

# Good essay about relevance of the umcwasho sex ban ritual in the 21st century

[Education](#), [Discipline](#)



Umcwashi was a traditional custom of chastity and sexual restraint applied to young unmarried Swazi girls (Rooyen & Hartell 321). The custom prohibited young maidens who had reached puberty from having sex within a stipulated time set by the king. The purpose of this custom was to ensure that youths maintained their virginity that marked their sexual morality. In addition, it was aimed at teaching young adults the quality of self-restraint. Those who adhered to the ritual earned respect from both their peers and elders.

When the time of the ceremony came, the king personally announced the ritual, the age of the girls to participate and the duration. After the proclamation, the appointed elderly women (teachers) inspected and selected the girls, determined the teachings that they would receive, and acted as confidants and role models for the maidens. The teachers were women who had successfully gone through the custom themselves. Other rules included confidentiality of teachings, non-contact with males, obtaining participation consent from their parents and use of passwords. Such passwords included Simile! (" We are keeping sexual matters on hold"), Sancoba! (" We are winning!") and Sewela! (" We are crossing over!") (Rooyen & Hartell 330). The participants also wore distinctive headgears and clothing that distinguished their ages. The junior maidens wore short beaded skirts called indlamu. Conversely, the " senior maidens wore long skirts, crisscrossing the two pieces of cloth attached to the waist, around their bodies" (Rooyen & Hartell 333).

The ritual consisted of three stages: separation, restoration and inclusion (Rooyen & Hartell 327). Separation involved selection of the girls and

delivery of rules. In addition, they abandon their childlike lifestyles and adopt behaviors attributed to adulthood. Restoration involved an intense training and development of intellectual, emotional, spiritual and moral faculties. Inclusion stage involved the transformation into a new identity, accompanied by distinctive roles, responsibilities and status within the community. An inclusion ceremony was held within the royal court to celebrate the girls' coming of age. After the ceremony, the maidens undertook a cleansing ceremony at the river to indicate their chastity, and were declared grown-ups.

The umcwaso tradition had several benefits. Firstly, it marked the transition of young girls from childhood to adulthood. During this period, the maidens received education on the traditions and cultures of their tribes, and instructions on sexuality. Therefore, the successful completion of the ritual marked the enculturation, moral development and maturity of the Swazi girl. Secondly, it was a mark of self-restraint on the boys since they would not engage in sexual activities if no girls were willing to. Thirdly, the umcwaso enabled parents and community elders to pass on their traditions to future generations. Moreover, the parents of maidens who successfully completed the ritual earned respect and honor in the community. Fourthly, the ritual served as a means of instilling and maintain the moral fiber of the nation. Young adults mastered the concept of self-restraint and thus could control their impulses and avoid the pitfalls associated with uninhibited sexual activities such as early pregnancies and prostitution. Furthermore, the ritual promoted unity since it brought communities together.

The 21st century ushered in modernity in dressing and perpetuated the

decline of cultures and traditions of the past. Nowadays, people begin experimenting with sex in their teen years and very few still practice virginity. They obtain information from the internet, television programs and pornographic magazines, which mostly present a distorted view on sex and love. Statistics released by the United Nations in 1999 indicated that a “quarter of the Swaziland adult population had HIV” (Voice of America par. 5). Thus, the sex ban highlights the severity of the HIV pandemic in the country. However, the ban has little impact on people’s sexual activities because young adults no longer consider virginity a prized possession like past societies. In fact, being a virgin may subject someone to ridicule and segregation among one’s peers. In addition, the modern society is fragmented, and parents no longer have control over their children’s lives. This loss of control stems from distant learning such as boarding schools, and long school hours which avail little time for parental advice. The sex ban only makes teens and young adults devise new ways of meeting and engaging in sexual activities. Moreover, the dressing gear prescribed under the new law is outdated and unfashionable. Hence, young adults are reluctant to wear them in public.

### **Work cited**

Rooyen, L., & Hartell, C. “ The Traditional Custom of Chastity and Sexual Restraint in the Education of the Young Swazi Girl.” *International Journal of Adolescence and Youth* 15. (2010): 319–342. Available at [http://repository.up.ac.za/bitstream/handle/2263/16484/VanRooyen\\_Traditional%282010%29.pdf?sequence=1](http://repository.up.ac.za/bitstream/handle/2263/16484/VanRooyen_Traditional%282010%29.pdf?sequence=1)

Voice of America. “ Swaziland's Leader Announces 5 Year Ban on Sex for

<https://assignbuster.com/good-essay-about-relevance-of-the-umcwaso-sex-ban-ritual-in-the-21st-century/>

Young People - 2001-09-26." 28 Oct. 2009. Web. 23 Oct. 2014. Available at <http://www.voanews.com/content/a-13-a-2001-09-26-25-swaziland-s-66962162/378323.html>