

The Traditional Custom¹ of Chastity and Sexual Restraint in the Education of the Young Swazi Girl

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ABSTRACT

This article deals with the traditional custom of chastity and sexual restraint of the Swazi people, living in a 'tiny kingdom' in Southern Africa under the current leadership of King Mswati III. The custom, referred to as Umcwashi, is a custom that forbids young, unmarried females engaging in any form of sexual activity for a specified period, the length of which is determined by the king. The Swazi people are known to be very strict and conservative, and traditionally permit only a restricted form of sexual activity among the young who have reached puberty. Swazi parents grant their teenagers no free sexual experimentation whatsoever. Parents, at all times, call upon restricted and inhibited sexual behaviour, which means that they will allow, 'at the utmost' only external intercourse and sex play. The maintenance of virginity in both boys and girls is above all treasured and extremely highly valued.

The above facts and the supposed impact thereof on young people contributed to determine the aim and focus of this research, namely, to determine what the custom of chastity and sexual restraint in Swazi culture entail, and what meaning and value the Swazi people attach to this type of traditional education. The value and importance of the custom of chastity and sexual restraint, that falls under the jurisdiction of the King himself became obvious during the course of this research. From the results of the study it is understood that not only the observation of the custom, but particularly the meaning thereof, are highly valued and respected by the nation.

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INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

'Close-knit' and conventional fabric of Swazi society

Swaziland² is a small country and a 'tiny kingdom' in Southern Africa under the current leadership of King Mswati III (Ruscombe-King, 2008). The previous King Ngwenya III is commonly regarded as 'the founder of the nation' (University of Phoenix, 2008), who was responsible for uniting the different clans and the subsequent continued close contact they had with each other (Matsebula 1988; p. 12; Ngwenya, 1995; p. 4). This fact could have contributed to them retaining their identity, and the careful preservation of their customs over many decades. "Even today some of the Swazi's, especially those living in rural areas, attach much value to their traditional customs, ceremonies and rites", which they punctually practise and transmit from generation to generation (Dlamini, 2006). These traditional customs include, e.g., *incwala* (first fruits), *umhlanga* (annual reed dance), *sibhaca* (a traditional dance) and *umcwasho* (the custom of chastity and sexual restraint) (Dlamini, 2006). It seems as if the careful maintaining of their traditional customs greatly contributed to the preservation of the conforming and close knit fabric of Swazi society.

Since the earliest times, Swaziland had a reputation for being conventional and extremely conservative (BBC NEWS, 24 June 2002, 10:47 GMT). Doo Apane, an attorney with the Swaziland branch of *Women in Law in Southern Africa*, recalls the 'medieval traditions' that prescribe to women what they might or might not do, what they should wear or should not wear, etc. He states that the sustained (persistent) observance of this practice confirms³ the fact that women are viewed as 'legal minors' in Swaziland⁴ (BBC NEWS, 24 June 2002) (Hall, 2002, p. 1).

Umcwasho – the custom of chastity and sexual restraint

This article will not cover all of the traditional customs referred to above, but will only focus on the custom of *umcwasho*, a cultural practice that can be translated as *the custom of chastity and sexual restraint*. This custom⁵ mainly applies to young Swazi girls (Ngwenya, 1995, p. 1), also referred to as 'maidens' (Mary Dlamini, 2007).

Umcwasho is a custom that forbids young, unmarried females engaging in any form of sexual activity for a specified period,

the length of which is determined by the king on a national or regional level. As mentioned earlier, the Swazi people (parents in particular) are very strict and conservative, and traditionally permit only a restricted form of sexual activity among the young who have reached puberty. The latter fact does not mean that Swazi parents grant their teenagers free sexual experimentation. On the contrary, parents *at all times* call upon restricted and inhibited sexual behaviour, which means that they will allow, 'at the utmost' only external intercourse⁶ and sex play (Ngwenya, 1995, p. 1).

Importance of the maintenance of virginity in Swazi culture

It is important to note that in Swazi culture, the maintenance of virginity in both boys and girls is above all treasured and extremely highly valued. It is viewed as evidence and confirmation of sexual morality, and sexual morality for the Swazi people takes precedence over chastity (*chastity* is viewed as the absence of any sexual activity [Kuper, 1963, p. 52; Barker, 1965, p. 94; Dlamini, 2006], and *morality* as the virtue that is derived from following traditional sexual principles [Dlamini, 2006; Mary Dlamini, 2007]). As a result, Swazi parents instruct their children regarding the above-mentioned restricted sexual activity ('pseudo-sexual intercourse') between a boy and a girl, without actual intercourse or penetration. Marwick (1966, p. 36) refers to this particular activity as "mutual masturbation".

JUSTIFICATION FOR THIS RESEARCH AND FORMULATION OF THE PROBLEM

The Western world is caught up in a devastating grip of immorality and indecency. The Royal Kingdom of Swaziland, being a "complex blend of traditional Swazi culture and Western (primarily British) tradition" (Booth, 1983, p. 13), finds itself in the heat of the current issue. This debate includes topics such as a lack of morality, and the failure of parents and schools (traditional⁷ and formal) to prepare children for a healthy and balanced life-style. Swaziland has the highest rate of HIV infections in the world among young adults (43%), a life expectancy of 33 years (Bureau of African Affairs, 2007) (Hall, 2002, p. 2), and an alarming number of teenage sexual activities and pregnancies, with consequent school drop-outs, abortions and infant mortality

(2001–89/1000 [Bureau of African Affairs, 2007]; Ngwenya, 1995, p. 5). Thirteen years ago Ngwenya (1995, p. 5) voiced educators' concerns about the devastating emotional results of immorality amongst the Swazi youth, and referred to issues such as feelings of personal guilt, emptiness, loss of self-respect, disappointment in the self, embarrassment and social disregard, and the impact thereof on the child, the parents and the family.

Current research findings report a growing concern about the youth that exists among Swazi parents, teachers, the clergy, traditional elders and the Swazi government (Hall, 2008; Gama, 2002; Dlamini, 2006; SABC News, 19:00, 23 April 2008). Mkhonta, a social welfare worker in the central commercial town of Manzini (in Hall, 2008, p. 1), refers to the problems of urban youth in Swaziland by stating that "our kids have been lost in a societal change", and "urban youth [are] slipping through the cracks". She continues: "... [they] might run into the thousands". The latter problem can be ascribed to the fact that UN Agencies and NGO's are primarily targeting rural areas for assistance, "as if the youth in the cities do not exist" (Mkhonta in Hall, 2008, p. 1). Hall refers to a lack of data on Swazi urban youth, due to the fact that research activities are focused on the rural areas, where "only persons in need are counted" (Hall, 2008, p. 1), as if problems elsewhere do not exist.

The Swazi people are convinced that the practice of their custom of chastity and sexual restraint can make a difference with regard to the rebuilding and restoring of the moral strength,⁸ particularly of the Swazi youth, but also of the whole Swazi nation (Dlamini, 2006; Ngwenya, 1995, p. 1). In the light of the foregoing discussion, the primary question of this research is the following: *What does the traditional custom of chastity and sexual restraint in Swazi culture entail, and what meaning and value do the Swazi people attach to this type of traditional education?*

DELIMITATION OF THE PROBLEM

To ensure that the researchers do an in-depth analysis of the research problem without becoming involved in non-relevant detail and too broad an investigation, the field of study was delimited to the following:

Geographical delimitation

Swaziland⁹ is surrounded by South Africa and Mozambique, and is a country of hills and pine forests covering mountains reaching up to 4500 feet above sea level. The Swazi people are a strong group-oriented nation of Nguni descent who, in the 1600's, settled in the regions known today as *Maputo* in Mozambique and *Swaziland*. This study will particularly focus on the people resident within the boundaries of the proclaimed *Kingdom of Swaziland*.

Political background¹⁰ and delimitation

Great Britain took control of Swaziland in 1902. The *Kingdom of Swaziland* under King Sobhuza II was established on 6 September 1968, and in 1973 the *Ngwenyama* (king) abolished the constitution that had been imposed by the British – Swaziland became a modified traditional monarchy. Since then, according to law and custom, all power¹¹ is vested in the king (currently King Mswati III), who is assisted by a council of ministers, legislature and *Ndlovukazi* (mother of the king).

Delimitation of focus

This research will focus on the custom of chastity and sexual restraint, as it was observed under the rule of the king(s) of Swaziland. It is important to note that the Swazi custom of chastity and sexual restraint is viewed as part of the initiation¹² of the girl, which in turn forms part of her traditional education and enculturation, for which the tribe (family, etc.) traditionally accepts the primary responsibility. The role and value of this custom, to a large extent, includes the *sexuality education* (Young, 1965, p. 30; Mphahlele, 1992, p. 8) or *education for life* (Lewinsohn, 1958, p. 29; Crooks & Baur, 1996, p. 121; Fafunwa & Aisiku, 1982, p. 10) of the young girl. In this research, it will be viewed as such.

METHOD OF INVESTIGATION

This is a qualitative research study that aims at investigating a phenomenon (the girl's participation in a custom) in a context-specific setting (the Swazi people).

Pilot study

Due to the relatively foreign field of the study and the nature of the research problem, a pilot study was undertaken. This was done by means of (a) a literature study, and (b) the conducting of interviews. When the pilot study revealed that only limited relevant (and rather outdated) literature was available, the conducting of the interviews became all the more important to supplement the available literature.

Electronic and printed sources were utilized to obtain the relevant material. The literature study consisted of two basic steps, namely the scrutiny and selection of relevant literature, and the determination of the reliability thereof. A variety of relevant key words for the electronic search were used to further identify conversant and knowledgeable people who are available and willing to be interviewed.

The aim of the pilot study was to serve as a preparatory phase, to

- explore the field; identify, select and study sufficient primary sources, and prepare for the interviews.
- familiarise the researchers with the primary sources and, should they deem it necessary, secondary sources.
- establish a solid background against which in-depth research can be conducted.
- become familiar with relevant concepts and customs and the unique cultural connotations attached.
- enable the researchers to properly interpret and evaluate the data that will be yielded during the in-depth phase of the research.

Meaningful facts yielded during the pilot study

Only a few scientific studies on the custom of chastity and sexual restraint have been published in popular magazines and

newspapers, and in this manner have found their way to the Internet. Many of these articles seem to have been written on an ad hoc basis, and published for their sensational value, e.g. the incident where thousands of woolen tassels symbolising chastity were publicly set on fire to mark the end of a sex ban imposed in 2001 (and dishonoured and breached by King Mswati III in 2005) (Shongwe, 2003; News from Africa, 2008; BBC News, 22 August 2005).

The researchers managed to obtain sufficient first-hand knowledge on the custom of chastity and sexual restraint by interviewing people who were directly as well as indirectly involved in the practicing of the custom. The value of this study will probably lie in this new knowledge that will be put on the table that can provide insight into and promote understanding of the role of this custom in the traditional education of the Swazi girl.

IN-DEPTH STUDY

Literature study

The most important consideration in selecting a reliable sample of literature for this study was to firstly identify and select material that was as closely representative of the Swazi people, resident in the Royal Kingdom of Swaziland, and the custom of chastity and sexual restraint, as possible.

The data which the researchers had identified and collected (the 'raw material') were carefully studied and subjected to two critical processes: firstly, the process of elimination, and, secondly, the process of internal and external criticism (Neuman, 1997, p. 61). During the process of external criticism it was also necessary to differentiate between an original text, later printings and revised editions. The process of *internal criticism* was realised by analysing and interpreting the findings and conclusions that had been obtained from the selected documents. This was done in an attempt to minimize illogical and biased assumptions and deductions.

Interviews

The results of the literature study (briefly discussed above) were augmented by the outcomes of the semi-structured interviews.

Ten individuals were interviewed, of which eight were females and two were males. Their ages differed between twenty-two and sixty-three years of age.

The interaction that took place during the interviews mainly dealt with issues regarding sexual customs and beliefs which made the interaction more complex. The questions for the interviews were carefully analysed to ensure that they don't inhibit or embarrass the interviewees or cause resentment, or 'put them on the spot'. It was important that each question elicited a flow of information, and that it therefore had to be clear and unambiguous. The informant has to feel at ease, and the interview has to be managed in such a way that a balance between revelation and the withholding of information can be maintained.

The in-depth study provided valid fundamental and intimate cultural information on the custom of chastity and sexual restraint, the main aim and rationale of the custom, the planning and organisation thereof, the participants, the traditional dress and headgear that are worn, the meaning thereof, and the value that the Swazi people attach to this custom, especially regarding its formative and disciplinary nature. Not all the data were used, because of ambiguity of meaning, or inapplicability to the frame of reference of the study, or incompleteness.

Aim of the custom as an aspect of the enculturation¹³ (or traditional education) of the Swazi girl

The enculturation of the girl has the primary aim of satisfying the immediate needs of the group and providing for the practical demands of everyday life. In this way, educational aims focus on satisfying the contemporary (concrete and abstract) demands of life (Van Rooyen, 1999, p. 5–6).

The girl is accepted as an adult when she has given proof of conforming to, and following the conventional norms, laws and traditions. The Swazi custom of chastity and sexual restraint serves as enculturation of the young girl and has the aim of spontaneously passing on the essential rules and traditions to enable her to suitably express and 'showcase' them in everyday life, through behaviour, language, music, dance, ornamentation and ceremony. It is by means of the custom that she is 'adjusted' to her material, social and spiritual environment with its concrete and abstract normative demands (in this case, determined by the King).

Aim of the custom as an aspect of the moral development of the Swazi girl

The young girl, by participating in the custom, moves to the focus of her training, namely her moral development,¹⁴ the development of her character and personality, and the 'elevation of her soul' (Van Rooyen, 1999, p. 4–7). She has to learn to "do consciously what adult women do naturally" (Van Rooyen, 1999, p. 5–6). Ngwenya (1995, p. 31) explains that the custom is imposed on young Swazi girls "so that they can become what they ought to be in terms of the standards set by the adults". He explains "in terms of the standards of the adults" as

- "standards demanded by the King",
- "the maintenance of virginity that is above all treasured and extremely highly valued", and
- "the postponement of sexual intercourse until marriage in both boys and girls" (Ngwenya, 1995, p. 31).

The aim of instilling and maintaining the morality of the nation

As a close-knit and conservative nation the relatively regular observance of the custom of chastity and sexual restraint, and, the fact that the girls, while practicing the custom, are 'around' and visible in their respective communities, serve as a reminder and contribute to the instilling and maintaining of a high sexual morality amongst the people (in this regard, also refer to *The aim of the custom as a 'Rite of passage'* below) (Ngwenya, 1995, p. 31).

The aim of the custom as a *Rite of passage*¹⁵

The fourth aim of the custom of chastity and sexual restraint lies in the fact that it simultaneously serves as a 'passageway' for the girl on her journey from childhood to adulthood. Fowler and Fowler (1972, p. 527) define *Rite of passage* as "a body of rituals that mark the passage from one stage of development to another". In this regard the works of Van Gennep (1909 and 1969). Van Gennep suggests a three stage process that includes the following: (a) *Severance* (separation), (b) *thresholding* (restoration, entrance, onset beginning, dawning of a new age), and (c) *incorporation* (inclusion, absorption).

Van Peursen (1987, p. 50) also suggests a three phase development, but of *interwoven-ness*, separation and *re-incorporation* and *re-absorption* of the girl in the group as an adult.

- 1 Her *interwoven-ness* with the world and the primary group illustrates her immense 'openness' and vulnerability to the influence from the surrounding life-world.
- 2 During the phase of *separation and abstraction* of the young girl she is expected to develop an own identity, become independent and accept responsibility for herself.
- 3 The phase of *incorporation* and *re-absorption* entails her 'return' to an 'open' community who is ready to accept the young girl as and graduate and adult in their midst.

The young Swazi girl, when observing the custom of chastity and sexual restraint, is figuratively speaking, waving farewell to childhood while simultaneously embracing adulthood. As part of the process, she 'dissociates' and 'disjoins' herself from the safety of her childlike lifestyle and identity, and "risks the tension of distance" (Van Rooyen, 1999, p. 5–7). The girl focuses on establishing herself, which gives rise to her new identity. This severance or abstraction of the young girl is not a superficial or partial detachment, but an intense process that involves her intellectual, social, emotional, spiritual and sexual being. The total being of the girl is thus involved in the process of inner growth and her progress from her 'old self' to a 'brand new I', with a new identity and a new role and responsibility to fulfil. This fact implies that, simultaneously, she has to change the way she thinks about herself. Her status in the community changes accordingly (Mary Dlamini, 2007). From being a rather 'insignificant' member of society, she grows into a dignified young woman – a status that grants new social privileges and a totally new standing in her family and community.

This change, which is an intense and deeply felt process, is probably the most significant (and most confusing) shift that the young girl will ever make in her entire life. Over the ages, experts have agreed that a teenager's transfer does not happen without crises and disarray in their minds, being and every day life. At the time, the Swazi girl is in desperate need of guidance, structure and stability – to restore the deep connection that she needs to maintain her personal balance and survival.

The above aims of the Swazi custom of chastity and sexual restraint can thus be summarized as the development, establishment and confirmation of sexual morality in the young

girl, as well as in the Swazi nation as a whole (Ngwenya, 1995, p. 91; Dlamini, 2006). The custom also serves as a type of *transit-education*, during which the girl progresses from childhood to adulthood.

PLANNING AND ORGANIZING THE CUSTOM

The call to the royal kraal

The custom of chastity and sexual restraint, as already explained, is realized under the authority of the King – the proclamation thereof is his sole decision and responsibility, and is personally announced by him, or, in rare circumstances, by a chief on his behalf (Dlamini, 2006).

It is not clear who is second in charge of the custom after the King. Ngwenya (1995, p. 100) casually mentions that the next person in the line of authority, as far as this custom is concerned, is the princess. “The leaders of the contingents submit to the leadership of the princess” (Ngwenya, 1995, p. 100). He also states the following: “Back home, the local leader’s (or chief’s) daughter or a princess assumes the supervisory role together with the senior maidens”. The researchers could not find any information in the literature to verify these statements. When questioned, the interviewees confirmed the role of the princess, but refuted the supervisory role of the local leader’s (or chief’s) daughter. Regarding the follow-up question, “What happens if there isn’t a princess at the time of the proclamation?”, the interviewees explained that there are always princesses in the royal household. They ascribed the presence of the many princesses to the many wives of the King, who counted thirteen at the time the research was conducted (Dlamini, 2006).

When the custom is proclaimed the young maidens between, 13 to 22,¹⁶ are called upon “to carry the tassels of chastity and sexual restraint” (in this regard, refer to the paragraph *Dress and headgear*) for the period required by the King (Ngwenya, 1995, p. 92). This period can be between one and five years. Literature mentions examples of two years (Kuper, 1978, p. 109; Johnson, 1983, p. 1000), three years (Twala, 1952, p. 94) and five years (BBC NEWS, 24 June 2002, 10:47 GMT) for the duration of the custom of chastity and sexual restraint.

The actual practising of the custom, the selection and physical inspection of the girls to be involved, the behaviour that is expected, the logistics of the teachings they are to receive, the

actual teachings (the content), etc., are planned, organized, presented and supervised by the appointed elderly women (hereafter referred to as *teachers*) who have undergone the custom themselves. It has to be kept in mind that only virgins are allowed to participate in the observation of the custom – the girls therefore have to be inspected – a task that is undertaken by appointed elderly women. The King alone decides upon the age of the girls (in this regard also read the second paragraph under the heading *Practice and Organising* the custom).

Each teacher has an assistant (a senior maiden who has successfully completed the custom) who can act as confidant and living role model (tutor and mentor) for the maidens (Ngwenya, 1995, p. 97). The senior maiden is selected on the basis that she has successfully undergone the custom herself, that she has maintained her chastity and virginity, has behaved herself as expected, and has worn the required attire and headgear in a dignified manner, whenever she appeared in public (Dlamini, 2006; Ngwenya, 1995, p. 97).

On the first day of the arrival of the contingents of maidens at the royal kraal, they are divided into groups and allocated to their teachers. They immediately receive their first teachings, that consist of a few words of welcome and some general information, such as the announcement of the *passwords* (a form of exclamation) that the maidens should use to greet each other, or when conversing with or responding to each other. Dlamini (2006) explains that the girls use the phrases to encourage each other to commit and dedicate themselves to the custom, and to uphold their promises and pledges for the period prescribed by the King. This practice can be regarded as a form of peer support and encouragement, and can also serve to promote group cohesion, collaboration and conformity. Examples of these passwords are *Simile!* ("We are keeping sexual matters on hold"), *Sancoba!* ("We are winning!"), *Ngilijuba!* ("I am young and free"), *Sikhulile!* ("We are grown up!") and *Sewela!* ("We are crossing over!").

Once the induction at the royal kraal is over, the maidens may then return to their respective homes. In this regard, it has to be noted that, different from initiation rituals that usually are a secretive and private event, this custom (except for the teachings that are confidential) is performed in public – the maidens *have* to be observed by other members of their communities (Ngwenya, 1995, p. 97). Mary Dlamini (2007) regards the maidens' presence in the community (while subjecting themselves to the call for self-control, for refraining from physical contact with males, for

maintaining their virginity, etc.), as extremely important. The fact that they remain at home and in their original surroundings for the duration of the custom must not be misinterpreted. It is important to understand that, although they are physically 'there', they do not mix or socialize with outsiders, but keep them 'personally' distant. It has to be remembered that their function in their respective communities are an exemplary function – revealing to the nation their commitment and dedication to the custom, upholding their promises to and obeying the rule of their King.

Participants

It has to be particularly noted that the call for the observation of the custom of chastity and sexual restraint is not an open call intended for all young Swazi girls, but only for those "who are without blemish, that is, for girls who are still virgins" and consequently have not given birth to children, and "who are at the prime of their growth" (Ngwenya, 1995, p. 94). They may either be about to start puberty (*'tidzandzane'*), or they can be young adults as old as 22 years of age. As it is, the girls can be with (or without) lovers, on condition that their virginity is still intact. Girls who have lovers are referred to as *'emachikiza'*, and those without lovers *'ematjiti'*, while those who are preparing for marriage are named *'tingcugce'*.

The course of the custom and the maintenance of control over the maidens

Once at home, for safety purposes, the maidens are advised to keep to their age groups and to remain in their groups when moving around. The junior maidens are separated from the senior maidens. The maidens from a specific area who have been selected for the observation of the custom not only have to fulfil the requirements discussed above, but also need to obtain the permission of their parents (which was a prerequisite before they could participate in the custom [Sukati, 1985, p. 89]). This is an interesting requirement, considering the authority of the King regarding the proclamation of the custom and the call up of the maidens.

The young girls are expected not to laze about in their neighbourhoods, or to engage in conversations with, or be

touched by, young men – the latter is considered a serious offence. Any physical contact with males is prohibited, and heavy fines are imposed on the males (Ngwenya, 1995, p. 99; Dlamini, 2006; Ngcamphalala, 2006). Heavy fines can also be imposed on a maiden who misbehaves, e.g., if she falls pregnant during her observing of the custom of chastity and sexual restraint (which is regarded as a disgrace to the whole group). The fine payable in such an instance can be at least one head of cattle, or its equivalent in hard cash (Ngcamphalala, 2006).

Zwane (2006) mentions the fact that, if the parents of a young admirer or lover request a particular maiden to visit the family, the girl needs the permission of her peers, who, if they agree, will determine a certain sum of money to be paid before the visit can take place. Prior to the visit, the maiden will be strongly advised and reminded (by her peers) about her responsibility not to engage in any sexual activity with the boy.

The community has to be made aware of the maiden's visit in advance, and, during the visit, she is required to hang her tassel conspicuously outside the home she is visiting, "for anyone to see" (Zwane, 2006). The interviewee explained that, due to the transparent nature of the custom¹⁷, and, very important, its credibility, the maiden's tassel *has* to hang outside as an indication of her 'controlled' visit.

From the interviews, it was understood that exceptions to the rule (i.e. prohibition of *any* contact whatsoever with young males during the course of the custom), do exist. Mthembu (2006), on the other hand, strongly denies that visits are permitted, since, according to him, it is then difficult to prevent any physical contact between the boy and girl. He nevertheless concludes by mentioning that, in extremely rare instances, the girl can be allowed to visit her boyfriend's family, but has to be accompanied by her peers, who must supervise her actions.

The maiden has to return home before nightfall, and it is the family's responsibility to ensure that it is done – if not, she and her boyfriend will be fined, usually a head of cattle (Zwane, 2006). One has to keep in mind that, considering the fact that the boy and girl do not own their own cattle (or money), it is the parents' responsibility to pay any of such fines on their behalf. This could be the reason why most of the parents are rather strict and maintain tight discipline. It is not clear what exactly the role of the peers (senior maidens) is and how it coincides with the role of the parents, as far as discipline and supervision of the girl are concerned.

It is important to note that the researchers never came across any information that indicates that physical punishment was induced for misbehaviour, a fact that led them to believe that the only form of penalisation that is used for misbehaviour, seems to be a fine.

Customary dress and headgear

The customary dress and headgear that are prescribed for the girls who participate in the custom of chastity and sexual restraint are extremely colourful and vibrant, and make the maidens look exceptionally cheerful and lively (Dlamini, 2006). Differently coloured beads are worn as an integral part of their outfits – each colour conveying a particular message. The colour of the headgear usually indicates the status of the maidens, as to whether they are ‘junior maidens’ (blue and yellow for girls without lovers at the time of proclamation of the custom) or ‘senior maidens’ (black and red for girls with lovers). To further distinguish between the ages of the girls, the junior maidens wear their beaded skirts (*indlamu*) shorter, while the senior maidens wear their skirts longer, crisscrossing the two pieces of cloth attached to the waist, around their bodies. Beaded lace is worn around the girl’s neck, with tassels attached to the lace and made to hang on the back of the girl. In the past the headgear or ‘decorative head ornaments’ (Ngwenya, 1995, p. 96) was made of grass that had been dyed¹⁸ different colours that show off beautifully when the girls are gathered in groups (Kuper, 1978, p. 108). Wool is currently used instead of grass (Zwane, 2006).

Meaning of the dress

The purpose of the girls’ smart attire is mainly to distinguish them as taking part in the custom of chastity and sexual restraint, with all the significance, connotations, rights, privileges and prohibitions attached to it. The attire reveals to the public the status of each maiden, and is a form of paying tribute to her, recognizing the fact that she has kept herself chaste and ‘unblemished’ (Ngwenya, 1995, p. 93), an example of a girl of ‘high morals’ (Zwane, 2006). The colourful outfits also attract attention and highlight the maidens’ young beauty (Kuper, 1978, p. 109).

The tassels that are worn hanging on the back are particularly significant, and show that a girl is a virgin and currently celebrating the custom of chastity and sexual restraint. Her dignified presence in her family and community commands everybody's respect and calls to mind the common value of high sexual morality that the nation shares and treasures. It also serves to inspire and encourage others to stand strong in what they believe (Dlamini, 2006; Ngwenya, 1995, p. 93; Kuper, 1978, p. 109). Zwane (2006) regards the colourful outfit as a means to attract and focus the attention of outsiders on the girls' self-control and the self-discipline that they display.

It is important to understand that in the Swazi culture, the maiden's choosing of a lover is no individual, secret and confidential matter. A lover is openly chosen with the permission of senior maidens. In this regard, note has to be taken of the important role that the peer group fulfils in educating, advising, supporting, controlling and supervising the young girl regarding her decisions and behaviour.

Food restrictions

During the interviews it became clear that there are particular prescriptive rules pertaining to the maidens' diet that they have to comply with. They are forbidden to eat the inner parts of a chicken, the softer part of bread (only the crust), the middle part of corn on the cob or the liver of a slaughtered animal. When questioned on these particular praxes, it was explained that the figurative meaning of these food laws alludes to pseudosexual intercourse (Zwane, 2006) (the inner parts of, e.g., a chicken or a loaf of bread allude to penetration of the vagina).

CONCLUSION OF THE CUSTOM

At the conclusion of the custom the maidens are summoned to the royal kraal where their teachers await them. The journey from their respective homes takes place under the guidance and supervision of senior maidens. As one can imagine, the maidens undertake the joyous excursion with much excitement and anticipation, particularly if they have played their part by complying with the requirement to maintain their chastity and virginity.

Upon arrival at the royal kraal, the teachers await the maidens and welcome them to the event or royal forum. The many interested spectators cheer and applaud while the maidens gather in celebration – they sing and dance till the sun is high in the sky. During the afternoon, during the ritual, they may remove the traditional headgear that they have been wearing for such a long time, and hand it over to their teachers, after which they are proclaimed honourable young women. This ceremony reminds one of a traditional graduation ceremony at a institution of learning. The concluding phase of the proceedings takes place at the river – the cleansing ritual. The cleansing of the girls symbolizes and celebrates the girls' pure and chaste state. The girls are now proclaimed grown-ups and nubile (Ngwenya, 1995, p. 94; Dlamini, 2006).

After the cleansing ritual, cattle, provided by the King, are slaughtered at the royal kraal, to mark the girls' responsibility and coming of age (Dlamini, 2006). The junior maidens are given permission to inform those who had proposed to them (prior to the onset of the custom) that they are ready to consider and, perhaps, accept one of the proposals. The senior maidens, who most probably had been busy with their marriage arrangements, and had to suspend them to assist in the observance of the custom, can then resume their arrangements and preparation (Sukati, 1985, p. 89). The end of the custom is marked by this celebration, where there is feasting, drinking, singing and dancing in honour of the 'graduated' maidens.

VALUE OF THE CUSTOM OF CHASTITY AND SEXUAL RESTRAINT FOR THE SWAZI PEOPLE

The results of this research have given the researchers to believe that the custom of chastity and sexual restraint still has a significant status amongst the traditional customs of the Swazi nation. Once this particular custom is proclaimed, it has the status of a traditional law that obliges all people to conform to prescribed patterns of behaviour (Mnguni, 2002). Those who fail to abide by its rules get punished, while those who persevere to the end become heroines and are promoted to adulthood.

During the interviews the participants were particularly questioned on the value of the custom. When asked whether the custom should be continued (reinstated in future), they all brusquely stated that it should be continued. In response to the follow-up questions ("Why do you regard the practising of

the custom of chastity and sexual restraint as important?" and "What do you regard as the value thereof?"), it was expected of the participants to motivate and elaborate on their previous answers. They supplied the following interesting answers:

On the unification of the nation and the preservation of their traditions:

- The custom unites the nation and contributes to them retaining their identity, and to the careful preservation of their customs over many decades (Dlamini, 2006; Mary Dlamini, 2007; Mnguni, 2002).
- The Swazi's, particularly those living in rural areas, attach much value to their traditional customs, ceremonies and rites, which they punctually practise and transmit from generation to generation (Dlamini, 2006).
- The careful maintenance of their traditional customs greatly contributes to the Swazi's being conventional and conservative. It also promotes the preservation of the conforming and close-knit fabric of Swazi society (Dlamini, 2006). Similar statements were also made on the BBC NEWS (24 June 2002).

On the maintenance of high morality in the nation as a whole, and in the young girls in particular:

- The regular practice of the custom contributes to motivating the people to maintain a high level of morality (Dlamini, 2006; Mary Dlamini, 2007; Mnguni, 2002).
- The custom is an opportunity for young Swazi girls 'so that they can become what they ought to be in terms of the standards set by the adults' (Ngwenya, 1995, p. 31). He explains the 'terms of the standards of the adults' as *the maintenance of virginity that is above all treasured and extremely highly valued, together with the postponement of sexual intercourse until marriage by both boys and girls* (Ngwenya, 1995, p. 31).
- One interviewee also mentioned the fact that the maidens who had participated in the custom, when they get married, respect their husbands and raise their families in the way they themselves have been raised (Mnguni, 2002). The statement 'raise their families in the way they themselves have been raised' indicates that value is attached to the preservation of the status quo regarding the upbringing of their children.

- The girl's participation in the custom can also be viewed as a period of physical (bodily) isolation, and consequently a time for preparing herself for marriage. It also serves as an exercise in containing her urges, should her husband fall ill or pass away (Dlamini, 2006).

On the value of the custom in general:

- The custom serves as a vehicle for the *sexuality education* (Young, 1965, p. 30; Mphahlele, 1992, p. 8) or *education for life* (Lewinsohn, 1958, p. 29; Crooks & Baur, 1996, p. 121) of the young girl. During the observation of the custom the girls are amongst other girls (i.e. same gender) who more or less are in a similar stage of development (junior maidens are separated from senior maidens), and who are striving towards one goal (chastity and sexual restraint). The latter situation constitutes an ideal learning opportunity with regard to sexuality education (Van Rooyen & Louw, 1994, p. 120–126).
- There is formative value in the teachings that the participants derive from it – the maidens receive direct guidance, while the nation is indirectly influenced.
- The whole issue of peer group interaction strengthens the individual child's character (Zwane, 2006).

The value and importance of the custom of chastity and sexual restraint, that falls under the jurisdiction of the King himself (and 'legalised' by him as it is), became obvious during the course of this research. It is understood that not only the observation of the custom, but particularly the meaning thereof, are highly valued and respected by the nation.

The custom for the young Swazi girl is indeed a 'rite of passage' – a ritual by means of which the girl enters into a state of adulthood, nobility, honour, dignity, etc. Participation in the custom remains an honour and a privilege.

NOTES

- 1 For the purpose of this research, the concept traditional customs will be used (also refer to *Clarification of concepts* below).
- 2 The history of the Swazi people as a group of communities dates back to the eighteenth century, when King Ngwane II led a group of people over the Lebombo Mountain to occupy Swaziland as it is presently known (Ngwenya, 1995, p. 1).

- 3 As recently as 2002, a senior official in the royal household declared women who wear trousers as being disrespectful to the Swazi king and Swazi traditions (Gama, 24 June 2002). Mary Dlamini, a Mbabane resident (22 years of age), confirmed that "if any of us dare wear pants, the soldiers will strip us naked" (Mary Dlamini, 2007)(BBC NEWS, 24 June 2002), especially in the vicinity of the Royal Village (Gama, 24 June 2002). An article that was published in a local newspaper (Beeld, 10 April 2008, p. 6) reports an incident in Umlazi, when four men literally stripped off a woman's pants in public. The matter was taken to court and the ban that prohibited the wearing of pants by women in public (in the T-section in Umlazi), was lifted.
- 4 A new national constitution proclaimed that, since January 2006, women's status was be elevated from minor to adult. They will, e.g., have the right to own property and businesses, and to refuse compliance with customs with which they disagree (UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, 2008).
- 5 Whenever reference is made to *the custom* or *this custom*, these concepts refer to the custom of chastity and sexual restraint.
- 6 *External intercourse* takes place when the penis is placed between the thighs of the girl. Penetration is not allowed. The act takes place under supervision (Ngwenya, 1995, p. 1).
- 7 For the purposes of this research, the concept *traditional school* refers to the enculturation of the child into the family and tribe.
- 8 Kuper (1978, p. 109) explains that, when Swazi soldiers returned to Swaziland after the Second World War in 1946, the King (King Sobhuza II) became apprehensive of the decline in sexual morality among the youth, and then instated the custom of chastity and sexual restraint to tame the killing spirit of the soldiers, 'by having disciplined females'.
- 9 Although *Kingdom of Swaziland* is the official name for 'Swaziland', the latter name is commonly used in research and other literature.
- 10 During the nineteenth century (1840), the Swazi came into conflict with the Zulu nation and, under the leadership of King Mswazi, appealed to the British for help against the Zulu. British traders and Boers (Dutch farmers from South Africa) came to Swaziland and 'guaranteed the independence of Swaziland' (University of Phoenix, 2008).
- 11 The executive, legislative, and also some judicial powers are vested in the king (University of Phoenix, 2008).
- 12 Initiation schools for Swazi boys and girls take place annually, and seem to still form the backbone of traditional education, particularly among the rural Swazi people.
- 13 The concept *enculturation* generally refers to the spontaneous indigenous education that a child receives from birth to introduce him or her into ordinary life as a member of a tribe (in this instance the Swazi tribe) (Ngwenya, 1995, p. 9). This particular concept is mainly used in scientific writings (Elliot, 1989, p. 15; Mabena, p. 1999, p. 24; Fafunwa & Aisiku, 1982, p. 15) and was particularly preferred, used and recommended by Margaret Mead in her writings (Schwartz, 1980). The concept *traditional* or *indigenous education* is also used to refer to the informal education or enculturation that the child undergoes in the home or tribe.
- 14 'Moral' [< L. *moralis*, manner, custom, practice] as pertaining to or concerned with correct conduct, or the distinction between right and wrong (as, the moral sense; moral considerations; the moral aspect of an action); concerned with the principles or rules of correct conduct (Fowler & Fowler, 1972).

- 15 *Rites of passage* is a concept that refers to a three-stage process, proffered by Arnold Van Gennep, twentieth century anthropologist (1909 and 1969).
- 16 The girls are not necessarily adolescents. Young adults (18–25 years of age) can also be included in the call of the King for the observation of the custom.
- 17 Despite the seeming transparency of the custom, the researchers could not obtain any detailed information regarding the content of the teachings that the girls received, except for remarks that it is 'a preparation for marriage' (Zwane, 2006), 'information regarding womanhood' (Mhtembu, 2006) and 'how to respect and serve one's husband' (Ngcamphalala, 2006). The researchers, when enquiring about topics such as childbirth, were told that 'the girl learns when it is her time' (Mary Dlamini, 2007) giving us to understand that the girl will be informed when it is time to give birth to her child.
- 18 Dyes of different colours were obtained from the roots of a variety of plants.

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