still speak of *isoka lamanyala* (dirty *isoka*) although today the concept has been partially unlinked from marriage. It is no longer common to hear of men being lambasted by the term *isoka lamanyala* for having many girlfriends and showing no

intention of marrying any of them. A more likely usage of *isoka lamanyala* might be to describe a man who cheats on his girlfriend with her best friend, or a man who spreads HIV.

Certainly, AIDS is bearing heavily down on the *isoka* masculinity. HIV/AIDS-related illnesses transform some of the most virile and popular bodies into barely living skeletons, shunned by friends and neighbors. Outwardly confident about being *isoka*, at times men betray their inner doubt. The contradictions of being *isoka* in the era of HIV/AIDS are perhaps most tragically played out at the many funerals in the area; previous ‘players’ are buried by their friends who were once envious of their ability to attract women. Consequently, men and masculinities are under huge scrutiny and critique, even if women are still commonly blamed for promiscuity and AIDS. Men’s own self-doubt is further propelled by women’s often aggressive critique of irresponsible men infecting women with HIV. 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)”.

There is some evidence in South Africa that male doubt is being institutionalized in groups such as “men for change” noted by Walker (2003) in Alexandra Township. These groups can counter the risk-taking and bravado implicit in dominant masculinities. Certainly, in the last 3 years of working in Mandeni, interviews have documented rising doubt among young men over the celebration of multiple partners. Nonetheless, sexuality is deeply enmeshed in with a broader cultural politics and its transformation takes place through contradictory tugs rather than unidirectional movements. Women seeking education and other opportunities have long been scorned as *izifebe* (loose women) and today the disciplining of rebellious women as loose still serves to bolster male power. One only has to spend a short time in many homes in South Africa’s townships or rural areas to observe that women shoulder huge burdens of domestic responsibility. The insult of *isifebe* hovers over women who challenge traditional gendered roles 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. These binary categories also, of course, help to reiterate the normativity of heterosexual masculinities.

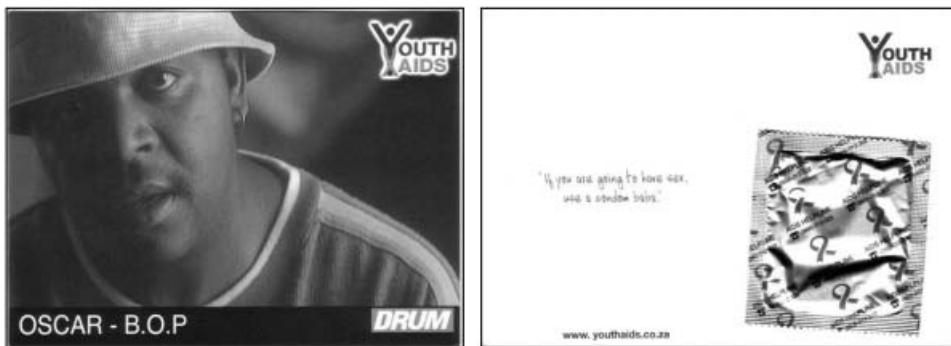
But it is too simplistic to suggest that masculinities are simply defended by men and challenged by women. Women’s efforts to secure livelihoods in harsh socio-economic circumstances can also serve to reproduce dominant masculinities. Many women are themselves quick to see the benefits of securing multiple partners, living in an environment where the prospects of work and marriage are slim and where they are often aware of their own boyfriends’ unfaithfulness. As one young man recently put it: “now [the post-apartheid period] women say that it is 50/50—if we have other girlfriends, they have other boyfriends”, a sentiment of course with a long history. The pleasure of sex is openly celebrated, but these liaisons can also be brazenly about money, especially those 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. The type of acquired dispositions (Bourdieu 1990) that women would invest in the 1940s, such as being seen to be chaste, *khutele* (hard working), and respectful, are much less important today as it is a sexy demeanour that can secure men and money in contemporary South Africa.

Facing these circumstances, intervention messages are highly contradictory, often unable to reconcile themselves with the material realities of life for the majority in post-apartheid

South Africa. At least publicly, churches tend to forcefully promote abstinence before marriage though the message seems hollow when betrothal is such a rarity. In KwaZulu-Natal, the pandemic has led to attempts to revive the practice of virginity testing (see Scorgie 2002). In Mandeni's township, a local church now annually organizes a virginity testing ceremony, an intervention not without irony given the historical role of churches in railing against 'heathen' traditions.<sup>7</sup>

One theme running through the narratives of youth interventions in South Africa is the need to treat young people, particularly women, with respect. Young peoples rights are championed and the category of youth is symbolically reworked to place young people on a more even keel with adults. The postcard advert from Youth AIDS (Figure 2) is suggestive of this theme, appropriating the word *baba* (father) in its text "If you are going to have sex, use a condom *baba*". Many young male readers will indeed be fathers, yet the postcard blends trendy youth images with a word usually reserved for older men, though now part of township lingo. It bestows on youth the duties of responsibility associated with manhood, in exchange for elevated male respect—respect being redefined away from traditional practices pivoting on gender and generational hierarchies. Such strategies of creating alternative values around manhood are also attempted by the most high profile AIDS institution in South Africa, Love Life, a large NGO established to reduce teenage pregnancies and HIV infections through media campaigns, telephone advice lines, and youth centers. The Love Life poster (Figure 3) encourages men to achieve respect through a healthy body, positioning sport as a desirable expression of manhood.

It is easy to see how these and other groovy intervention messages promoting choice, independence, and self-respect can appeal to those who envisage bright prospects in the new South Africa. Certainly there is a growing African middle-class in South Africa and most South Africa whites have relatively good prospects of work. However, for the majority of poorer, predominantly African, South Africans (the principal subject of this paper), the resonations between choice, positive living and the lived experiences of poor schooling and unemployment are more muted. Notwithstanding these comments, it has perhaps become too easy to dismiss campaigns such as Love Life's out of hand as simply being aimed at a relatively small elite. A more balanced assessment must also recognize how deeply hampered *any* interventions to rework masculinities, and more broadly sexuality, are by the



Figures 2. A postcard given away in July 2003 with popular magazine Drum. Oscar is a successful South African music personality. With a condom attached, the postcard speaks to young men through the word *baba* (father). *Baba*, a term historically used by older men, has been appropriated by young township men today as an informal, yet respectful, greeting. Youth AIDS thus doubly appropriates it in an attempt to bestow responsibility on youth to engage in safe sex.

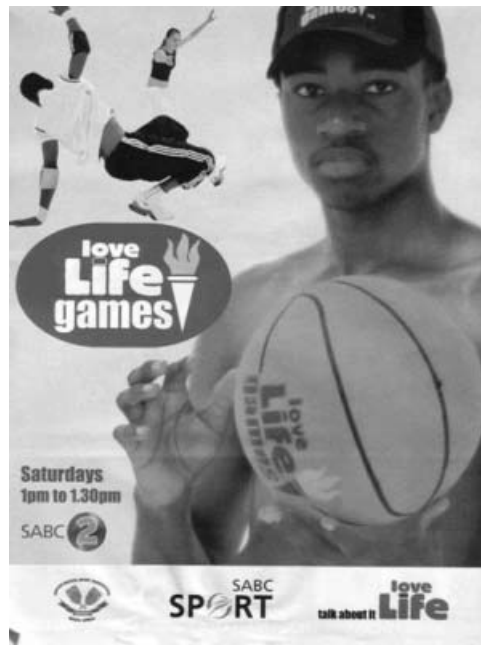


Figure 3. Love Life, South Africa's largest intervention campaign, portrays itself as a new lifestyle brand, competing with consumer icons such as Nike and Coke. In an era when *umnumzana* (head of household) status is denied to many men, sports are promoted as fashionable alternative expression of manliness (Source: S'camtoPrint, Issue 53, August 17, 2003).

extremely poverty in many areas of the country. Creating a new lifestyle brand, as Love Life has attempted, certainly does open up spaces for contestation by all South Africans, rich and poor, and this must be seen as a positive development; at the moment, however, it seems that it is middle-class, urban based, youth who have the strongest base from which to employ such symbols to challenge dominant expressions of sexuality.

Viewing masculinities and notions of respect through a historical lens also makes it possible to see why one of the key slogans of Love Life "Talk about it"—promoting parent/child dialogue on sex—is so controversial in South Africa. Sexual socialization historically took place through age-sets; talking about sex across generations could be seen as highly impertinent and counter to notions of *inhlonipho* (respect). Thus, opposition to new notions of mutual respect and universal rights may have more to do with attempts to preserve gendered and generational hierarchies than any kind of blanket African taboo on talking about sex, as some suggest. Supporters and critics of campaigns such as Love Life all arguably tend to focus too narrowly on sexuality rather than exploring its embeddedness within a multiplicity of gendered struggles and practices in everyday life.

### **Disaggregating male power and forefronting cultural politics**

The notion of cultural politics captures the way that men and women, the young and the old, the gay and the straight, contest everyday cultural beliefs, ones that have real material consequences. The practice of multiple-partners has never been static in South African history and is contested on the ebb and flow of changing material livelihoods. Gender is

more than simply the one dimensional expression of male power but, as historical analysis of the *isoka* masculinity demonstrates, embodied in male vulnerabilities and weaknesses. It is the coming together of male power in some ideological and material domains with men's weakness in others, including their ability to achieve full manhood through building an *umuzi* (home), that can create the violence and risky masculinities so often tragically noted in the era of HIV/AIDS. Historically rooted analysis—rarely featuring in HIV/AIDS debates—has an important role to play in replacing stereotypes of static African masculinities or culture with accounts that recognize complex, contested, processes of cultural change.

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### Notes

1. See also Heald 1995 for this critique of the Caldwell's work.
2. See Morrell 1996 and also Hamilton 1998 for important historical writings on 'Zulu-ness'.
3. Particularly important exceptions combining contemporary ethnography with historical analysis are Schoepf 1988 and Setel 1999.
4. Ndukwana in a long and complex testimony to James Stuart at the turn of the century 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. 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).
5. 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.
6. 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.

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