

# **Masculinities and multiple-sexual-partners in KwaZulu-Natal: The Making and Unmaking of *Isoka***

***Mark Hunter, Dept. Geography, University of California at Berkeley<sup>1</sup>***

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*, i.e. a Don Juan or a Casanova.

Vilakazi, *A Zulu Transformations*, 1962, p. 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 an important factor driving the AIDS pandemic (for instance HSRC, 2002). Given the tragic levels of AIDS deaths today, masculinities that celebrate multiple sexual partners are, as I show later, facing intense criticism in African communities, those the worse hit by the AIDS pandemic and the subject of this paper. But even some of the most vigorous critics of these powerful masculinities tend to see them in historically static terms – hangovers from a relatively fixed African past when men wielded uninterrupted power. Rather ironically, given his controversial stance on HIV/AIDS, it is President Mbeki who has most publicly adopted a historical and constructionist approach, rightly pointing to

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how dominant white groups have represented Africans as “diseased” and “promiscuous”.<sup>2</sup> And yet Mbeki stops firmly at the door of representation, appearing to view any more concrete research on African masculinities as inherently racist.<sup>3</sup> This essay argues that masculinities play a powerful material role in social life and yet possess a fluidity that only historical analysis can capture - there is no essential “African” or “Zulu” masculinity and yet masculinities are important constituents of social relations. It does so by attempting to chart in KwaZulu-Natal the rise and fall of the *isoka* masculinity. In its contemporary form, this masculinity draws from powerful symbols of “tradition”, notably polygamy, to associate manhood with multiple concurrent sexual partners.<sup>4</sup>

Empirically, the following discussion is based on 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.<sup>5</sup> My PhD will focus primarily on the post-1950s period, though in this paper I take discussions back to the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It is clearly ambitious, possibly over-ambitious, to engage with such a large time period in a single paper. Nevertheless, in order to challenge any notion that an “innate” African masculinity exists, I think that it is important to examine the historical processes through which the *isoka* masculinity was “made”, as well as the contemporary processes through which the *isoka* masculinity is being reworked.

The paper begins by pointing out how in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century certain forms of *non-penetrative* sexual relations faced relatively modest control and, moreover, that there is evidence to suggest that unmarried women were allowed to have more than one courting

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<sup>2</sup> Vaughan (1991) and McClintock (1995) describe in detail the sexualisation of colonial discourses and practices.

<sup>3</sup> See Mbali (2002) 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. I make to attempt in this paper to give priority to masculinities over other historical factors that have affected the AIDS pandemic, for instance the racialized health system that fostered high rates of STIs 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.

<sup>4</sup> Three key texts broadly influencing this historical approach to sexuality are Foucault (1979), Weeks (1985), and Connell (1995).

<sup>5</sup> In 2001 Mandeni municipality was renamed eNdongakusuka 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 well 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 the local Love Life Youth Centre. All of the names of people appearing in this paper are pseudonyms.

partner – multiple-partners were not solely the right of *isoka*, as they became later. The first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was a time of tremendous turmoil: polygamy was declining, migrant labour increasing and Christianization taking a greater hold. By the 1950s, the paper argues, the *isoka* masculinity played an important role in differentiating between the “traditional” rights of men, allowed to have multiple partners including increasingly concubines, and the rights of women who, by then, faced great discouragement from having non-monogamous relations. Yet at this time, the masculinity was regulated by the expectation that unmarried men would eventually marry at least one of their girlfriends. Marriage and building an *umuzi* (homestead) were still the most important signifiers of manhood. By the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, high unemployment and a crisis in the affordability of marriage – rooted in the inability of many men to pay *ilobolo* (bridewealth) – emerged as key factors reshaping sexualities. As other forms of manhood became unachievable, and as the expectation of marriage reduced, a powerful *isoka* masculinity celebrating multiple partners and penetrative sex became dominant. Yet, today this more aggressive *isoka* masculinity is being once again reshaped, as frightening levels of AIDS deaths reverberate across African communities. The *isoka* masculinity is increasingly becoming fractured, yet an alternative masculinity has yet to take its place.

There is now an abundance of literature on Western societies that shows how the decline in working-class industrial employment in the last 20 years has reshaped masculinities (see for instance McDowell, 2000). While some of these accounts show how economic upheavals affect family relations, what is specific about the setting I describe is the way that marriage itself, a most critical component of manhood, is challenged by many men’s inability to afford *ilobolo*. Though I stress in this essay the importance of the marriage to masculinities, sexuality is, of course, constituted through much more than simply wedlock. The state, Christianity, kinship, medical practices, work, and the media all interact with sexuality in complex ways. Indeed, recent writings have shown how a multiplicity of interrelated masculinities have operated in historically and geographically contingent contexts.<sup>6</sup> Yet, I have forefronted the dramatic decline in marriage because it

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<sup>6</sup> For a general overview of the literature on masculinities in southern Africa see Morrell (1998, 2000). For recent historical accounts see Breckenridge (1998); Carton (2000); Glaser (1992); Harries (1994); Mager (1999); and Moodie (1994).

has been so infrequently commented on within debates on masculinities and HIV/AIDS in spite of its considerable importance.

I also pay a great deal of attention in this paper to the constraints, strategies, and dilemmas faced by women. I want to show the importance, when studying masculinities, of giving adequate attention to women and not simply men. In the section on township youth in particular, I highlight how women both actively produce, as well as contest, masculinities. Today, some women draw from prominent discourses of “rights” and “equality” to hold up monogamous relations as an ideal. But many other women challenge only the *exclusiveness* of men’s right to take multiple partners - not, importantly, the practice of multiple-partnered relationships itself. Though AIDS intervention strategies now widely accept that men can exert coercive, sometimes violent, power over women, much less attention is given to the subtle ways that women consent to and, indeed, can be co-producers of dominant masculinities.

### **Late 19<sup>th</sup> Century Masculinities: Aspiring for Polygamy**

In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, a man’s status was heavily dependent on him accumulating cattle, taking a wife, and building a successful *umuzi* (homestead). The quintessential man was the polygamous patriarch, an *umnumzana* (homestead head) at the helm of a successful *umuzi*, his authority underpinned by the *ukuhlonipha* system of deference and avoidance (see Carton, 2000). At this time, men’s popularity with women was undoubtedly celebrated. Men among men, however, aspired to be not simply popular with women, but to have multiple wives.

During this period, dictionaries suggest that the word *isoka* was heavily associated with the commencement of courting. One root of the word seems to be in *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.

Before the discovery of diamonds and gold, milestones in the expansion of migrant labour, the success of a man’s homestead was heavily dependent on his ability to control predominantly female agricultural labour. A masculinity celebrating polygamy thus underpinned, and was underpinned by, economic success.<sup>7</sup> As Jeff Guy and others point out, in studying this pre-colonial/early colonial period, an important distinction must be made between fertility and sexuality.<sup>8</sup> It was the former, fertility, which faced the most important social control since *reproduction* was so important to the supply of agricultural labour. Certain forms of pre-marital sex were allowed among courting youth. Supporting this distinction, Ndukwana’s testimony to James Stuart relates how courting couples could engage relatively freely in the practice of non-penetrative, thigh sex (*ukusoma* or *ukuhlobonga*). Ndukwana’s account further suggests that some unmarried women could have more than one *soma* partner, so long as pregnancy did not ensue. In her classic account of Mpondoland, albeit discussing a later period, Monica Hunter (1936: 182) also says that unmarried women could engage in *ukumetsha* (*ukusoma*) relations with more than one partner: “The more skulls the better.”<sup>9</sup>

Of course such analysis 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

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<sup>7</sup> 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% in 1870 to 30% in 1909.

<sup>8</sup> See Guy (1987) for a materialist analysis of pre-colonial African society that makes this distinction. Caldwell et. al, (1989), from more structural functionalist tradition, also come to a similar conclusion.

<sup>9</sup> 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 19<sup>th</sup> 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 & Malcolm (1986: 295). Writing at roughly the same time as Monica Hunter, Kohler (1933) argues that in Southern Natal the young are left to themselves by elders to engage in *soma*-ing, particularly after feasts, though, he says that a woman who *soma*’s with more than one man will damage her name. The difference between Hunter and Kohler’s accounts underlines the importance of recognizing geographical variations in sexual practices.

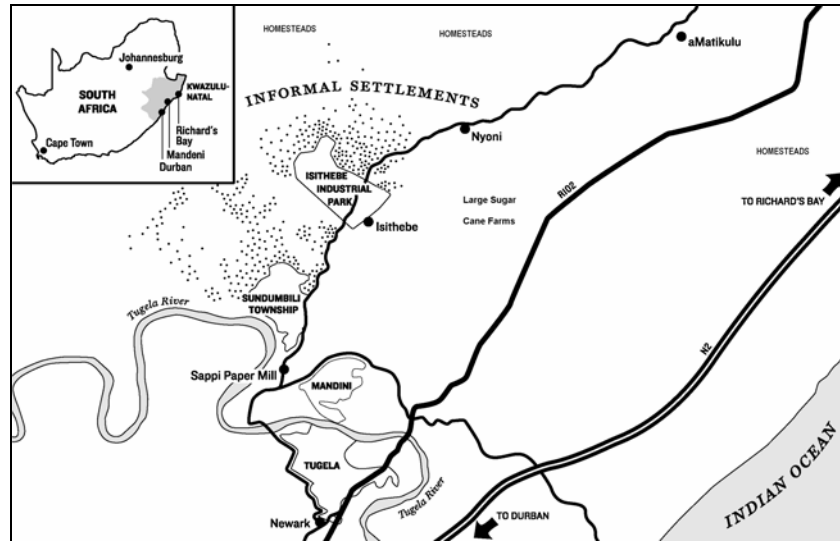
female passivity. A system of marriage dependent on cattle for *ilobolo* also made sexuality anything but fixed, as evidenced by the cases of elopement at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century following the decimation of cattle by rinderpest.<sup>10</sup> But it was arguably the control of fertility, 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. Non-penetrative forms of sex were tolerated, even encouraged. All of this was to dramatically change in the 20<sup>th</sup> century as Christianity became more dominant – bringing sexuality and fertility closer towards a single moral code (“the body is the temple of god”) – as the homestead economy declined, and as migrant labour dramatically expanded.<sup>11</sup> Indeed, as I intend to suggest below, in the 20<sup>th</sup> century the concept of *isoka* became associated less with a man coming of sexual age, and used more to describe (and justify) a man who had sexual relations with multiple women to whom he was not married; furthermore, women appear to have been increasingly disallowed from having multiple sexual partners.

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<sup>10</sup> On rinderpest and sexuality see Carton (2000). Julie Parle and Mike Mahoney are also addressing this question in a future African Studies history seminar, University of Natal, May 28.

<sup>11</sup> An interesting example of the lessening emphasis on fertility during the 20<sup>th</sup> 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 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> 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-20<sup>th</sup> 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 Makanyezi, 1907. On *ilobolo* as “child-price” – the transfer of productive and reproductive rights - see Jeffreys (1951) and Guy (1979).

## Oral Testimonies from Mandeni



**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 that is today Mandeni municipality has long led industrial development in Zululand. In 1908 the first sugar mill in Zululand was established at Matikulu. In 1954, SAPPi paper mill – only the South African company’s second - was established on the banks of the Thukela and many of its workers became housed at Sundumbili Township, built in 1964. In 1971, the flat land of nearby Isithebe 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 23 000 workers at its peak. These developments created huge dislocation and inequalities in the area – one’s 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, led many factories to close or relocate. 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 5 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). In the Mandeni area, AIDS deaths have been at frightening levels for many years: Sundumbili, the main township of Mandeni, was described in 1997 by *Drum* (1997) magazine as "Death City ... The AIDS capital of KwaZulu-Natal."

This remaining part of the paper is divided into two main sections. The first draws from interviews with elderly people living in *imizi* (homesteads) in a semi-rural part of Mandeni, which I call *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 I am collecting life histories and testimonies from all age groups within these two areas, as well as from informants in the nearby informal settlements, comparing the period of early adulthood for these two groups allows me to draw attention to how masculinities might have changed over time.<sup>12</sup> 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 to the interviews I must highlight that there is a constant and irresolvable tension between interpreting interviews as *representations of the past*, focusing on their construction through contemporary discourses and emphasising the context of the interview, and positioning these accounts in a more positivist way as *repositories of facts*. I recognize, and try at times to stress, the fluidity of memory and the performativity of

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<sup>12</sup> 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 5 or 6 times in some cases. We also spoke with men and women from the two generations below these elderly informants. 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.



interviews - the interview process is anything but the simple collection “facts”.<sup>13</sup> At the same time, I acknowledge that I have not given as much space as I could to highlighting the complex processes through which this “data” was collected and understood.

### **Coming of age in the 1940s and 1950s: working to become *umnumzana* and the limits to *isoka***

If one draws the family trees of elderly people from *Ekufundeni*, what stands out immediately is how marriage has progressively declined over the generations. Six out of eighteen elderly informants for whom I had accurate information had fathers who had married polygamously. With the exception of one man who never married, all of the 13 men over 60 whom I spoke with had married one wife. Yet, virtually none of the informants that I spoke with who were under 35 were married.<sup>14</sup>

Most men of the generation born in the 1920s/30s/40s had undertaken wage labour, usually in Durban. Leaving home and engaging in often dirty and dangerous work was itself associated with manhood. But the primary product of work was money; and this bought cattle for *ilobolo*, or paid for *ilobolo* directly - necessary steps in order to secure marriage and to build an *umuzi* (homestead). Even at 85, the only one of my informants who had never married (he was prevented in the past because he was *thakatwa'd* (bewitched) and lacked *amandla* (power/money)) told me (with a touch of irony):

I am going to take [a wife] because I now have things ... [motioning] ... over there is sugar cane ... I am going to put it in the mill then I go and pay *invulamlomo*.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> David Cohen (1994) and, from a feminist perspective, Joan Scott (1999) provide among the best general critiques of positivist social history, and Hofmeyr's (1993) work on oral histories is an invaluable guide in South Africa.

<sup>14</sup> It should be recognized that the ambiguity of marriage is 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, for instance, 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).

<sup>15</sup> Literally, open the mouth. A payment made to seek permission to negotiate for *ilobolo*. Although this is widely seen as a longstanding “tradition” it appears to have developed, along with *izibizo* gifts to the bride's family, after colonial legislation limited *ilobolo* payments. *Izibizo* is comprised of presents for the bride's

Marriage was typically preceded by a long period of wooing girls. Male informants related how they would *shela* (propose love to/burn for) a woman who, upon accepting his advances, would *qoma* him (choose/choose a man). Many elderly informants said that this process could take several years. While his parents advised him not to *shela* relatives, Muziwempi's "elder brothers" provided 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 (*ihlawulo*) that the son's father would have to pay for illicit pregnancies.<sup>16</sup> Penetrative sex was, however, celebrated by some men as a sign of manliness: "They wanted to rush to be men". Indeed, 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]. Missionaries also presented *ukusoma* as "lewd" and encouraged abstention before marriage.

Christian marriages and discourses, together with a stagnating agrarian economy, led to a relatively swift decline in polygamy, as the figures above suggest. Based on his research in Bechuanaland in the 1930s, Schapera (1940) argues that the decline in polygamy together with the expansion of migrant labour led to an increase in men engaging in concubine relations. If a similar trend took place in Mandeni, and some interviews suggest that it did, this apparent growth of infidelity, particularly male infidelity, collided head to head with Christianity's single standard of morality for men and women – monogamy. Preachers frowned on *isoka* and suggested that it was not just women, but also men, who could be "loose" for having more than one sexual partner. Indeed, one male informant says that as a Christian he only had one girlfriend at a time,

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family such as blankets and clothes. Braatvedt (1927) describes these two and other additional payments as "utterly foreign" to Zulu custom.

<sup>16</sup> *Ihlawulo* 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).

though he admits that many Christian men paid only lip service to this rule and, certainly, the church attracted a far larger female following.<sup>17</sup>

Some of the most violent marital disputes in this period had their roots in the husband's double standards surrounding extra-marital affairs.<sup>18</sup> According to a number of elderly informants, one of the most common causes of a husband beating his wife was if she accused him – correctly or incorrectly - of having an affair. Unfaithful women too could face severe beatings; indeed chiefs and Native Commissioners allowed men to use a certain amount of violence to discipline women. The Natal Code of Native Law underpinned this rule through “customary law” and the Code itself provided strong legislative backing for the uneven rights of men and women to have multiple sexual partners.<sup>19</sup>

In the face of these shifting currents, my interviews suggest that by the 1940s/50s the concept of *isoka* had become associated less with a man simply coming of sexual age and used more to describe and justify a man who had multiple-sexual partners – a meaning present in earlier accounts although not so heavily emphasised. Some evidence for the changing meaning of *isoka* can be found in Doke, Malcolm, Sikana and Vilakazi'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”. My interviews 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 employed in a more general sense to describe and justify men's sole right to have multiple partners, for instance when married men had

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<sup>17</sup> Men's objections to Christianity on the grounds that it would impose too heavy a duty on faithfulness are described well in Mbatha (1960) writing about the Botha Hill area.

<sup>18</sup> 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).

<sup>19</sup> 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).

concubines.<sup>20</sup> 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. Vilikazi (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.<sup>21</sup> 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 could 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 away more than one *ucu* without first breaking off an existing relationship. Though these "traditional" courting practices are usually remembered enthusiastically and with great humour by informants, 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.<sup>22</sup>

Marriage, however, 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). Married men did evoke the *isoka* masculinity to justify extra-marital liaisons but in many ways the archetypal *isoka* was the young single

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<sup>20</sup> A common question I asked elderly informants was *Kwakuyini isoka?* (what was an *isoka*). The most common answer was *umuntu oqonyiwe kakhulu* (a man with a lot of girlfriends), followed by "a woman's boyfriend", the latter more frequently mentioned by women than men.

<sup>21</sup> See Koopman (1987), Turner (1999), and Gunner & 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 & 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.

<sup>22</sup> 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.

man who courted many women. Nonetheless, even these young men faced limits. 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. Through this discourse, 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. 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*.<sup>23</sup>

This brings us to a second apparent contrast with the 19<sup>th</sup> century: men and women's sexual freedom appeared to diverge such that women having multiple sexual partners were increasingly frowned upon. All of my informants who grew up in the rural areas in the 1940s and 1950s are adamant that *umthetho* (the law) allowed women to have only one sexual partner – multiple-partners was *isoka*'s right alone and women who did have more than one partner were seen as *izifebe* (loose women). The use of the word *umthetho* is significant here because, compared to the similar concept of *amasiko* (customs), it usually evokes a stronger level of enforcement, legal or otherwise. Nonetheless, the fact that many women did have secret lovers alerts us to how *umthetho* was frequently broken and that these concepts were highly fluid. In all likelihood,

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<sup>23</sup> District Surgeon's reports from the forties and fifties 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.

however, in comparison to the 19<sup>th</sup> century, in the 1950s, the level of public acceptance around women having multiple-sexual partners seems to have lessened. What can account for this apparent change?

Some clues are provided by Shula Marks' (1989) work which shows particularly clearly how seemingly divergent groups - white missionaries, Zulu nationalists, African Christians, and the Department of Native Affairs – railed against the disintegration of “tribal discipline” evidenced by the increasing “immorality” of woman in urban and rural areas.<sup>24</sup> These groups coalesced in the 1920s and 1930s around “Zulu purity” and according to Marks (89: 225): “It was in the position of African women that the forces of conservatism found a natural focus.” Zealous reactions to women’s “immorality”, while outwardly focused on “sex”, were, therefore, intimately connected to broader struggles, notably the wishes of men and elders to reinstate their control over women’s labour at a time when women were taking increased advantage of the new opportunities to migrate. The apparent extension of the concept of *isifebe* (loose woman) in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, to unequivocally disallow women to have more than one sexual partner, is certainly consistent with this greater attention to women’s “purity” – from Christians and traditionalists alike.

Rural informants suggest that women born in the 1920s/30s were expected to act *khutele* (hardworking) and with *ihlonipho* (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. The *amaqhikiza* were very important to the regulation of girls in this regard. These were a group of elder girls, elevated in status since they had already *qoma*'d (chosen) a man. They would advise and warn post-pubescent 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<sup>25</sup>:

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 ...

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<sup>24</sup> On African women, ‘purity’, and prayer associations (*manyanos*) see Gaitskell (1982).

<sup>25</sup> 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.

But not all women saw the benefits of fostering a chaste and passive demeanour. Some women rejected the path of endlessly waiting for boyfriends or husbands to return from work and themselves left for the towns. Others engaged in extra-marital relations, as evidenced by numerous court cases of the time surrounding adultery.<sup>26</sup> Secret lovers could be justified, at least among married women, to varying degrees. Tholakele spoke with a wry smile, as many women talking about this subject did, when she related how secret lovers were called *isidikiselo*, the top of a pot. These complimented a woman's first man, her *ibhodwe*, the main pot. Many elderly women 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. With husbands frequently away, illicit sexual relations were undertaken not simply for sexual pleasure but for economic gain, although most informants are adamant that money played only a small part in relations among unmarried youth. Women, married and unmarried, faced huge dilemmas around their sexual activity at this time. Not only was virginity testing still relatively widespread, but woman who had more than one boyfriend ran the risk of being positioned as a loose woman (*isifebe*). This would bring shame on her and her family and, for the unmarried, could make future marriage difficult. So severe was the insult '*isifebe*' that its calling could result in a defamation case.<sup>27</sup>

The most intimate moments were also shaped by these quandaries. Following Tholakele's *qoma*'ing of her husband-to-be, 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 *amaqkikiza*." 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

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<sup>26</sup> 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.

<sup>27</sup> 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.

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 recognize 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 (85: 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.

### **Sex and Money, Township Style: The contemporary *isoka* and the challenge of AIDS**

Sundumbili Township was built in the 1960s by the Department of Bantu Administration and Development as a “model township” for married SAPPI workers. It was extended in the 1970s and 1980s to house employees from Isithebe industrial park. Though constructed on a wave of new employment opportunities, unemployment is now endemic in Sundumbili. Only 7 out of 34 students who graduated from a class in a high school I visited in 2000 had found work two years later.<sup>28</sup>

The township’s identity, like all identities, is formed in relation to “what it is not”. Sundumbili is frequently positioned as *phucukile* (civilised) in comparison to the outlying

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<sup>28</sup> 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. On the links between high unemployment, sexual violence and masculinities in Umtata see Wood & Jewkes (2000).



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 informal settlements or rural areas that lack reticulated water and tarred roads. As if to demonstrate this, a frequent topic of conversation in the township among youth is “rights”, which are usually seen as arriving in 1994 with the new democratic constitution (although, of course, this discourse has a longer history, being heavily tied up with the democratic struggle). 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.

The advent of democracy also served to expand youth's physical boundaries. In the early 1990s, terrible political violence 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.<sup>29</sup> The end of violence opened up new spaces: youth talk excitedly about how street parties (*ibheshi*, or bashes) where alcohol is widely available have become the focus for fashionable, parent free, excursions at night.

Urban ethnographies written 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”.<sup>30</sup> It is tempting to draw the conclusion that the rapid increase in urbanisation is the driving force behind a new, less constrained, *isoka* masculinity.<sup>31</sup> Yet it is important to recognize that township development also fostered a middle-class

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<sup>29</sup> In 1993 and 1994 alone 120 people died from political violence between the ANC and IFP in the Mandeni area, see de Haas (1994).

<sup>30</sup> See Krige (1936b), Hellman (1948), Longmore (1959), and Mayer (1971). I am not doing justice in this very brief summary to the many nuances within these varied accounts. For recent reviews of some of this literature see Delius and Glaser (2002) and Burns (2002).

<sup>31</sup> Glaser's (1992) important article highlights the emergence of a *tsotsi* subculture and masculine identity on the Witwatersrand in the early to mid-1940s. This masculinity hinged on fighting, law-breaking and the exertion of control over women who were subjected to extreme violence, including rape. Interestingly, there is no mention, in this paper at least, of this masculinity being associated with men having more than one concurrent sexual partner (the modern day *isoka* masculinity). Instead, uneven notions of male and female faithfulness appear to be articulated in men's sole right to terminate relationships.

masculinity associated with marriage (increasingly Christian, monogamous) and the ownership of a four-room house (see Mager, 1999 on the production of middle-class values in Zwelitsha; Edwards, 1996 for KwaMashu). Adverts appearing in the Zulu newspaper *Illanga* in the 1950s depict a modern urban *umnumzana* (man/head of household) who aspired to Western standards of education and clothing.<sup>32</sup> 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, 95: 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 drew from the *isoka* masculinity to justify these as “tradition”.

A marriage system predicated on *ilobolo* (bridewealth) is naturally very vulnerable to economic change. Throughout the last century, men were increasingly forced to turn to wage labour in order to buy cattle for *ilobolo* (bridewealth), or simply to save money in order to pay *ilobolo* in cash, in lieu of cattle. In very simple terms, although there have been previous periods of economic crisis, from the 1970s African unemployment began to rise persistently and rapidly and this dramatically challenged the institution of marriage and became an important factor in the reshaping of sexualities. Unlike funerals, weddings in Sundumbili are rare events.<sup>33</sup>

Today in the township, there is a close association between manliness and securing multiple-sexual partners. As Siphos put it: “if he has 6, I want 7, then he wants to have 8.” 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...

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<sup>32</sup> See for instance *Illanga*, March 11, 1950, p.10, a one page advert for a man’s clothing shop. The advert is entitled *Banumzana* (in this context, the most close definition probably being “gentlemen”). The picture is of a white man, sharply dressed in a suit and tie, strolling confidently away from an urban scene. All of the text is in Zulu except for the phrase “Ngama Easy Terms !!”.

<sup>33</sup> In KwaZulu-Natal, the common *ilobolo* figure of 10 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.

But, he is 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?

Although men and women do still use the term *isoka lamanyala* to denote an unacceptable masculinity, 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. Indeed, since work, marriage, and an independent *umuzi* (homestead/household) are very often unobtainable, in the 1980s and 1990s “success” with multiple women became a critical marker of manhood.

In comparing this 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 a certain romanticism in descriptions of the past, I think that it is possible to determine important changes to masculinities. In the 1950s, an *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 2 or 3; 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 5 or 6 girlfriends is not untypical); they are seldom able to make the step from being *isoka* to being an *umnumzana*, even if most still aspire 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.

Although 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*, I am now far

more convinced that the *isoka* masculinity is fundamentally changing. During early research, I probably paid less attention to the contradictions in this masculinity, but in the last two years I have watched these contradictions grow. Day by day, funeral by funeral, AIDS bears harder down on the *isoka* masculinity. The symptoms, recognized by even very young children in the township, couldn't be more emasculating - and demasculinizing: 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 shocking 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 - is becoming increasingly linked to a man who infringes women's or children's "rights" or spread disease, particularly HIV/AIDS.

In 2000 I recorded an interview with three young men from the township. The importance they placed on securing multiple-sexual partners and on consumer goods seemed to me to capture both the dominant *isoka* masculinity and the strong emphasis in the township on consumption (embodied perhaps most strongly in cell-phones). I drew from this interview in a recent article (Hunter 2002). Talking about the importance of the right cell-phone to attract women, the boys said:

If you come with an Alcatel, it is the thing of the child ... They want an expensive one, like a T28 or 6110. If you come with this little Nokia, they are going to respect you. If you come with the small Siemens, the C2, they respect you, they can see that you are the boss, you have money ...

In late 2002, as I chatted with one of these young men, Thulani, in the busy Nandos on the Durban beachfront, he started telling me about his new Durban girlfriend (for whom he was saving the burger that I had bought him). As we talked further, I was surprised when he volunteered the information that he was still a virgin. He was scared of AIDS and his

family was relying on him to do well at Durban Technikon. I realised how mistaken I had been to take his comments in 2000 at face value - it was not the first that time that I had made overgeneralizations after hearing men's claims of masculine prowess.

But not only is this episode emblematic of the difficulties inherent in studying this subject, but it also shows the extent that masculine discourses of *isoka* do not necessarily correlate with masculine practices. This apparent mismatch between discourse and practice is very revealing. For even if in practice some men abstain from sex, as Thulani said he did, men can still utilize the *isoka/isifebe* discourse to claim a certain "patriarchal dividend". Thulani himself, for example, is in competition with his female siblings for limited household resources. His demand for financial support in order to study in Durban is certainly done no harm by the continued existence of some discourses that position educated women as being "*izifebe*". This is a reminder that while the *isoka/isifebe* discourse – at its core differentiating between men and women's appropriate sexual behaviour - may be increasingly challenged, its ability to give men, and some women, power in other arenas gives many a heavy stake in its continuation.

Most studies of masculinities focus on men. Yet women challenge but at times also reinforced the *isoka* masculinity. Bolstered by discourses of women's "rights" in the post-apartheid period, some women now oppose with new vigour *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 *ubufebe*. It was a long time ago that there were *isoka* --- now there are just players. A man, he can *feba*.

One 29 year old lady 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)".

The media, especially television, enjoys wide coverage in the township and soaps and movies are prominent source of images through which sexuality can be reworked. In the post-apartheid period, sexualised images and discourses, often emanating from the West, have exploded into the public sphere (Posel, 2003). 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 complex 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.

Yet, 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.<sup>34</sup> 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, spatiality, and the changing sexual economy that begs historicizing. 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

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<sup>34</sup> 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.

example.<sup>35</sup> *Amaqhikiza* (elder girls) worked to ensure that “respect” was upheld, even if, at times, women ignored their guidance. Yet, while 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. Without wanting to posit a simple connection between material interest and cultural performances, this framework also 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 resonant 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.<sup>36</sup> 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 gradually less common today. More recent interviews suggest that, in the face of AIDS, many women, like men, are

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<sup>35</sup> 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).

<sup>36</sup> 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.

reducing the number of sexual partners that they are having or seeking protection through condoms.

## **Masculinities and their Malcontents**

In order to explore historically the *isoka* masculinity, this paper has made a number of assertions that, particularly for the earliest periods, are rather tentative; in part this is a consequence of the dearth of writing in Southern Africa on the history of sexuality. At its most basic level my argument is that to understand contemporary sexuality in southern Africa – and this is where Western literature on masculinities is perhaps less relevant - it is essential to recognize the historical and geographical linkages between the economy, marriage, masculinities and sexual practices. Thus, the remarkably understudied decline in marriage over the last generation is an important vantage point from which to view masculinities and sexual practices today. Although I forefront marriage, I recognize that it is only one element of manhood; economic independence and the setting up of an *umuzi* are other important factors themselves being undermined by the unemployment crisis. Marriage does though have a particularly strong connection to the *isoka* masculinity. This can be seen in the powerful concept of *isoka lamanyala* (dirty *isoka*) – remembered vividly by those coming of age in the 1940s and 1950s – that chastised men who would waste and not marry their multiple girlfriends.

Resting heavily on the symbolism of polygamy, the modern *isoka* masculinity became dominant in the era of high structural unemployment. In KwaZulu-Natal at least, where this study has been based, *ukulobola* is still widely practiced and many youth are finding it difficult to marry. Slowly, however, the institution of marriage is adapting: I recently heard about a church in Mandeni collecting money to pay *ilobolo* for one of its “sons”; moreover, the cash equivalent for *ilobolo* cattle can fluctuate widely from a few hundred Rand to several thousand. Masculinities too are constantly being transformed. One possible derivation of the important concept *umnumzana* is from *umnini* (owner) and *umzala* (small kraal), though *umnumzana* is today extended to denote more generally a



respected man or simply “Mister”.<sup>37</sup> But whatever new forms of manhood transpire in the future, today in South Africa, where unemployment is 60 or 70% in some areas, only perhaps a minority of African men can achieve the status of *umnumzana* (household head) upon which strong elements of manhood have historically rested.

This paper has argued that the *isoka* masculinity, so pervasive among today’s youth, is being increasingly questioned by men and women today. If in the 1950s, a man’s unwillingness to marry positioned him as *isoka lamanyala* (dirty *isoka*), and in the 1980s and 1990s the decline in marriage was a factor in the development of a more vigorous *isoka* masculinity celebrating multiple-partners, in the new millennium AIDS is now working to re-associate multiple-partners with dirt and irresponsibility - a masculinity gone too far. Utilizing Raymond Williams (1977) lexicon of “dominant, residual, and emergent” cultural forms, one can argue that the *isoka* masculinity is probably no longer entirely “dominant” - and yet a new “emergent” masculinity has yet to rise out of its fractured present form.

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<sup>37</sup> I am relying on Doke et. al. (1958) for this possible derivation.

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