

# Zulu Virgins Celebrate Their Bodies, Themselves

By DONALD G. McNEIL Jr.

ENYOKENI ROYAL RESIDENCE, South Africa—To Western eyes, it may seem odd that 2,000 girls who are here to be sternly lectured about virginity are also heavily pressured to strip off almost every stitch of their clothing. But that's the reed dance.

And to the ZULU, the custom makes perfect sense. The proof that a virgin is a virgin is that she is proud of her pure body. Some of the girls dancing before King Goodwill Zwelithini recently even wore beadwork aprons with the words "intombi nto"—"straight girl"—beaded into them.

The reed dance is a Zulu and Swazi rite of spring danced before the King every September, when spring comes to the Southern Hemisphere. The 30-year old King of nearby Swaziland held his on Sept. 9, and chose his newest wife from among the dancers—another royal privilege since the dance is also a kind of debut ante ball.

Here in KwaZulu/Natal, the ancient dance has recently become more political. Besides being a nation-building spectacle, it is a subtle minuet in the struggle for influence between the 50-year-old King and his 70-year-old cousin, Chief Mangosuthu Buthelezi, head of the Inkatha Freedom Party. It has also, in the last three years, become a new front in the battle against AIDS.

Traditionally, young girls from all over the King's domain cut reeds to present him for roofing his huts and lining his cattle pen. The sight is glorious—hundreds of 5-foot girls bearing 25-foot reeds like lances, pennant tops waving in the breeze, weaving slowly in dancing regiments, the first formed entirely of princesses, up the road to the King's stockade.

The King, dressed in leopard skins, carrying a cowhide shield and gold battle-ax and surrounded by his warriors, waits to meet them, kisses one of his daughters and accepts the first reed from her while praise-singers shout the family history to an awed knot of guests.

In the background, three oxen chosen for the night's feast are being butchered, hunks of meat the size of car doors hanging on the corral fence.

There are incongruous modern touches. The King wears expensive Italian sandals, and one of his headmen is in Converse running shoes. The grounds are full of circus tents where the girls will sleep that

night. And they arrive on buses from faraway cities like Durban, pulling off sweaters and flowered underwear under the eyes of their headwomen and the lenses of television news crews, then donning scant dress for the dance. Only those in strictly traditional garb—three-inch-wide bead belts with tiny aprons, not modern cotton miniskirts—are allowed in the front ranks.

Do the cameras and the male onlookers bother these girls, who usually wear school uniforms and other teen-age-style clothes?

"No," said Nombuhle Buthelezi and Mbalentle Zwane, who had led a high-kicking dance in a circle of 50 classmates. They participate, they said, "because we are virgins," explaining that they did not mind the cameras and wanted only "to set a good example to others" and please their parents, who "love this thing."

"No," said Princess Sduzo Ndlovu, 23, daughter of the King's sister and a student at Natal Technical College, who was here with classmates filming a documentary on the festivities. "I have been doing this since I was 4 or 5. People can see how fat I am, but I like to show myself. You are saying, 'Look at me. I'm proud.'"

The reed dance was always nominally reserved for virgins, but that has taken on new emphasis since AIDS began to ravage rural Zulu villages. Many of the dance groups are run by Flowers of the Nation, a movement started in 1995 with the patronage of the royal family to encourage chastity. Its symbol is a long Zulu shield between two red ribbons. Girls are encouraged to form clubs to discuss sex and marriage; the headwomen quiz the boys whom the girls express an interest in.

There are monthly visual virginity checks, an old Zulu custom that had fallen into disuse. The national Health Minister, Dr. Nkosazana Zuma, herself a Zulu princess, endorses the practice.

As Princess Dumezweni Mahlango, a patron of Flowers of the Nation, put it, "We are teaching them in traditional ways, not telling people about condoms and whatever."

After the dancing, as the girls shivered on a chilly, overcast afternoon, the King gave a long, sometimes laughter-provoking speech extolling traditional values. "Men used to go to the river to propose to girls," he said. "That has changed because we have taps in our homes." Since girls went to the river in groups, older sisters would grill the boys to see if their intentions were honorable. The King wants the custom revived. "We must show other people the self-respect of the

Zulus' he said, urging the girls to show virtue.

The King also reminded the girls of the dangers of sexually transmitted diseases and the humiliation of divorce—a woman who cheats is sent back to her family, who sometimes have to pay a cow as a peace offering. "Even grandmothers who sleep around can get H.I.V. — anyone can get H.I.V.," the King counseled. "Stick to one man from the beginning until you die."

Many rural women are infected by their husbands but because the men often work in cities, there were very few youths to be lectured to behave themselves too.

After the speeches, the royal family passed out T-shirts that read "I am a virgin" on the back.

The ceremony has other undertones that hint at the internal politics of Zulu nationalism. The King and Chief Buthelezi had a nasty public severance of ties in 1994. The King tried to cancel late-September Zulu festivities that year, and the Chief retaliated by calling boycotts of ceremonies that the King favored.

The royal patronage of Flowers of the Nation led to larger crowds here. "People had been dragging their feet," said Khumlane Mahlangu, a member of the royal household and an organizer. "The King should have thousands of people to address, not 30. Somebody had to take the initiative to revive this ceremony."

This year's reed dance was the biggest many years, observers said. Chief Buthelezi did not attend, but prominent members of his party did, which local journalists said was significant.

Since 1997 the feud seems to have abated, as both the King and Chief Buthelezi have forged good relationships with Mr. Mandela, and neither has been left powerless in the new South Africa ruled by the African National Congress. On a broader scale, Zulu nationalism and calls for an independent kingdom have all but disappeared from public debate, and the political violence once rampant in the province is now largely confined to the Richmond area, where a new political party, the United Democratic Movement, appears to be fighting with the A.N.C., not Chief Buthelezi's Inkatha.

In about three months, on a date to be set by the King, will be the boys' ceremony, the first fruits dance. As a symbol of national unity it is not nearly so gentle. To signal that his people may eat the season's crops, the King, dressed in green plants, smashes a pumpkin. Then he and his warriors proceed into the corral and beat an ox to death with their fists.

Naked girls may be photographed, but those rites cannot. The King in green and the death of the ox, said Mr. Mahlangu, "are not to be seen by everyone—not even all Zulus."