



Exploring the effects of COVID-19 on the practice of Ukuhlolwa Kwezintombi, focusing on the perspective of young women of Impendle

**By**

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of the requirement for the degree of

**Masters in Anthropology**

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**Date: 1 April 2025**

## DECLARATION

I **Nonjabulo Rejoice Zondi** declare that:

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- iii. This dissertation does not contain other persons' data, pictures, graphs or other information unless specifically acknowledged as being sourced from other persons.
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## **DEDICATION**

I want to dedicate this Masters dissertation to parents Mzimkhulu Nicholas Zondi and Fisani Zondi. You have been the great supporter since the beginning of this research even though you did not understand why it took such a long time to complete. Your words of motivation and your wishes for us to get educated have come true. I also extend my sincere gratitude of the support and love I have continually got from my siblings. I am hoping that your prayers will endure to build up the character I am becoming.

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My special thanks goes to my parents, Mzimkhulu Nicholas Zondi and Fisani Zondi for raising me to the person I am today. Your support and prayers throughout this amazing journey is very much appreciated, and may God bless you and keep you for many more years. I cannot forget my mother, Fisani Zondi, who always asked, “how is this thing of yours going, when are you going to finish your research?” and for always worrying whenever I got worried. You are really loved and appreciated. I also grasp a moment to appreciate my siblings especially my younger sister Nonsikelelo Zondi. Thank you for being there always especially during the time whereby I was asking her for a more points whenever I got stuck. You are forever loved little sister! Last but not least I would like to thank my daughter Anokuhle Zondi for ensuring that I finish this dissertation. Your presence alone is what pushes me to work even more harder, may God keep and protect you for me!

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## ABSTRACT

This qualitative study explores the impact of COVID-19 on the practice of *ukuhlolwa kwezintombi* (virginity testing) among young women aged 13 to 19 in Impendle, KwaZulu-Natal. Given the inclusion of minors, the study adhered to strict ethical protocols, including parental or guardian consent, participant assent, confidentiality, and the right to withdraw without consequence. The study was grounded in three theoretical frameworks, namely: Social Identity Theory, Cultural Determinism, and Social Constructivism. These theories provided a comprehensive lens through which to analyse the interplay between cultural identity, societal influences, and individual experiences. A total of 28 participants including 12 maidens, 12 family members, and 4 inspectors were selected using purposive and snowball sampling to ensure diverse and contextually relevant perspectives. Data collection was conducted through semi-structured interviews, allowing for an in-depth exploration of participants' views. Thematic analysis was employed to identify key patterns and emergent themes. The findings indicate that COVID-19 significantly disrupted *ukuhlolwa kwezintombi*, not only halting its regular practice but also sparking debates regarding its relevance, associated health risks, and evolving role in contemporary society. While some young women perceived the absence of virginity testing during lockdowns as a form of liberation, others expressed a profound sense of cultural displacement and diminished social belonging. Furthermore, the study underscores the need for culturally sensitive health policies and inclusive dialogues that balance the preservation of tradition with the protection of young women's rights. By contributing to broader discussions on the intersection of cultural practices, public health, and individual autonomy, this research provides valuable insights into the evolving dynamics of cultural identity in the post-pandemic era.

**Key words:** *ukuhlolwa kwezintombi*, virginity testing, COVID-19, cultural practices, young women, cultural identity, social distancing, lockdown restrictions, maidens, culture, social norms, inspectors/abahloli

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## **ACRONYMS**

**KZN**-KwaZulu-Natal

**STD**- Sexual Transmitted Disease

**TB**-Tuberculosis

**WHO**- World Health Organization

**COVID-19** – Coronavirus Disease 2019

**SRH** – Sexual and Reproductive Health

**STIs** – Sexually Transmitted Infections

**HIV** – Human Immunodeficiency Virus

**AIDS** – Acquired Immunodeficiency

Syndrome

**WHO** – World Health Organization

**UN** – United Nations

**NGO** – Non-Governmental Organization

**KZN** – KwaZulu-Natal

## CHAPTER ONE

### AN OVERVIEW OF THE STUDY

#### 1.1 Introduction

Traditional practices are an essential indicator of indigenous knowledge systems. As a result, since culture becomes a focal point in anthropological study, it helps understand the society being studied. Anthropologists have taken an interest in understanding individuals in a particular culture, including their past and present experiences (Kottak, 2017). *Ukuhlolwa kwezintombi* also known as virginity testing is one of the oldest cultural practices that many rural communities have been practicing since the earliest ages until the present (Waiganjo, 2022). According to Behrens (2014), *ukuhlolwa kwezintombi* can be defined as a process whereby young girls get tested to determine if they are maintaining their virginity. Moreover, inspectors (*abahloli*) perform the rituals on a young maiden's vaginal clitoris using two fingers and eye observation to determine whether a female has engaged in sexual intercourse (Behrens, 2014). The main physical trait observed to establish the virginal status of women is the presence of intact hymen. *Ukuhlolwa kwezintombi* (virginity testing) is practiced in countries from multiple regions of the world (Waiganjo, 2022). These include Sub-Saharan Africa, Swaziland, the United States, Egypt, Indonesia, and the Netherlands. However, it is mainly practiced by people in KwaZulu-Natal, among *AmaZulu*.

The practice of *ukuhlolwa kwezintombi* is linked to the Zulu royal's major ceremony called '*umkhosi womhlanga*' (royal reed dance) in the Zulu Kingdom (Biyela, 2018). Rakubu (2019) noted that virginity testing is a significant custom in many rural settlements in Africa because it is the method used to instruct young girls about sexual matters, emphasizing abstinence. It also helps to prevent HIV infection, particularly among teenage girls (Rakubu, 2019; Sithole & Khumalo, 2018). However, this practice has been subject to significant criticism and debate. Proponents argue that it promotes cultural values and sexual health education (Rakubu, 2019), while critics highlight concerns about its psychological impact, bodily autonomy, and ethical implications (Ndlovu, 2020; Mthethwa, 2021). The tension between cultural preservation and modern health practices raises critical questions about balancing respect for traditional rites and protecting young people's rights and well-being (Mabena & Chirwa, 2017; Richards, 2019). Nonetheless, some

perceive *ukuhlolwa kwezintombi* as a custom that violates women's rights since it is only women who get tested. At the same time, men are allowed to do whatever they want and have multiple girlfriends if they prefer. Ntuli (2018) added that the practice of virginity testing also violets women's bodies. In addition, some scholars, such as Biyela (2018) and Behrens (2014), added that *ukuhlolwa kwezintombi* is exaggerated as it is inaccurately connected with female genital mutilation. In Africa, virginity testing is also linked to the phenomenon of child brides since it occurs in patriarchal societies, where elders and parents play a dominant role in choosing spouses for their children (Rakubu, 2019). Hence, 'culture in these societies' places significance on a female's virginity that determines family honour.

African and Western perspectives on the practice of *ukuhlolwa kwezintombi* often diverge significantly, reflecting differing cultural, ethical, and ideological frameworks (Mthethwa, 2020; Smith & Jones, 2018). From an African perspective, particularly in rural communities, *ukuhlolwa kwezintombi* is seen as a crucial cultural practice that serves to preserve tradition, promote sexual abstinence, and protect young women from HIV by ensuring they remain virgins before marriage (Mabena & Chirwa, 2017; Sithole, 2019). Many African scholars and cultural advocates argue that it reinforces moral values, strengthens community bonds, and upholds gender roles within a traditional context (Rakubu, 2019; Ndlovu, 2020). In contrast, Western perspectives typically criticize virginity testing as a violation of bodily autonomy, citing concerns about its psychological impact on young women and its potential to reinforce harmful gender stereotypes (Richards, 2019; Brown, 2021). Western scholars often emphasize the ethical implications, highlighting the practice as an infringement on individual rights, particularly with regard to consent and privacy (Jones & Moyo, 2020). Moreover, from a human rights standpoint, Western critics argue that virginity testing is discriminatory and perpetuates patriarchal control over women's bodies (Smith et al., 2021; Richards, 2020). This contrast underscores the tension between respecting cultural practices and upholding universal human rights, with African perspectives prioritizing cultural continuity and community values, while Western views stress individual autonomy and gender equality (Brown, 2018; Mthethwa, 2020).

The UN Human Rights Office and Women's Health Organization (WHO) delivered a statement stressing that virginity testing is not scientific, violates human rights, is medically unnecessary and often painful and humiliating, and must end this traumatic practice (Crosby et al., 2020). Crosby

et al. (2020) outlined that for some cultures, virginity is considered an important social norm that links sexual purity with the honour of an individual woman, family, and community. The social norm includes the social and environmental issues that remain a significant dilemma of teenage behavior in cultural terms. The arrival of COVID-19 has resulted in numerous adverse effects, such as the global economy, politics, ecology, and culture. During the lockdown, there were interruptions of societal norms, customs and religion (the cancelling of the worship services of various faiths), which marked that COVID-19 has impacted many aspects of people's lives, including their cultural practices such as *ukuhlolwa kwezintombi* (Tang, 2021). People living in rural areas and informal settlements have social inequalities that might have placed some rural residents at a higher risk of contracting COVID-19.

Similarly, people living in rural areas are often poor, so they need access to adequate testing facilities or health care on time (Crosby et al., 2020). The impact of COVID-19 has forced change in these communities, especially if observing religious or cultural activities. The chapter will share the background of the research problem, the aim and scope of the study, the problem statement, the significance of the study, the location of the study, critical concepts asked, the key research questions to be asked, a brief introduction of the research design and methods used for data collection and analysis, brief introduction of theoretical frameworks and the structure of the project.

## **1.2 Background of the research problem**

The background of the study stems from the need to explore contemporary deep cultural values on *ukuhlolwa kwezintombi*, the adaptation to current environmental changes in the preservation of traditional practices during the COVID-19 pandemic and assessment of the *AmaZulu* traditional practice *ukuhlolwa kwezintombi*. On the one hand, the contemporary values attached to conventional practices contribute to preventing illness and disease, transforming the historical values attached to the practice (Waiganjo, 2022). Therefore, there is a need to explore these traditional practice dynamics throughout the study. This suggestion above refers to *ukuhlolwa kwezintombi* traditional practice adaptation to environmental changes (Waiganjo, 2022). These environmental changes included restrictions that were in place, which limited contact and mobility. Hence, this was one of the strategies to mitigate the COVID-19 infections. At the beginning of

2020, the World Health Organization named the novel coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19). Coronaviruses can cause upper respiratory tract infections like MERS, SARS, and ordinary colds (Morens et al., 2020). According to Morens et al. (2020), COVID-19 originated in the "wet market" in Wuhan, China. This virus is transmitted through sneezing, coughing, through expelled droplets. Therefore, it is easily spread and has caused large-scale illness and death. The South African government proposed a country shutdown followed by rules and regulations during the period. Schools were closed during the lockdown, including clubs and taverns, and cultural events were prohibited to decrease COVID-19 cases. However, these restrictions, such as the closing of schools, involuntarily generated grounds for teenagers to engage in sexual intercourse and some even to vacate virginity testing. This was evident as experts observed the increased rate of teenage pregnancy due to COVID-19 restrictions.

The COVID-19 restrictions disrupted numerous social customs, including the practice of *ukuhlolwa kwezintombi* (virginity testing), prompting increased scholarly interest in its implications. Emerging debates suggest that such cultural practices are deeply embedded in gender norms that associate sexual purity with the honour of an individual woman, her family, her husband, and the broader society (Bantu & Seo, 2022). This study, *Ukuhlolwa kwezintombi* and COVID-19, distinguishes itself from existing literature by examining the pandemic's impact on both the practice and the evolving meaning of virginity testing in contemporary society. While previous research has primarily explored the cultural, gendered, and psychosocial dimensions of virginity testing, this study extends the discourse by investigating how public health measures, social distancing, and health concerns during the pandemic have influenced its practice. Additionally, it examines the intersection of sexual and reproductive health (SRH), cultural identity, and economic pressures—such as *black tax*—during the COVID-19 crisis, providing a novel epidemiological and anthropological perspective on the shifting significance of this tradition. By exploring the narratives surrounding *ukuhlolwa kwezintombi* and the effects of pandemic-related lockdowns, this research seeks to illuminate how COVID-19 has shaped the practice and its relevance. Therefore, against the background of the research problem, I seek to explore the effects of COVID-19 on the practice of *ukuhlolwa kwezintombi*, using the perspective of young women of Impendle.

## **1.2 Aim and Scope of the Study**

We are exploring the effects of COVID-19 on the practice of *ukuhlolwa kwezintombi* (virginity testing), focusing on the perspective of young women of Impendle between the ages of thirteen and nineteen. This study explores the effects of COVID-19 on the practice of *Ukuhlolwa Kwezintombi* (virginity testing) from the perspective of young women in the Impendle area. The scope of this research includes interviews with young women who have undergone the practice, as well as maidens' parents or guardians and maiden inspectors, commonly known as *abahloli*. This approach will help develop a holistic understanding of how COVID-19 affected the practice and its intersection with issues of gender inequality.

*Ukuhlolwa Kwezintombi* is a long-standing cultural practice among the *AmaZulu* people, valued for its role in promoting chastity, preserving cultural identity, and upholding moral standards within communities. The study seeks to investigate the significance of *Ukuhlolwa Kwezintombi* in Impendle, examining how it continues to shape the lives of young women and the broader social fabric. A key focus is to understand how COVID-19 lockdown restrictions disrupted or altered this practice, as movement restrictions, social distancing measures, and bans on large gatherings would have made it difficult for traditional ceremonies and testing events to take place. The study also aims to uncover the challenges faced by teenage girls undergoing *Ukuhlolwa Kwezintombi* during the lockdown period, including social stigma, psychological distress, and difficulties in maintaining the practice under unprecedented health regulations. Furthermore, the study seeks to explore whether *Ukuhlolwa Kwezintombi* contributes to gender inequality in the Impendle area, particularly by reinforcing patriarchal norms and controlling female sexuality.

## **1.3 Problem Statement**

A research problem is a statement about an area of concern, including a condition to be improved (Sacred Heart University Library, 2020). As explained in the above sections, the arrival of COVID-19 has had many adverse effects worldwide. It was an issue that left lasting effects around the world. The impact was huge as the pandemic spread very quickly, with a high death rate. Impendle is a rural community confronting continuous healthcare capacity concerns, such as facility closures and personnel shortfalls. As a result, older people suffer to get the care they require both for COVID-19 and other emergency chronic health issues. Global societies have experienced a significant disruption due to the COVID-19 pandemic. It has affected many cultural practices,

healthcare, and livelihoods and resulted in a high mortality rate. The COVID-19 pandemic significantly impacted virginity testing, causing adaptations and changes in cultural contexts. The government's proposed lockdown caused this impact and restricted people from conserving/maintaining their cultural practices (*ukuhlolwa kwezintombi*). For instance, maidens were no longer going for virginity testing. Therefore, embarking on this study will help me to discover how maidens, inspectors (mama abahlolayo) and the parents/guardians of the maidens encouraged virginity testing in the context of a global health crisis. This may extend to discovering their perceptions of the practice. The goal is centered on understanding the history of the cultural practice and what it entails for the people of Impendle, from maidens to inspectors. This might also feature how they overcame the challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic.

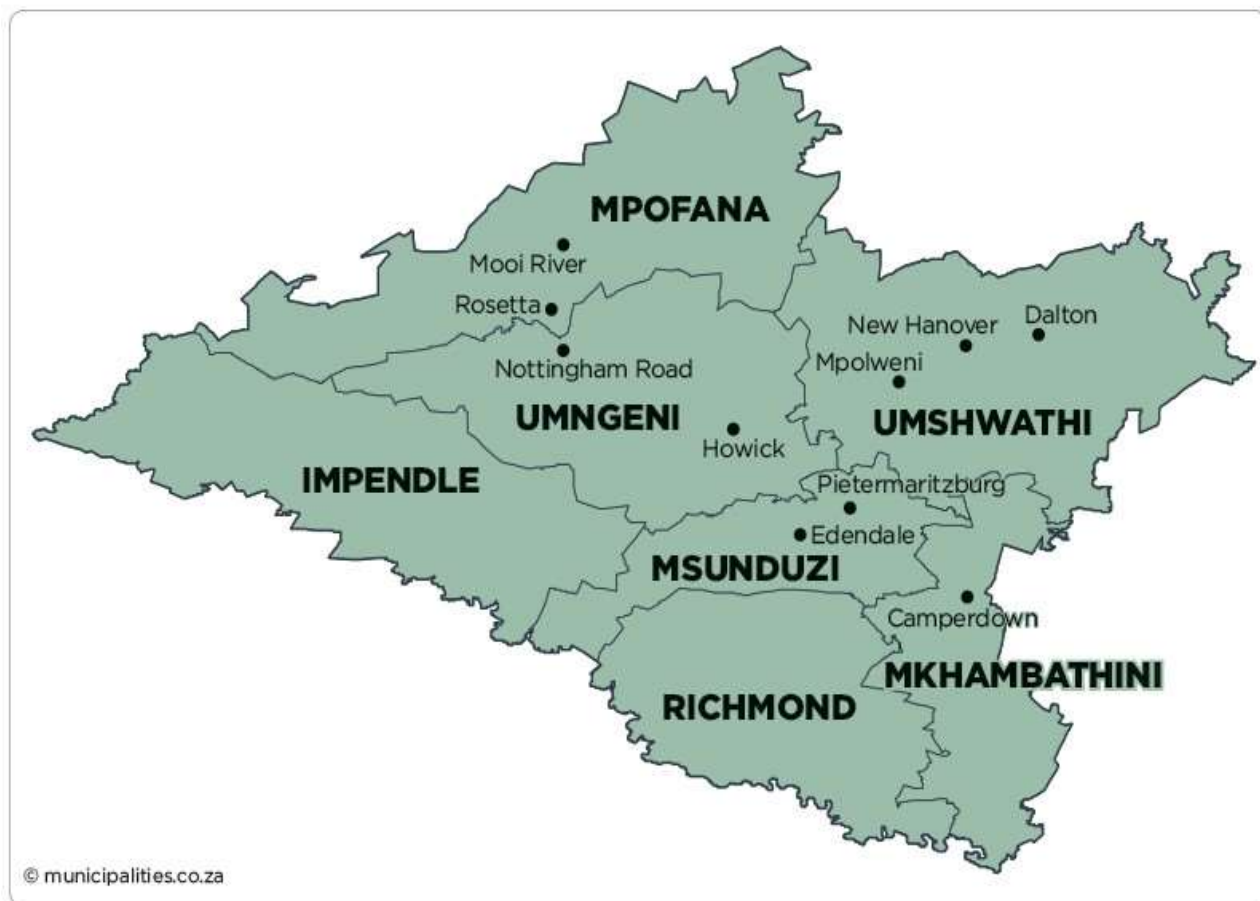
#### **1.4 Significance of the study**

In most studies, researchers attempt to generate solutions that benefit society. In the context of this study, the focus is on issues relating to *ukuhlolwa kwezintombi* and situations affecting the ceremony amid COVID-19 pandemic. Therefore, the study will benefit many since very few studies have been conducted on this phenomenon. *Ukuhlolwa kwzintombi* is a cultural practice that has deep roots in some cultures. Examining its evolution during the pandemic can reveal broader societal attitudes, values, and traditional trends. This can help us understand the dynamic relationship between culture and external factors. Moreover, considering the effect of COVID-19 on the practice of virginity testing, the study attempts to provide illumination on public health issues during a global pandemic. Investigating how health crises influence cultural practices is essential for developing strategies to moderate the negative consequences on individuals' well-being. This study can also be a foundation for future research in related areas. It may contribute to advocacy efforts to challenge harmful cultural practices and promote a more equitable and rights-based approach to public health. Durojaye (2016), virginity testing has been criticized for its violation of human rights, particularly those related to gender equality and bodily autonomy. The study explores whether the pandemic has led to changes in traditional practices such as *ukuhlolwa kwezintombi*, potentially providing an opportunity to advocate for individuals' rights. The study will also determine if there were vulnerable groups affected by the practice of virginity testing during the COVID-19 pandemic.

#### **1.4 Location of the Study**

This study explores the effects of COVID-19 on the practice of *ukuhlolwa kwezintombi*, focusing on the perspective of young women of *Impendle*. *Impendle* is a rural settlement located in the province of KwaZulu-Natal in South Africa. It is located in the city of Pietermaritzburg, under Msunduzi Municipality. The area of study is mainly known as 'black' peoples' space, with the majority of the *AmaZulu* ethnic group, very few White farmers, and few Sotho people living there for work purposes. The area has diverse cultural beliefs, living standards, personalities, languages, family types (nuclear families, single-parent families, and extended families) and sizes per household. The community is also traditional and mainly practices African religions.

*Impendle* area is also known as a dynamic and exciting community, which consists of mainly lower to middle-class black residents as well as a significantly declining number of poor black families due to the increasing numbers of educated individuals that are employed in different cities, provinces and even outside South Africa. Nevertheless, the area still needs more support to overcome unemployment, land-use challenges and the lack of institutional support. It is also important for some young people to remain at home due to the lack of opportunities, especially graduates. This establishes interest in studying *Impendle* rural areas to obtain the emic and etic perspective.



**Figure 1: A Map of *Impendle* Area. Source: Google Maps (2020)**

### **1.5 Key Concepts**

The following concepts provide a framework for understanding the key themes explored in this thesis:

***Ukuhlolwa Kwezintombi*** – The Zulu term "*ukuhlolwa kwezintombi*" refers to the practice of virginity testing, wherein young girls are physically examined to determine their virginity status (Horsthemke, 2018). This cultural tradition is particularly prevalent among the *AmaZulu* and in various communities across South Africa and other parts of the world (Bank and Sharpeley, 2022). The study of *ukuhlolwa kwezintombi* and COVID-19 explores how the pandemic has reshaped both the practice and its cultural meaning within a contemporary context. In contrast to previous research, which predominantly addresses the cultural, gendered, and psychosocial dimensions of virginity testing, this work incorporates the impact of public health measures, social distancing,

and economic pressures during the pandemic (Joffe, 2021). By integrating an epidemiological and anthropological perspective, the study offers a unique analysis of how *ukuhlolwa kwezintombi* has evolved in response to a global health crisis.

**Pandemic** - is a global outbreak of an infectious disease that spreads across multiple countries or continents, affecting a significant portion of the population. It is characterized by sustained human-to-human transmission, high infection rates, and widespread health, social, and economic consequences. Pandemics often require coordinated international public health responses to mitigate their impact. In the context of this study, the COVID-19 pandemic serves as a critical backdrop for examining how public health measures and societal disruptions have influenced the cultural practice of *ukuhlolwa kwezintombi* among young women in Impendle.

**COVID-19** is a highly contagious respiratory illness caused by the novel coronavirus SARS-CoV-2, first identified in December 2019 in Wuhan, China (McArthur et al., 2020). The disease can range from mild symptoms, such as fever, cough, and fatigue, to severe cases leading to pneumonia, acute respiratory distress syndrome, and death. It spread globally, leading to a pandemic the World Health Organization declared in March 2020. COVID-19 is primarily transmitted through respiratory droplets from infected individuals, and measures such as vaccination, mask-wearing, and social distancing have been implemented to control its spread (McArthur et al., 2020). Governments worldwide enforced lockdowns, travel restrictions, and quarantine measures to mitigate the virus's impact on public health systems and reduce transmission rates (Jones & Smith, 2021). The pandemic significantly disrupted daily life, affecting economies, education, healthcare access, and cultural practices (Brown, 2021). In many communities, traditional gatherings, rituals, and ceremonies were either postponed, modified, or abandoned to comply with health regulations (Taylor, 2021). The psychological toll of isolation and uncertainty also led to increased mental health concerns globally (Kumar & Lee, 2021). Despite vaccination efforts, new variants of the virus have continued to challenge containment strategies and prolong the pandemic's effects (WHO, 2022).

**Social distancing** – it is the practice of limiting physical closeness and contact with other people, especially in order to avoid catching or transmitting an infectious disease by staying at least 6 feet (2 meters) apart (Greenstone & Nigam, 2020). It often includes avoiding large gatherings, close

contact, and crowded places to limit the transmission of infections. Social distancing was one of the main tactics employed to slow the virus's spread during the COVID-19 (Thunström et al., 2020). Social distancing was recommended by public health officials along with other measures such as hand hygiene and mask-wearing (Thunström et al., 2020).

***Omama abahlolayo/Abahloli*** – is the Zulu term for mothers who test a girl's virginity (Biyela, 2018). According to Khuzwayo (2000), individuals who conduct virginity tests are commonly referred to as "virginity testers or inspectors" These individuals can include medical professionals, traditional healers, or even family members, such as mothers, who are involved in conducting the test to determine whether a girl or woman has engaged in sexual activity (Biyela, 2018).

***Umkhosi womhlanga*** - is a customary ritual celebrated by the Zulu community in South Africa. This annual September event is a celebration of cultural harmony and sexual purity and encourages young girls to abstain from sexual intercourse until they get married (Nkosi, 2019). *Umkhosi womhlanga* is a Zulu word of Reed Dance. Mvune (2013) highlighted that *Umkhosi Womhlanga* promotes cultural unity and encourages moral behaviour, though it has been criticized for including virginity testing.

***Cultural events*** are gatherings or activities that celebrate, preserve, and promote a particular community or group's traditions, customs, and heritage (Nkosi, 2019). these events often include food, dance, music, performances and rituals that reflect the heritage and values of the culture being celebrated (Mamasodiqovna, 2022).

***Maidens*** - A term used to describe a single or unmarried young woman frequently interpreted as representing virginity or purity in a variety of cultural contexts (Nsele, 2021). In events like Umkhosi woMhlanga (Reed Dance), the term specifically describes the young women who participate in the ceremony, carrying reeds as part of a traditional celebration of their virginity and transition into womanhood (Nsele, 2021). The Zulu names for maidens include *izintombi* or *amatshitshi* (Sithole, 2016).

***Female Genital Mutilation (FMG)*** - refers to a ritual cutting or the removal of the clitoris and labia (Odukogbe et al., 2017). In 30 countries across Africa, the Middle East, and Asia, female genital mutilation (FGM) is practiced by over 230 million girls and women who are alive today (Klein et al., 2018). Moreover, this ritual is often done to young girls amid infants until the age of

15. According to Odukobe et al., 2017 female genital mutilation violates women's fundamental human rights, including their rights to health, security, and dignity. In other words, FMG is an indication of a deeply rooted gender inequality since it perpetuates negative gender norms and power differences by unreasonably targeting women and girls.

***Patriarchal society*** is a social system in which men hold more power and privilege compared to women. They also control everything, including cultural and social life (Rothman, 2016). Fathers and other men have a major influence over families, clans, tribes, and greater social unity in patriarchal societies (Rawart, 2014).

***Thigh sex*** - also known as "intercrural sex," is a sexual activity where a person positions their genitalia between their partner's thighs and engages in thrusting movements (Van Pelt et al., 2011). This form of non-penetrative sex can be an alternative to vaginal or anal intercourse, and it is often chosen for personal, cultural, or safety reasons (Van Pelt et al., 2011). Thigh sex can provide sexual pleasure and intimacy without the risks associated with penetrative sex, such as sexually transmitted infections (STIs) or pregnancy (Connan et al., 2019).

***Umemulo***- is a traditional Zulu coming-of-age ceremony for young women, marking their transition into womanhood and eligibility for marriage through rituals, singing, dancing, and gifts (Turner, 2018). This ceremony is usually done for young women who were able to preserve their virginity until the age of 21.

***Gender inequality*** - is the unequal treatment of individuals based on their gender, resulting in disparities in income, education, healthcare, and opportunities, often affecting women and girls but also men and boys (Ponthieux & Meurs, 2015)

***Ilobolo*** - is a payment made to the woman's family by her future husband and his family upon marriage (Cira, 2015). It is meant to serve as a means of establishing familial ties between the two families and as compensation for the bride.

***Cultural identity*** - is the feeling that people have of being a part of a specific culture or group, which is influenced by common behaviors, attitudes, beliefs, customs, language, and traditions (Holliday, 2010). It often forms an integral part of an individual's overall identity, influencing how they view themselves and their relationships with others (Holliday 2010).

Cultural displacement is the process in which individuals or communities experience a loss or shift in their cultural identity due to external influences such as globalization, migration, urbanization, or socio-political changes (Tuttle, 2022). According to Richardson et al. (2019), this phenomenon often occurs when dominant cultural norms, values, and traditions replace or marginalize existing cultural practices, leading to a sense of alienation, loss of belonging, or identity crisis among affected groups. In the context of public health, anthropology, and indigenous studies, cultural displacement can impact social cohesion, mental well-being, and the preservation of traditional knowledge systems. In the context of the research topic, COVID-19 restrictions, such as social distancing and lockdown measures, limited communal gatherings, affected how cultural rituals were conducted. Additionally, the influence of modern health policies and changing societal attitudes may have contributed to young women's shifting perceptions of the practice. This displacement raises critical questions about cultural preservation, adaptation, and the intersection of indigenous knowledge systems with contemporary public health challenges.

Sexual reproductive health (SRH) focuses on the well-being of individuals in relation to their sexuality and reproductive processes, including access to information, services, and rights related to contraception, safe sex practices, sexual education, and the prevention and treatment of sexually transmitted infections (STIs) (Tang, 2020). SRH emphasizes the importance of both physical and mental health in the context of sexual and reproductive decisions and behaviours, ensuring that individuals are empowered to make informed choices about their health (Ryou et al., 2019). In relation to the research topic, SRH is critical for understanding how the pandemic has affected young women's access to sexual health services, altered their perceptions of traditional practices like *ukuhlolwa kwezintombi*, and influenced their reproductive health choices. The research will explore how public health measures during the pandemic, such as lockdowns and health communication, intersect with cultural practices and impact young women's sexual and reproductive health.

### **1.5 Research problems and objectives:**

The primary objective is to anthropologically explore the effects of COVID-19 on the practice of *ukuhlolwa kwezintombi* (virginity testing) at Impendle where the study is taking place. The secondary research objectives of this study are:

- To investigate the significance of *ukuhlolwa kwezintombi* in the Impendle area
- To understand how COVID-19 lockdown restrictions have impacted the practice of *ukuhlolwa kwezintombi*
- To discover if there were challenges faced by the teenage girls undergoing the practice of *ukuhlolwa kwezintombi* during COVID-19 lockdown restrictions
- To find out ways in which *ukuhlolwa kwezintombi* endorses gender inequality in the Impendle area

#### **1.6 The key research questions to be asked are:**

- What is the significance of virginity testing in Impendle communities?
- How have the COVID-19 lockdown restrictions impacted the practice of *ukuhlolwa kwezintombi*?
- How do family members and virgin testers encourage virginity even during COVID-19?
- In what ways does *ukuhlolwa kwezintombi* endorse gender inequality in the Impendle area?

#### **1.7 Brief introduction of the research design and methods for data collection**

The research methodology for the study follows a qualitative technique, which allows for the use of semi-structured interviews and non-probability sampling methods, namely purposive and snowballing sampling. The qualitative method is used predominantly in humanities research and anthropological research. Qualitative research allows the collection of descriptive, detailed, and analytical data. According to Rapport (2010), qualitative methods answer questions about experience, meaning and perspective, most often from the participant's standpoint (Njie and Asimiran, 2014). Data is collected from 28 participants (12 maidens, 12 parents/guardians of the maidens and four inspectors (*omama abahlolayo*) using semi-structured interviews. Each participant will be interviewed solely to gather all the essential information to respond to the study's objectives. A thematic analysis will be used to analyse data.

#### **1.8 Brief introduction of theoretical frameworks**

This research is guided by three theoretical perspectives: the social identity theory, cultural determinism theory, and social constructivism. The social identity theory is an individual's sense of whom they are based on their group membership. Two social psychologists, Henry Tafel and John Turner developed this theory. These psychologists claimed that social identity is a person's

knowledge that each individual belongs to a social group. At the same time, cultural determinism theory is the belief that culture dictates people's behaviour widely through economic, political organizations, educational, and religious elements rather than our biological genes. This theory was coined by France Boas, who first came up with the notion of culture. He described it as the principal concept for identifying human behaviour rather than biological factors. Then, social constructivism is a belief that knowledge is socially constructed (Amineh, 2015). In other words, this means that everybody constructs knowledge and constructs reality. A primary focus of social constructionism is to uncover how individuals and groups create their perceived social reality (Amineh, 2015). It examines how humans' social aspects are developed, institutionalized, known, and made into tradition. Thus, these theoretical lenses will contribute to the wording of the study's research objectives and questions and inform the literature's scope in the following chapter. The theoretical framework contribution informed the research design used in this study and will guide data presentation, analysis, and recommendations made by the study.

## **1.9 Structure of Thesis**

This thesis contains a total of five chapters, each detailing a specific process as follows:

### **Chapter 1: Introduction**

This chapter involves a summary of the following aspects: it includes the topic of the study, background of the study, significance of the study, problem statement and the aim and objectives of the study.

### **Chapter 2: Literature Review and Theoretical Framework**

This chapter will review the information on virginity testing and Covid-19, where significant literature will be reviewed. This chapter also consists of three different theoretical frameworks, namely, social identity theory, social determinism theory, and social constructivism theory.

### **Chapter: Research Methodology**

A comprehensive explanation of the study's methodology is presented in this chapter. It will cover methods to be used in this study, such as the research approach design, study location, sampling techniques used and data collection methods.

### **Chapter 4: Findings and data analysis**

This chapter involves analysing and interpreting data that will be collected using primary data. Data analysis and empirical findings as aligned with the goals of the study

presented.

## **Chapter 5: Summary, Recommendation and Conclusion**

This chapter will describe conclusions that will be drawn from the readings acquired as well as fieldwork responses. The researcher will make conclusions based on the key issues. Limitations of the study will also be outlined, followed by the conclusion.

### **1.9 Chapter summary**

This chapter introduces the study. An inclusive overview of this research was provided by disclosing the core of this dissertation. It gave the reason behind this study. The advocate of this chapter has thoroughly included the brief background of *ukuhlolwa kwezintombi* (virginity testing), including how this cultural practice was affected during the COVID-19 pandemic. The chapter also included a problem statement, the study's justification, and location. There is also a brief introduction to the research methodology, which used qualitative methods, semi-structured interviews, theoretical frameworks, and theories such as social identity theory, cultural determination theory, and social constructivism theory. The next chapter unpacks the literature review and theoretical framework chosen for the study.

## CHAPTER TWO

### LITERATURE REVIEW

#### 2. Introduction

The previous chapter was the introduction to the study. This chapter aims to review the literature for this study. The literature review plays an intrinsic part in any research process. It helps a researcher to engage appropriately with a research topic as it is a critical technique for analysing and evaluating current bodies of work (Ridley, 2012). According to Rowley (2004), the literature review is a collection of the most relevant and significant publications to offer a wide-ranging look at the topic and by whom existing. It is a detailed analysis of published and unpublished scholarly material relating to a researcher's area as a product (Leedy and Ormrod, 2016). In other words, the literature review examines scholarly sources that indicate the precise topic. This idea helps the researcher to obtain a different understanding of how a researcher investigates and decorates information in a unique research area (Randolph, 2009). COVID-19 has many adverse effects on individuals living in different societies, and these effects need to be researched. COVID-19 is a virus that heavily impacts people and may cause illnesses to both animals and humans. It causes a respiratory infection ranging from a common cold to a more severe disease (Martin et al., 2020). The literature aims to reflect the dimensions of *ukuhlolwa kwezintombi* and how this cultural practice was disturbed during Corona outbreaks.

This literature seeks to introduce the significant concepts of virginity testing and Covid-19. It will also introduce new concepts that resulted from the effect of COVID-19 in *ukuhlolwa kwezintombi*, such as pregnancy, gender inequality, gender-based violence, poverty, and unemployment. This review will discuss the dynamic social challenges and environmental issues related to COVID-19 and virginity testing. However, this will be done using a qualitative approach to share anthropological contributions towards COVID-19, including its effects on *ukuhlolwa kwezintombi*. This chapter further reviews the correlation between the objectives and aim of the study under investigation. The literature review section identifies theories and previous research inquiries that have influenced the research topic and the methods I adopted as a researcher. The literature review of this study is organized thematically.

## 2.1 Conceptualizing the cultural practice of *ukuhlolwa kwezintombi*

*Ukuhlolwa kwezintombi* (virginity testing) refers to a cultural practice that includes examining the genitals of young women and girls to determine if they are sexually chaste and, therefore, still virgins. Biyela (2019) asserts that cultural practice refers to the values and beliefs developed within a specific ethnic group, especially those practised since ancient times. *Ukuhlolwa kwezintombi*, as a cultural practice, is primarily practised in *AmaZulu* community in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. Virginity in this practice is determined by factors such as the vagina of a girl and a young woman who has never engaged in sexual practice, firm breasts and body muscles and innocence in the eyes (Crosby et al., 2020). According to Cira (2015), *ukuhlolwa kwezintombi* has been and is almost equally supported and criticized by some. Those who condemn the practice of *ukuhlolwa kwezintombi* are those who perceive it as a gender issue because only girls are tested and not boys. Correspondingly, those who support the practice of *ukuhlolwa kwezintombi* usually perceive it as an HIV-preventing method, especially among Christians (Cira, 2015). The connection between this statement and the Zulu practice of *ukuhlolwa kwezintombi* is rooted in the belief that virginity testing functions as a means of HIV prevention. Supporters argue that by promoting abstinence until marriage, the practice reduces the risk of HIV transmission and other sexually transmitted infections (STIs). This belief is particularly reinforced within Christian communities, where virginity is closely tied to moral and religious principles (Cira, 2015). As a result, virginity testing is often framed not only as a cultural tradition but also as a public health intervention aimed at safeguarding young women from sexual health risks.

During virginity, the girls line up and then lie on their backs in a row on grass mats set out on the ground (Biyela, 2019). They part their legs while the virgin tester (inspector) peers briefly at each girl's exposed genitals before making her judgment. Occasionally, the woman who tests their virgins uses her hands to part a girl's labia (Crosby et al., 2020). In this form of testing, it is essential that the girl lies down and parts her legs for an inspector. She can lie down on anything; it does not have to be the grass mat (Crosby et al., 2020). Biyela (2019) has also highlighted another technique of testing where a female elder who leads and inspects notes the muscle tone of a girl and evaluates the girl's general behaviour, which is considered when determining their virginity status. This form of testing is controversial because the older woman looks at a woman's body muscle to assess whether she is a virgin or not (Biyela, 2019). In the context of *ukuhlolwa kwezintombi*, remains a highly contested practice, particularly due to the subjective and non-

scientific methods used to determine a young woman's virginity. Traditionally, an older woman examines the tightness of body muscles as an indicator of virginity, a method that lacks medical credibility and is often criticized for violating bodily autonomy and dignity (Biyela, 2019). Aligned with the focus of this study, the COVID-19 pandemic has further complicated the practice by introducing health risks, social restrictions, and shifts in perception among maidens, parents, and testers. Understanding how these external pressures have influenced the continuity, adaptation, or contestation of virginity testing in Impendle provides critical insight into the intersections of culture, gender, and public health in rural South Africa.

## **2.2 The historical foundation of *ukuhlolwa kwezintombi***

History plays a significant role in people's lives. It teaches people how past cultures, ideologies, societies, systems, technologies, and governments were built. This also expands knowledge in how they operated, and how they have changed. Knowing the historical foundation of culture helps individuals construct their identity and build a sense of pride in being part of that culture (Crosby, 2020). Cira (2015) argues that virginity testing has been there since the earliest ages. South African civil society has debated the acceptable role of "custom" in public life for the past two decades, particularly on themes of gender and sexuality (Crosby, 2020). The history of *ukuhlolwa kwezintombi* illustrates that the longing for custom points to the loss of sexual independence that accompanied colonialism (Biyela, 2019). In the precolonial and the early colonial era, *ukuhlolwa kwezintombi* was forcefully patriarchal, meaning the practice itself protected female sexual autonomy and provided protections that were undermined by the colonial legal regime and have yet to be effectively replaced (Cira, 2015). Nonetheless, since the 1990s, the testing has spread across much of KwaZulu-Natal and beyond, with its performance reports in places as far afield as Mpumalanga province and Swaziland (Ntuli, 2018).

*Ukuhlolwa kwezintombi* originated among the isiZulu population from the idea of confirming the chastity of young brides before marriage. It has been established that during ancient times, the Zulu people in homesteads used virginity testing to urge girls to remain virgins until they were married. It must still be ascertained whether the support for this practice is based on fear and concern for the spread of HIV and AIDS (Crosby et al., 2020). In contrast to the Victorian concept of chastity, virginity among *AmaZulu* has never been separated from self-discipline. The important thing was to avoid penetrative sex, defloration, and thus pregnancy (Crosby et al., 2020). Thus,

virginity is not connected to chastity; both virginity and sexual experience are of immense importance. During the 1970s, young girls were educated by older girls who already had boyfriends but were still virgins (Crosby, 2020). They looked after the younger ones and arranged meetings between boys and girls. To prevent penetration, they learned to practice 'thigh sex', which meant that the girl laid on her right side with her legs firmly crossed, and the boy who laid on his left side could break in between her thighs to the mons Veneris, but without reaching inside the labia (Crosby et al., 2020). The boys, on their part, went to initiation schools where they learned not to penetrate a girl (Cira, 2015). In their care for the younger members of their community, they took on the responsibility of facilitating interactions between boys and girls. In an effort to prevent penetration, they developed a practice called 'thigh sex,' in which the girl would lie on her right side with her legs firmly crossed. The boy, positioned on his left side, would position himself between her thighs, close to the mons Veneris, but would avoid direct contact with the labia (Crosby et al., 2020). This practice was a culturally significant way of managing intimacy while maintaining certain boundaries.

### **2.3 Significance of *Ukuhlolwa Kwezintombi***

The custom of virginity testing is amongst the most effective practices in rural parts, especially in areas like Kwa-Zulu Natal. This cultural practice encourages virginity with some hopes for many young girls to become royal wives (Cira, 2015). Therefore, this creates an impression that the only honour woman who is maintaining her virginity and potentially increasing the amount of *lobola* paid for her. This practice bends more toward the importance of culture rather than religious identity and the importance of sexual teachings. In rural areas, most young girls engage in virginity testing because it symbolizes the pride of their family and their husbands. Ntuli (2019) argues that virginity testing is essential in their society because it protects and limits people from contracting HIV. This practice is performed in women because they are easier to control than men. Virginity testing also prevents teenage pregnancy. Performing this custom is crucial because it makes young girls afraid of boys (Cira, 2015). Hence, most boys firstly strip a girl's virginity and the next thing they are HIV and pregnant.

In rural households, a girl's virginity brings honour to the family since her *lobola* will be valued highly because a girl can abstract from sexual intercourse until she gets married. (Biyela, 2019). The virginity of the *AmaZulu* girl is a profit to her parents; therefore, a girl's virginity is depicted

as an opportunity to bring wealth to the family. Talking to girls about the importance of maintaining virginity before marriage formed part of the traditional puberty ritual known as *umhlonyane* (Ntuli, 2018). In training for this, a girl needed to be taught how to ensure that she would not 'expose her mother's cattle', that is, lose her virginity. Virginity testing is an excellent opportunity to teach values to girls. Biyela (2019) specified that girls are given advice and then tested so that they cannot do as they like. This provides girls with particular pride in their identity. Virginity testing is a traditional practice that controls and helps youth not to engage in sexual intercourse before marriage (Cira, 2015).

#### **2.4 Virginity testing as a gendered cultural practice**

The status of women is complex and multidimensional. This is because gender inequality is both ideological (the beliefs, norms, and values about the status and roles of women in a society) and structural (women's access to and positions within social institutions). As a result, *ukuhlolwa kwezintombi* is also perceived as a cultural practice that promotes gender inequality among societies. According to Biyela (2018), a body does not belong to an individual woman. However, it serves as a symbol for society, which means that this cultural practice only focuses on a girl child. Therefore, it can be considered discriminatory in terms of gender and promoting patriarchy. The Children's Act prohibits cultural practices that are 'detrimental to a child's well-being (Ntuli, 2018). The Sexual Offences Act 32 of 2007 forbids all forms of forced sexual penetration, including genital penetration, such as a finger. This also includes *ukuhlolwa kwezintombi* because it involves the inspection of a girl and woman by an older woman using her fingers.

Furthermore, *ukuhlolwa kwezintombi* needs to be looked at comprehensively in terms of gender discrimination against women because it can potentially reinforce the subordination of women and cause psychological harm through rebellion against culture and society's expectations (Biyela, 2018). For boys, there are no expectations for them to remain virgins until marriage. In other words, even if boys are not virgins, they are still expected to marry virgin girls without being judged by society. Cira (2015) also emphasized that virginity testing perpetuates gender inequality. The argument is that it encourages only girls to maintain their virginity while boys are expected to act as real men; the features of a real man are the one who has many sexual partners.

## **2.5 Virginty testing as a division of a society**

Scholars discovered that virginty testing causes and promotes division among the members of the community, especially among the youth. These divisions emphasize that those who are practising virginty testing are justifiably faithful, pure and well-behaved girls who will have a shining future and potentially good husbands. Those not practicing this ritual are regarded as having unclean misbehaviours with bad morals, which have not only disgraced their parents and families but deprived them of the full *lobola* (Biyela, 2018). They are suspected of being HIV and AIDS carriers, undeserving of anyone's son as a good husband. The *lobola* price for such a girl is thus valued lower than culturally determined (Biyela, 2018). In this manner, it might cause division among parents between parents whose girls have undergone virginty testing versus those whose girls do not practice this ritual. Moreover, where the same parents and girls are church members, it may also cause divisions in the church. Those who are virgins may think they are better than those who are not. In the same way, it also promotes inequality between girls and boys in the sense that boys see themselves better since only girls are tested (Biyela, 2018). Biyela (2018) outlined that women are treated as the inferior sex and ranked low. As a result, women are effectively ranked second in status to men, along with their children. Therefore, virginty testing needs to be weighed up in terms of whether it is a practice that promotes unity or division (Biyela, 2018).

## **2.6 Indigenous knowledge and cultural practices**

Indigenous knowledge plays a vital role in human culture. Indigenous knowledge refers to the local knowledge unique to a given culture or society that people have developed and continue to develop (Sillitoe et al., 2005: 3). Usually, Indigenous knowledge centres on the cultural values and norms existing within society. Culture plays a significant role in the functioning of the world as a whole. Different continents, countries, communities, groups, families, and individuals practice different cultures that shape their functioning. DuPlessis and Raza (2004: 86-87) believe that the history of culture represents a record of reactions in thoughts and feelings to the changed conditions of everyday life. Culture can be understood only within the context of social actions; it is deeply rooted in the identity of a given society and reflects society's customs, knowledge, art forms, morals, habits, ideologies and politics. Usually, individuals obey and show great respect for their culture. Nonetheless, when dealing with social issues, it is essential to consider different perspectives from different social groups.

The socio-cultural theory emphasizes that culture must be transmitted from generation to generation since it enforces acceptable behaviours within an individual's social context (Swartz et al., 2000). However, even though Indigenous knowledge may be viewed as a source of reinforcing positive behaviour among young people, the general breakdown of traditional norms has led to the neglect of the Indigenous approach. For instance, today's youth mostly have negative attitudes towards traditional norms and practices, which they tend to regard as superstitions. They argue that individuals who believe in such traditions still live in the past. As a result, parents face difficulties discussing indigenous knowledge's value with their children (Swartz et al., 2000). Conducting this study will enable a greater understanding of strategies used to pass indigenous knowledge from one generation to another to promote their well-being.

### **2.6.1 VirginitY testing within Indigenous knowledge systems**

A great example of this is virginitY testing, which is an excellent example of an Indigenous knowledge system. This is because it is one of the cultural practices practiced since the past era. *Ukuhlolwa kwezintombi* is an indigenous way to preserve culture. It is mainly practised in rural areas compared to urban areas. This shows that rural communities preserve culture and are not influenced by scientific or Western influences. Notwithstanding, although these individuals view virginitY testing as an indigenous method that can be used to prevent teenage pregnancy and reinforce resistance, South African policymakers criticize this idea. For instance, the South African Human Rights and Gender Commission 24 argues against virginitY testing. "South Africa's Constitution stands firmly on the side of Human Rights and the Bill of Rights, which argues that girls who are compelled to participate in virginitY testing have their rights and dignity violated. It is a discriminatory practice since males are not tested" (Taylor et al., 2007: 34). Human rights organizations argue that virginitY testing is dangerous since it is done in public. If young girls fail the test, they find themselves labelled, stigmatized and classified as prostitutes, and if they pass the test, they are at risk of being raped by those who believe that HIV can be cured by having sex with a virgin (Denis, 2006: 319). Some South African government departments, such as the National Department of Health, also have concerns regarding virginitY testing. They argue that virginitY testers are assisting in the spread of HIV and STDs as they touch and inspect one girl after another during the process.

### **2.6.2 Implications of VirginitY Testing on SRH and Indigenous Cultural Practices**

Despite the controversies surrounding virginity testing, it remains an integral aspect of certain Indigenous knowledge systems, reflecting the tension between traditional practices and evolving views on gender, sexuality, and human rights. While some argue that virginity testing reinforces harmful gender stereotypes and violates individual autonomy, others within rural communities view it as an important cultural practice that upholds values of modesty and community responsibility. However, the practice raises critical concerns for sexual and reproductive health, particularly for young women, as it often leads to the stigmatization and objectification of those subjected to it (Denis, 2006). In the context of this study, examining virginity testing through the lens of SRH offers valuable insights into how cultural practices intersect with contemporary health challenges. For example, the spread of HIV and other sexually transmitted infections (STIs) within communities that practice virginity testing is a critical issue. This practice is also tied to misconceptions about sexual health, such as the dangerous belief that intercourse with a virgin can cure HIV, which further complicates the health outcomes for these communities (Denis, 2006). The intersection of cultural beliefs and modern health practices, including SRH, requires an in-depth examination to understand how both can coexist or come into conflict, particularly in marginalized and Indigenous communities where traditional knowledge systems shape both everyday life and health decisions.

Virginity testing, while rooted in Indigenous cultural practices, has significant implications for sexual and reproductive health (SRH), particularly for young women in rural communities. In many Indigenous societies, virginity testing is seen as a way to uphold cultural values around purity, modesty, and family honour. However, this practice raises concerns regarding the health and well-being of those subjected to it. Studies highlight the stigmatization and objectification that result from virginity testing, as young women who "fail" the test may be labelled negatively within their communities (Denis, 2006). Additionally, the practice is often linked to harmful misconceptions, such as the belief that sexual intercourse with a virgin can cure HIV, further complicating efforts to address sexual health and prevent the spread of sexually transmitted infections (STIs) (Denis, 2006). Furthermore, while traditional knowledge systems value the preservation of culture, the intersection of virginity testing with modern SRH practices underscores the tension between cultural preservation and contemporary health needs. These practices also raise concerns about bodily autonomy and human rights, as critics argue that virginity testing infringes upon young women's rights, particularly when it is conducted in public or without

consent (Taylor et al., 2007). Understanding the complex relationship between virginity testing, SRH, and Indigenous cultural practices is essential for addressing health disparities while respecting cultural traditions.

## **2.7 Constitutional rights on the practice of *ukuhlolwa kwezintombi***

The Constitution is applied to support the practice of virginity testing. In this regard, the practice of virginity testing is justified as a constitutional right to practice becoming one's cultural choice (Biyela, 2018), as the Constitution provides for the right to culture and recognizes traditional leadership. This implies that participants view their constitutional right to practice virginity testing (Biyela, 2018). However, similar arguments were raised in support of the MBS, and the mayor of the UDM, Dudu Mazibuko, was reported stating that 'the Constitution itself refers to the right of cultural, religious and linguistic communities' (Khoza, 2016). The offering of MBS through the cultural practice of virginity testing is viewed as a constitutionally accepted action. Moreover, UDM's Mayor mentioned that CGE failed to prove that the cultural practice of virginity testing violates any of the provisions of the Bill of Rights (Khoza, 2016). She further stated that the CGE report failed to quote any part of the Constitution that prevents the UDM from utilizing the state's resources to support the cultural association of the maidens (Khoza, 2016). Thus, this argument shows that the advocates of virginity testing view the practice as a girl's constitutional right – culturally and in terms of association (Biyela, 2018).

## **2.8 The Ritual Ceremonies**

### **2.8.1 The Zulu goddess *Nomkhubulwane* ritual**

Performances of certain rituals also contribute to girlhood protection. For instance, The Zulu goddess *Nomkhubulwane* ritual is performed by traditional healers, virgin girls and parents in KwaZulu-Natal at Impendle. In traditional Zulu culture, *Nomkhubulwane* is known as a rain princess. Individuals who promote this ritual argue that due to the failure to perform this ritual, *Nomkhubulwane* turns her back and walks away. Her absence leads to social crises such as droughts, great storms, terrible wind and soil that lies exhausted and barren (Kendall, 1999). During these crises, only virgin girls have the power to communicate with *Nomkhubulwane*. "*Nomkhubulwane* considered all *izintombi* (Zulu girl children or virgins) her daughters and can only show herself to them; she protects them and makes them and the earth wet with life waters, healthy and whole" (Kendall, 1999: 96). Therefore, a girl, being part of this festival, depends on

her ability and motive to maintain her virginity. By doing this, there is the likelihood that she will delay sexual activities. Ngobese, cited in Kendall (1999: 99), hopes that the "*Nomkhubulwane* festival will help to restore ancient Zulu respect for virginity and, through the restoration of reverence for virginity, communities will alter teenage sexual behaviour and curb illegitimate pregnancy and the spread of AIDS and STDs".

### **2.8.2 The Royal Reed Dance Festival (*uMkhosi Womhlanga*)**

The Royal Reed Dance Festival (*uMkhosi womhlanga*) is a significant cultural event held at the Royal Zulu Palace, *KwaBulawayo*, attracting thousands of participants and spectators each year. This festival is regarded as an Indigenous mechanism for promoting and preserving girlhood, with virginity testing serving as a prerequisite for participation (Bennett et al., 2010). The ceremony reinforces cultural ideals of purity, femininity, and communal identity, particularly within Zulu society. However, the COVID-19 pandemic introduced unprecedented disruptions to this tradition, as restrictions on public gatherings and heightened health concerns altered the practice of virginity testing and the overall execution of the festival (Ndaba, 2022).

These disruptions raise important questions about the evolving perceptions of young women in Impendle regarding their participation in the festival and their views on the changing role of virginity testing within contemporary society (Ndlovu, 2023). Furthermore, the perspectives of virginity inspectors (*omama abahlolayo*) and family members are crucial in understanding how different stakeholders interpret and respond to these cultural shifts. Ndaba (2022), attested that examining these perspectives provides a nuanced understanding of how Indigenous cultural practices adapt in response to external pressures such as public health crises. This discussion contributes to broader debates on the intersection of public health policies, Indigenous knowledge systems, and gendered cultural expectations in a rapidly evolving socio-cultural landscape.

### **2.9 COVID-19 and the effects of its regulation on the performance of customs**

In 2020, there was a worldwide discovery of the coronavirus, which caused several nationwide deaths and many social and health complications (Hunter, 2020). Most people contracted this pandemic at work, clubs/taverns, shops/supermarkets, schools, and universities. This was due to the large number of people occupying the place (Hunter, 2020). As a result, the South African government foreseen that this was endangering people and decreasing the country's lifespan.

Therefore, they predicted that introducing COVID-19 regulation within a country is well worth a try because COVID-19 spreads quickly when people are clustered or crowded.

Consequently, the government alerted the nation about the lockdown that would take place in mid-March. The lockdown started from level five and went down to level one. Nonetheless, that depends on whether COVID-19 increases or not. Under level five of the lockdown, people adhered to strict restrictions as the country was closed. This involved no travelling being allowed, no walking around without reason or without wearing a face mask, alcohol and cigarettes were prohibited, clubs were closed, and the only people who were allowed to work were healthy practitioners (doctors and nurses), warders and police officers (Hunter, 2020). During this time, the practice of virginity testing got distracted because no close contact was allowed, and all cultural events were closed. Hence, virginity testing involves touching, and virgin girls must be close to women who test their virgins. The family members or guardians of the virgin girls no longer forced/encouraged daughters to go for virginity testing because it was prohibited. Many girls who used to adhere to the rules of being a virgin ended up exploring new things and doing whatever they wanted since no one was going to test their virginity. This has resulted in an increase in teenage pregnancy among the youngest girls who were undergoing virginity testing. This proves that girls' gatherings are important among girls undergoing virginity testing. They get to talk about essential things such as the importance of maintaining their virginity before marriage, singing and dancing together and the private conversations they share every time they meet. Virginity testing also brings the maidens closer because it is an essential event for them.

The arrival of COVID-19 has brought a change in people's lives across the world. The social gatherings and the performance of customs got disturbed, causing certain cultures/rituals to be destroyed (Courtemanche et al., 2020). The government warned people against performing certain rituals and visiting religious sites as it could help to spread the disease rapidly (Courtemanche et al., 2020). These include traditional customs, group meetings, beaches/parks, and churches (especially when it involves touching or kissing the statues). The churches were advised to refrain from handshakes, hugs, Chalise sharing during Lent and hand-holding. Furthermore, the government also prohibited social gatherings since the large gatherings make individuals particularly vulnerable to the epidemic (Courtemanche et al., 2020).

Similarly, fears of further coronavirus spread have deeply impacted religious activities worldwide (Courtemanche et al., 2020). In South Africa, all ritual activities, such as traditional ceremonies, unveilings, virginity testing, and first fruit festivals, were prohibited on advanced lockdown (level 5 and level 4). However, only 50 indoor activities were allowed during level three, and 100 outdoor activities were allowed. The virgin girl's ceremony is called the Reed Dance (*Umkhosi Womhlanga*). It is attended by the virgin girls in September, once a year. During this ceremony, thousands of girls from various places gather at the Zulu Royal Residence, *eNyokeni* in *KwaNongoma*, to be groomed to take pride in their virginity and keep it until marriage. However, COVID-19 has impacted the Reed Dance ceremony because it ended up not happening during the years 2020 and 2021 since it is attended by plenty of girls from different regions and could facilitate the spread of the coronavirus.

## **2.10 Rural Response to COVID-19**

Rural households have suffered from the severe consequences of COVID-19. South Africa has grappled with the second type of COVID-19, including all rural communities (Ruetzler et al., 2020). A lack of infrastructure, limited awareness about the spread of the pandemic, and vaccine hesitancy are reasons why many rural areas were inadequately equipped to deal with the pandemic (Dutta and Fisher, 2021). During the year 2020, around March, there were about 60 and above Civil Society Organisations came together to form a partnership with the Rapid Rural Community Response to COVID-19 (RCRC) to facilitate a quicker response to this pandemic among rural regions (Ruetzler et al., 2021). However, rural residents experienced challenges regarding how to deal with the virus. Ruetzler et al. (2020) emphasized that most rural areas needed help with testing infrastructure in the areas where our member organizations work falls far short of the requirement. There were considerable delays in blood samples sent for testing, and test reports are often significantly delayed (Ruetzler et al., 2021). People are reluctant to follow quarantine protocols, and quarantine facilities are unavailable (Ruetzler et al., 2021). The tailored communication approaches were provided to inform and educate rural inhabitants about COVID-19 and how they can protect themselves from contracting the virus, such as healthy eating and coping with stress, chronic diseases and physical activities (Dutta and Fisher, 2021). This assisted rural residents because it made people better understand COVID-19, the stereotype decreased a bit, and people started to be conscious and responsible for their health (Dutta and Fisher, 2021).

### **2.11 Effect of COVID-19 on Gender**

The effects of COVID-19 are experienced in different ways by both genders. Nevertheless, it has impacted most women more than men. This is the primary reason this study focuses more on women, particularly young women. In rural areas, most women work as domestic workers, sell in other people's shops, and work as hawkers; some are just house-wives. At the same time, most men work in urban areas doing different jobs. COVID-19 created changes in gender hierarchies among families, as most men lost their jobs, which resulted in them coming back home. Then, women became household breadwinners, the only ones to provide for their families using Child Support Grants. This created an inferiority to men as they depended on their wives and could not provide for their families. Moreover, the disaggregated sex data for COVID-19 reveal no differences in the number of cases of women and men (Smith, 2019). The difference is spotted regarding mortality and the vulnerability to COVID-19 (Lancet, 2020). The evidence that is emerging suggests that fewer women than men were killed by COVID-19, based on sex immunological or gender differences, which include smoking patterns and prevalence.

### **2.12 Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical framework plays a significant role in anthropological study. This is because it is an organization that supports and holds a theory of a research study (Luciani, 2015). According to Davis et al. (2014), a theoretical framework is a tangible set of thoughts and theories related to the phenomenon study. It outlines the theoretical scope while assisting a researcher in developing and examining a research topic, problem, and questions. In other words, theories guide researchers throughout the research process and assist them in creating a clear expectation about how things are related. The theoretical framework also connects a researcher to existing knowledge (Luciani, 2015). This research is embedded or informed by three theoretical frameworks: the social identity theory, cultural determinism theory and social constructionism theory. These three theories are utilized and connected in this anthropological study because they all provide a considerate understanding that social interaction and societal components occur not only in isolation but in a comprehensive manner. These theories work together as much as each contributes uniquely to the study. These theoretical frameworks help give meaning to the reasons for creating certain ideologies that individuals think and act upon. In this case, it is used to make sense of the possible reasons why young women and virginity-testing advocators accept the cultural practice of *ukuhlolwa kwezintombi*.

### **2.12.1 The use of a theoretical framework in qualitative research**

The theoretical framework is one of the most critical aspects of every research process. It is portrayed as the spinal cord of the research because it helps the researcher clarify the implicit theory more clearly. According to Leeming (2018), a theoretical framework is the use of a theory or theories in a study that simultaneously conveys the deepest values of the researchers and provides an articulated indication or lens for how the study will process knowledge (Collins, 2018). The significance of theory-driven thinking and acting is underlined in selecting a research topic, developing research questions, conceptualizing the literature review, designing the approach, and analysis plan for the dissertation study (Leeming, 2018). Collins (2018) claims that there are three primary applications of a theory in qualitative research. These may include the theory of research paradigm and method, a theory built due to data collection and a theory as a framework to guide the study. Discussion of theory in qualitative research relates to the theories that ground a methodological approach, such as ethnography, phenomenology, and narrative. This can also include the epistemological paradigms that guide a study, such as critical, constructivist and post-positivist (Collin, 2018).

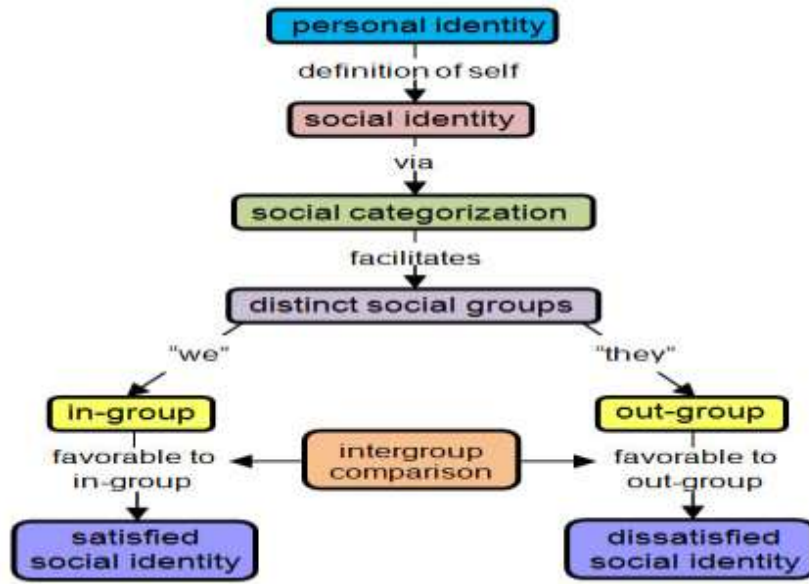
### **2.12.2 Social Identity Theory**

The social identity theory will be used to understand the effect of COVID-19 on the cultural practice of *ukuhlolwa kwezintombi*. According to Hogg (2016), social identity theory is an individual's sense of identity based on group membership. Two social psychologists, Henry Tafel and John Turne, developed this theory. These psychologists claimed that social identity is a person's knowledge that each individual belongs to a social group. Hogg (2016) labelled a social group as people who view themselves as members of the same social class and embrace common social identification. In the comparison process, individuals similar to the self are labelled as 'in-group.' However, if the individuals differ from the self, they are labelled as 'out-group' (Hogg, 2016). Therefore, this clarifies that the social groups where people place themselves are part of a structured society and only relate to opposing groups. For example, each group (Blacks, Whites, Coloureds, and Indians) has its status and prestige, and one has either more or less power Hogg, (2016).

Tajfel and Turner (1979) proposed that there are three mental processes involved in evaluating others as "us" or "them" (i.e., "in-group" and "out-group." These take place in a particular order, using three vital cognitive components: social categorization, social identification, and social

comparison. The first cognitive component is social categorization. This component states that we categorize objects to understand and identify them. We categorize people (including ourselves) in a very similar way to understand the social environment. For instance, we use social categories like black, white, Christian, Australian, Muslim, bus driver, and student because they are helpful. If we can assign people to a category, that tells us things about those people. As we saw with the bus driver example, we could not function normally without using these categories, i.e., in the bus context.

We learn about ourselves by knowing the categories to which we belong. We define appropriate behaviour by referencing the norms of the groups we belong to, but one can only do this if one can tell who belongs to one group. An individual can belong to many different groups. The second cognitive component (stage) is social identification. We adopt the identity of the group to which we have categorized ourselves. For example, suppose you have categorized yourself as a student. In that case, the chances are you will adopt the identity of a student and begin to act in the ways you believe students because you are conforming to the norms of the group you fall into. There will be an emotional significance to your identification with a group, and your self-esteem will become bound with group membership. The final stage is social comparison. Once we have categorized ourselves as part of a group and identified with that group, we tend to compare that group with other groups. If our self-esteem is to be maintained, our group must compare favourably with other groups. This is critical to understanding prejudice because once two groups identify themselves as rivals, they are forced to compete in order for the members to maintain their self-esteem. Competition and hostility between groups is thus not only a matter of competing for resources (like in Sherif's Robbers Cave) like jobs but also the result of competing identities.



Source: Mor Barak, L. and Michalle, A., (2008). *Social Psychological Perspectives of Workforce Diversity and Inclusion in National and Global Contexts*.

### 2.12.3 The relevance of social identity theory to the study

The social identity theory benefited the study by explaining the established identity of young maidens in *Ukuhlolwa kwezintombi*. In other words, it describes the elements that connect or disclose the identity shared by the maidens. This can be the pride they have about keeping their virginity, dignity, self-respect and modesty. Social identity theory holds that people derive their roles in society, specific identities, and characteristics. Social identity theory is relevant to the study because it not only focuses on the relationship between young maidens, the family members (parents/guardians) of the maidens and the inspectors (mama abahlolayo), but it also focuses on how these young girls interact with each other as they share the same identity. This study explores the effect of COVID-19 on the practice of *ukuhlolwa kwezintombi* among teenage girls residing in Impendle. Hogg (2016) contends that the anthropological viewpoint of identity is necessary when one is trying to understand other people's identities. Adopting this perspective allowed me to know that these maidens are born with a specific identity; they live in cultural conditions such as the "second nature of man", which allows them to be conceptualized or understood differently from others. Moreover, there is no doubt that COVID-19 heavily impacted the practice of *ukuhlolwa kwezintombi* because no ceremony or tradition was allowed to occur as COVID-19 cases were increasing daily. Therefore, this theory attempts to disclose how inspectors (mama abahlolayo)

and maidens dealt with the cultural practice of *ukuhlolwa kwezintombi* under COVID-19 lockdown restrictions so they could keep their identities attached.

#### **2.12.4 Theory of cultural determinism**

Culture is a multifaceted concept that holds varying meanings across different disciplines and societies. Anthropologist Franz Boas was among the first scholars to introduce the notion of culture, emphasizing its role as the primary determinant of human behaviour rather than biological factors (Spiro, 2001). From this foundation emerged the theory of cultural determinism, which posits that human behaviour is largely shaped by cultural influences, including economic systems, political structures, education, and religious beliefs, rather than genetic predispositions (Spiro, 2001). Cultural determinism asserts that individuals are socialized into specific behavioural patterns dictated by their cultural environment. For instance, belonging to a social group requires adherence to cultural norms, as culture shapes human interactions through shared ideas, attitudes, and traditions passed down across generations (Spiro, 2001). Consequently, human nature is not an inherent biological trait but rather a learned construct formed by collective meanings, values, and beliefs embedded within society (Spiro, 2001). In contemporary anthropology, cultural determinism continues to be a key theoretical framework in understanding how cultural ideologies influence human behaviour and social structures (Spiro, 2001).

According to Liu et al. (2021), cultural determinism is rooted in the concept of cultural relativism, which asserts that individuals' beliefs, values, and practices should be understood within the context of their own culture rather than judged against external standards. This perspective acknowledges that societal development varies across cultures and cannot be universally equated (Rabie, 2013). There are two primary forms of cultural determinism: pessimistic and optimistic (Dutton, 2018). Pessimistic cultural determinism suggests that individuals are entirely shaped by their culture and unable to adopt new cultural perspectives, regardless of external influences (Dutton, 2018). For instance, someone growing up in a cultural environment like KwaZulu-Natal is likely to carry their core cultural beliefs with them throughout life, even if they come across different perspectives along the way. In contrast, optimistic cultural determinism posits that while culture plays a significant role in shaping individuals, they retain the ability to critically assess and modify their beliefs over time (Liu et al., 2021). This perspective highlights the dynamic nature of

cultural identity, recognizing that individuals may choose to adapt or reject aspects of their cultural upbringing.



Source: Hammersley, M., 2019. The concept of culture. *History and reappraisal*.

### **2.12.5 The relevance of cultural determinism theory to the study**

The theory of cultural determinism is relevant in the study because people in Impendle adhere to the cultural norms within their environment. The young maidens are forced to partake in this cultural practice because it is part of the cultural norms or customs that every young girl adheres to in the Impendle Inzinga community). At a young age, their parents/guardians encourage the cultural practice of *ukuhlolwa kwezintombi* to ensure their kids understand the importance of being *intombi* (virgin). Endorsing cultural determinism further disclosed how COVID-19 has impacted the maidens in adhering to the custom (virginity testing) they grew up practicing. Moreover, cultural determinism uncovered the significance of virginity testing within the Impendle area. It also enhanced the scope of cultural value and the role placed on the practice of *ukuhlolwa kwezintombi*. In other words, cultural determinism acted as a guideline or a midway point that places the role, significance, and value behind virginity testing.

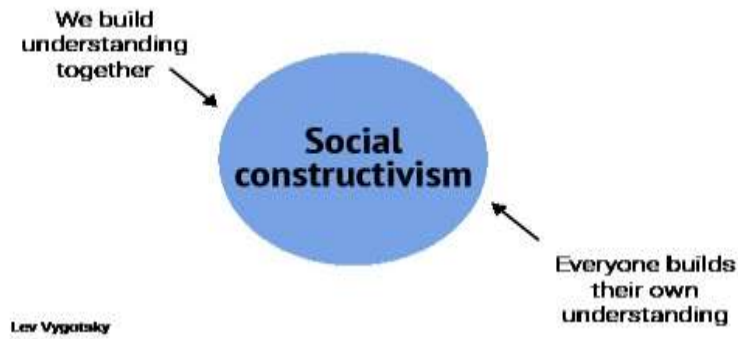
Cultural determinism provides a framework for understanding the intergenerational transmission of cultural values and the social expectations placed on young women in Impendle. The practice of *ukuhlolwa kwezintombi* is not only a personal or familial decision but is deeply embedded in the broader social fabric, where adherence to cultural norms is often reinforced by community elders, virginity inspectors (*omama abahlolayo*), and peers. This reinforces the argument that cultural identity and social belonging are shaped by collective values rather than individual choices. Additionally, the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted these cultural processes, challenging traditional ways of enforcing virginity testing and creating tension between public health measures and cultural obligations. The theory of cultural determinism thus helps explain the resistance or adaptation of cultural practices in response to external crises, shedding light on how young women in Impendle navigate their cultural identity amid changing societal conditions.

#### **2.12.6 Social constructivism theory**

People create social constructs by structuring what they perceive and experience into categories. The knowledge of how they perceive things is constructed by society (Agius, 2013; Keaton, 2011). In other words, everybody constructs knowledge and constructs the reality. Social constructivism theory was discovered by Vygotsky in 1968. Amineh (2015) contends that culture and language are the frameworks through which humans experience, communicate and understand reality. A primary focus of social constructionism is to uncover how individuals and groups construct their perceived social reality (Hay, 2015). It examines how humans' social aspects are developed, institutionalized, known, and made into tradition. The social construct is the connotation or meaning placed in an event or an object by a society (Agius, 2013). In that respect, a social construct as an idea widely accepted as a standard by society (Amineh, 2015). The Social Constructionists perceive knowledge as a construct of society rather than an immutable law (Hay, 2015). Reality is objective and subjective, both socially constructed (Keaton, 2011). This is because of multiple realities and perspectives and subjective reality. Thus, it is important to research to investigate individual points of view.

Social constructivism theory emphasizes the role of *social interaction* and *collaboration* in the process of constructing knowledge (Hay, 2015). Vygotsky argued that cognitive development is

deeply embedded in social contexts and that individuals learn and develop through interaction with others (Amineh, 2015). This perspective highlights the role of social networks, cultural practices, and shared activities in shaping how people come to understand and navigate the world around them. Social constructivism thus suggests that knowledge is not solely an individual endeavour but a collective process shaped by cultural, historical, and social contexts (Hay, 2015). By engaging with others and participating in cultural and societal practices, individuals refine their understanding and contribute to the construction of shared realities. This collective nature of knowledge creation is particularly significant in understanding how traditions and practices, such as cultural rituals or gender norms, are passed down, adapted, and maintained over time (Agius, 2013).



Source: Amineh, R.J. and Asl, H.D., 2015. Review of constructivism and social constructivism. *Journal of social sciences, literature and languages*, 1(1).

**Social Constructivism**  
**Knowledge is Built in Groups**

- Individual mind, alone, doesn't exist. Mind is part of society and culture.
- Learning cannot occur in isolation.
- Humans construct reality and change it constantly so that it fits the true reality better.
- Conventional knowledge is socially accepted.
- Chief proponent: Lev Vygotsky

Source: Adams, P., 2006. Exploring social constructivism: Theories and practicalities. *Education*, 34(3).

**2.12.7 The relevance of social constructivism theory to the study**

The social constructivism theory is relevant to the study because it looked at a particular construct: sentiments and the ideas behind virginity testing from the *AmaZulu* people as part of their culture. The theory will work to discover where and how virgin girls share their constructive perceptions

of virginity testing. The social significance of the virginity-testing ritual creates the identity of virgin girls. The drive to learn about the socially established importance of the practice may result in cooperative learning in this study, which involves the Reed dance ceremony (also known as *Umkhosi Womhlanga*), which maidens attend to celebrate their virginity and get to share their background knowledge about the importance of virginity testing. This might shift towards establishing how their society encourages and shapes them as maidens and how to overcome challenges related to holding and attending the ceremony during the pandemic. Likewise, participating in the traditional practice helps them to settle and negotiate on their shared constructed meaning, as their environment emphasizes collaboration and exchange of ideas.

### **2.12.9 Chapter summary**

The chapter was focused on the literature review. This chapter discussed literature on aspects that relate to the effects of COVID-19 on the practice of *ukuhlolwa kwezintombi*. It contained existing literature related to what this study is trying to discover. The literature highlighted the significance of *ukuhlolwa kwezintombi* as well as the historical perspective of the practice. It also looks at how COVID-19 interfered with the practice of *ukuhlolwa kwezintombi* during lockdown because group activities or meetings were prohibited to avoid the spread of COVID-19. The literature looked at how society shapes maidens as well as ordinary girls who do not undergo virginity testing. This chapter also focuses on the theoretical framework underpinning this study: social identity theory, cultural determinism and social constructivism theory. The following chapter focuses on the methods and methodologies this study will use.

# CHAPTER THREE

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

### 3. Introduction

The previous chapter examined the body of the literature that was relevant to the topic. The interest was to oversee the challenges faced by the maidens, the inspectors (omama abahlolayo), and the parents/guardians of the maidens. This chapter discusses the research methodology that guided the study. Numerous academics have retained that research methodology is crucial to any fruitful study. Research methodology establishes the framework for guiding data and gives the researcher exact tools and guidance. The researcher is reminded to stay within the intended data by the study process. The significant role of methodology is to offer a structured guideline for data collection methods, analysis, and the study area. It also involves using qualitative research design, allowing the use of techniques such as focus group interviews for data collection and thematic analysis. Moreover, this chapter also explains how anthropology research objectives, theoretical frameworks, and research techniques operate in concert. It describes how the researcher obtained the ethical and gatekeeper clearances and how I, as the study's principal investigator, ensured ethics during data collection, how the data was analysed, and the process involved in data analysis.

### 3.1 What is research?

The creation of knowledge depends on research. According to Goundar (2012), research is a systematic and organized process of gathering, analysing, interpreting, and evaluating information to answer a specific question or solve a problem. Research methodology is often seen as the art of scientific inquiry. It is a systematic investigation to gain new information, improve existing knowledge, or verify existing hypotheses (Kuluse, 2021). Research can be conducted in various fields, including science, technology, social sciences, humanities, and more. However, this research is undertaken under Humanities in the School of Social Sciences. Goundar (2012:6) viewpoint classifies it as a strategy that can pose the right questions while detecting answers. Research is a search for knowledge, hence why this study was conducted to anthropologically explore the effects of COVID-19 on the practice of *ukuhlolwa kwezintombi*, focusing on the perspective of young women of Impendle between the ages of thirteen to nineteen.

**According to Jensen (2013), the important research components include the following:**

- *Purpose:* Clearly defining the purpose or objective of the research is crucial. Researchers aim to explore, describe, explain, or predict phenomena.
- *Question or Hypothesis:* Formulating a research question or hypothesis is an essential step. This helps guide the research and provides a focus for the investigation.
- *Design:* Planning the research design involves selecting the methods and procedures for data collection and analysis. This could involve experiments, surveys, case studies, observational studies, or a combination of these.
- *Data Collection:* Gathering relevant data using appropriate methods and tools. This may involve experiments, surveys, interviews, observations, or analysis of existing data.
- *Analysis:* Examining and interpreting the collected data to draw meaningful conclusions. Statistical methods, qualitative analysis, or a combination of both may be employed depending on the nature of the research.
- *Results:* Communicating the findings of the research through reports, papers, presentations, or other means. This step involves summarizing the results and discussing their implications.
- *Peer Review:* In many academic and scientific settings, research undergoes peer review, where other experts in the field evaluate the methodology, results, and conclusions before publication.

This research was cleared as credible from the discipline level and granted ethical clearance by the Human Research Council, and the endorsement number is HSSREC/00000926/2019.

## **3.2 Research Methods**

### **3.2.1 Qualitative method**

The study is undertaking the qualitative research design. This form of social science research allows for a detailed description. Qualitative research is an approach that focuses on people and their experiences, behaviours, and opinions. It seeks to answer 'why' and 'how', providing detailed insight and understanding that quantitative research cannot reach. Facilitating an easy data collection phase becomes possible through the interpersonal requirement of the method, which is the face-to-face interaction (Esterberg, 2002). This works with non-numerical data and interprets meanings that support existing social issues through the study of populations (Njie and Asimiran, 2014). The expressive nature of the qualitative method allows for identifying trends, which

explains connections between people and their communities through research. Within social science, qualitative research typically focuses on the most personal elements of social interaction that comprise everyday life in the community of interest. The capacity of the qualitative method allows for the characterisation of behaviour and other possibilities for human interaction (Njie and Asimiran, 2014).

### **3.2.2 Reason behind utilizing the qualitative method**

The study aims to explore the effects of COVID-19 on the practice of *ukuhlolwa kwezintombi* using the perspective of young women of Impendle. Anthropology requires interpersonal interaction; thus, I relied on qualitative research methods. The qualitative method is utilised because of subjective experiences that the study has disclosed in understanding the research problem. It also assisted my participants in revealing how the COVID-19 lockdown had impacted their ordinary lives, specifically maintaining their identities. Correspondingly, the qualitative approach showed the general significance of the cultural practice of *ukuhlolwa kwezintombi* in the community and its relevance using young girls' perspectives (thirteen to nineteen). Through qualitative method, I was able to discover how family members/guardians and inspectors (*omama abahlolayo*) influenced or encouraged virginity testing to young girls during COVID-19. It also disclosed how maidens maintained their virginity and the relationship they had with other maidens as well as with their inspectors (*omama abahlolayo*).

Alternatively, this research allowed me to collect narratives of people I was studying. It created the opportunity for closeness, which contributed to reliable data collection. The qualitative strategy allowed me to understand virgin girls' perceptions and behaviour before COVID-19, during the lockdown and after COVID-19. The qualitative approach is flexible and easily adaptable to unforeseen changes in the targeted study area (Esterberg, 2002). The ambition to engage with maidens, inspectors, and the maiden's guardians was important in developing a first-hand data collection process. The inclusion of inspectors and the guardians of the maidens were also selected to gather additional information on *ukuhlolwa kwezintombi* and to compare and illuminate what the practice of *ukuhlolwa kwezintombi* was like before COVID-19 and how it has changed due to Corona outbreak. However, the interview process was challenged by the unavailability of some participants, particularly with the COVID-19 lockdown restrictions. I was then forced to seek their

personal phone numbers so I could call to make appointments or communicate through WhatsApp, depending on what my participants preferred.

### **3.2.3 Relevance of the qualitative research in anthropological research and the research topic**

Qualitative research is crucial to anthropological studies for some reasons. It is also essential to the research topic and plays a significant role. The study of human societies and cultures is known as anthropology, and qualitative methods help analyze the diversity and difficulty of these phenomena (Good, 2013). Good (2013), argues that there are numerous reasons why qualitative research is essential in anthropological studies, though this study will only address a few:

- *Holistic understanding*: qualitative research enables anthropologists to gain a comprehensive understanding of human societies and cultures. This is through examining the interconnectedness of customs, beliefs, practices, and social structures (Maher and Dertadian, 2018).
- *Cultural Sensitivity*: Anthropologists often work in diverse cultural contexts. Maher and Dertadian (2018) assert that qualitative methods such as participant observation and in-depth interviews. It also allows researchers to immerse themselves in the cultural context thus gaining insights that may not be apparent through quantitative methods alone. This helps develop a more refined and culturally sensitive understanding of the studied communities.
- *Community Engagement*: Anthropologists use qualitative research methods to involve community members in the study to foster a more participatory approach and incorporating their perspectives (Hammersley, 2000).
- *Contextualization*: Contextualizing social phenomena is an excellent use for qualitative research methods (Maher and Dertadian, 2018). It facilitates researchers' examination of social, political, and historical settings that influence people's lives. This contextualization is essential to interpret cultural practices and comprehend how larger social forces impact them.
- *Flexibility*: Within the context of data collection and analysis, qualitative research methods provide flexibility. Researchers can modify their approach depending on how their research questions change over time and what they learn from the investigation. This flexibility is crucial in social contexts that are dynamic and changing quickly.

- *Emic Perspective*: Researchers can take an emic perspective by using qualitative methods to comprehend and interpret phenomena from the participants' viewpoint. This method is crucial for preventing ethnocentrism and identifying individuals' personal interpretations of their actions and encounters (Hammersley, 2000).
- *Theory Building*: Qualitative research frequently aids theories' development. Scholars can create novel theoretical frameworks or enhance pre-existing ones using comprehensive investigation and evaluation. This advances our understanding of human behavior and anthropological theory (Maher and Dertadian, 2018).

### **3.3 Research Methods for Data Collection**

#### **3.3.1 Interviewing**

An interview process is a conversation accelerated to gather information (Rowley, 2012). Conducting an interview is a more natural form of interacting with people than making them fill out a questionnaire, do a test, or perform some experimental task. The interview lets one know people closely and understand their thoughts and feelings (Knott and Rao, 2022). Interviewing may have repercussions because respondents answer questions they need help understanding, sometimes giving wrong information (Rowley, 2012). Asking questions and getting answers is much more challenging than it may seem initially. No matter how careful we phrase the questions, the spoken or written word has always been a residue of ambiguity. However, interviewing is one of the most potent ways to understand our fellow human beings. The most common types of interviewing are individuals through telephone and face-to-face verbal interchange (Knott and Rao, 2022).

##### **3.3.1.1 Semi-structured interviews**

Semi-structured interviews were used as a method of data collection. Other methods, like focus groups, were not used as they would have had the potential to make my participants feel restricted and inhibited in expressing their views in the presence of other members. Semi-structured interviews follow a set outline of topics, which are the triggers for the main direction of the interview and allow an interviewer to explore additional information that the respondent has raised (Alston and Bowles, 2003: 116). The interviews were conducted from August to October 2023. Individual interviews were used to collect data from all participants. The interviews were semi-structured, with open-ended questions. These were selected to obtain descriptive and in-depth

information. I had about 28 participants, and my interviews were approximately 15 to 30 minutes, depending on the kind of participants I had at that time. However, this was done by following and maintaining COVID-19 restriction protocols such as avoiding close contact, wearing masks, and sanitizing. According to Roulston and Choi (2018), the questions must be thought through before an interview. I took this action to ensure that the participants' time was not wasted by preparing my research data collection instrument in advance. The use of isiZulu during my interviews took place to eliminate the language barrier, as it is the language that is spoken at Impendle. I had prepared both English and IsiZulu questions as a requirement from the Ethics department. This instruction supports the notion of culture influencing the interview outcomes; hence, language is part of people's culture. As a result, I had to consider that factor.

The research interview schedule was developed to keep up with the research questions. This schedule consists of demographic and open-ended questions. The interview schedule is an interview guide or questions that help the researcher focus on relevant information or themes while maintaining a professional conversation. Data collection took place in participants' households. All participants agreed to participate during the first contact since they were very interested in the study and appreciated that someone was willing to listen to their views. This was advantageous as it saved more time and costs. The interview sessions took place at the convenience of the participants at their homes. Using the participants' preferred location has the benefit of making them appear more at ease and engaged. Specific skills were used, even though the interview's structure was similar to a regular conversation in which participants shared their experiences, knowledge, interpretations, opinions, and so on. These included acting professionally and listening, probing, and questioning without passing judgment or using threats. Therefore, establishing a good rapport and relationship with the participants led to acquiring a wealth of information.

Accommodating the participants produced a more extended response, which meant more data for me, taking notes and interviewing interview responses. This standing allowed the participants to express themselves more by sharing their experiences. I conducted interviews in isiZulu, I translated the answers into the English medium of instruction. Interviewing highlights the experiences of people and the meanings they create from experience (Knox and Burkard, 2009; Kuluse, 2021). The semi-structured interview comprises the interview schedule, which provides

the answers for the study objectives. Using interviews as a data collection method assisted me in reading the facial expressions of my participants, as they answered my questions. For example, facial expressions say a lot about how an individual is feeling.

### **3.3.2 Defining sampling**

Sampling is a critical component of any research conducted. The requirement is to choose the available sampling methods suitable for the study (Acharya et al., 2013). Sampling about the research refers to selecting individuals to be studied for research purposes (Bradley, 2013). The selected groups were chosen cautiously and in a way that they would respond to questions appropriately and within the research constraints (Showkat and Parveen, 2017). The sample comes in a small but carefully chosen group of individuals or objects representing a wider group or the population under study. The researcher intends to explore the effects of COVID-19 on the practice of *ukuhlolwa kwezintombi* (virginity testing) using the perceptions of young women of Impendle. However, a researcher noted that there would be many research gaps if I only included maidens as my participants, representing the entire population. So, I decided to add inspectors (*omama abahlolayo*) and mothers/guardians of the maidens as participants.

### **3.3.3 Sampling Method Used (Non-probability Sampling)**

There are two types of sampling methods a researcher chooses from when conducting a research. However, this study opted for non-probability sampling. Non-probability sampling uses non-random criteria like the availability, geographical proximity, or expert knowledge of the individuals you want to research to answer a research question (Palinkas et al., 2015). Non-probability sampling is used when the sample population is believed to be nearly impossible to determine or when there are difficulties in accessing the entire population for a particular study (Etikan et al., 2015). Palinkas et al. (2015) consider this the most effective method for implementing research and providing consistency in developing qualitative study methods. The study is concerned with obtaining in-depth and detailed information regarding how COVID-19 affected the practice of *ukuhlolwa kwezintombi* among young girls of Impendle. The researcher did not select a large number of participants to be studied select the population of twelve maidens, twelve maidens' mothers, and four of inspectors (*omama abahlolayo*) to represent the whole population.

### **3.3.4 Purposive and Snowball Sampling**

This study will utilize two types of non-probability sampling methods: purposive sampling and snowball sampling. On the one hand, purposive sampling is when a researcher chooses the participants as per his/her judgment, keeping back in mind the purpose of the study (Showkat and Parveen, 2017:7). This may also allow for the participation of groups of people that might be appropriate and could provide relevant information about the topic at hand (Showkat and Parveen, 2017:7). Therefore, it offers a perspective on the choice of relevant questions to be asked, making this sample unique. De Vos et al. (2011) agree that purposive sampling allows the researcher to recruit and select participants who meet the topic's characteristics and are known to have the intended data. The selection of purposive sampling has directed me to the right individuals: rural people who reside in Impendle. On the other hand, snowball sampling includes social connections that can provide the researchers with a higher proportion of other respondents with characteristics similar to those of the initial respondents (Etikan et al., 2015). This type of sampling facilitates knowledge based on referral, which shifts from the initial participant to the last one. The sampling methods chosen were suitable for the study, and the choice of sample was considered carefully and critically to enhance the study's quality and increase the trustworthiness of the research findings.

Using purposive sampling was beneficial because I could find my participants easily since I knew who was supposed to participate in my research. I purposely selected the 4 inspectors (*omama abahlolayo*) as my key informants and purposely selected 12 family members of each teenage girl undergoing virginity testing. The twelve teenage girls undergoing virginity testing were snowballed with the help of the key informants until I reached a saturation point. During data collection, when an interview was successful, I would ask the participant to propose further participants known to them so the sample grows like a rolling snowball. The more people referred me to others, the more data was accumulated. These sampling methods were critical to this study because they are the directors of this research, which drove me to identify specific participants who are required to assist with answering the interview questions.

### **3.4 Data Analysis (Thematic method)**

Thematic analysis was used to analyze the findings. The thematic analysis follows a series of analytical steps, including transcribing, familiarization, deducing themes, coding, interpretation, and checking (Castleberry and Nolen, 2018). All interviews were recorded during data collection

and later transcribed into word-processing documents. The interviews were conducted in the participants' language, IsiZulu, a researcher, translated the transcripts into English. Therefore, the interview recordings and the written focused group interview data was analyzed. As a result, this was done to obtain an in-depth understanding of the participants. Castleberry and Nolen, (2018) emphasize that it is vital to transcribe texts from interviews and observational notes into word-processing documents before beginning to analyze data. In this way, a researcher re-lives the data collection scenes to understand meaning based on ideals constructed during the data collection process. During the data familiarizing process, emerging themes were identified. Lacey and Luff (2001) state that to establish themes, a researcher must transcribe and read all collected data to categorize common data. A typical data coding strategy was used to highlight emerging themes. The literature review and theoretical framework then helped interpret the data.

### **3.5 Dependability and Credibility (Reliability and Validity)**

Qualitative research is open to multiple interpretations of situations; the researchers must often defend subjectivity. Although some researchers use reliability and validity, qualitative researchers increasingly use dependability and credibility.

Dependability (or reliability) refers to whether the results can be relied on and whether the research process is consistent and follows qualitative methodological principles (Anne, 2014). Data gathering through semi-structured interviews was conducted personally by the writer, who had developed and was thus familiar with the interviewing guide, therefore ensuring consistency in questioning and probing. Questions were clarified and repeated where necessary to prevent misinterpretation by the participants. In qualitative research, credibility (also called validity) focuses on confidence in the truth of the findings, including an accurate understanding of the context (Anne, 2014). As mentioned above, qualitative data is inevitably partial because it is subject to multiple interpretations. Anne (2014) maintains that it is impossible to have absolute confidence regarding credibility mainly because research is influenced by how a researcher investigates and represents a particular topic and the findings. However, Golafshani (2003) and Ulin et al. (2002) suggest that the findings should be consistent regarding the explanations they support. In this study, the findings relate directly to the data gathered, which was rich, detailed, and adequate to support the findings. *ukuhlolwa kwezintombi* is quite a sensitive issue, and

extensive reading on the topic and considerable engagement with experts in this area contributed to the credibility of the results.

### **3.4 Ethical Considerations**

Ethical approval for this study was first obtained from the University of KwaZulu-Natal's Humanities and Social Science Research Ethics Committee (Protocol Reference Number: HSS/0256/019M). The second process had to be seeking permission from the Impendle Chief to conduct my study in his area, and fortunately, I was given the go-ahead. The factors to reflect are more aligned with the participant's comfortability and the parties' willingness. Ethical issues are as follows:

- **Voluntary participation**

The researcher ensured that all participants were willing to participate in the study, with no participants compelled (Ryan et al., 2005). My research participants (inspectors as key informants, young girls undergoing virginity testing, and their parents/guardians were free from any pressure. They were assured they were free to withdraw their participation if they wished to, and there were no consequences for refusing to participate or withdraw from the study.

- **Informed consent**

The process by which a researcher provides participants with information about a study's risks, benefits, and alternatives is known as informed consent. The participants must make an informed choice about whether they participate in the study (Burns and Grove, 2013). Participants have explained the purpose of the investigation and what it entails. Participants were made aware of the purpose and aim of the study and were only interviewed after they had given their consent. Informed consent was sought from the participants conducting the study.

- **Confidentiality**

It is the ethical protection of persons studied by keeping research data confidential or private from the public (Neuman, 2014). This information obtained will not be made available or accessed by anyone but only the researcher. Data for this research was kept in a safe place and locked away for confidentiality. Participants need to be treated with confidentiality. No real names were used in the information. During the study, I accepted the responsibility to maintain confidentiality. This assisted in protecting my participants; unlike classic research, the contemporary enquiry in research must be considerate and priorities the feelings and dignity of participants.

- **Trustworthiness**

The degree of confidence in data, interpretation, and procedures employed to ensure the quality of a study is referred to as the study's trustworthiness (Connelly, 2016). Researchers should establish the protocols and methods required for a study to be considered worthy of readers' attention in each study (Connelly, 2016). The data was directly collected; thus, deep personalized trust was first achieved with the relevant parties. Anthropologists rely on interpersonal interaction, which makes trustworthiness an intrinsic part of their research to obtain authentic and relevant information out of trust, which I achieved during my fieldwork.

- **Dependability**

Dependability refers to the data's consistency over time and across study contexts (Ulin et al., 2002). It is like reliability in quantitative research, but the study's nature determines the stability of conditions. It is also decided by the study's consistency (Ulin et al., 2002). To illustrate dependability, the research questions were clear and logically connected to the research design and objectives. I used IsiZulu, which is the native language spoken in Impendle. The researcher also avoided double-barrel questions, making it harder for respondents to respond meaningfully.

- **Confirmability**

It refers to the degree of objectivity in research study outcomes (Shanton, 2004). This means the conclusions are based on the participants' responses rather than the researcher's bias or personal interests. There was also no type of misleading information. This has been the central point of my data as I avoided biases and personal involvement.

- **Credibility**

It refers to the degree to which the research reflects the participants' true meanings or the truth value (Shanton, 2004). This boils down to whether or not the findings are correct and accurate. *Triangulation* is a technique used by qualitative researchers to demonstrate the validity of their findings (Shanton, 2004). The anthropology research has collected empirical information directly from participants in Impendle. This ensures credibility as assumptions may be accurate; thus, the anthropology armchair has largely been discouraged.

- **Validity**

Validity should be evaluated early in the study process while deciding how to collect your data (Shanton, 2004). This necessitates the selection of proper measurement methods. Ensure your method and measuring approach are of excellent quality and are specifically designed to measure what you want to know. They should be well-researched and founded on prior information. I

sought permission to record our conversations during the interviews to re-listen and discover new themes or responses I might have missed during the interview.

- **Reliability**

Reliability should be considered throughout the data collection process. When collecting data with a tool or methodology, the results must be exact, consistent, and repeatable (Walker, 2007). Plan your procedure carefully to ensure that each measurement follows the same steps in the same order. This is especially true when numerous researchers are involved (Walker, 2007). For example, if you conduct interviews or observations, spell out how specific behaviours or responses will be counted and ensure your questions are written consistently. The data collection instrument was prepared in advance to organize the questions to be asked properly.

### **3.5 Chapter summary**

This methodology chapter has illustrated answers to what and how questions about the effect of COVID-19 in the practice of *ukuhlolwa kwezintombi*, using the perspective of young women of Impendle. The chapter has described the research concept and the type of methodology used in this dissertation, which is the qualitative method, represented by 28 participants. The qualitative method was defined as a research method that allows the researcher to collect views of people affected by a phenomenon and further observe their behaviour in their social context. The material application of different qualitative methods in this thesis has assisted my expedition to uncover all the challenges that were faced by young girls undergoing virginity testing as well as how inspectors and parents/guardians encouraged *ukuhlolwa kwezintombi* even during COVID-19 lockdown restrictions. There was also the depiction of the relevance of the qualitative research design in anthropological research and the research topic. The suitable methods, such as interviews (semi-structured), sampling methods (purposive and snowball), and thematic methods, were the most compatible for this study. The interviews allowed proximity to my subject, where the conclusions on their behavior and expressions were drawn. The introduction of thematic analysis selectively expressed my experience as it became my primary method of data analysis and preparation for the next chapter, which is for data presentation and analyses.

The next chapter presents data and ensures that the discussion and analysis of my findings are aligned with the goals of the study presented.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### FINDINGS AND DATA ANALYSIS

#### 4.1 Introduction

The previous chapter comprehensively explained the research methodology used in this study. This chapter mainly focuses on data analysis for the study titled 'Exploring the effect of COVID-19 in the practice of *ukuhlolwa kwezintombi*, using the perspectives of young women of Impendle'. The success of this chapter depended on theoretical lenses, favoring the idea that the data analysis could be analyzed better using the qualitative data analysis technique (Gwala, 2020). Qualitative research allows humans to share and hear their stories in a study. Data analysis in this qualitative study used inductive reasoning (Du Plooy et al. 2014). After carefully comparing and thoroughly examining the data, the researcher was allowed to develop themes and categories from the raw data. Themes were developed based on the relatedness of the categories of data collected. Furthermore, once the data was transcribed, the researcher checked that the recordings and transcriptions correlated. Initial themes were noted during this process. Initial themes were written under each interview and compared across interviews. Codes were given to themes that were repeated over interviews.

Additionally, when a theme was analyzed, related literature review and the theoretical framework were considered to produce profound findings. The themes created were characterized by focusing on my participants' repeated and similar perceptions and opinions during the interview. These were organized into patterns that better clarify themes. The researcher utilized fictitious names for each participant's responses. The names are coded as Participant 1 to Participant 28, per ethical observance of conducting research at the University of KwaZulu-Natal. The data segment comes from the 28 research participants' instrumental in the findings. The diverse response offered a distinct, valuable focus for analysis and critical engagement. The incorporation of aims and objectives has been necessary for data presentation build-up. The use of the themes guides the scope of understanding with the creative, critical analysis, a significant feature of this project's qualitative method. The data collected from 28 participants (12 maidens, 12 family members (parents and guardians), and four inspectors (*omama abahlolayo*) revealed the different biographies. The chapter is divided into two sections: Section A entails participants' demographic details, and Section B provides the thematic analysis of the findings.

## **4.2 Data Analysis Process**

*Thematic analysis* is a qualitative research method used to identify, analyze, and report patterns or themes within a dataset. Preparing data for thematic analysis involves several steps to ensure a systematic and rigorous approach to analyzing qualitative data. The researcher used the following guide for data preparation using thematic analysis.

### **4.2.1 Familiarization with the Data**

Familiarization with the data is a crucial first step in any data analysis or research project, particularly when adopting thematic analysis. Familiarization with the data in the context of thematic analysis involves understanding the content of your qualitative data in a way conducive to identifying patterns, themes, and meaningful insights (Braun and Clarke, 2012). It also means familiarizing yourself with the data by reading and re-reading the transcriptions (Castleberry and Nolen, 2018).

I conducted the interviews myself, I had the advantage of collecting data in my native language (isiZulu) and knowing the content before embarking on the time-consuming data analysis process. However, I was still responsible for preparing the gathered data for proper analysis. This included double-checking and editing transcripts after transcribing the interviews and interpreting the data obtained from my participants. I had some moments of reflection as I carefully read through the interviews and listened to the recorded information in preparation for generating codes. I recalled what was said in the interviews, the participants' gestures as they responded to the questions, and the general mood in the sessions. I also recorded the information shared by the participants in my field notebook to ensure that I do not forget nor lose the information I collected from my participants. This assisted me in immersing in the participants' perspectives and aided in my familiarization with the collected data. The focus was more on the participant's responses concerning the research questions.

I conducted interviews in the IsiZulu language with IsiZulu-speaking people. I then transcribed and translated information from scripts and recordings on my field workbook to generate meanings and capture descriptive noises/expressions from my participants, including maidens, maidens' parents/guardians, and maidens' inspectors. This was done to generate meaning, as I could see my participants' facial expressions during our interviews. Furthermore, transcribing and revisiting my

data regularly allowed me to capture a general sense of the information I had gathered from the interviews.

Notably, memos play a crucial role in ensuring the transparency and trustworthiness of the research. According to Razaghi et al., 2020, memoing is the fundamental technique in qualitative research, where researchers write down their thoughts, insights, and interpretations of their data throughout the research process. Moreover, researchers make notes while exploring data (Razaghi et al., 2020). This deepens your analysis, generates new ideas, and communicates your findings. When relating to this study, I took down interview responses, allowing me to elaborate on concepts and themes identified during the coding process. The process involved taking reflective notes on the information I read and coding it to make sense of the data.

#### **4.2.2 Initial Coding**

The most crucial stage in qualitative data analysis is coding or categorizing the data Brandt & Brandt (1998). I went through the transcripts of the 28 interviews, highlighting the experiences revealed by participants. The information from the participants was relevant and met the study's objectives. After generating the codes, I organized them into related ideas. I then generated themes by turning the codes into themes, and the research further concluded them. I started taking notes, looking for potential data that links data collected and other data that came up during research interviews. The researcher also started linking. At this stage, I separated the relevant information to the study.

#### **4.3 Brief description of the setting**

In the process, the researcher was allowed to develop themes and categories from raw data after the researcher had carefully compared and thoroughly examined the data. This is when a researcher conducts interviews to obtain people's descriptive experiences and trusts the collected data to explain the researched phenomenon, as in this study. The study was guided by research questions formulated by major theoretical frameworks: social constructivism, cultural determinism, and social identity theory. The findings of the study are also related to these frameworks.

## SECTION A

### 4.4 DEMOGRAPHIC DETAILS OF PARTICIPANTS

This section describes the demographics of the participants who made up the sample for this study. As highlighted in the previous chapter, the population of 12 maidens, 12 maidens' guardians/parents, and four inspectors (*omama abahlolayo*) were selected to represent the whole population. The researcher selected the participants required for the study (purposive sampling), four virgin testers as key informants. A researcher also purposely selected 12 maidens' guardians/parents. Then, 12 maidens were snowballed with the help of the critical informants until I reached a saturation point. In-depth interviews were done with 28 participants, and data was analysed and interpreted.

The study participants were all females, and all participants are African, speak IsiZulu, support indigenous knowledge, and believe in ancestors. Note that the names of the participants are not mentioned to ensure confidentiality and anonymity. Therefore, participants are referred according to their participant number.

**Table 4.1** The following table represents the demographic information of the participants for this project

Coding participants	Area in Impendle	Age	Gender	Racial group	Marital status	Religion	Educational level	Participant role
Participant 1	Inzinga	65	Female	Black	Married	Christianity	Primary (GR4)	Umama ohlodayo (Inspector)
Participant 2	Makhuzeni	70	Female	Black	Married	Indigenous religion	Illiteracy	Umama ohlodayo (Inspector)
Participant 3	Gomane	61	Female	Black	Married	Indigenous religion	Secondary (GR10)	Umama ohlodayo (Inspector)
Participant 4	Similobha	73	Female	Black	Widowed	Indigenous religion	Primary (GR2)	Inspector
Participant 5	Gomane	14	Female	Black	Single	Christianity	Secondary (GR7)	Maiden
Participant 6	Gomane	49	Female	Black	Married	Christianity	Secondary (matric)	Maiden's mother
Participant 7	Gomane	13	Female	Black	Single	Indigenous religion	Primary (GR7)	Maiden
Participant 8	Gomane	67	Female	Black	Widowed	Indigenous religion	Primary (GR6)	Maiden's guardian
Participant 9	Gomane	18	Female	Black	Single	Christianity	Secondary (GR11)	Maiden
Participant 10	Gomane	54	Female	Black	Married	Christianity	Tertiary	Maiden's mother

Participant 11	Similobha	12	Female	Black	Single	Indigenous religion	Primary (GR5)	Maiden
Participant 12	Similobha	48	Female	Black	Married	Indigenous religion	Tertiary (Diploma)	Maiden's mother
Participant 13	Similobha	19	Female	Black	Single	Indigenous religion	Secondary (Matric)	Maiden
Participant 14	Similobha	50	Female	Black	Single	Indigenous religion	Tertiary	Maiden's mother
Participant 15	Similobha	13	Female	Black	Single	Christianity	Secondary (GR8)	Maiden
Participant 16	Similobha	57	Female	Black	Widowed	Christianity	Primary (GR6)	Maiden's guardian
Participant 17	Makhuzeni	16	Female	Black	Single	Christianity	Primary (GR11)	Maiden
Participant 18	Makhuzeni	79	Female	Black	Married	Christianity	Illiteracy	Maiden
Participant 19	Makhuzeni	13	Female	Black	Single	Indigenous religion	Illiteracy	Maiden
Participant 20	Makhuzeni	69	Female	Black	Widowed	Indigenous religion	Primary (GR6)	Maiden's grandmother
Participant 21	Makhuzeni	15	Female	Black	Single	Indigenous religion	Primary (GR7)	Maiden
Participant 22	Makhuzeni	71	Female	Black	Married	Indigenous religion	Primary (GR5)	Maiden's grand mother
Participant 23	Inzinga	19	Female	Black	Single	Christianity	Secondary (Matric)	Maiden
Participant 24	Inzinga	74	Female	Black	Married	Christianity	Secondary (Matric)	Maiden's mother
Participant 25	Inzinga	14	Female	Black	Single	Christianity	Secondary (GR8)	Maiden
Participant 26	Inzinga	56	Female	Black	Married	Indigenous religion	Secondary (GR12)	Maiden's Grandmother
Participant 27	Inzinga	16	Female	Black	Single	Indigenous religion	Secondary (GR10)	Maiden
Participant 28	Inzinga	69	Female	Black	Single	Indigenous religion	Tertiary	Maiden's mother

The following discussion outlines the impact of the demographic details in **Table 4.1** on the experiences and challenges faced by maidens, maidens' inspectors, and the family members of the maidens during the COVID-19 pandemic.

#### **4.5 Age, gender, racial group, and geographical area of the research participants**

**Table 4.1** shows that the participants in this study are females. These are black African women from the Impendle rural area. However, they came from various age groups, different religions, different educational levels, and different roles that each participant played in this study. A total of 28 female participants was essential for this dissertation. As a result, the sharing of experiences occurred through an interview format. This data collection method allowed valuable data

production, as represented in **Table 1**. The claimed ages ranged from 13 to 77 years old. Some 12 respondents were teenagers undergoing *ukuhlolwa kwezintombi*, and their ages ranged from 13 to 19. The other 16 respondents were adults, 12 being the parent/guardian and four inspectors (omama abahlolayo) and their ages ranged from 48 to 77.

The comparative analysis of the respondents to the interview was also visible based on the diverse areas in the Impendle area. In other words, the 28 respondents were located in 4 different geographical areas of Impendle: Inzinga, Gomane, Makhuzeni and Similobha. For instance, in each geographical area, I interviewed 7 participants (3 maidens, 3 of the maiden’s family members and one inspector (omama abahlolayo). The four areas are more like the same in terms of the land. However, Gomane is slightly more developed than the other three areas; it has bigger houses, a tar road, tap water, and a nearby taxi rank.

Age	Gomane	Similobha	Makhuzeni	Inzinga
<b>10-19</b>	3	3	3	3
<b>20-29</b>	0	0	0	0
<b>30-39</b>	0	0	0	0
<b>40-49</b>	1	1	0	0
<b>50-59</b>	1	2	0	1
<b>60+</b>	2	1	4	3

**Table 2: Age range and areas of Impendle**

As shown in **Table 2**, three participants were interviewed at the Gomane location between the ages of 10 and 19, all of whom were teenage girls practicing *ukuhlolwa kwezintombi*. There were no interviews between the ages of 20-29 and between 30-39. There was only one interview between the ages of 40 and 49 and one between 50 and 59 years old. The table shows that only two out of 28 participants who were 60 years or older were interviewed. At the Similobha location, three teenage girls practicing *ukuhlolwa kwezintombi* were interviewed, ranging in age from 10 to 19. There were no interviews between the ages of 20 and 39, only one between the ages of 40 and 49, and two between the ages of 50 and 59. An interview was conducted with only one participant who was older than sixty. At the Makhuzeni location, three teenage girls practicing *ukuhlolwa*

*kwezintombi* were interviewed, ranging in age from 10 to 19. There were no interviews between the ages of 20 and 59 and approximately four interviews between the ages of 60 and above. At the Inzinga location, three participants aged 10 to 19 were interviewed, all of whom were teenage girls practicing *ukuhlolwa kwezintombi*. There were no interviews with people aged 20-29, 30-39 and 40-49. There was only one participant interviewed between the ages of 50 and 59. Then, three participants over the age of sixty were interviewed.

#### **4.6 Marital status of the research participants**

Marital status as a variable in research can be useful for various reasons, depending on the nature and goals of the study. It is closely linked to family dynamics, social roles, and economic stability (Sudha et al., 2006). Understanding whether participants are married, divorced, separated, or widowed sheds light on family structures, caregiving responsibilities, and potential sources of support or stress (Sudha et al., 2006). Additionally, marital status can influence psychological well-being, health outcomes, and decision-making processes (Waite & Gallagher, 2000). For this study, marital status provided insights into the participants' social and cultural contexts. Given that cultural norms and societal expectations shape individuals' experiences, marital status plays a role in how certain traditions, such as *ukuhlolwa kwezintombi*, are perceived and practiced. For instance, unmarried women may experience greater social pressure to adhere to virginity testing, whereas married women may reflect on the practice through the lens of their past experiences. Furthermore, marital status can help identify variations in attitudes toward cultural traditions across different demographic groups, thereby enriching the analysis of how social expectations influence individual choices (Gibbs et al., 2019).

**Table 3** below reveals that the participants featured various categories for marital status, including married, widowed, and single, with most being married because those widowed were also once married. The single participants were teenagers undergoing the practice of *ukuhlolwa kwezintombi*, many preserving their virginity for marriage. My participants' marital status also explained the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on the practice of *ukuhlolwa kwezintombi*. The participants' marital status provided insights into how the COVID-19 pandemic influenced the practice of *ukuhlolwa kwezintombi* in several ways. For unmarried participants, particularly young women, lockdown restrictions may have limited their ability to participate in the practice, disrupting traditional expectations around virginity testing. For married participants or those who transitioned

into marriage during or after the pandemic, their experiences highlight how the practice was perceived in relation to marriageability, family honour, and societal expectations before and after COVID-19. Additionally, marital status could reveal shifts in attitudes toward *ukuhlolwa kwezintombi*, especially if economic hardships or changing gender roles influenced its significance in the community.

Age	Single	Married	Divorced	Widowed
10-19	12	0	0	0
20-29	0	0	0	0
30-39	0	0	0	0
40-49	0	2	0	0
50-59	1	2	0	1
60+	1	5	0	3

**Table 3: Marital status**

#### 4.7 Religion

**Table 4.1** shows that most of my participants' religions were indigenous. These are encouraged by the cultural practice of *ukuhlolwa kwezintombi*; they might be in the belief that culture is essential and thus needs to be preserved. This proves that religions can be linked to specific indigenous groups' cultures, traditions, and environments. As a result, 16 of my participants were from indigenous religions, while the remaining 12 were Christians. This also demonstrates that the study area (Impendle) is a rural community that frequently maintains traditional values and ways of life. For example, their traditions, customs, and cultural practices, such as *ukuhlolwa kwezintombi*, are typically better preserved and passed down through generations. According to Robotjazi et al. (2016), virginity testing is not limited to a single region or culture; it occurs in a variety of contexts around the world. In other words, religious perspectives on virginity testing are incredibly diverse, and interpretations within each religion can differ depending on cultural, regional, and individual beliefs. The study found that despite their faith in Christianity or indigenous religions, participants still valued the importance of *ukuhlolwa kwezintombi*, a traditional practice for young women.

It is important to note that not all individuals within a religious community share the same views on virginity testing, and practices can evolve. On the one hand, Christian opinions on virginity

also vary among denominations (Mhlongo, 2009). Christ means she must protect her virginity until the day she enters Holy Matrimony. Some Christian traditions emphasize abstinence until marriage and may promote the idea of preserving one's virginity. On the other hand, Indigenous religions may have cultural practices related to virginity and initiation rituals. However, these practices are often deeply rooted in specific cultural contexts and may not be consistent across Indigenous communities. According to Shange (2012), it is critical to understand that practices such as virginity testing are frequently influenced by cultural traditions, societal norms, and local customs rather than explicit religious guidelines. Likewise, many religious leaders and communities may reconsider or evolve their perspectives on such practices over time due to cultural evolution/adaptation and the history of colonialism, which has frequently impacted indigenous cultures (Robatjazi et al., 2016).

#### **4.8 Educational Level**

**Table 4.1** shows that my participants' educational levels were either illiterate, primary, secondary, or tertiary. There were only three illiterate participants, all of whom were either maidens' parents/guardians or inspectors (*omama abahlolayo*), as maidens were enrolled in primary or secondary school due to their ages. Ten of my participants held primary education credentials, including maidens, maidens' parents/guardians, and inspectors (*omama abahlolayo*). Six participants were adults; one was an inspector, and the other five were either the maidens' parents or guardians. Impendle is a rural area with low socioeconomic status, as illiteracy is primarily associated with lower socioeconomic status. For example, in the past, access to formal education might have been limited or unavailable for sure generations due to economic conditions, social norms, or regional disparities in educational opportunities.

Furthermore, these women are illiterate due to cultural factors such as traditional gender roles or societal expectations, which may have discouraged them from pursuing an education in the past. However, their illiteracy does not prevent them from practicing or leading some cultural practices, such as *ukuhlolwa kwezintombi*, which does not require education to be performed correctly. Moreover, there were twelve participants in the secondary education category. Nonetheless, 7 participants were adults (parents/guardians and inspectors (*omama abahlolayo*), while 5 were

maidens. Then, only 3 adult participants held a tertiary formal education, and none were inspectors (*omama abahlolayo*).

**Table 4.2.1** Themes and sub- themes of the semi-structured interviews emerged as follows:

<b>Research Objectives</b>	<b>Main Themes</b>	<b>Sub-themes</b>
1. To investigate the significance of <i>ukuhlolwa kwezintombi</i> (virginity testing) in Impendle area	- Significance of the Practice	- Cultural tradition and values - Pride and self-awareness - Social expectations and gender roles. - <i>Ukuhlolwa kwezintombi</i> as pregnancy prevention strategy - <i>Ukuhlolwa kwezintombi</i> as HIV prevention strategy.
2. To understand how COVID-19 lockdown restrictions have impacted the practice of <i>ukuhlolwa kwezintombi</i> ?	- Impact of restrictions	- Effects on the practice- Readiness of implementation - - Psychosocial impact
3. To discover if there were challenges faced by the teenage girls undergoing the practice	- Practical challenges	- Main inhibitors
4. To find out how <i>ukuhlolwa</i>	- Inequality in practice	- Cultural aspects

<p><i>kwezintombi</i> (virginity testing) endorses gender inequality in Impendle area.</p>		
<p>5. To find out how family members and inspectors (omama abahlolayo) encouraged virginity even during Covid- 19?</p>	<p>- Encouragement and Contextual Roles</p>	<p>-Role of inspectors (omama abahlolayo) on the practice of <i>ukuhlolwa kwezintombi</i></p>

**Interpretation of findings**

Regarding the study literature review, all five themes are discussed in detail in the following sub-sections. The themes and sub-themes were combined and presented as responses to the main research questions.

The following section summarizes the study's findings based on its key objectives. These objectives are subheadings, and brief discussions are provided under each.

**OBJECTIVE ONE: *To investigate the significance of ukuhlolwa kwezintombi (virginity testing) in Impendle area***

**THEME ONE**

**4.3.1 SIGNIFICANCE OF PRACTICE**

This central theme discusses the significance of COVID-19 on the practice of *ukuhlolwa kwezintombi*. The sub-themes that emerged from this theme are as follows: cultural tradition and values, pride and awareness, social expectations and gender roles, and *ukuhlolwa kwezintombi* as pregnancy prevention strategy and HIV prevention strategy. As mentioned in previous chapters, *ukuhlolwa kwezintombi* has become a significant traditional cultural practice in some communities, mainly rural KwaZulu-Natal. It is important to note that opinions on this practice differ

significantly, with some advocating for its preservation as a cultural tradition and others criticizing it for various reasons. Each sub-themes that emerged from the main theme will be discussed below.

#### **4.3.1.1 Cultural tradition and values**

Cultural traditions and values play a fundamental role in shaping the identity, beliefs, and behaviours of a community (Durojaye, 2016). As Robins (2021) argues, these traditions are central to cultural anthropology, as they provide insight into the shared meanings, customs, and practices that define a particular group of people. Anthropological studies emphasize the significance of cultural traditions in fostering social cohesion and preserving heritage (Robbins, 2012). In this context, *ukuhlolwa kwezintombi*, the traditional practice of virginity testing, serves as a means of ensuring that young girls adhere to cultural norms and values. Based on participants' perspectives, this practice remains an essential aspect of cultural identity, reinforcing a sense of belonging and continuity within the community. Many participants expressed the importance of preserving *ukuhlolwa kwezintombi* as a way of maintaining their cultural heritage and instilling moral values in young women.

During interviews, participants highlighted various cultural traditions practiced in the Impendle area, including *Imbeleko*, unveiling ceremonies, *Umabo*, *Umembeso*, *Umkhosi Womhlanga*, *Umhlonyane*, and *Umemulo*. However, *Umemulo* and *Umkhosi Womhlanga* were identified as particularly significant in relation to *ukuhlolwa kwezintombi*. *Umkhosi Womhlanga*, also known as the Reed Dance, is a cultural event designed to encourage young women to abstain from premarital sex, thereby preventing sexually transmitted infections and unplanned pregnancies (Nxumalo, 2014). Additionally, the ceremony serves as a campaign against the increasing reliance on child support grants among young African women. The event is also a celebration of maidens who have upheld chastity, reinforcing the cultural expectation of purity before marriage. On the day of the ceremony, young women gather to perform a rhythmic dance in front of the royal family, dignitaries, and spectators. This performance is both a symbolic display of cultural pride and a celebration of womanhood, emphasizing the role of tradition in shaping gendered cultural identities.

*Umemulo* is a significant cultural ceremony within Zulu tradition, performed for young women who have maintained their virginity until a certain age. It is a female coming-of-age ritual in which the young woman's parents slaughter a cow and invite community members to celebrate her

chastity (Thornberry, 2015). This ritual serves as a public acknowledgment of the young woman's transition into adulthood and her readiness for marriage (Thornberry, 2015; Mnguni, 2006). According to Marcus (2008), the practice of *ukuhlolwa kwezintombi* has historically played a role in encouraging young women to remain virgins until marriage. Within this cultural framework, women are taught the importance of sexual purity, which is closely linked to their prospects for marriage and their perceived moral standing in the community. If *Umemulo* is not performed, it is believed that unmarried women may face difficulties in the future, as the *amadlozi* (ancestral spirits) would not have been informed of their transition to a marriageable status. Seeking permission from *amadlozi* is considered essential, as their blessing is believed to enhance the young woman's ability to bear children (Jewkes and Morrell, 2010). This underscores the close connection between *ukuhlolwa kwezintombi* and *umemulo*, as the latter serves as a cultural reward and incentive for maintaining virginity until marriageable age.

The findings from this study indicate that cultural traditions, particularly those concerning virginity testing and coming-of-age rituals, are deeply intertwined with religious beliefs and practices. Most participants, particularly elders such as maiden inspectors and parents, emphasized the inseparability of cultural and religious values. These values shape ethical choices, rituals, and moral expectations within the community. The practice of *ukuhlolwa kwezintombi*, as an initiation rite, symbolizes the transition from girlhood to womanhood and plays a crucial role in preserving the *AmaZulu* people's cultural heritage. Furthermore, cultural values embedded in the practice such as purity, respect for elders, and cultural identity were frequently highlighted by participants. One respondent stressed that *ukuhlolwa kwezintombi* provides an essential platform for teaching young girls about cultural values and guiding them toward moral conduct. By undergoing virginity testing, young women gain a sense of pride in their identity and cultural heritage. Additionally, participation in this practice fosters a sense of community and collective responsibility, as older women mentor and advise younger girls, ensuring that cultural traditions are upheld and passed on to future generations.

Participants 5,10 and 17

The participant said:

*"I think ukuhlolwa kwezintombi will forever be significant in our community. Raising a girl child is very difficult now compared to the past. Raising a girl child today is much more difficult than in the past. We as parents raise our children in different ways, but one common thing is teaching values to young girls, which is important. However, I believe that ukuhlolwa kwezintombi is another brilliant opportunity to teach values to young girls, ensuring that they grow up knowing themselves, respecting themselves and others, being responsible, courageous, and so on. Ukuhlolwa kwezintombi also helps our young girls not to do whatever they want and, most importantly, gives them a sense of pride in their identity."* [participant 5, maidens' mother]

*"Ngicabanga ukuthi izintombi zokuhlolwa zizobaluleka kuze kube phakade emphakathini wethu. Ukukhulisa ingane yentombazane kunzima kakhulu manje uma kuqhathaniswa nesikhathi esidlule. Ukukhulisa ingane yentombazane namuhla kunzima kakhulu kunesikhathi esidlule. Thina njengabazali sikhulisa izingane zethu ngezindlela ezahlukene, kodwa enye into evamile ukufundisa amagugu amantombazane amancane, okubalulekile. Kodwa-ke, ngikholwa ukuthi ukuhlolwa kwamantombazane kungenye ithuba eliqhakazile lokufundisa amagugu kumantombazane amancane, ukuqinisekisa ukuthi akhula ezazi, ezihlonipha yena nabanye, enesibopho, enesibindi, njalonjalo. Amantombazane okuhlolwa nawo asiza amantombazane ethu amancane ukuthi angenzi noma yini ayifunayo futhi, okubaluleke kakhulu, abanika umuzwa wokuziqhenya ngobunikazi bawo."* [umhlanganyeli 5, unina wezintombi]

Another participant said:

*"The practice of ukuhlolwa kwezintombi is not only about inspecting whether the maidens are still virgins, but also a platform where young girls are given important advice of ukuziphatha as a maiden. It not that we are failing as parents but going for virginity testing also help them to remind each other important teachings while embracing their culture and celebrating their virginity."* [participant 10, maiden's mother]

*"Umkhuba wokuhlolwa kwezintombi awugcini nje ngokuhlola ukuthi izintombi ziseyizintombi yini, kodwa futhi ipulatifomu lapho amantombazane amancane enikezwa khona izeluleko ezibalulekile zokusebenza njengentombi. Akukhona ukuthi siyahluleka njengabazali kodwa ukuya ekuhlolweni kobuntombi nakho kubasiza ukuba bakhumbuzane izimfundiso ezibalulekile ngenkathi bemukela isiko labo futhi begubha ubuntombi babo."* [umhlanganyeli 10, unina wentombi]

Additional participant said:

*“There are any cultural traditions (ceremonies) are practiced in our area. These include, Imbeleko, unveiling ceremonies, Umabo, Umembeso, Umkhosi Womhlanga, Umhlonyane, Umemulo and so on. However, the Nonetheless, the ones for the practice of ukuhlolwa kwezintombi include Umemulo and Umkhosi Womhlanga ceremonies. We usually do uMemulo when we are thanking our daughters for taking care of themselves and preserving their virginity until the age of 21. By this age a girl is known to be ready for marriage and this is the way of alerting the ancestors that their daughter has grown and ready to get married so that they give her their blessing to bear children. If parents chose not to perform umemulo, their unmarried daughters could encounter problems in the future because the amadlozi (ancestors) would not have been told of the rise of the young woman to a marriageable status. On the other hand, Umkhosi Womhlanga is the ceremony where maidens gather together to celebrate their virginity in the Royal Palace at Nongoma.” [Participant 17, maiden’s parent]*

*"Maningi amasiko enziwa kule ndawo yangakithi. Lezi zihlanganisa, Imbeleko, ukwethula imikhosi, Umabo, Umembeso, Umkhosi Womhlanga, Umhlonyane, Umemulo nokunye. Kodwa-ke, suiko lokuhlolwa kwezintombi zihlanganisa imikhosi ye-Umemulo ne-Umkhosi Womhlanga. Sivame ukwenza uMemulo lapho sibonga amadodakazi ethu ngokuzinakekela nokulondoloza ubuntombi bawo kuze kube yiminyaka engu-21. Ngale minyaka intombazane yaziwa ukuthi isilungele umshado futhi le yindlela yokuxwayisa okhokho ukuthi indodakazi yabo ikhule futhi ilungele ukushada ukuze bayinike isibusiso sabo sokuzala izingane. Uma abazali bekhetha ungenzi umemulo, amadodakazi abo angashadile angahlangana nezinkinga esikhathini esizayo ngoba amadlozi (okhokho) ayengeke atshelwe ngokukhuphuka kowesifazane osemncane esimweni somshado. Ngakolunye uhlangothi, Umkhosi Womhlanga ngumkhosi lapho izintombi zihlangana khona ukugubha ubuntombi bazo eRoyal Palace kwaNongoma." [Umhlanganyeli 17, umzali wentombi]*

The responses illustrate a strong cultural reinforcement of virginity testing (*ukuhlolwa kwezintombi*) as a tradition deeply embedded in Zulu society, emphasizing moral values, discipline, and collective identity. Participants highlight its role in shaping young girls' behavior, fostering self-respect, and preserving cultural continuity through ceremonies such as *Umemulo* and *Umkhosi Womhlanga*. For instance, Participant 5 perceives virginity testing as a moral framework

that instils responsibility, respect, and self-discipline, ultimately deterring reckless behavior while promoting a sense of cultural pride. Similarly, Participant 10 argues that the practice extends beyond the mere verification of virginity, serving as a platform for mentorship, where young girls receive guidance on appropriate conduct (*ukuziphatha*). Furthermore, Participant 17 links *ukuhlolwa kwezintombi* to broader Zulu cultural traditions, particularly *Umemulo*, a rite of passage marking a young woman's transition to marriageable status, and *Umkhosi Womhlanga* (Reed Dance), a public celebration of virginity. This perspective underscores the belief that neglecting these customs may anger ancestors (*amadlozi*), potentially resulting in misfortune, thereby reinforcing the spiritual significance of the practice. Importantly, participants do not view virginity testing as a substitute for parental guidance but rather as an additional mechanism that supports moral upbringing. The responses suggest a collective responsibility, wherein parents, elders, and the community collectively shape young girls' behavior, highlighting the interconnectedness of virginity testing with broader societal expectations.

#### **4.3.1.2 Pride (self-dignity) and self-awareness**

Participants were asked to express their opinions on the importance of virginity testing. All female participants viewed virginity testing as a part of Zulu cultural identity. The young girls are encouraged to be proud of themselves and their culture. The participants claimed that *ukuhlolwa kwezintombi* is associated with self-respect, modesty, and pride. A girl child is expected to be proud of her virginity, and society should treat her with respect. If she is no longer a virgin, she does not deserve social respect and will face prejudice from her peers (Cira, 2015).

According to the findings, the parents of a girl who has been discovered to be a virgin will be respected and honoured because they raised the girl in a culturally acceptable manner. The girls who are tested virgins also bring pride to their future in-laws (Shange, 2012). The in-laws will be happy that the bride is a virgin, and they will treat her with respect and honour. Based on the participants' perspectives, virginity testing is likely to result in a happy marriage. If a girl loses her virginity before marriage, she might experience the stigma of not being a virgin in the marriage. They further explained that girls who are not virgins will constantly be subjected to scrutiny as they lose their virginity before marriage. For a girl to enjoy a happy and fulfilling marriage, she has to maintain her virginity until after her wedding. This demonstrates that *ukuhlolwa kwezintombi* elevates girls' status in society, particularly in the Impendle area. Young adolescents

believe that virginity testing gives them power as young girls (Cira, 2015). The participants reported that they are respected not only by elders but also by young boys who see them as potential wives rather than girls with whom they can have sex but do not marry.

Participants 4, 7, 12 and 2

One participant said:

*"As a Zulu girl, I still see the significance of ukuhlolwa kwezintombi. I say this because when we dance and chant, especially during the Umkhosi Womhlanga ceremony, I am constantly reminded of who I am and where I came from. This includes the advantages of being part of amatshitshi (maidens), such as being respected by my peers and the community at large. Overall, a girl should demonstrate and be proud of her virginity even if the Lobola is not paid."* [Participant 4, Maiden]

*"Njengentombazane yamaZulu, ngisakubona ukubaluleka kosiko lokuhlolwa kwezintombi. Lokhu ngikusho ngoba uma sidansa futhi sicula, ikakhulukazi ngesikhathi somkhosi woMhlanga, ngihlale ngikhunjuzwa ukuthi ngingubani nokuthi ngivelaphi. Lokhu kubandakanya izinzuzo zokuba yingxenye yamatshitshi (izintombi), njengokuhlonishwa ontanga yami kanye nomphakathi wonkana. Sekukonke, intombazane kufanele ikhombise futhi iziqhenye ngobuntombi bayo ngisho noma iLobola ingakhokhelwa."* [Umhlanganyeli 4, Maiden]

Another participant said:

*"In my opinion, virginity testing is an important practice, especially among our Zulu tribe. We are all aware that ukuhlolwa kwezintombi is allied with pride and self-respect. I mean, a girl should be proud of herself for carrying herself in a culturally acceptable manner. The elders will respect her, as will her peers and the younger girls, who are likely to see us as role models. We are also respected by young boys, who may regard us as potential wives rather than girls with whom they can have sex but not marry. The support we give each other as maidens is amazing, however if one of us was discovered to be not a virgin anymore faces discrimination within our group and within the society itself. If you married a non-virgin, you are constantly reminded of that fact. As a result, no one wants that, which is why we try to avoid triggers that could lead to the loss of our virginity."* Participant 7, maiden].

*"Ngokubona kwami, usiko lokuhlolwa kwezintombi kuwumkhuba obalulekile, ikakhulukazi phakathi kwesizwe sethu samaZulu. Sonke siyazi ukuthi izintombi zokuhlolwa zihlangene nokuziqhenya nokuzihlonipha. Ngiqonde ukuthi, intombazane kufanele iziqhenye ngokuzithwala ngendlela eyamukelekayo ngamasiko. Abadala bazomhlonipha, njengoba kuzokwenza ontanga yakhe namantombazane amancane, okungenzeka asibone njengezibonelo. Sihlonishwa nabafana abancane, abangase basibheke njengabafazi abangaba khona kunamantombazane abangaya nawo ocansini kodwa bangashadi. Ukwesekwa esinikezana khona njengezintombi kuyamangalisa, nokho uma omunye wethu etholakala ukuthi akayona intombi ubhekene nokubandlululwa ngaphakathi eqenjini lethu nangaphakathi emphakathini uqobo. Uma ushade nomuntu ongeyena intombi, uhlala ukhunjuzwa ngalelo qiniso. Ngenxa yalokho, akekho ofuna lokho, yingakho sizama ukugwema izimbangela ezingaholela ekulahlekelweni ubuntombi bethu." [umhlanganyeli 7, itshitshi].*

Additional participant said:

*"As a parent I think ukuhlolwa kwezintombi is still an important practice because it encourages young girls to take care of themselves in a respectful manner. For example, if you are raising a girl child it is important to perpetuate the practice of ukuhlolwa kwezintombi until your daughter gets married. This in turn bring the positive effects in the girl's family, should she gets married because the bride's family normally get respect from the community and from the groom family for raising such a disciple young girl. When it is time for Lobola negotiations; the family get about 11 cows or more for appreciating their virgin makoti (bride)." [Participant 12, Maiden's mother]*

*"Njengomzali ngicabanga ukuthi ukuhlolwa kwezintombi kusengumkhuba obalulekile ngoba kukhuthaza amantombazane amancane ukuthi azinakekele ngendlela ehloniphekile. Isibonelo, uma ukhulisa ingane yentombazane kubalulekile ukuqhubekisa umkhuba wokuhlolwa kwezintombi kuze kube yilapho indodakazi yakho ishada. Lokhu nakho kuletha imiphumela emihle emndenini wentombazane, uma kufanele ishade ngoba umndeni womlobokazi uvame ukuthola inhlonipho emphakathini" [umhlanganyeli 12, unina wetshitshi]*

Some respondents shared the same view that virginity testing is also associated with pride, respect and self-awareness and not necessarily for Lobola payment only. According to Biyela (2018), as cited in Mhlongo (2009), Christianity encourages young people to preserve their virginity

exclusively for marriage. One respondent, a maiden's parent, uses the Christian perspective to explain the significance of having pride, self-esteem, and self-awareness as a maiden. The respondent emphasised that in the Bible, virginity was a source of pride and dignity for a woman, her parents, and her religious community. Maintaining virginity is a Christian virtue that supports virginity testing. To maintain virginity is a Christian virtue that justifies virginity testing. They even use the word 'holy', a religious term for maintaining holiness. According to a maiden's response, they are preserving their virginity not just for marriage but also for self-dignity, pride, and self-awareness. Biyela (2018) argues that for a girl to accept Christ she has to protect her virginity until the day she enters into Holy Matrimony. Sleeping around amounts to pretending to be already married, and this disqualifies you from Christian marriage.

The participant said:

*"For a girl to accept Christ, she must maintain her virginity until the day she enters Holy Matrimony. In the Bible, virginity was regarded as a source of pride and dignity for a woman, her parents, and her religious community. Maintaining virginity is a Christian virtue that supports virginity testing. We frequently use the word 'holy', which is a religious term that refers to the preservation of holiness as a Christian child. If young girls are proven to be virgins, they are typically given certificates as proof of virginity."* [Participant 2, Maiden's Guardian]

*"Ukuze intombazane yamukele uKristu, kumele igcine ubuntombi bayo kuze kube usuku engena ngalo eNgcwele Matrimony. EBhayibhelini, ubuntombi babebhekwa njengomthombo wokuziqhenya nesithunzi sowesifazane, abazali bakhe nomphakathi wakhe wenkolo. Ukugcina ubuntombi kuyisici sobuKristu esisekela ukuhlolwa kobuntombi. Sivame ukusebenzisa igama elithi 'ngcwele', okuyigama lenkolo elibhekisela ekulondolozweni kobungcwele njengengane yobuKristu. Uma amantombazane amancane efakazelwa ukuthi ayizintombi, ngokuvamile anikezwa izitifiketi njengobufakazi bobuntombi."* [Umhlanganyeli 2, i-Maiden's Guardian]

These responses demonstrate a strong cultural endorsement of *ukuhlolwa kwezintombi* (virginity testing) as a practice tied to identity, respect, and societal expectations. The participants view it as an important tradition that instils pride, discipline, and self-respect in young women while also reinforcing cultural values within the Zulu community.

#### 4.3.1.3 Social expectations and gender roles

Societal expectations and gender roles in rural communities are often deeply rooted in cultural traditions and practices. These expectations can vary widely depending on the specific context and cultural background. *Ukuhlohlwa kwezintombi* is often tied to social expectations and gender roles in a particular society (Cira, 2015). The respondents were asked if there were social expectations and gender roles behind the practice of *ukuhlohlwa kwezintombi*. One of the respondents agreed and shared that *ukuhlohlwa kwezintombi* in Impendle is a societal mechanism for controlling female sexuality, requiring virginity tests to maintain traditional gender roles and purity until marriage. Virginity status in some communities is linked to social status and marriage prospects, causing pressure on young girls to undergo testing to secure future prospects and avoid social stigma. Nonetheless, another respondent outlined that the practice of *ukuhlohlwa kwezintombi* is often rooted in patriarchal norms that prioritize male authority and control over female bodies. It reinforces the idea that women should be submissive and adhere to societal expectations of purity and chastity while men are afforded more sexual freedom. This perpetuates unequal power dynamics between genders. This factor may contribute to the perpetuation of gender inequality. Rural communities often have strong social norms and expectations regarding appropriate behavior for men and women. These norms may dictate how individuals dress, interact with others, and fulfil their roles within the community. Deviating from these norms can lead to social stigma and ostracism, particularly in tightly-knit rural communities where conformity is valued. As a result, individuals may feel pressure to conform to traditional gender roles and expectations, even if they desire greater autonomy and freedom of expression. The respondent also outlined that failing a virginity test can lead to social stigma, shame, and even violence against women. Women who are discovered not to be virgins may face rejection from their families, communities, or potential partners, resulting in severe consequences such as ostracism, loss of social status, or even honour-based violence. This demonstrates the disproportionate burden placed on women to meet societal expectations of purity and chastity.

Participants 13

The participant said:

*“I feel like virginity testing has lost its value, it is no longer important as it was portrayed in the past. I feel like the practice of *ukuhlohlwa kwezintombi* was intended to oppress women. The reason*

*I say this is because gender roles and patriarchal norms only advocate for men and control over female bodies. For example, losing your virginity will undoubtedly result in societal stigma and discrimination, as well as rejection within your family. Joining the practice of ukuhlolwa kwezintombi was never my decision, but rather my family's. I'm not saying they were wrong, but they never sat down with me to ask if I wanted to join the practice."* [Participant 13, maiden]

*"Ngibona sengathi ukuhlolwa kobuntombi, akusabalulekile kakhulu mesiqhathanisa nesikhathini sakudala. Ngibona sengathi umkhuba wokuhlolwa kwamantombazane wawuhloselwe ukucindezela abesifazane. Isizathu sokuthi ngithi lokhu kungenxa yokuthi izindima zobulili kanye nezimiso zobuzali zikhuthaza kuphela amadoda nokulawula imizimba yabesifazane. Ngokwesibonelo, ukulahlekelwa ubuntombi bakho ngokungangabazeki kuzoholela ekuhlazekeni nasebandlululweni emphakathini, kanye nokulahlwa ngaphakathi emndenini wakho. Ukujoyina umkhuba wokuhlolwa kwamazintombi akuzange kube yisinqumo sami, kodwa kunalokho umndeni wami. Angisho ukuthi babengalungile, kodwa abakaze bahlale phansi nami bebuza ukuthi ngiyafuna yini ukujoyina lo mkhuba."* [Umhlanganyeli 13, itshitshi]

#### Participant 25

*To me ukuhlolwa kwezintombi is often rooted in patriarchal norms that prioritize male authority and control over female bodies. It reinforces the idea that women should be submissive and adhere to societal expectations of purity and chastity, while men are afforded more sexual freedom. This perpetuates unequal power dynamics between genders and contributes to the perpetuation of gender inequality.* [Participant 25, maiden]

*"Kimi izintombi zokuhlolwa zivame ukusekelwe ezinkambisweni zokhokho ezibeka phambili igunya labesilisa nokulawula imizimba yabesifazane. Kuqinisa umqondo wokuthi abesifazane kufanele bazithobe futhi banamathele ekulindelekeni komphakathi kokuhlanzeka nobumsulwa, kanti amadoda anikezwa inkululeko eyengeziwe yobulili. Lokhu kuqhubekisa amandla angalingani phakathi kobulili futhi kunomthelela ekuqhubekeni kokungalingani ngokobulili."* [Umhlanganyeli 25, itshitshi]

These responses present a critical analysis of *ukuhlolwa kwezintombi* (virginity testing), particularly in relation to its role in reinforcing patriarchal norms and gender inequality. Both participants express scepticism about the practice, contending that it is deeply embedded in societal

structures that regulate and control female bodies while simultaneously upholding male authority and greater sexual autonomy.

Participant 13 argues that virginity testing has lost its original cultural significance and now serves as a tool of oppression rather than empowerment. They highlight how gender roles and patriarchal norms place the burden of sexual purity exclusively on women, subjecting those who deviate from this expectation to stigma, discrimination, and even rejection by their families. Furthermore, the participant underscores the absence of personal agency in the process, as their participation in virginity testing was dictated by family members rather than being a voluntary choice. Similarly, Participant 25 critiques *ukuhlolwa kwezintombi* as a practice that reinforces gender inequality by holding women to higher moral and sexual standards while allowing men greater sexual freedom. The participant contends that this dynamic perpetuates unequal power structures, positioning women as submissive and solely responsible for maintaining chastity, while men are absolved of comparable societal expectations. Collectively, these responses highlight the ways in which virginity testing not only reinforces patriarchal control over female bodies but also sustains broader gender disparities within society.

The practice of *ukuhlolwa kwezintombi* (virginity testing) reflects deeply entrenched patriarchal norms that reinforce unequal gender roles and limit female autonomy within both private and public spheres. This cultural practice places significant pressure on young women to conform to societal expectations of purity and chastity, positioning female sexual behaviour as a matter of collective concern rather than individual choice. The double standard is evident in how men are afforded greater sexual freedom, while women face social stigma and discrimination for deviating from norms of sexual purity. This imbalance reflects broader societal power dynamics where male authority is prioritised, and female bodies are subject to control and regulation. For instance, young women often participate in virginity testing not out of personal conviction but due to pressure from family and community members, reinforcing the idea that their value is linked to sexual purity. The lack of consent in participating in such practices highlights the limited agency young women have over their bodies and sexual health. Moreover, the consequences of failing virginity tests such as rejection by family and social exclusion—further illustrate how patriarchal control extends beyond the individual, affecting women's social standing and opportunities. This unequal treatment underscores how patriarchal norms sustain power imbalances, where men are granted

greater freedom and autonomy, while women's worth is measured according to their adherence to restrictive moral codes. Ultimately, *ukuhlolwa kwezintombi* operates as a mechanism for maintaining gender inequality by reinforcing male dominance over female choices and bodies, limiting women's ability to navigate their own sexual and social identities on their terms.

#### **4.3.1.4 *Ukuhlolwa kwezintombi* as pregnancy prevention strategy**

The respondents were asked if the practice of *ukuhlolwa kwezintombi* is viewed as a strategy to prevent pregnancy. One of the participants attests that *ukuhlolwa kwezintombi* is expected to reduce the rate of teenage pregnancy among the girls who are tested for virginity. Prohibiting young girls from engaging in sexual activity before marriage reduces the number of children born out of marriage. Mhlongo (2009) further argued that the reason why there is a high rate of teenage pregnancy is that young people are no longer undergoing virginity testing in some areas. The participant confirmed this by saying that if all young girls are tested for virginity, they will feel afraid of engaging in sexual activity. In that way, teenage pregnancy will be reduced.

Participant 14, 20

The participant said:

*"It will not prevent all pregnancies; it will only prevent pregnancy for those who undergo virginity testing because they know that they will undergo virginity testing but for those who do not undergo virginity testing it will not prevent it."* [Participant 14, maiden]

*"Ngeke kuvimbele konke ukukhulelwa; kuzovimbela ukukhulelwa kwalabo abahlolwa ubuntombi kuphela ngoba bayazi ukuthi bazohlolwa ubuntombi kodwa kulabo abangahlolwa ubuntombi ngeke kukuvimbele."* [Umhlanganyeli 14, itshitshi]

Another participant said:

*"If every girl can undergo virginity testing, the teenage pregnancy rate can drop; one of the reasons why there is a high rate of teenage pregnancy is because not every girl undergoes virginity testing. When girls do not undergo virginity testing, they do as they please and they get pregnant at an earlier age. They are not afraid of anything. I think every girl should undergo it"* [Participant 20, maiden's grandmother]

*"Uma yonke intombazane ingahlolwa ubuntombi, izinga lokukhulelwa kwentsha lingancipha; esinye sezizathu ezenza kube nezinga eliphezulu lokukhulelwa kwentsha kungenxa yokuthi akuyona yonke intombazane ehlolelwa ubuntombi. Lapho amantombazane engahlolwa ubuntombi, enza njengoba ethanda futhi akhulelwe esemncane. Abesabi lutho. Ngicabanga ukuthi yonke intombazane kufanele ibhekane nayo"* [Umhlanganyeli 20, uqoko wetshitshi]

These responses suggest that the perceived effectiveness of *ukuhlolwa kwezintombi* (virginity testing) in preventing teenage pregnancy is conditional and varies depending on participation in the practice. Participant 14 acknowledges that virginity testing can only deter pregnancy for those who actively undergo the practice because they are aware that their sexual activity will be monitored. However, for those who do not participate, virginity testing has no influence on their sexual behaviour or risk of pregnancy. This implies that the practice does not offer a universal solution to teenage pregnancy but instead functions as a deterrent for a specific group of young women who adhere to it.

On the other hand, Participant 20 argues that teenage pregnancy rates could decline if every girl were required to undergo virginity testing. This perspective suggests that the absence of universal participation allows some young women to engage in sexual activity without fear of being held accountable through the practice. The response reflects the belief that fear and societal expectations associated with virginity testing play a crucial role in shaping young women's sexual behaviour. However, it also assumes that the primary reason for teenage pregnancy is the lack of virginity testing rather than broader social, economic, and educational factors. The practice of *ukuhlolwa kwezintombi* is viewed by some as a potential strategy for preventing teenage pregnancies, although its effectiveness remains contested and deeply rooted in patriarchal norms.

One perspective suggests that virginity testing may only prevent pregnancy for those who actively participate in the practice, as the fear of failing the test and facing social stigma might deter some young women from engaging in sexual activity. Participant highlights this limitation by pointing out that virginity testing will not influence those who do not undergo the practice, indicating that its impact is selective rather than universal. This suggests that virginity testing operates as a moral and social deterrent rather than a comprehensive solution to teenage pregnancy. However, another viewpoint strongly supports the notion that universal participation in virginity testing could significantly reduce teenage pregnancies. Participant argues that one of the reasons behind the

high teenage pregnancy rate is that not all girls are subjected to virginity testing. According to this view, the moral pressure and fear of social rejection that accompany virginity testing could instil discipline and discourage early sexual activity, thereby reducing the likelihood of teenage pregnancy.

This perspective reflects a broader patriarchal belief that female sexuality should be controlled and regulated through cultural and social mechanisms. By suggesting that “every girl should undergo it,” the participant reinforces the notion that the responsibility for preventing teenage pregnancies lies primarily with young women rather than addressing the broader structural and social factors that contribute to early pregnancies, such as unequal access to sexual education, lack of contraceptive services, and gendered power imbalances in intimate relationships. The idea that girls “do as they please” when they are not subjected to virginity testing reflects the moral policing of female behaviour and the assumption that women’s sexual choices should be regulated through fear and social consequences. This reinforces gendered double standards where young women face greater scrutiny and moral judgment for their sexual behaviour, while male sexual behaviour remains largely unregulated and socially accepted.

The emphasis on virginity testing as a pregnancy prevention strategy overlooks the importance of empowering young women through comprehensive sexual education and access to reproductive health services. It frames sexual purity as a measure of moral value, positioning teenage pregnancy as a failure of moral discipline rather than a result of broader structural issues. This approach not only reinforces unequal gender norms but also risks contributing to the social stigma and shame faced by young mothers, further marginalising them within their communities. By focusing solely on regulating female sexuality through virginity testing, this perspective perpetuates the unequal power dynamics that place the burden of sexual morality on young women while excusing male responsibility. Ultimately, virginity testing as a pregnancy prevention strategy reflects and reinforces patriarchal control over female bodies and choices, sustaining broader patterns of gender inequality and limiting young women’s autonomy over their sexual and reproductive health.

#### **4.3.1.5 *Ukuhlolwa kwezintombi* as HIV prevention strategy**

Given the high HIV prevalence in KwaZulu-Natal, *ukuhlolwa kwezintombi* has been identified as one method that might decrease the spread of HIV/AIDS. As of 2022, KwaZulu-Natal reported an

HIV prevalence rate of 16.0%, a decrease from 18.0% in 2017, equating to approximately 1,980,000 individuals living with HIV in the province (HSRC, 2022). Regarding virginity testing (*ukuhlolwa kwezintombi*), specific prevalence statistics within KwaZulu-Natal are limited. However, studies indicate that this traditional practice has experienced a resurgence in certain communities as a cultural response to the HIV/AIDS epidemic. For instance, research in the KwaMashu district reveals that virginity testing is historically regarded as a vital social tool, bringing pride to the virgin girl, her parents, and the community (Masondo, 2018). Additionally, a study exploring the experiences of female adolescents in the uThungulu district found that virginity testing is practiced among young girls, highlighting its continued cultural significance (Mchunu, 2016). While virginity testing is promoted by some as a strategy to encourage abstinence and reduce HIV transmission, its effectiveness remains a topic of debate, and comprehensive statistical data on its prevalence and impact are scarce.

Thobejane & Mdhluli (2015), pointed out that many rural societies believe that *ukuhlolwa kwezintombi* can be a solution to the HIV pandemic. The practice is also supported by political figures, cultural activists, and other stakeholders (Thobejane and Mdhluli, 2015). On the basis of this argument virginity testing is a prevention strategy which helps to curb HIV/AIDS infections. It is also a form of social control to instil the value of premarital chastity and its emphasis is on total abstinence from sexual intercourse by girls (Mazibuko, 2017). The practice is being revived to prevent HIV infection, to detect incest and abuse, and to re-instil and promote lost cultural values.

The participants were asked if the practice of *ukuhlolwa kwezintombi* is viewed as a strategy to decrease the spread of HIV/AIDS. According to some of the participants, delaying the onset of sexual activity among young women will help reduce the number of people infected with HIV/AIDS, and *ukuhlolwa kwezintombi* will help stop the spread of the disease. This is because they are aware that they will be discovered to be non-virgins if they engage in sexual intercourse. When they are required to undergo virginity testing, they will be afraid to have sex. Some girls think that by testing for virginity, they become more independent as young women and lower their risk of HIV/AIDS. According to Mhlongo (2009), although boys are not tested, they must practise monogamy and be faithful to their partners. Two participants (maidens) attested to this, and one of them suggested that the community leaders should also encourage boys to avoid sexual

intercourse before marriage and not only focus on us girls because they are not the only ones who are coming with children born out of wedlock and contracting diseases like HIV/AIDS and STIs. The other maiden suggested that both partners should get HIV tests before getting married. This demonstrated that not all maidens regard *ukuhlolwa kwezintombi* as essential but rather as an oppressive custom against women.

The following statements supports the above findings:

Participant 3, 6, 22, 11, 8

*"I believe that ukuhlolwa kwezintombi is an important practice, especially in this century. When looking at our country's statistics, particularly in KwaZulu-Natal, HIV/AIDS continues to rise steadily, which is unfortunate given that many HIV/AIDS cases are in their youth or late twenties. Ukuhlolwa kwezintombi is an African cultural practice used to combat the virus as black people. We encourage young girls not to engage in sexual activities before marriage, and given the prevalence of AIDS, I believe this is the way they intend to combat the virus. This also includes any sexual illnesses that a person can contract from having sex with multiple partners or through interchanging partners."* [Participant 3, Maidens inspector]

*"Ngikholwa wukuthi ukuhlolwa kwezintombi kuwumkhuba obalulekile, ikakhulukazi kuleli khulu leminyaka. Uma sibheka izibalo zezwe lethu, ikakhulukazi KwaZulu-Natal, i-HIV/AIDS iyaqhubeka nokukhuphuka kancane kancane, okuyinto engeyinhle uma kubhekwa ukuthi izigameko eziningi ze-HIV/AIDS zisebusheni bazo noma ngasekupheleni kweminyaka engamashumi amabili. Izintombi zokuhlolwa ngumkhuba wamasiko ase-Afrika osetshenziselwa ukulwa naleli gciwane njengabantu abamnyama. Sikhuthaza amantombazane amancane ukuthi angazibandakanyi emisebenzini yocansi ngaphambi komshado, futhi uma kubhekwa ukusabalala kwe-AIDS, ngikholwa wukuthi le yindlela ahlose ukulwa ngayo naleli gciwane. Lokhu kuhlangukisa nanoma yiziphi izifo zocansi umuntu angathola ngazo ngokulala nabalingani abaningi noma ngokusebenzisa abalingani abashintshanisayo."* [Umhlanganyeli 3, umhloli weMaidens]

*"I think ukuhlolwa kwezintombi is one the cultural practice that reduces the spread of HIV/AIDS. The reason I say this it is because maidens do not find it easy to engage in sexual activity as they*

*will have the fear that the testers will find out that they are no longer virgins.*" [participant 6, maiden's parent]

*"Ngicabanga ukuthi izintombi zokuhlolwa ngenye yezinto zamasiko ezinciphisa ukusabalala kwe-HIV/AIDS. Isizathu sokuthi ngisho lokhu kungenxa yokuthi izintombi azikutholi kulula ukuzibandakanya ocansini njengoba zizoba nokwesaba ukuthi abahloli bazothola ukuthi abasezona izintombi."* [umhlanganyeli 6, umzali wentombi]

*"Virginity testing encourages me to abstain from sexual activity, which keeps me from getting HIV/AIDS. As a young woman, this gives me more power as I develop my independence and not feeling pressured to engage in sexual relationships sexual activity and remain a virgin until marriage."* [Participant 22, maiden]

*"Ukuhlolwa kobuntombi kungikhuthaza ukuthi ngishiye umsebenzi wocansi, okwenza ngitholi i-HIV/AIDS. Njengomuntu wesifazane osemusha, lokhu kunginika amandla amaningi njengoba ngithuthukisa ukuzimela kwami futhi ngingazizwa ngicindezelekile ukuba ngizibandakanye ocansini lobulili futhi ngihlale ngiyintombi kuze kube umshado."* [Umhlanganyeli 22, itshitshi]

*"I think it should not only be the girls who are tested but also boys so that when they get married both partners are HIV negative. Community leaders should also encourage boys to also abstain from sex before marriage."* [participant 11, maiden]

*"Ngicabanga ukuthi akumele kube ngamantombazane ahlolwayo kuphela kodwa nabafana ukuze uma beshada bobabili abalingani babe ne-HIV. Abaholi bomphakathi kufanele futhi bakhuthaze abafana ukuthi nabo bayeke ucansi ngaphambi komshado."* [umhlanganyeli 11, itshitshi]

*"I certainly believe that we, as part of the Zulu nation, should work together in the fight against AIDS, if girls are being tested for virginity testing I mean all girls, the disease will decrease, and also teach those who are already HIV positive to live with the virus without infecting others, that can help, but for me I think virginity testing does help in the fight against AIDS."* [Participant 8, maiden' grandmother]

*"Ngokuqinisekile ngikholwa wukuthi thina, njengengxenywe yesizwe samaZulu, kufanele sisebenzisane ekulweni ne-AIDS, uma amantombazane ehlolelwa ukuhlolwa kobuntombi ngisho wonke amantombazane, lesi sifo sizokwehla, siphinde sifundise nalabo asebene-HIV ukuphila*

*naleli gciwane ngaphandle kokuthetheleka kwabanye, lokho kungasiza, kodwa kimina ngicabanga ukuthi ukuhlolwa kobuntombi kuyasiza ekulweni ne-AIDS."* [Umhlanganyeli 8, ugo wetshitshi]

The above responses collectively demonstrate the perception that *ukuhlolwa kwezintombi* (virginity testing) is regarded by some members of the community as a cultural mechanism for HIV/AIDS prevention. The responses highlight a widely held belief that the practice discourages young women from engaging in premarital sexual activity due to the fear of being discovered as non-virgins, thereby reducing their risk of contracting HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted infections (STIs). Additionally, the responses reflect the role of *ukuhlolwa kwezintombi* in reinforcing abstinence as a moral and cultural value, particularly within Zulu traditions. Some participants argue that virginity testing empowers young women by fostering independence and resistance to peer pressure related to sexual relationships. However, the responses also indicate a growing awareness of gender disparities in the application of sexual health expectations.

One participant (Participant 11) calls for the inclusion of boys in similar testing or initiatives, arguing that sexual responsibility should not be placed solely on young women. This suggests that while virginity testing is seen as beneficial by some, others acknowledge the need for a more equitable approach to sexual health and HIV prevention that involves both genders. Moreover, the responses demonstrate a broader communal perspective on HIV/AIDS prevention, with some participants emphasizing the importance of collective efforts, education, and alternative strategies to combat the epidemic. For instance, Participant 8 suggests that HIV-positive individuals should be educated on how to live with the virus responsibly to prevent further transmission. This indicates that, while virginity testing is seen as a preventive measure, there is recognition that it should be supplemented with education and broader public health interventions.

**OBJECTIVE TWO:** *To understand how COVID-19 lockdown restrictions have impacted the practice of *ukuhlolwa kwezintombi**

## **THEME TWO**

### **4.3.2 IMPACT OF RESTRICTIONS**

This theme examines the impact of COVID-19 lockdown restrictions on the cultural practice of *ukuhlolwa kwezintombi* (virginity testing). The enforcement of lockdown measures, including social distancing, limitations on gatherings, and movement restrictions, significantly disrupted this long-standing tradition. The inability to conduct *ukuhlolwa kwezintombi* as usual raised concerns about cultural preservation, social cohesion, and the well-being of those who participate in the practice.

Several key sub-themes emerged from this analysis. First, the study explores the direct effects of lockdown restrictions on the practice itself, highlighting the extent to which ceremonies were halted or modified. Secondly, it discusses the challenges that arose due to these restrictions, including logistical constraints, the weakening of community structures, and concerns about maintaining cultural values in a rapidly changing environment. Another critical sub-theme addresses the readiness of *omama abahlolayo* (inspectors) to implement alternative strategies to sustain the practice while complying with health protocols. Finally, the psychosocial impact of COVID-19 on young girls who participate in *ukuhlolwa kwezintombi* is examined, focusing on the emotional and social consequences of the disruption. Together, these sub-themes provide a comprehensive analysis of how the pandemic has reshaped this cultural practice and its significance within the community.

#### **4.3.2.1 Effects on the Practice**

The COVID-19 lockdown restrictions had a profound impact on the practice of *ukuhlolwa kwezintombi* (virginity testing), disrupting not only this tradition but also other cultural ceremonies, social interactions, and marriage arrangements within Zulu communities, including those in the Impendle area. Due to the enforcement of social distancing measures and the prohibition of cultural gatherings, *ukuhlolwa kwezintombi* could not be conducted as it traditionally requires physical proximity between the inspectors (*omama abahlolayo*) and the maidens. As a result, the suspension of virginity testing raised concerns regarding the preservation of cultural values and the sexual behaviour of young women during this period.

Although parents, guardians, and *omama abahlolayo* continued to emphasize the importance of maintaining virginity, the absence of regular testing meant there was no formal mechanism to monitor adherence to this expectation. Some participants reported that the lack of testing led certain girls, who had previously adhered to the principles of virginity, to engage in behaviours they might have otherwise avoided, knowing that they would not be subjected to verification. This, in turn, was linked to an increase in teenage pregnancies among young girls who had previously undergone virginity testing. The findings suggest that the communal aspect of *ukuhlolwa kwezintombi* plays a significant role not only in upholding cultural values but also in fostering a sense of accountability among maidens. The testimonies of participants 1, 9, 16, 20, and 26 illustrate the perceived consequences of the disruption, highlighting the broader implications of the COVID-19 lockdown on the social and cultural fabric of the community

The participant said:

*“During COVID-19, many maidens believed that the practice of ukuhlolwa kwezintombi was no longer going to be practice as the Covid-19 cases continued to increase every day. As a result, many maidens started doing as they please since they were no longer tested for virginity. Some maidens started having sex and some ended up being pregnant as there was nothing encouraged or promised the way forward regarding the practice of ukuhlolwa kwezintombi. [participant 1, inspector]*

*"Ngesikhathi se-COVID-19, izintombi eziningi zikholelwa ukuthi usiko lokuhlolwa kwezintombi awusekho umkhuba njengoba izigameko zeCovid-19 ziqhubekile nokwanda nsuku zonke. Ngenxa yalokho, izintombi eziningi zaqala ukwenza njengoba zithokozisa ekubeni zazingasahlolwa ubuntombi. Ezinye izintombi zaqala ukwenza ucansi kanti ezinye zagcina zikhulelwe njengoba kwakungekho lutho olukhuthazwayo noma oluthenjisiwe indlela eya phambili mayelana nomkhuba wokuhlolwa kwamantombazane. [umhlanganyeli 1, umhloli]*

The above assertion demonstrates that the COVID-19 lockdown restrictions had a profound impact on the practice of *ukuhlolwa kwezintombi*, affecting its continuity, implementation, and cultural significance. It highlights the extent to which external factors, such as public health policies and social distancing measures, can disrupt deeply rooted cultural traditions. Furthermore, the assertion

underscores the challenges faced by both practitioners (*omama abahlolayo*) and participants (maidens and their guardians) in maintaining the practice under restrictive conditions.

Additionally, it suggests that the absence of *ukuhlolwa kwezintombi* during the lockdown may have contributed to unintended social consequences, such as changes in sexual behavior among young women and an increase in teenage pregnancies. The discussion of sub-themes also proves that *ukuhlolwa kwezintombi* extends beyond a mere physical practice; it serves as a broader mechanism for cultural preservation, social cohesion, and moral guidance within the community. Ultimately, this assertion supports the argument that cultural practices are not static but are deeply influenced by external disruptions, necessitating adaptive strategies for their survival and relevance in changing social contexts. The COVID-19 lockdown restrictions had a profound effect on the practice of *ukuhlolwa kwezintombi* (virginity testing), resulting in significant changes in the behaviour of young women, particularly in terms of their sexual activity and adherence to cultural norms. With the suspension of the practice due to the pandemic, many maidens no longer faced the usual social pressures associated with virginity testing, which traditionally served as a means of regulating female sexuality. The fear of public inspection, rejection by families, and social stigma for failing the virginity test were temporarily lifted, leaving a void in the moral framework that had previously governed sexual behaviour. As a result, some young women began to engage in sexual activity, and the lack of consequences tied to the practice led to a rise in teenage pregnancies, as there were no longer external mechanisms of control to deter early sexual experiences.

This disruption exposed how deeply *ukuhlolwa kwezintombi* was intertwined with patriarchal systems that controlled and regulated female sexuality. The absence of the practice made it clear that for many young women, their sexual choices were heavily influenced by societal expectations tied to cultural practices, and without these expectations, they felt freer to act on their desires. However, this newfound freedom was not without its challenges. Some women, particularly those with limited access to sexual education or contraceptives, became more vulnerable to unintended pregnancies, highlighting the risks associated with the absence of traditional mechanisms that served as moral and social guidelines.

The situation also revealed a tension between cultural preservation and the increasing autonomy of young women. While some may have felt liberated from the moral constraints imposed by the practice, the unintended consequences such as early pregnancies illustrated the complex dynamics at play. The suspension of virginity testing demonstrated that cultural practices like *ukuhlolwa kwezintombi* not only shaped women's sexual choices but also reflected broader gendered power structures. Ultimately, the disruption of this practice during the pandemic emphasized the need for a more holistic approach to sexual health education, one that balances cultural traditions with empowerment and access to information that can help mitigate the risks young women face.

#### **4.3.2.1 Effects on the Practice**

The COVID-19 lockdown restrictions have most likely affected the practice of *ukuhlolwa kwezintombi*. COVID-19 lockdown restrictions disrupted other traditional ceremonies, social interactions, and marriage arrangements in Zulu communities, including the Impendle area. During COVID-19 lockdown restrictions, *ukuhlolwa kwezintombi* was disrupted because no close contact was permitted, and all cultural events were cancelled. As a result, virginity testing requires physical contact and virgin girls must be close to women who test their virginity. The parents/guardians and as well as virgin inspectors still encouraged maidens to keep their virginity, but that did not guarantee that maidens were going to keep their virginity as they were not tested. This resulted in an increase in teenage pregnancy among the youngest girls undergoing virginity testing, with many losing their virginity. This demonstrates the importance of girls gathering as maidens when undergoing virginity tests.

Participants 1, 9, and 20, 16, and 26

The participant said:

*“During COVID-19, many maidens believed that the practice of ukuhlolwa kwezintombi would no longer be practised as the COVID-19 cases continued to increase every day. As a result, many maidens started doing as they pleased since they were no longer tested for virginity. Some maidens started having sex, and some ended up being pregnant as there was nothing encouraged or promised the way forward regarding the practice of ukuhlolwa kwezintombi. [participant 1, inspector]*

*Ngesikhathi se-COVID-19, izintombi eziningi zazikholelwa ukuthi umkhuba wokuzintombi zokuhlolwa ngeke usasebenza njengoba amacala e-COVID-19 eqhubeka nokwanda nsuku zonke. Ngenxa yalokho, izintombi eziningi zaqala ukwenza njengoba zathanda ekubeni zazingasahlololwa ubuntombi. Ezinye izintombi zaqala ukwenza ucansi, ezinye zagcina zikhulelwe njengoba kwakungekho lutho olukhuthazwayo noma oluthenjisiwe indlela eya phambili mayelana nomkhuba wokuhlolwa kwamantombazane. [umhlanganyeli 1, umhloli]*

According to the literature, the emergence of COVID-19 significantly disrupted social structures and cultural practices worldwide. Social gatherings, including the performance of customs and rituals, were severely affected, leading to the erosion of certain cultural traditions (Courtemanche et al., 2020). The participants' responses align with these findings, as one respondent emphasized that *ukuhlolwa kwezintombi* extends beyond the physical act of virginity testing. It encompasses communal gatherings, singing, dancing, and social interactions among young women, providing a platform for maidens to bond, share experiences, and reinforce cultural values and traditions.

The restrictions on social contact due to COVID-19 disrupted these communal aspects, as maidens could no longer convene, potentially leading to disengagement from the practice. The lack of participation in ceremonies may have resulted in boredom and diminished interest in virginity testing, as the social and cultural reinforcement that traditionally accompanied the practice was no longer present. Participants also attested that the prohibition of social gatherings led to the loss of friendships and opportunities to bond with other maidens, further weakening their connection to the tradition. However, these restrictions were necessary public health measures implemented to mitigate the rapid spread of COVID-19 (Courtemanche et al., 2020).

One participant said:

*“From my knowledge, ukuhlolwa kwezintombi is not just about testing, as some people believe. Maidens enjoy singing and dancing when they are together. So, prohibiting the practice of ukuhlolwa kwezintombi caused them to become bored and possibly change their habits because they used to gather with other girls during their spare time and remind each other of the importance of ukuhlolwa kwezintombi. Maidens also have missed out on the social interactions and friendship that come with ukuhlolwa kwezintombi gatherings. These gatherings serve as*

*important spaces for building friendships, strengthening bonds, and sharing knowledge.*  
[Participant 9, inspector]

*"Ngokwazi kwami, izintombi zokuhlola akuzona nje ukuhlolwa, njengoba abanye abantu bekholelwa. Izintombi ziyakujabulela ukucula nokudansa uma bendawonye. Ngakho-ke, ukuvimbela umkhuba wokuhlolwa kwamantombazane kwabangela ukuba babe nesithukuthezi futhi mhlawumbe bashintshe imikhuba yabo ngoba babevame ukuhlangana namanye amantombazane ngesikhathi sabo sokuphumula futhi bakhumbuzane ngokubaluleka kokuhlolwa kwezintombi. Ama-Maidens nawo aphuthelwe ukusebenzisana nomphakathi nobuhlobo obuzofika nemibuthano yamantombazane okuhlolwa. Le mibuthano isebenza njengezikhala ezibalulekile zokwakha ubungane, ukuqinisa izibopho nokwabelana ngolwazi."* [Umhlanganyeli 9, umhloli]

One participant reported that the COVID-19 lockdown has significantly impacted cultural transmission, mainly through prohibiting *ukuhlolwa kwezintombi* gatherings, which are crucial for transmitting knowledge and traditions, especially for future generations. These gatherings not only serve as a means of cultural education but also reinforce social cohesion, identity, and moral values among young women. The absence of these communal interactions may have led to a weakening of cultural ties, as maidens lost opportunities to engage with elders and peers who traditionally guide them through important rites of passage. Furthermore, without these gatherings, the mentorship aspect of *ukuhlolwa kwezintombi* where experienced women provide guidance on cultural expectations, personal discipline, and social responsibilities was disrupted. As a result, younger generations may struggle to fully grasp the significance of these practices, potentially leading to their gradual decline over time.

The participant said:

*Covid-19 lockdown restrictions disrupted cultural transmission. The practice of ukuhlolwa kwezintombi gatherings encourage transmitting cultural knowledge, values, and traditions from elders to younger generations. Therefore, prohibition of these gatherings severely disrupted intergenerational exchange and jeopardised cultural continuity as maidens were not attending virginity testing then.* [Participant 20, maiden's parent]

Many *ukuhlolwa kwezintombi* ceremonies require travel to specific locations, such as *Umkhosi Womhlanga*, also known as the Reed Dance, where maidens from different regions gather to

celebrate their virginity, demonstrate self-respect, and honor their elders. These ceremonies serve as a platform for cultural pride, socialization, and the reinforcement of traditional values. However, during the COVID-19 lockdown, measures such as travel restrictions, border closures, and limitations on large gatherings significantly hindered the ability of individuals to attend these important events. As a result, the organization and participation in virginity testing ceremonies were disrupted, leading to a loss of cultural continuity. Additionally, the absence of these ceremonies may have diminished the sense of belonging and identity among young women, as they were unable to partake in communal experiences that reinforce their cultural heritage. The lack of these gatherings may also have contributed to a decline in interest or engagement with the tradition, potentially affecting its future practice and significance.

The participant said:

*Undergoing the practice of ukuhlolwa kwezintombi is fun and enjoyable to us maidens because we get to go travel in different places such as Umkhosi Womhlanga which is conducted at Nongoma. However, during Covid-19 lockdown restrictions gatherings were prohibited. As a result, we ended up not being able to attend Umkhosi Womhlanga like we used to before the COVID-19 arrived [Participant 16, maiden]*

*“Ngaphansi komkhuba wokuhlolwa kwezintombi kumnandi futhi kujabulisa thina zintombi ngoba sithola ukuhamba ezindaweni ezahlukene ezifana noMkhosi Womhlanga oqhutshwa kwaNongoma. Kodwa-ke, ngesikhathi semikhawulo yokuvalwa kweCovid-19 imibuthano yayinqatshelwe. Ngenxa yalokho, sagcina singakwazi ukuya eMkhosini Womhlanga njengoba sasivame ngaphambi kokufika kwe-COVID-19” [Umhlanganyeli 16, itshitshi]*

The findings indicate that the inability to undergo *ukuhlolwa kwezintombi* due to COVID-19 restrictions resulted in significant social stigma and discrimination, particularly among young women for whom the practice is a key cultural expectation. As *ukuhlolwa kwezintombi* serves as both a communal and individual affirmation of cultural identity and moral standing, the disruption of these ceremonies led to negative social perceptions. Many maidens were unable to participate in any traditional gatherings, such as *Umkhosi Womhlanga* and *Umemulo*, due to lockdown restrictions, which in turn caused members of the community to question their adherence to cultural values and norms. Some young women faced judgment, social ostracization, and even

accusations of moral decline due to their inability to publicly demonstrate their purity. According to one respondent, this experience led to diminished self-esteem and a loss of pride in their virginity, as the absence of testing meant they could no longer provide tangible proof of their chastity. This highlights how virginity testing is not merely a personal or family matter but also a broader societal expectation, where failure to participate can result in exclusion and negative social labeling.

The participant said:

*“During Covid-19, we kind of faced some social stigmatisation and discrimination from our community and within our families even. I remember the other day when I was visiting my aunt, she asked me if I was still a virgin and if I am still adhering what we are taught as maidens because she have heard from other community members that I was no longer a virgin. That question hurt me so much because of the way she was asking; it was as if she had already come up with conclusions, and on the other hand, I was not able to prove that it was false news. Since I was not able to prove myself, I began to lose self-esteem and feel less pride because of the pressure I received from my community and to some family members”.* [Participant 26, maiden]

*"Ngesikhathi seCovid-19, thina uhlobo lwabhekana nokucwaswa okuthile emphakathini kanye nokubandlululwa okuvela emphakathini wethu nangaphakathi emindenini yethu ngisho. Ngikhumbula ngelinye ilanga ngivakashela umakoti wami, wangibuza ukuthi ngiseyintombi yini nokuthi ngisanamathela yini kulokho esikufundiswa njengezintombi ngoba uzwile ngamanye amalungu omphakathi ukuthi ngangingaseyona intombi. Lowo mbuzo wangilimaza kakhulu ngenxa yendlela ayebuzayo; kwaba sengathi usevele uqhamuke neziphetho, futhi ngakolunye uhlangothi, angikwazanga ukufakazela ukuthi kwakuyizindaba ezingamanga. Njengoba ngakwazi ukuzibonakalisa, ngaqala ukulahlekelwa ukuzihlonipha futhi ngazizwa ngingaziqhenya kangako ngenxa yengcindezi engayithola emphakathini wami nakwamanye amalungu omndeni".* [Umhlanganyeli 26, itshitshi]

#### 4.3.2.2 Readiness of implementation

The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly disrupted the practice of *ukuhlolwa kwezintombi*, raising critical questions about its relevance, safety, and cultural significance in the context of public health emergencies (Kortman, 2023). Despite the challenges posed by lockdown restrictions, communities in the Impendle area demonstrated resilience by exploring digital alternatives to sustain the practice. According to one respondent (*inspector*), efforts were made to implement new strategies that would allow *ukuhlolwa kwezintombi* to continue while adhering to public health guidelines. Instead of traditional physical examinations, the community adapted by utilizing telehealth consultations, virtual gatherings, and online educational sessions. However, this transition was not without obstacles, as network connectivity issues and limited technological literacy among community elders initially posed challenges. Nevertheless, the maidens played a crucial role in facilitating this shift by teaching the inspectors how to use platforms such as WhatsApp video calls to maintain engagement during the lockdown. This adaptation underscores the cultural significance of *ukuhlolwa kwezintombi*, as communities sought innovative ways to sustain the practice despite pandemic-related restrictions. The shift to virtual methods highlights the intersection of tradition and modernity, illustrating how cultural practices can evolve in response to public health crises while maintaining their fundamental role in community identity and social cohesion.

The participant said:

*“Ukuhlolwa kwezintombi is a very important custom in our area. However, due to Covid-19 lockdown restrictions we had to stop our usual way of doing it which is touching vagina to see if the hymen is still there. We instead used telehealth consultations, virtual gatherings and online education to engage with maidens as well as their families to encourage ukuziphatha njengentombi even during that difficult time Nevertheless, we faced some network issues at times and lack of technology knowledge but our maidens did their best for teaching us how to use WhatsApp video call so we see and connect with them even during Covid-19”* [Participant 4, Inspector]

*"Ukuhlolwa kwezintombi kuyisiko elibaluleke kakhulu endaweni yethu. Kodwa-ke, ngenxa yemikhawulo yokuvalwa kweCovid-19 kwadingeka siyeke indlela yethu ejwayelekile yokwenza okuyinto ethinta isitho sangasese ukuze sibone ukuthi i-hymen isekhona yini. Esikhundleni salokho sisebenzise ukubonisana kwe-telehealth, imibuthano ebonakalayo kanye nemfundo ye-intanethi*

*ukuzibandakanya nezintombi kanye nemindeni yazo ukukhuthaza ukuziphatha njengentombi ngisho nangasiphi isikhathi esinzima Noma kunjalo, sabhekana nezinye izindaba zenethiwekhi ngezinye izikhathi kanye nokuntuleka kolwazi lobuchwepheshe kodwa izintombi zethu zenza konke okusemandleni ukusifundisa indlela yokusebenzisa ucingo lwevidiyo ye-WhatsApp ukuze sibone futhi sixhumane nazo ngisho nangesikhathi seCovid-19" [Umhlanganyeli 4, Umhloli]*

This response demonstrates the adaptability and resilience of the community in sustaining the practice of *ukuhlolwa kwezintombi* during the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite lockdown restrictions preventing traditional in-person virginity testing, the participants sought alternative methods, including telehealth consultations, virtual gatherings, and online education, to continue engaging with maidens and their families. The response also highlights the digital divide, as network issues and limited technological knowledge posed challenges in implementing these virtual strategies. However, it emphasizes intergenerational collaboration, as the maidens played an active role in teaching elders how to use digital communication tools like WhatsApp video calls to maintain connectivity. This reflects both the cultural significance of *ukuhlolwa kwezintombi* and the willingness of the community to integrate modern technology to preserve traditions in times of crisis. Furthermore, the response underscores the broader role of *ukuhlolwa kwezintombi* beyond virginity verification, as it serves as a platform for instilling cultural values, promoting proper behavior (*ukuziphatha*), and reinforcing social cohesion

#### **4.3.2.3 Psychosocial impact**

The practice of *ukuhlolwa kwezintombi* can profoundly impact the psychosocial health of individuals, particularly young women who undergo the test. According to Moroole (2021), this has led to feelings of stigma, shame, anxiety, trauma, and depression among maidens because people in society had doubts about their virginity, even used to say “*siyoyicela ivuthiwe*” meaning that they will see if the virginity thing is going to succeed even after COVID-19. According to Moroole (2021), the efforts to address the negative consequences of virginity testing must prioritize the promotion of gender equality, bodily autonomy, and mental health support for affected individuals. The literature established that the experience of undergoing *ukuhlolwa kwezintombi* and the pressure to uphold societal expectations of purity can have significant impacts on the mental health of teenage girls undergoing *ukuhlolwa kwezintombi*. The maidens may

experience anxiety, depression, and other psychological distress as a result of the fear of failing the test, the stigma associated with virginity testing, and the pressure to conform to cultural norms.

Additionally, the invasive nature of the practice itself can contribute to feelings of violation and a lack of bodily autonomy. Scholars such as Sithole and Ndlovu (2022) argue that this infringement on personal agency may have long-term effects on young women's self-esteem, body image, and overall well-being. The cultural reinforcement of virginity testing perpetuates gender inequality, as it places the burden of sexual purity solely on women while absolving men of similar expectations (Zulu, 2020). This double standard further marginalizes young women, limiting their autonomy and reinforcing patriarchal control over their bodies. In some cases, the pressure to pass the test has led to extreme measures, such as avoiding medical treatments that may break the hymen or even engaging in risky behaviours like anal intercourse to maintain the perception of virginity (Mkhize, 2018). These behaviours not only expose young women to health risks but also highlight the detrimental impact of cultural expectations that prioritize virginity over holistic well-being. Thus, it is crucial to consider the long-term psychological and social effects of this practice and explore strategies to lessen its potential harm while fostering a more supportive and inclusive environment for young women. Interventions should include culturally sensitive education on sexual and reproductive health, increased mental health support for those affected, and community dialogues that challenge harmful gender norms while preserving cultural identity in a way that does not compromise individual well-being.

Participant 15 and 23

The participant said:

*I feel like the practice of ukuhlolwa kwezintombi somehow impacted my mental health, especially during Covid-19 pandemic. Even before this pandemic came I always feel anxious whenever I'm going a test. In other words, I do not feel comfortable when I am being touched my vagina but I am still part of izintombi because it is the cultural practice that my family and the community at large endorses most to us young girls. During Covid-19 pandemic I was not tested nor meeting with other maidens, the community and my peers that have never undergo virginity testing started stigmatising me and being distant to me because I was not part of their group. Hence, I belonged the other group which we refer to amatshitshi (maidens). [Participant 15, maiden]*

*“I believe Covid-19 had a significant impact on my mental health. As a stepchild, I live with both my biological father and my stepmother. My stepmother began emotionally abusing me after they got married with my father and she overworked me that I would even sometimes go to bed hungry. So, I would use virginity testing to relieve stress and then return home later. This is because when I am with maidens, I get very happy because we usually have long talks, dancing, and chanting that I even forget my problems. During Covid-19, I had no idea how I would get out from home because I wasn't even supposed to go shopping unless she said [Participant 23, maiden]*

These responses demonstrate the significant psychosocial and emotional impact of *ukuhlolwa kwezintombi* (virginity testing), particularly in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. The narratives highlight both the psychological distress associated with the practice and its role as a coping mechanism for some individuals.

### **Psychological Distress and Anxiety**

Participant 15 expresses feelings of anxiety related to undergoing virginity testing, particularly due to the invasive nature of the procedure. The discomfort associated with the physical examination suggests a lack of bodily autonomy, where cultural expectations override personal boundaries. However, despite these concerns, the participant continues to take part in the practice due to familial and community pressures, demonstrating how social expectations dictate young women's participation in *ukuhlolwa kwezintombi*, even when it causes personal discomfort. Moreover, the participant's experience during the COVID-19 pandemic underscores the social stigma attached to not undergoing virginity testing. The participant describes exclusion from peer groups, particularly from those who had never participated in the practice, indicating that virginity testing serves as a marker of identity and belonging within the community. The distinction between *amatshitshi* (maidens who participate in the practice) and those who do not reflects the rigid social structures that shape young women's experiences, reinforcing notions of purity and cultural conformity. The stigmatization and alienation experienced by the participant during the pandemic highlight the emotional burden placed on individuals who, for any reason, deviate from traditional expectations.

### **Virginity Testing as a Coping Mechanism**

In contrast, Participant 23 illustrates how *ukuhlolwa kwezintombi* can serve as a form of emotional relief and social support. For this participant, virginity testing was not just about fulfilling a cultural

obligation but also provided a means of escape from a challenging home environment characterized by emotional abuse and neglect. The communal aspects of virginity testing such as social gatherings, singing, and dancing offered a sense of belonging, joy, and temporary relief from personal struggles. The participant's response suggests that, beyond its primary function of assessing virginity, *ukhlohlwa kwezintombi* plays a crucial role in fostering social bonds and emotional well-being for some individuals. However, the COVID-19 lockdown disrupted this form of social support, leaving the participant feeling trapped in an abusive household with no means of escape. This response highlights the intersection between cultural practices and mental health, showing how the absence of social interaction and community engagement during the pandemic exacerbated emotional distress. The participant's statement about having "no idea how to get out from home" underscores the pandemic's impact on individuals who relied on communal gatherings as a refuge from domestic challenges

**OBJECTIVE THREE:** *To discover if there were challenges faced by the teenage girls undergoing the practice*

### **THEME THREE**

#### **4.3.3 PRACTICAL CHALLENGES**

##### **4.3.3.1 Main inhibitors**

COVID-19 lockdown restrictions present significant barriers to the practice of virginity testing. These include meeting restrictions, health risks, access to medical facilities, prejudice and stigma, changes in cultural norms, ethical issues, and resource limitations (Kortman, 2023). According to the participant, during COVID-19, they stopped going for virginity tests because of the lockdown regulations that prohibited both touching and gatherings. To communicate with Omama Abahlolayo and other maidens, they used either WhatsApp voice and video calls or phone calls. However, using cell phones to communicate was a challenge on its own. Some of the participants experienced network problems, especially the ones who were residing at Inzinga and Makhuzeni. Many elders (maidens' parents/guardians and inspectors) were not used to WhatsApp video calls, so the maidens had to teach them how to add a group in one video call. Another participant also mentioned that although using video and WhatsApp calls enabled them to establish connections with maidens, they encountered financial difficulties because of the COVID-19 pandemic, which caused many people to lose their jobs. As a result, many of them could not attend because of network issues and a lack of data. Due to the uncertainty that the world would return to normal following the COVID-19 crisis, some maidens were less afraid of losing their virginity.

The participant said:

*“The biggest challenge I faced as a maiden during COVID-19 was the new strategy that was used instead of meeting physically like we normally do. The use of WhatsApp video calls and phone calls did not work to some of us. The network connections did not do justice for us as our area still doesn't have a stable network. Many elders (maidens' parents/guardian and inspectors) were not used to WhatsApp video calls so we had to teach them how to add a group in one video call. I am still a virgin yes but many of the maidens did not come back to the practice of ukuhlolwa kwezintombi as some were already lost their virginity. So, the decreasing number of maidens in our group really affected us.”* [Participant 18, maiden]

*"Inselelo enkulu engibhekane nayo njengentombi ngesikhathi se-COVID-19 yiqhinga elisha elalisetshenziswa esikhundleni sokuhlangana ngokomzimba njengoba sivame ukwenza. Ukusetshenziswa kwezingcingo zevidiyo ze-WhatsApp kanye nezingcingo akuzange kusebenze kwabanye bethu. Ukuxhumana kwenethiwekhi akuzange kusenzele ubulungiswa njengoba indawo yethu namanje ingenayo inethiwekhi ezinzile. Abadala abaningi (abazali bezintombi / umgcini kanye nabahloli) abazange bajwayele izingcingo zevidiyo ze-WhatsApp ngakho-ke kwadingeka sibafundise indlela yokwengeza iqembu kwelinye ikholi yevidiyo. Ngiseyintombi yebo kodwa izintombi eziningi azizange zibuyele emkhubeni wokuhlolwa kwezintombi njengoba ezinye zazivele zilahlekelwe ubuntombi bazo. Ngakho, ukwehla kwenani lezintombi eqenjini lethu kwasithinta ngempela."* [Umhlanganyeli 18, itshitshi]

Another participant said:

*In addition to the new strategy challenge that was put into place to help us communicate. During COVID-19, nobody was working at home, so I also had a data issue. We were solely dependent on our social grant for income after my parents' jobs were lost. Because I lacked the funds to purchase data or airtime, I was unable to interact with people during phone conversations, WhatsApp conversations, or video calls.* [Participant 17, maiden]

*"Ngaphezu kwenselelo entsha yeqhinga eyafakwa ukusisiza ukuxhumana. Ngesikhathi se-COVID-19, akekho owayesebenza ekhaya, ngakho nami ngaba nodaba lwedatha. Sasincike kuphela kwisibonelelo sethu senhlalo ukuze sithole imali engenayo ngemuva kokulahleka kwemisebenzi yabazali bami. Ngenxa yokuthi ngangingenayo imali yokuthenga idatha noma i-airtime, angikwazanga ukusebenzisana nabantu ngesikhathi sezingxoxo zocingo, izingxoxo ze-WhatsApp, noma izingcingo zevidiyo."* [Umhlanganyeli 17, intombi]

The above responses highlight the challenges posed by the transition from in-person *ukuhlolwa kwezintombi* (virginity testing) ceremonies to digital platforms during the COVID-19 pandemic. One major issue was the digital divide, as many participants, particularly in rural areas, struggled with poor network connectivity and a lack of technological knowledge among elders. Participant 18 notes that teaching guardians and inspectors how to use WhatsApp video calls was necessary, but the unstable network made virtual gatherings difficult. Similarly, Participant 17 underscores financial barriers, explaining that due to job losses in their household, they could not afford mobile

data or airtime to participate in virtual meetings. These responses emphasize how technological and economic disparities prevented many from engaging in the practice, limiting cultural transmission and social connection.

The shift to digital virginity testing also contributed to a decline in maiden participation, as some individuals disengaged from the practice, particularly those who had lost their virginity during the lockdown. As Participant 18 states, the reduced number of maidens in the group affected those who remained, altering the sense of community and cultural solidarity. Additionally, these responses highlight economic vulnerability, particularly among young women from lower-income backgrounds. Participant 17's reliance on social grants demonstrates how financial hardship further limited engagement, restricting both cultural participation and social interactions. Overall, these accounts illustrate how the pandemic exacerbated existing structural inequalities, with lasting implications for cultural continuity and the well-being of those involved in *ukuhlolwa kwezintombi*.

**OBJECTIVE FOUR:** *To find out ways in which ukhlohlwa kwezintombi (virginity testing) endorses gender inequality in Impendle area.*

## **THEME FOUR**

### **4.3.4 INEQUALITY IN PRACTICE**

There are many contrasting views on virginity testing and gender inequality. Some are advocating for *ukhlohlwa kwezintombi*, and some are against it. In many societies, men usually hold higher statuses compared to women. This results from gender inequality, which is defined as the social phenomenon in which people are not treated equally based on gender. The participants were asked if *ukhlohlwa kwezintombi* endorses gender inequality in their residential area (Impendle). Their responses are to be discussed below.

#### **4.3.4.1 Traditional gender roles, norms and values**

In most African countries, men and women are not treated equally due to the differences in socially constructed gender roles, norms and values (Ghanotakis et al., 2012). Gender roles are sets of expected behaviors, attitudes, and characteristics based on concepts of masculinity and femininity established by culture and society (Wienclaw, 2011). Depending on the individual's sex, they are typically regarded as suitable, acceptable, or desirable within society. On the other hand, societal norms refer to particular behavioral standards or regulations, whereas values are broad principles that establish what is desirable or good (Frese, 2015). According to the World Health Organization and other health authorities, virginity testing should be banned since it controls women and girls, feeds stereotypes about female morality and sexuality, and perpetuates gender discrimination (Behrens, 2014). It is also associated with harmful practices like forced and child marriages, as well as violence against women (Behrens, 2014). Essentially, the global consensus among health and human rights organizations is that virginity testing is a discriminatory practice that has no medical basis and should be outlawed, even though certain norms and values may support it. It is crucial to promote values that respect women's rights and dignity rather than those that subject them to invasive and harmful practices (Wienclaw, 2011).

Some participants believe that *ukhlohlwa kwezintombi* is mainly influenced by gender inequality. Some of the participants (maidens) highlighted that they somehow feel compelled to undergo virginity testing due to cultural norms and expectations. They mentioned that the pressure to conform to established practices and avoid social stigma may influence their decision to participate

in *ukuhlolwa kwezintombi*. Young women may undergo virginity testing to uphold family honour and avoid potential shame or social isolation associated with perceived impropriety (Cira, 2015). Mhlongo (2009) also argued that in some cultures, virginity testing can be a manifestation of patriarchal values and control over women's bodies. Cultural norms that support male authority and control may contribute to the continuation of such practices. Furthermore, virginity testing on young women is not a justified method of preventing HIV and unplanned pregnancies because it violates equality principles; the outlawing of the practice in the proposed Children's Bill was received with strong opposition from traditional leaders (Albertyn, 2010).

Participant 19, 27, 24

The participant said:

*"I feel compelled to undergo the practice of ukuhlolwa kwezintombi. The reason I am saying this is because it has been the cultural practice that has been happening even in the past. My mother was once a maiden, and my sister was a maiden until they got married to dad. There are gender roles that influence this; for example, in my society, a woman must be pure in order to marry and bring honour to her family. However, nothing requires or encourages boys to remain pure until marriage."* [Participant 19, maiden]

*"Ngizizwa ngiphoqelekile ukuthi ngenze umkhuba wokuhlolwa kwezintombi. Isizathu sokuthi ngisho lokhu yingoba kube umkhuba wamasiko obulokhu wenzeka ngisho nasesikhathini esedlule. Umama wake waba yintombi, udadewethu wayeyintombi baze bashada nobaba. Kunezindima zobulili ezithinta lokhu; isibonelo, emphakathini wami, owesifazane kumele abe msulwa ukuze ashade futhi alethe udumo emndenini wakhe. Kodwa-ke, akukho okudinga noma okukhuthaza abafana ukuba bahlale behlanzekile kuze kube umshado."* [Umhlanganyeli 19, intombi]

Another participant said:

*Ukuhlolwa kwezintombi, to me, is an indication of patriarchal beliefs and authority over our bodies as women. Such acts are enforced by the cultural norms that support male dominance and control. We are expected to be submissive and adhere to societal expectations of purity and chastity while men are afforded more sexual freedom. So, we end up attending the practice of ukuhlolwa kwezintombi because of the things we are taught in our society"* [Participant 27, maiden]

*“Ukuhlolwa kwamantombazane, kimi, kuyinkomba yezinkolelo zokhokho negunya phezu kwemizimba yethu njengabesifazane. Izenzo ezinjalo ziphoqeelwa yizimiso zamasiko ezisekela ukubusa nokulawula kwabesilisa. Kulindeleke ukuba sizithobe futhi sinamathele ekulindelekeni komphakathi kokuhlanzeka nobumsulwa ngenkathi amadoda enikezwa inkululeko eyengeziwe yobulili. Ngakho-ke, siqeda ukuhambela umkhuba wokuzintombi zokuhlolwa ngenxa yezinto esizifundiswa emphakathini wethu” [Participant 27, maiden]*

Additional participant said:

*“I feel like undergoing ukuhlolwa kwezintombi is one of the way of pleasing and show off to men and to men’s family should it happen that I get married as maiden. This is because men in nowadays are attending our important ceremony (Umkhosi Womhlanga also known as Reed Dance), in an effort to find and complement izintombi, or virgins. The terrible thing that has come out of this is the increased rape cases. Our fellow maidens are raped on the day of Umkhosi Womhlanga and it is now scary because I don’t know when my day is coming. I think boys sometimes rape izintombi (virgins) in order to show their anger and reduce the girl’s pride. To me, no boys should be allowed in our ceremony (Umkhosi Womhlanga) so that issues like rape will be avoided but I am sure this would never be the case because our society favours men.” [Participant 24, maiden]*

*“Ngibona sengathi unomkhubulwane kungenye yendlela yokujabulisa nokukhombisa amadoda nomndeni wamadoda uma kwenzeka ukuthi ngishade njengentombi. Lokhu kungenxa yokuthi amadoda kulezi zinsuku ahambele umkhosi wethu obalulekile (Umkhosi Womhlanga owaziwa ngelika Reed Dance), ngemizamo yokuthola nokuphelelisa izintombi, noma izintombi. Into esabekayo ephume kulokhu ukwanda kwamacala okudlwengula. Ezinye izintombi zethu ziyadlwengulwa ngosuku lwe-Umkhosi Womhlanga futhi manje sekwesabisa ngoba angazi ukuthi usuku lwami luyeza nini. Ngicabanga ukuthi abafana kwesinye isikhathi badlwengula izintombi (izintombi) ukuze bakhombise intukuthelo yabo futhi banciphise ukuziqhenya kwentombazane. Kimi, akekho abafana okumele bavunyelwe emkhosini wethu (Umkhosi Womhlanga) ukuze kuzogwenywa izindaba ezifana nokudlwengula kodwa nginesiqiniseko sokuthi lokhu ngeke kuze kube njalo ngoba umphakathi wethu uthanda amadoda.” [Umhlanganyeli 24, itshitshi]*

The responses above suggest that gender inequality remains deeply rooted in rural areas, persisting into the twenty-first century despite broader societal progress. Many young girls still feel pressured to undergo *ukuhlolwa kwezintombi* (virginity testing), a practice that continues to be endorsed and upheld by the Impendle community, reinforcing cultural expectations for young women while men remain free from similar scrutiny. This reflects a double standard in sexual norms, where female chastity is closely monitored while male sexual freedom is normalized.

The literature supports these findings, emphasizing that virginity testing is a manifestation of gender inequality, perpetuating cultural, social, and institutional biases that disproportionately harm women (Biyela, 2018). As Cira (2015) highlights, the practice reinforces gendered expectations, where girls are expected to preserve their virginity as a symbol of purity and moral worth, while boys are encouraged to engage in multiple sexual relationships as a sign of masculinity. This imbalance underscores the patriarchal structures embedded in Impendle society, which place men in positions of dominance over women and dictate rigid gender roles (Biyela, 2018). Furthermore, virginity testing not only reflects but also reinforces systemic gender discrimination, as it subjects women to public scrutiny, judgment, and potential stigma based on their perceived sexual status. This can have long-term psychological and emotional consequences, including shame, anxiety, and diminished self-worth, particularly for those who fail the test or choose not to participate (Morroole, 2021). In contrast, boys face no equivalent examination of their sexual behavior, further entrenching deep-seated gender imbalances in both cultural and institutional frameworks.

Scholars argue that such practices contribute to the broader marginalization of women, limiting their ability to exercise autonomy over their bodies and reinforcing their subordinate status in both the family and society (Ndlovu, 2017). The expectation for women to uphold cultural ideals of purity can also influence their access to education, economic opportunities, and personal decision-making, as failure to conform may result in social exclusion, family rejection, or diminished marriage prospects (Dlamini, 2019). This highlights the need for critical discourse and policy interventions that challenge oppressive gender norms and promote gender equity, bodily autonomy, and human rights.

**OBJECTIVE FIVE: *To find out how family members and inspectors (omama abahlolayo) encouraged virginity even during Covid-19***

## **THEME FIVE**

### **4.3.5 ENCOURAGEMENT (CONTEXTUAL ROLES)**

#### **4.3.5.1 Role of inspectors (omama abahlolayo) on the practice of *ukuhlolwa kwezintombi***

The omama abahlolayo (inspectors) plays a significant role among maidens. According to the respondents, *ukuhlolwa kwezintombi* is commonly carried out by female inspectors and is known as "omama abahlolayo." They believe that omama abahlolayo plays a significant and complex role in the practice of *ukuhlolwa kwezintombi*. One of the respondents (omama abahlolayo) also highlighted that they are regarded as cultural guardians in their community. Mhlongo (2009) testified that inspectors serve as Social Norm Mediators since they mediate social norms related to gender roles and sexuality.

Omama abahlolayo positions themselves as defenders of cultural rights and as active participants in the fight against HIV/AIDS by promoting abstinence while empowering young people to talk about sex with appropriate elders (Wickstrom, 2010). One of the participants (maiden's guardian/parent) added that they must also ensure they preserve and pass the cultural heritage and identity by upholding the *ukuhlolwa kwezintombi*. Additionally, they ensure that the following generation inherits the cultural meaning and worth of *ukuhlolwa kwezintombi*.

Virginity testing reportedly raises young women's self-awareness by teaching them to respect their bodies. The participants believe that many of the traditional practices that have negative consequences in terms of HIV and AIDS are part of the rituals and ceremonies that community leaders can readily adapt if they are given the necessary health information because all cultures are constantly evolving and reactive to external influences. According to the literature, the process of engaging with leaders to discuss the issues related to HIV. It involves dealing with issues such as violence against women, sexuality, sex work, drug use and men who have sex with other men. They then highlight that culture is essential for human rights and HIV because culture is tied up with the formal legal system (Mokoboto-Zwane, 2016).

Participant 21, 26, 23, 28, 4, 3

*“Inspectors are regarded as cultural guardianship authorities. They ensure that the customs surrounding the practice of ukuhlolwa kwezintombi are followed and they preserve the cultural significance of virginity within the community. They also offer words of encouragement among maidens so that they they’ll be aware of the importance of the practice of ukuhlolwa kwezintombi”*  
[Participant 21 maiden’s mother]

*An inspector's job is to keep the community's purity standards up to date. Young women's virginity is evaluated through physical examinations and cultural markers, such as the presence of an intact hymen and chaste behaviour.* [participant 26, maiden’s mother]

*Omama abahlolayo frequently teach young ladies the value of virginity in the context of their culture. They might offer advice on proper conduct and moral standards that the community expects of young ladies.* [Participant 23, maiden’s mother]

*Inspectors mediate social norms related to gender roles and sexuality. By engaging in ukuhlolwa kwezintombi, they uphold the social norms surrounding female chastity and purity.* [Participant 28, maiden parent]

*Inspectors help to preserve cultural heritage and identity by upholding the ukuhlolwa kwezintombi practice. They make certain that enduring traditions are transmitted from one generation to the next.* [Participant 4, maiden’s parent]

*We often position ourselves as defenders of cultural rights and as active participants in the fight against HIV/AIDS by promoting abstinence while empowering maidens to talk about sex with us. This raises young women’s self-esteem because we are also teaching them to respect their bodies.*  
[Participant 3, inspector]

These responses highlight the role of inspectors as key figures in the practice of *ukuhlolwa kwezintombi*, emphasizing their cultural, social, and moral authority within the community. Inspectors are portrayed as guardians of tradition, ensuring that the practice adheres to established customs and that its cultural significance is preserved. Their responsibilities extend beyond virginity testing to include guidance, education, and moral instruction, reinforcing societal expectations related to female chastity, behaviour, and respectability. The responses also

demonstrate that inspectors act as mediators of social norms, particularly concerning gender roles and sexuality. By upholding the importance of virginity as a cultural marker, they reinforce the idea that young women's purity is central to community values. This aligns with broader patriarchal structures, where female sexual behaviour is closely regulated, while male sexuality remains largely unrestricted.

Furthermore, the responses suggest that inspectors play a dual role in both preserving cultural heritage and addressing contemporary social issues, such as HIV/AIDS awareness and sexual health education. While promoting abstinence and self-respect among maidens, they also position themselves as protectors of cultural rights, advocating for the continuity of *ukuhlolwa kwezintombi* across generations. However, this raises critical questions about bodily autonomy, gender equality, and the potential psychological impact of the practice on young women, particularly in contemporary society.

### **Chapter summary**

This chapter presents the data analysis for the study. The analysis employed qualitative research methods, specifically inductive reasoning, to identify and develop themes and categories from the data. The researcher transcribed the interviews and ensured the recordings and transcriptions were consistent, noting initial themes as they emerged. These themes were then compared across interviews, with repeated themes being assigned codes. The study aimed to explore the impact of COVID-19 on the practice of *ukuhlolwa kwezintombi*, the challenges faced by the girls involved, and the role of virginity testing in perpetuating gender inequality in the Impendle area. The chapter also explores the contrasting views on virginity testing and gender inequality, highlighting how societal norms influence the practice. A key focus is on the role of *omama abahlolayo* (female inspectors), who are seen as cultural guardians in the community and serve as mediators of social norms, particularly around gender and sexuality. Their role in encouraging the practice of virginity testing, even during COVID-19, was emphasized by the participants.

## **CHAPTER FIVE**

### **SUMMARY, RECOMMENDATIONS, LIMITATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS**

#### **5. Introduction**

This chapter presents the final synthesis of the research conducted in this study. It provides a comprehensive summary of the key findings, recommendations, and overall conclusions based on the results discussed in Chapter Four. The primary objective of this chapter is to consolidate the critical insights derived from the research, emphasizing their significance in addressing the study's central inquiry. The study explored the effects of COVID-19 on the practice of *ukuhlolwa kwezintombi* (virginity testing), focusing on the perspectives of young women in Impendle aged 13 to 19. A qualitative approach was employed, utilizing semi-structured interviews with maidens, *omama abahlolayo* (inspectors), and the parents or guardians of the maidens to gain an in-depth understanding of their experiences and perceptions.

The research was based on a sample of 28 participants, comprising 12 maidens, 12 parents or guardians, and four *omama abahlolayo* as key informants. Participants were drawn from various sections of the Impendle area, including Inzinga, Gomane, Similobha, and Makhuzeni regions characterized by their predominantly rural and socioeconomically disadvantaged contexts. Data collection was conducted through semi-structured face-to-face interviews, allowing for a flexible yet focused exploration of participants' perspectives. The study employed non-probability sampling techniques, specifically purposive and snowball sampling. Purposive sampling ensured the inclusion of key informants directly involved in the practice, while snowball sampling facilitated access to additional participants through referrals, thereby enriching the depth of the data collected. This chapter concludes the dissertation by summarizing the research findings, offering recommendations, and discussing the broader implications of the study.

## 5.1 Summary of Chapters

**Chapter One** (also known as an introductory chapter) outlined the background information on the topic, problem statement, rationale, study location, and aims and objectives of this study. I then reviewed the definitions of the key concepts different researchers had brought up. The section for research questions guiding the study was also included, and they were as follows:

- What is the significance of virginity testing in Impendle communities?
- How have the COVID-19 lockdown restrictions impacted the practice of *ukuhlolwa kwezintombi*?
- How do family members and virgin testers encourage virginity even during COVID-19?
- In what ways does *ukuhlolwa kwezintombi* endorse gender inequality in the Impendle area?

This chapter provides a concise overview of the research methodology employed in the study. It outlines the use of qualitative research techniques, including semi-structured interviews, to gain in-depth insights into participants' lived experiences. Additionally, it details the application of non-probability sampling methods, specifically purposive and snowball sampling, to strategically identify and recruit participants with relevant knowledge and experiences. Thematic data analysis was utilized to systematically identify patterns and themes emerging from the data. Furthermore, this chapter presents a brief discussion of the study's theoretical foundations, drawing on social constructivism, cultural determinism, and social identity theories to contextualize the findings within broader sociocultural and epistemological frameworks.

In **Chapter Two**, I provided a comprehensive review of the existing literature related to the study. Numerous national and international studies have examined the practice of *ukuhlolwa kwezintombi* (virginity testing), exploring its cultural, social, and gendered dimensions. Additionally, various studies have analysed the impact of COVID-19 on individuals and their cultural practices, highlighting the far-reaching consequences of the pandemic. The literature review introduced key concepts related to *ukuhlolwa kwezintombi* in the context of COVID-19, shedding light on emerging issues such as increased rates of teenage pregnancy, gender inequality, gender-based violence, poverty, and unemployment, all of which have been exacerbated by the pandemic.

To structure the literature review, several thematic areas were explored: Conceptualizing the cultural practice of *ukuhlolwa kwezintombi*, the historical foundations of *ukuhlolwa kwezintombi*, the significance of *ukuhlolwa kwezintombi*, virginity testing as a gendered cultural practice, virginity testing as a mechanism for societal division, indigenous knowledge and cultural practices, virginity testing within Indigenous knowledge systems, constitutional rights and the practice of *ukuhlolwa kwezintombi*, and Ritual ceremonies, including the Zulu goddess Nomkhubulwane ritual and the Royal Reed Dance festival.

Furthermore, the chapter reviewed existing studies on COVID-19, specifically examining its impact on the performance of cultural customs, rural communities' responses to the pandemic, and the broader effects of COVID-19 on gender dynamics. The chapter also incorporated a detailed discussion of the theoretical frameworks relevant to the study, providing a critical analysis of theories such as social constructivism, cultural determinism, and social identity theory. These frameworks serve as the foundation for understanding the sociocultural and epistemological dimensions of *ukuhlolwa kwezintombi* in the post-pandemic era.

The **Third Chapter** discussed the research methodology that guided the nature of the data presented in the following chapters. I covered in-depth the research design and methodology relevant to this study, including the qualitative approach and its suitability for my research. Methods of data collection (semi-structured interviews, data analysis, validity and reliability, ethical issues, and limitations of this study) were presented. Through semi-structured interviews, I got a close-up look at my study topic and made assumptions and inferences about my participants' expressions and behavior. Thematic analysis was carefully introduced to reflect my experience as it developed into my primary method of data analysis and preparation which was done in the following chapter. The sample approaches worked together to take part in my data collection. As the data collection phase went on, the snowballing helped me meet more participants. Its goal was to direct me toward the most appropriate participants. The use of purposive sampling was beneficial to me because I was able to find my participants easily since I knew who was supposed to participate in my research. I purposely selected the four inspector (*omama abahlolayo*) as my key informants and purposely selected twelve family members of each teenage girls undergoing

*ukuhlolwa kwezintombi*. The twelve teenage girls undergoing *ukuhlolwa kwezintombi* were snowballed with the help of the key informants.

The **Third Chapter** discussed the research methodology that guided the nature of the data presented in the following chapters. I covered in-depth the research design and methodology relevant to this study, with particular emphasis on the qualitative approach and its suitability for exploring my research topic. The methods of data collection, including semi-structured interviews, data analysis techniques, measures for ensuring validity and reliability, ethical considerations, and the limitations of this study, are thoroughly presented. Semi-structured interviews served as a primary data collection method, allowing me to gain an in-depth understanding of my study topic. This approach enabled me to make informed assumptions and draw inferences based on participants' expressions and behaviours, providing rich, nuanced insights into their experiences. Thematic analysis was introduced as the main method for data analysis, aligning with my evolving experience throughout the study. This approach was chosen for its ability to systematically identify and interpret patterns within qualitative data, which was crucial for accurately reflecting participants' perspectives. The data analysis and preparation process, detailed in the following chapter, built upon this methodology.

A combination of sampling strategies was employed to enhance data collection. Snowball sampling played a significant role in expanding my participant pool as the data collection phase progressed. This technique proved invaluable in connecting me with additional participants, guiding me toward individuals best suited for this study. Purposive sampling was particularly beneficial, as it allowed me to select participants who were most relevant to my research objectives. I intentionally selected four inspectors (*omama abahlolayo*) as key informants due to their expertise and central role in the study context. Additionally, I purposively selected twelve family members of teenage girls undergoing *ukuhlolwa kwezintombi*, ensuring that I captured diverse family perspectives. The twelve teenage girls participating in the *ukuhlolwa kwezintombi* process were identified through snowball sampling, facilitated by the key informants. This strategic combination of purposive and snowball sampling methods ensured that the study included participants with the most relevant experiences, enhancing the depth and reliability of the findings.

Ethical considerations were carefully addressed throughout the study, ensuring participants' confidentiality, informed consent, and the respectful handling of sensitive topics. Limitations of the study, including potential biases and challenges encountered during data collection, are also discussed to provide a transparent account of the research process.

In **Chapter Four**, I presented the data presentation and data analysis. The study included 28 participants: four *omama abahlolayo* (inspectors), twelve maidens and twelve maidens' parents/guardians. The outputs supplied a scale of data from which demographic information was derived. Extracts indicating participants' responses were used to support the findings. The extracts were translated from isiZulu to English, and every endeavor was made to keep the translation as close as possible to what the participants said. Data were analyzed using the themes that emerged during data analysis. The chapter also provided relevant material, which supported the qualitative use of thematic analysis.

## **5.2 Summary of Findings and Conclusions**

The study' exploring the effect of COVID-19 towards the practice of *ukuhlolwa kwezintombi* (virginity testing) focusing on the perspective of young women of Impendle between the ages of thirteen to nineteen' produced numerous significant findings. One of the findings revealed by a study included the effects of Covid-19 restrictions. COVID-19 lockdowns and restrictions caused major disruptions to traditional ceremonies associated with *ukuhlolwa kwezintombi*. Social events such as *Umkhosi womhlanga* (Reed Dance) and *Umemulo* ceremonies were suspended, impacting the practice's cultural relevance and continuity. To adapt, most Impendle communities held virtual versions as an alternative way of communicating with maidens, but this changed the customary experience for young women and omama abahlolayo (inspectors). However, using virtual versions as an alternative way of communicating took time as some of the participants needed to be more literate, and their source of income was nagging since many participants lost their jobs due to COVID-19. The next section of this chapter summarizes the main findings of this study.

The following section summarizes the study's findings based on its key objectives. These objectives are subheadings, and brief discussions are provided under each.

The following section summarizes the study's findings based on its key objectives. These objectives are subheadings, and brief discussions are provided under each.

### **5.2.1 Objective One was to investigate the significance of *ukuhlolwa kwezintombi* (virginity testing) in the Impendle area**

The researcher explored modern knowledge and the significance of the practice of *ukuhlolwa kwezintombi*. This objective also aimed at exploring this traditional practice's cultural, social, and personal impacts.

Based on the study's findings, it can be concluded that the practice of *ukuhlolwa kwezintombi* is deeply rooted in the cultural traditions of Impendle. *Ukuhlowa kwezintombi* is believed to uphold cultural values, including purity, respect, and honour for the family and community. This practice is viewed as an excellent opportunity to teach values to girls and give advice to young girls about *ukuziphatha njenge ntombi*. Moreover, the community viewed *ukuhlolwa kwezintombi* as one of the important methods to reduce teenage pregnancies and sexually transmitted infections (STIs). So they encourage young girls to abstain from premarital sex until they get married. The findings established that *ukuhlolwa kwezintombi* is also viewed as an HIV prevention strategy. Prohibiting young girls from engaging in sexual activity before marriage reduces the number of children born out of marriage. Thus, delaying the onset of sexual activity among young women will help reduce the number of people infected with HIV/AIDS, and *ukuhlolwa kwezintombi* will help stop the spread of the disease.

The findings further revealed that *ukuhlolwa kwezintombi*, a traditional practice in Impendle, upholds The study reveals that virginity testing is a part of Zulu cultural identity, encouraging young girls to be proud of themselves and their culture. It is expected that a girl's loss of virginity will result in social respect and prejudice. The study also highlights the importance of *ukuhlolwa kwezintombi*, which elevates girls' status in society, particularly in the Impendle area. These expectations are deeply rooted in cultural traditions and practices.

### **5.2.2 Objective One was to understand how COVID-19 lockdown restrictions have impacted the practice of *ukuhlolwa kwezintombi***

The findings discovered that COVID-19 lockdown restrictions have most likely had multiple effects on the practice of *ukuhlolwa kwezintombi*. COVID-19 lockdown restrictions disrupted other traditional ceremonies, social interactions, and marriage arrangements in AmaZulu communities, including the Impendle area. During COVID-19 lockdown restrictions, *ukuhlolwa*

kwezintombi was disrupted because no close contact was permitted, and all cultural events were cancelled. The findings were consistent with the literature in that they highlighted that *ukuhlolwa kwezintombi* is not limited to testing but also includes socializing, singing, dancing, and group get-togethers among young women. Maidens have the chance to connect, exchange stories, and uphold cultural norms and values at these get-togethers. Thus, prohibiting social contact due to COVID-19 disrupted all that because maidens no longer met. Many maidens who used to adhere to the rules of being a virgin ended up exploring new things and doing whatever they wanted since no one was going to test their virginity. This has resulted in an increase in teenage pregnancy among the youngest girls undergoing virginity testing, with many losing their virginity. and they saw an opportunity to do as they pleased. The COVID-19 ban on social contact disrupted all of that. This demonstrates the importance of girls gathering as maidens when undergoing virginity tests.

The findings established that the inability to undergo *ukuhlolwa kwezintombi* testing due to COVID-19 restrictions resulted in social stigma and discrimination, particularly among young women who are expected to do so as part of cultural norms and traditions. It might be possible that since the maidens were not able to participate in any ceremonies due to COVID-19 lockdown restrictions. The majority in the community started to judge, ostracise, and have their adherence to cultural values and norms questioned. According to the result, this made them lose self-esteem and be less proud of their virginity as there was no proof that they were still pure.

The results showed that inspectors, or omama abahlolayo, had adopted new tactics for *ukuhlolwa kwezintombi* during the COVID-19 lockdown restriction. Telehealth consultations, virtual gatherings, and online education sessions were used in place of in-person meetings and physical touch when testing virginity in young girls. However, they encountered specific difficulties, such as intermittent network problems and the elders' need for more technological expertise. Even during COVID-19, the maidens were crucial in teaching their inspectors how to use WhatsApp video calls to connect and see each other. The maidens played a huge role in teaching their inspectors how to use WhatsApp video calls to connect and see each other even during COVID-19. This offered opportunities to engage with maidens and their families while adhering to public health guidelines. The adaptability and resilience of the community were evident as they navigated the challenges posed by the pandemic. Traditional leaders and community elders played fundamental roles in guiding communities through the changes brought about by the pandemic.

They facilitated discussions on the future of *ukuhlolwa kwezintombi* and sought to balance cultural preservation with evolving societal norms.

The study discovered that the disruption of the cultural practice of virginity testing by COVID-19 had a significant psychosocial impact on the mental health, social interactions, and sense of cultural identity of the young women in Impendle. Due to the practice's cancellation, young women felt a variety of emotions, such as sadness, confusion, and anxiety. The interruption of these ceremonies affected their sense of self and their ties to their cultural history. Social distancing measures and restrictions on gatherings led to increased feelings of isolation among young women, as they missed out on the communal support and validation usually provided by the practice. Young women expressed conflicting feelings concerning postponing or modifying *ukuhlolwa kwezintombi* ceremonies. Some felt a sense of disconnection from cultural heritage or disappointment, while others felt relieved from the pressure and scrutiny that came with the practice.

#### **5.2.3 OBJECTIVE THREE: To discover if there were challenges faced by the teenage girls undergoing the practice**

The findings revealed that during COVID-19, participants stopped virginity tests due to lockdown regulations. Instead, they used WhatsApp, voice and video call, and phone calls to communicate with maidens. However, network issues, elders' unfamiliarity with WhatsApp video calls, and financial difficulties due to job loss made it difficult for many to attend due to network issues and data shortages. The study also discovered that some maidens were less afraid of losing their virginity because they did not know when the world would return to normal after the COVID-19 crisis. Thus, some maidens ended up not returning for virginity testing since some maidens became pregnant.

#### **5.2.4 OBJECTIVE FOUR: To find out ways in which *ukuhlolwa kwezintombi* (virginity testing) endorses gender inequality in Impendle area.**

The findings proved that there's indeed gender inequality within the practice of *ukuhlolwa kwezintombi*. Traditional gender roles are reinforced by virginity testing, which emphasizes the value of female chastity and purity while downplaying the significance of male behaviour. The expectation that women should protect the family's honour through their sexual behaviour is perpetuated by this practice. The findings disclosed that some maidens felt obligated to practice *ukuhlolwa kwezintombi* because of cultural expectations and conventions. The study revealed that

their decision to participate in *ukuhlolwa kwezintombi* may have been influenced by pressure to adhere to social norms and prevent social stigma. The findings also revealed that girls who fail the virginity test face significant stigma, discrimination, and social ostracism, affecting their mental health and self-esteem. This discrimination is gender-specific, as similar inspection and public shaming are not applied to boys and men. Similarly, COVID-19 pandemic has underscored existing gender disparities, with women extremely affected by job losses, increased caregiving responsibilities, and heightened risks of domestic violence. The crisis has highlighted the need for gender-sensitive policies and interventions.

#### **5.2.5 OBJECTIVE FIVE: To find out how family members and inspectors (*omama abahlolayo*) encouraged virginity even during COVID-19**

The study' exploring the effect of COVID-19 towards the practice of *ukuhlolwa kwezintombi* (virginity testing) focusing on the perspective of young women of Impendle between the ages of thirteen to nineteen' produced numerous significant findings. One of the findings revealed by a study included the effects of COVID-19 restrictions. COVID-19 lockdowns and restrictions caused significant disruptions to traditional ceremonies associated with *ukuhlolwa kwezintombi*. Social events such as *Umkhosi womhlanga*(Reed Dance) and *Umemulo* ceremonies were suspended, impacting the practice's cultural relevance and continuity. To adapt, most Impendle communities held virtual versions as an alternative way of communicating with maidens, but this changed the customary experience for young women and *omama abahlolayo* (inspectors). However, using virtual versions as an alternative way of communicating took time as some of the participants needed to be more literate, and their source of income was nagging since many participants lost their jobs due to COVID-19. The next section of this chapter summarises the main findings of this study.

#### **5.3 Limitations of the study**

Exploring the effects of COVID-19 on the practice of *ukuhlolwa kwezintombi* (virginity testing), focusing on the perspectives of young women of Impendle between the ages of thirteen and nineteen, involves several inherent limitations. Acknowledging these limitations is crucial for understanding the context and constraints of the research findings. Future research will also benefit from these limitations because they can deepen our understanding and paint a more complete picture of the interactions between cultural practices and pandemic conditions. The Chief's

gatekeeper letter was the first difficulty I encountered. I received the gatekeeper's letter after almost a year due to the Chief's delays.

Nevertheless, these setbacks helped me finish my first three chapters on schedule, allowing me to concentrate on data collection only. Furthermore, due to the rural nature of Impendle, I also experienced challenges in accessing participants, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic when movement restrictions were in place. The ongoing pandemic, caused by the effects of COVID-19, also influenced participants' willingness and ability to engage in the study. Additionally, restrictions on gatherings and social interactions hindered face-to-face interviews during the enduring pandemic, so the data collection process was prolonged, so it took me a year to finish it. I opted for face-to-face interviews because I knew telephone interviews could have limited the depth of qualitative data. I found discussing *ukuhlolwa kwezintombi* to be culturally sensitive and caused discomfort among some participants, as most participants postponed our face-to-face interviews. Thus, some participants, especially maidens, needed to share honest views.

## **5.4 Recommendations**

Based on the findings of the study "Exploring the effects of COVID-19 on the practice of *ukuhlolwa kwezintombi* (virginity testing)," focusing on young women in Impendle aged thirteen to nineteen, the following recommendations are proposed:

### **5.4.1 Community Dialogue and Education**

- The medical experts should arrange with the Impendle community, including young women, parents, and traditional leaders, to discuss the implications of *ukuhlolwa kwezintombi* in light of contemporary issues and COVID-19-related health concerns. They should also involve other stakeholders, such as governmental and non-governmental organizations, in creating and applying recommendations.
- Community centres and schools should also have education programs to promote an understanding of reproductive health, bodily autonomy, and gender equality. Those programs should also include discussions on the myths and realities of *ukuhlolwa kwezintombi* to empower young women with knowledge. These can assist young women to make informed decisions when it comes to testing.

#### **5.4.2 Supporting Services and Resources**

- **Psychosocial Support:** To address the emotional and psychological effects of societal pressures and cultural expectations surrounding the practice of *ukuhlolwa kwezintombi*, set up support groups or counselling services.
- **Health Care Access:** Guarantee that services related to sexual and reproductive health are available to young women in a non-judgmental, private manner. STI prevention, contraception, and comprehensive sexual education should all be made available.

#### **5.4.3 Culturally-Adaptive Practices**

- **Encourage Inclusivity:** Make sure that cultural norms accept a range of identities and experiences, including those of LGBTQ+ people who might encounter additional difficulties and stigma. They should also approach discussions and interventions with cultural sensitivity and respect for local traditions while advocating for human rights and gender equality.
- **Promote the modification of *ukuhlolwa kwezintombi* ceremonies** to consider contemporary health issues and realities. Examine online or adapted ceremonies that preserve cultural values while honouring personal freedoms and preferences.

#### **5.4.4 Advocacy and Policy**

- **Community Leadership:** Involve local elders and traditional leaders in promoting reproductive rights and gender equality. Urge them to back cultural practices that are changing for the better and that uphold people's right to autonomy and choice.
- **Policy Adjustment:** Advocate for legislative changes that uphold the rights and dignity of adolescent girls and women, such as those that forbid forced or involuntary participation in virginity testing. Work with legislators, legal professionals, and human rights organizations to improve legal frameworks.

#### **5.4.4 Research and Monitoring**

- **Longitudinal Studies:** Conduct longitudinal studies to track the changing perspectives and methods surrounding *ukuhlolwa kwezintombi* in Impendle and surrounding communities. Monitor shifts over time in health outcomes, cultural norms, and the effectiveness of interventions.

- **Data Collection:** Gather in-depth information about the community's attitudes toward virginity testing and its prevalence among various age and gender groups. Utilize research with empirical support to guide community interventions and policy choices.

### **5.5 Final Remarks**

The study examining the impact of COVID-19 on the cultural practice of *ukuhlolwa kwezintombi* (virginity testing) from the perspective of young women in Impendle revealed significant disruptions, along with a range of psychosocial consequences. The pandemic led to the cancellation or alteration of these long-standing rituals, resulting in feelings of loss, anxiety, and a deep sense of disconnection from cultural heritage. These disruptions were further compounded by the social isolation experienced by young women, which undermined the vital communal support typically provided by elders and peers during such cultural events. The absence of this support system not only heightened feelings of alienation but also contributed to increased mental health concerns, including stress, depression, and a loss of identity. Despite these challenges, the community exhibited resilience by exploring alternative approaches to uphold cultural traditions, such as virtual gatherings and smaller, more private ceremonies. This adaptability demonstrated a desire to maintain cultural continuity while addressing the immediate constraints posed by the pandemic. The study highlights the importance of providing mental health support and creating flexible frameworks for cultural practices that can adapt to crises, ensuring that young women are able to navigate such disruptions without compromising their well-being. It also calls for further research on the intersection of cultural practices, mental health, and crisis management, emphasizing the need for a balance between preserving tradition and promoting the mental and emotional health of young women in times of crisis.

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## **Appendix One: Consent to participate in a research study**

My name is Nonjabulo Zondi (216000262), I am currently a Masters candidate specializing in Anthropology at the University of Kwazulu-Natal, Pietermaritzburg Campus. The title of my research is: exploring the effects of COVID-19 on the practice of *ukuhlolwa kwezintombi* (virginity testing), focusing on the perspective of young women of Impendle between the ages of thirteen and nineteen.

The aim of the study is to understand the significance on the practice of virginity testing custom during Covid-19. The aim of the study is to also understand the challenges faced by the teenage undergoing virginity testing during Covid-19 lockdown restrictions. I am interested in interviewing you so as to share your experiences and observations on the subject matter.

Please note that:

- The information that you provide will be used for scholarly research only.
- Your participation is entirely voluntary. You have a choice to participate, not to participate or stop participating in the research. You will not be penalized for taking such an action.
- Your views in this interview will be presented anonymously. Neither your name nor identity will be disclosed in any form in the study.
- The interview will take about 40-45 minutes
- The record as well as other items associated with the interview will be held in a password-protected file accessible only to myself and my supervisors. After a period of 5 years, in line with the rules of the university, it will be disposed by shredding and burning.
- If you agree to participate please sign the declaration attached to this statement (a separate sheet will be provided for signatures)

I can be contacted at: School of Social Sciences, University of KwaZulu-Natal,

Pietermaritzburg Campus, Scottsville, Pietermaritzburg Campus. Email:  
[216000262@stu.ukzn.ac.za](mailto:216000262@stu.ukzn.ac.za)

Cell: [REDACTED]

My supervisor is Dr Nokwanda Nzuza who is located at the School of Social Sciences, Howard College Campus, Durban of the University of KwaZulu-Natal. Contact details:

email: [nzuzan@ukzn.ac.za](mailto:nzuzan@ukzn.ac.za) Phone number [REDACTED]

The Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee contact details are as follows:  
Ms Phumelele Ximba, University of KwaZulu-Natal, Research Office, Email:  
[ximbap@ukzn.ac.za](mailto:ximbap@ukzn.ac.za), Phone number +27312603587.

Would you like to continue with the interview? YES \_\_\_\_\_ NO \_\_\_\_\_

If you have answered 'YES' above, please fill in the agreement and consent section below

which we will both sign and keep a copy of.

My Name/Signature: Nonjabulo Zondi

Participant Name/Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## **Appendix two: Ikhasi Leminingwane Kanye Nemvume Yokubamba Iqhaza Kucwaningo**

### **Imvume**

Mina..... (igama) ngazisiwe ngoncwano olumayelana nokuhlwa kwezintombi ngesikhathi sengciwane le Khorona.

Ngiyayiqonda inhloso nenqubo yalolucwaningo oluthinta izintombi Kanye no Nokuhlolwa okuyisiko elibalulekile.

Nginikeziwe ithuba lokuthi ngiphendule imibuzo mayelana nalolucwaningo futhi ngiphendule ngendlela engiculisayo.

Ngiyaqinisekisa ukuthi ukubamba kwami iqhaza kulolucwaningo kungemvumo yami futhi ngazisiwe ukuthi ngingahoxa kulolucwaningo noma kunini ngale kokuhlawuliswa noma ukuthinteka kwamalungelo ami.

Ngazisiwe ngobungozi obungalandela noma imizwa engavuka ngenxa yokuzibandakanya kwami kulolucwaningo.

Lapho nginemibuzo noma ukukhathazeka khona mayelana nalolucwaningo ngiyazi ukuthi ngingaxhumana nomkoleki wolwazi ngalezi zindlela zokuxhumana

Ucingo: Cell: 0 [REDACTED]  
Noma nge E-mail: [216000262@stu.ukzn.ac.za](mailto:216000262@stu.ukzn.ac.za)

Ngiyazi ukuthi uma kwenzeka ngiba nemibuzo noma ukukhathazeka ngamalungelo ami ngokubamba iqhaza kulolucwaningo noma enye ingxenye ethinta lolucwaningo noma umkoleki wolwazi uqobo ngingaxhumana nethimba lenyuvesi elibhekelela izimiso zokuhle kuleminingwane elandelayo:

Umpathi wami uDkt Nokwanda Nzuzo ofundisa eSikoleni seSocial Sciences, ekhampasi yaseHoward College, eThekwini eNyuvesi yaKwaZulu-Natal. Imningwane Yokuxhumana: i-imeyili: nzuzan@ukzn.ac.za Inombolo yocingo [REDACTED]

Iminingwane yokuxhumana neKomidi Locwaningo Lwezimiso Zokuziphatha Kwabantu Nesayensi Yezenhlalakahle imi kanje: UNksz Phumelele Ximba, waseNyuvesi yaKwaZulu-Natal, Ihhovisi Locwaningo, i-imeyili: ximbap@ukzn.ac.za, Inombolo yocingo +27312603587

Ngiyavuma ukubamba iqhaza kulolucwaningo

Ingaqoshwa ingxoxo yami / ingxoxo ehlanganisa nabanye YES / NO

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**Sayinda**

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**Usuku**

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**Sayinda (ufakazi)  
(Uma ekhona)**

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**Usuku**

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**Sayinda (utolika)**

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**Usuku**

## **Appendix three: Interview guide in English**

### **The Maidens**

- What motivated you to attend virginity testing?
- What challenges have you faced while undergoing virginity testing during Covid-19 lockdown restrictions?
- What are suggested adaptations did you undergo through during Covid-19 as a teenagers attending the ceremony?
- What do you think is the value of virginity testing?
- Do you think virginity testing should be a generational custom and why?

### **Family members**

- What is the significance of virginity testing in the Inzinga community?
- Do you think virginity testing during Covid-19 is still a relevant custom?
- How did you encourage virginity during Covid-19, and why?
- Do you still allow your children to test their virginity during Covid-19?
- Do you think virginity testing still holds the same value as it did before Covid-19?

### **Virgin Testers (inspectors)**

- Why is it important for young girls to undergo virginity testing?
- How does virginity testing work?
- How have the Covid-19 lockdown restrictions impacted on virginity testing?
- What initiative do you have to motivate young girls to continue coming even during Covid-19?
- What criteria were used to limit the number of young virgin girls from attending Reed Dance?
- Has the number of girls who undergo virginity testing declined due Covid-19?
- What were challenges have you faced with the maidens during the lockdown period?

## **Appendix five: Ukuqoqa ulwazi**

### **Imibuzo yokuxoxanisa**

#### **Izintombi ezihlolwayo**

- Yini eyakugquzela ukuthi uyohlolola Ubuntombi?
- Yiziphi izingqinamba owabhekana nazo ngokuhlolwa ngesikhathi semigomo yegciwane iKhorona?
- Iziphi izinguquko owabheka nazo njengomuntu osemusha ohamba unomkhubulwano nangesikhathi segciwane iKhorona?
- Ucabanga ukuthi kusizaphi ukuhamba unomkhubulwane?
- Ucabanga ukuthi ukuhlolwa kwezintombi kufanele kudluliselwe nakwisizukulwane ? yindabda ucabanga kanjalo?

#### **Amalunga omndeni**

- Kubaluleke ngani ukuhlolwa kwezintombi endaweni yaseNzinga?
- Ucabanga ukuthi kusabalulekile ukuhlolwa kwezintombi nangesikhathi segciwane iKhorona?
- Nisazivumela ingane zenu zihambe ziyohlolwa ubuntombi nangalesikhathi seKhorona?
- Nibagquzela kanjani abantwana benu ukuthi baqhubeke nokuhlolwa nangalesi sikhathi segciwane iKhorona, futhi yindaba nibagquzela?
- Ucabanga ukuthi ukuhlolwa kwezintombi kusadlala indima njengoba bekwenzeka kungakafiki igciwane le Khorona?

#### **Omama abahlolwayo**

- Kubaluleke ngani ukuthi intsha ihlolwe Ubuntombi?
- Kungabe kusebenza kanjani ukuhlolwa kwezintombi?
- Kungabe imigomo yegciwane le Khorona libe namuphi umthelela ekuhlolweni kwezintombi?
- Imiphi imizamo eniyenzile yokugquzela izintombi ezihlolwayo ukuthi ziqhube zizohlolwa nangesi khathi segciwane leKhorona?

- Iziphi izindlela enizisebenzisile ukuze ninciphise isibalo sezintombi ezihamba uMkhosi Womhlanga njengoba kunaleli gciwane le Khorona?
- Kungabe sehlile yini isibalo sezintombi ezihlolwayo njengoba kunale Khorona?
- Iziphi izingqinamba enibhekane nazo nezintombi ezihlolwayo ngesikhathi kokuvalwa kwezwe?