

Tool 4: How does culture influence relations between men and women in church and society?



“Some men appeal to ‘ancestral traditions’ or ‘sacred texts’ to defend patriarchal privileges... The task lies in setting ‘gender-equitable’ norms and values within the various religions and cultures.”

Ezra Chitando¹⁴

¹⁴ In: Haddad, Beverley. 2011. *Religion and HIV and AIDS: Charting the Terrain*. Pietermaritzburg: University of KwaZulu Natal Press

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This tool explores some aspects of our upbringing that are influenced by our cultures and traditions that we often take for granted, without thinking about whether they are positive or have a harmful effect on men and women and gender relationships.

Some of them are positive and life-giving for both men and women. These should be maintained, and saved from getting lost in the face of change. Others are, or have become, destructive to human dignity and freedom, and contradict Jesus’ promise of abundant life to all. We need to have the courage to speak out against them as the Church.

Cultural practices are accepted ways of doing things in a particular group. These are often based in social assumptions or values a society places on certain things. A cultural practice can become a tradition if it is passed on from parents to children, until it becomes an acceptable practice in that culture.

This tool opens up space to explore these influences and how the church can respond.¹⁵

¹⁵ This tool relies heavily on:
Council of Churches in Zambia, Evangelical Fellowship of Zambia and Zambia Episcopal Conference, facilitated by Mindolo Ecumenical Foundation. 2011. The Church’s Training Manual on Gender Justice and Gender Based Violence in Zambia. Lusaka.



What do we mean by culture and tradition?

Sometimes we use the same words, but mean different things. So this tool looks more deeply at the definition of Culture introduced in Tool 2, and talks about how culture can influence gender relations and affect the wellbeing of both women and men.

Culture is made up of the social customs or accepted ways of doing things, marking special events, and distributing roles and privileges. In wider society, it includes social, political and economic practices. Cultures also include the attitudes, expectations, behaviour, religious beliefs, basic worldview, and the ritual practices of people.

Tradition is “the handing down or handing over of beliefs or customs from one generation to the next.” (Cheryl Bird, 2008)

Upbringing: Our understanding of the world usually comes to us from our parents, elders, teachers and religious leaders. This is how culture and tradition are passed on from one generation to the next.

The way societies view the world is determined by those who have the power to influence public opinion. Throughout history, this has mostly been men. As a result, the basic beliefs, traditions and cultural practices that have been passed on from generation to generation are mostly defined by men's understanding of the world.

Culture and gender

Cultural beliefs and traditions heavily influence the social beliefs and assumptions that affect how we understand what is 'normal' right or appropriate. Often people from different cultures disagree, for example, on what is appropriate clothing for a man or woman to wear.

Think about it – Jesus never wore trousers, because he wore the traditional robes that men wore in the Middle Eastern Jewish society of his time. What do you think he might wear if he appeared in Lesotho today, or if he appeared in Zambia or Malawi?

Can cultures change?

Think about it. Many of our ancestors walked around in animal skins, and the young women in some cultures did not even wear a top! Yet, we see few people doing these things nowadays, except perhaps on a special cultural commemoration event. This cultural practice has died out in many communities.

So cultures are not just different in different groups, but the same cultures do change over time. Traditions also die out, change or new ones develop. This depends on what a community or society values as important.



Cultures do change over time. Contemporary clothing worn with traditional accessories and hairstyle.
Source: www.wikipedia.org

It is possible to challenge and bring about change to cultural assumptions about men and women and how they should behave and relate. It is usually those with the most power that influence what a society values most.

But in modern society, anyone can decide to do things differently, if they are prepared to convince others why.

It is up to each of us to decide what kind of society we want to our children to live in, and talk to other people about what cultural practices and traditions will help preserve the values we want to hold on to. We also have to have the courage to question those that undermine some people's freedom, dignity or safety.

Even if sometimes we will end up in arguments or be judged for doing the 'wrong' thing, we can make decisions about whether we want to support those cultural practices that are not positive in our own lives and families or not.

Questioning the meaning of "our culture"¹⁶

Some writers¹⁷ have shown that in precolonial times African culture was also based in patriarchal systems, but it was very different from what many young men refer to as "our culture" today.

Women were respected, not as equals, but as complementary and essential role players in the economic system of the day. This revolved around homestead subsistence farming, the production of crafts and tools (both of which women were in charge of), and hunting and warfare (which were the priority areas for men). While overall headship remained with men, in many communities women played active leadership roles in their spheres of work, both economically and in some cases politically.

Unlike most European languages, many African languages do not have male and female pronouns, and many names are used for either male or female children. This also shows that

¹⁶ This section is adapted from a PACSA Factsheet on Masculinities. Forthcoming 2014.

¹⁷ Examples include: *Ufo Okeke Uzodike and Christopher Isike. 2012. Towards a Theoretical and Cultural Analysis of Dangerous Masculinities in Contemporary Africa: Can we Reinvent African Patriarchies to Curb HIV and AIDS?* In Ezra Chitando and Sophie Chirongoma (eds). 2012. *Redemptive Masculinities: Men, HIV and Religion*. Geneva: WCC Publications (pp. 31-53).
Ntuthuka yaManguni Khuzwayo. 2012. A Perspective from a Traditional Leader. In Daniela Gennrich (ed.) 2013. *Men and Masculinities in South Africa*. Volume 2. Pietermaritzburg: PACSA and Sonke Gender Justice.

gender was less of an issue than age and seniority. For example, young men in precolonial times submitted to the leadership of older women as well as older men. Religious ceremonies in many precolonial communities and how they dressed, also put more emphasis on seniority and other markers of social status rather than on gender.

While women's fertility was highly valued, as this was important for the continued survival of tribes and communities, their bodies were not seen as objects merely for the sexual pleasure of men.

So what happened?

The writers say that women lost their status as communities came in contact with colonial and missionary powers from Europe. This was because these foreigners imposed a different (public) economic system that devalued the economics of the homestead. They also selected certain men to benefit economically (through cash crops) and politically (through imposed chiefdoms, who would give away tribal land to enrich themselves). This introduced a new kind of patriarchy – it not only gave men greater power over women, but it also brought in a hierarchy between men based on wealth and political power. As more tribal land was lost to colonial settlements, and cattle-bartering was replaced by cash as wealth, many men were also drawn to work in the towns as labourers earning minimal wages. They often did not return for a whole year. This meant their sons grew up without proper mentoring from their fathers, and this is how many traditions became misunderstood by the younger generation of men.

Missionary teachings about sex and marriage and the inferiority of women as being unfit for leadership, had a huge influence on how African communities viewed women over time. This also entrenched a system that lost respect for women, devalued the homestead economy, and considered it right for men to control how their women lived their lives.

These writers go on to question the cultural practices that many men today say are “our culture” - especially when this is used to defend their aggressive and disrespectful practices towards women. They say it is actually a form of ‘culture’ that has been degraded by colonial interference in the social systems of African people and does not represent truly African values and norms.

For example:

- *Ubusoka*: this concept allowed men to engage in sexual activity outside of marriage with women, but penetrative sex was not allowed. This was copied by the sons of the first generation of migrant labourers, except that they did have penetrative sex, and “this resulted in them having children all over” (Khuzwayo, p. 43).

- Elopement (*Kutzizya* in Tonga, *Kusemya* in Namwanga, *Ukuthwala* in isiZulu): this tradition was meant as a space for a young woman who objected to the man her family had chosen for her to marry. Her brothers, sisters and friends would kidnap her and take her to her chosen husband. What this has become is a licence for an (often much older) man to kidnap a girl or woman of his choice against her will. Khuzwayo (p.49) says this is a human rights abuse and is not supported by Contralesa (Congress of Traditional Leaders in South Africa).



Time to talk

- Talk about the arguments made above. Which ones do you find convincing, and which do you disagree with?
- Discuss each of the cultural practices below, and think about whether they might have existed in this form in pre-colonial times. Decide whether you think these are harmful, because they undermine the human rights of women, give men too much power over women's bodies and women's lives, or can even harm them.
 - Wife inheritance (Tonga, Zulu, Xhosa) – 'Sexual cleansing' when a woman's partner dies. Often this involves being forced to have sex with the brother of her husband.
 - Early marriage – in some cultures it is acceptable for girls to be given in marriage by their parents before they turn 16.
 - Wife battering – is seen in some groupings as a 'sign of love', although it is unlikely that it was acceptable in traditional culture.
 - Ufisi (Chichewa) - an elderly man is asked to go secretly to a small house, where a virgin is being kept as part of her initiation and have sex with her before she 'graduates' from her seclusion.
 - Female Genital Cutting: This has various forms, ranging from removing a girl's clitoris (organ for sexual pleasure) to sewing up her vagina completely.
 - Incest - In some cultures it is acceptable for a father to have sex with his biological daughter (though in most it is taboo).
- Can you think of other practices that are referred to as "African culture" these days that degrade women, and rob men of the chance and challenge to be responsible and respectful in their relationships?
- If you are from a different culture altogether, can you share some positive and some harmful cultural practices? How do they affect the dignity of women and the relationships between men and women?

The writers challenge us to 'modernise without westernising'.

- How could you use the above insights to create a new framework of cultural beliefs that takes the best out of African precolonial culture and Western cultural ideas and rejects those that are destructive?
- How could you use these to advocate for gender transformation in your own community, church and country?
- How did Jesus relate to the traditional cultural practices of his day, and what can we learn from him?
(E.g. Think about him breaking traditions like taboos, when eating food meant as sacrifice, his reaction to them stoning the woman caught in adultery, or the way he talked to women in public, which was seen as degrading for Jewish men).

Socialisation and prejudice



Time to talk

Have you ever heard any of these sorts of statements about women?

- Is a woman a person? (Lozi)
- Women have no mouth. (Beti proverb, Cameroon)
- Women have no heads. (Tonga)
- Women never reign. (Igbo)
- Whatever a man demands in a marriage must be given by a woman because the man has paid *lobola* [bride price] (Tonga, Zulu)
- What the devil does in a year, an old woman does in an hour. (Moorish)
- If you give your heart to a woman she will kill you. (Northern Nigerian)
- A man's "Yes" is a "Yes"; a woman's "Yes" is often a "No". (Tswana)
- Obedience to a woman makes one enter hell. (Moorish)
- A woman is like the milk of the young coconut, it is not pleasant except in its shell. (Swahili)
- Only a fool will take a no from a lady. (Malawi)
- An elephant eats from more than one tree. (Venda)

And from the Bible:

- "Give not your strength unto women, nor your ways to those who destroy kings." (Proverbs 31 vs 3)

Can you add any others from your culture?

- How do they make you feel?
- How do you think these kinds of sayings influence people's attitudes and relationships between men and women?
- Can you think of any sayings or songs that promote positive and healthy relationships between men and women?
- How can you use idioms, sayings and songs in your culture to raise awareness of the deep-seated prejudices that exist in your culture and society today?
- Do you think this can help people decide to do things differently? What might be some obstacles in the way?

Can you think of any idioms that put women and girls in a more positive light?

- How can you use these to instil positive attitudes in the minds of boys and girls as they grow up?

Positive Cultural Practices

Some cultural practices are **positive** and promote mutual respect, love and/or power relations between men and women, or protect them from abuse:

For example:

- The value of Ubuntu has led to a number of cultural practices in different Southern African cultures that are based on the understanding that I am the person I am because of the other people who are around me. Or, put in another way: I am responsible not only for myself but also for others.
 - One of the practices related to this is that every child is everyone's child. In other words, every adult has a responsibility for looking after every child in a village or community and protecting them from harm. If this were still practised, then more people would prevent child abuse or confront a perpetrator.
 - Another is the practice called *ilima* (in isiZulu) – that the whole community will come to the aid of someone in trouble, or if they are building a house, etc. If this were practised in a fresh way, it might lead to more people intervening if they witness a crime, or at least being prepared to come forward as a witness in court.
- It is taboo in some cultures for a father to beat a girl child that has reached puberty. This intends to protect her dignity and safety and limits the power of a father.
- It is taboo in most cultures for a man to have sex with his daughter or sister. This intends to prevent incest.



Time to talk

- Can you think of other cultural practices that promote respect and/or protect women against abuse?
- Discuss whether and why you agree that the above practices contribute towards healthy gender relations.

The Effects of harmful cultural practices on people's lives

We have seen that there are sayings, traditions and cultural practices that harm girls and women, which prevent them from becoming fully themselves, making them suppress their feelings, or forcing them to do things that they are not comfortable with or are harmful to them. Some of these effects have become even more serious in this age of HIV and AIDS.

But there are also those that harm boys and men too, even if not in exactly the same ways.



Time to talk

- Talk about some of the harmful traditional practices in your own culture. On a large sheet of flipchart paper, draw up the following table:

Beliefs, sayings and traditional cultural practices that are not good for GIRLS AND WOMEN	Specific EFFECTs on GIRLS AND WOMEN (and gender relations in general)

Beliefs, sayings and traditional cultural practices that are not good for BOYS AND MEN	Specific EFFECTs on BOYS AND MEN (and gender relations in general)

- Talk about ways to raise awareness of the negative effects of these practices, songs and sayings.
- How can you use the positive as well as the negative beliefs, sayings and traditional cultural practices you talked about above to conscientise people to work towards more positive sayings and cultural practices that promote gender equality, justice and harmony?

Culture and tradition can block work for improved gender justice

Sometimes, people refer to their cultures as an excuse for not wanting to become more just in their gender relations. At other times, cultural beliefs and practices make it hard for women to get help when they are in trouble. And at still other times, women experience a clash between their cultural and biblical beliefs, or between the social expectations on them and their biblical beliefs.

Women prevented from seeking help



Time to talk

Read the quotation below, from a clergy wife, and talk about the questions that follow.

“There is a traditional teaching that it’s usually the woman’s fault when there is violence in the home, and that the woman must repent.

But these days there is more awareness about gender based violence and saying no, although this is at variance with traditional teaching. The Zambian Mother’s Union has started talking about gender based violence, and we even attend workshops.

But still, very few women speak out if they are being abused personally, because they feel it will bring shame on the family or discredit their husband. So it is as if they have knowledge about gender based violence, but they still do not feel free to speak out, because of cultural and social pressures to bear it in silence.” Mrs Ruth Nwaou, Anglican Priest’s wife in Zambia

- How can churches help women to speak out when they are victims of abuse?
- How can churches speak out against abuse in wider society?
- What theological basis is there for standing up against abuse and encouraging women to seek help?
- Do you know anyone that is in an abusive relationship but cannot speak about it? What can you do to help? What can she do? (See also Tool 9 on Gender Based Violence).

Traditional beliefs and practices can prevent women from exercising their ministry freely



Time to talk

Read and talk about the story below.

“I was visited recently by a group of male lay leaders, asking me how it was possible that I had performed every Sunday for the past month! I tried to explain that I had not menstruated over any weekend, but there was visible unhappiness that I might have ‘defiled’ the Lord’s ministry!”

Talk about this difficult subject:

- Is it acceptable for women to exercise their ordained ministry while menstruating?
- What biblical justifications (if any) are there for forbidding women from working for God while menstruating? (Be careful not to impose your cultural beliefs or the cultures of biblical times on spiritual truths.)

Society and identity



Time to talk

Read this story below, and answer the questions.

"I was taught to work hard, to persevere, to bear unbearable conditions. I am a woman you see. Also the name that I was given (Sizane) means "What is the use of me?" and my second name (Dumazile) means the family was disappointed. I came to the wrong place. Nobody needed me. They all expected a boy child. So I was a disgrace." Dumazile

- How does this story make you feel?
- When you were growing up, were you treated differently from your brothers or sisters? How did this make you feel? How do you think they felt?
- If you are a parent, do you regard and treat your girl and boy children differently? Why? How do you think this makes them feel?
- How do you think negative attitudes about male and female children affect how people treat girls? Do you think it contributes to the level of respect women have for themselves, and men have for women?
- Is it okay for a woman to accept "unbearable conditions"? Why? Or Why not?

Sometimes cultural beliefs and biblical teachings clash

We talked in Tool 2 about the different discourses that influence gender relations. Most men and women's identities are shaped by these different discourses, or beliefs about gender.



Mrs Chisirimunhu conducting the Mpopoma Choir Methodist Church in Zimbabwe, Bulawayo during the Zimbabwe Council of Churches Golden Jubilee celebration in Harare.

Source: Loveness Jambaya Nyakujarah



Time to talk

Talk about the two stories below, using the questions that follow them. Spend more time on the very last question after both stories.

Connie's husband has two girlfriends. Sometimes he even brings one of them home. She does not confront him about it and just accepts it as part of life. She says that men do that. There is a saying in Venda that "A man eats from more than one tree". She feels a bit uncomfortable in church, because the Bible says that marriage is between only one man and one woman. But she accepts that she cannot do anything about it. Sometimes she wonders if he might be HIV Positive, because he does not seem healthy lately. But, she says, "God does not want me to deny him".

- How do you feel about Connie's situation?
- What are the different discourses or beliefs influencing her life? Are they life-giving or death-dealing?
- How would you advise her if she was your friend?

Eunice is not feeling well. Her illness began shortly after her husband got a new girlfriend. She and her mother believe the girlfriend has put a curse on Eunice, and she visits the sangoma to ask him to sort out the girlfriend. Her church group also comes once a week to pray with her for God's healing.

- Why do you think Eunice has got sick?
- She is trying to find a solution based on two conflicting discourses (ways of talking about women and men) in her life. What are they?
- What other discourses could influence her to find a healthy way forward, related to health as well as gender relations?
- How would you advise her if she was your friend?

- Do you ever find your biblical and cultural beliefs clash? How do you resolve this? How does it affect your life? Share your stories with one another.

Culture, tradition and religion

Myths¹⁸ and stories that are handed down over generations

There are some traditional stories that are handed down between generations, which deeply affect how a society understands how the world should be. This is not just about men and women and how they should be and act, but they influence our values and our sense of what is right or wrong.

Some of the most powerful of these are myths and sacred texts about how the world came to be. We looked in Tool 3 at the Biblical creation myths that have strongly influenced the many

¹⁸ The word Myth is used here to describe traditional stories that teach moral and life lessons, whether they are based on historical fact or not. Many of the sacred Scriptures of different religions are mythological.



societies that were evangelised by missionaries over generations. We look at some others together below.



Time to talk

Creation stories

There are many stories about creation which exist in African and other cultures.

- Do you know any? When you grew up, were you taught that these were true?
- How are these stories similar and different from the biblical accounts?
- The biblical accounts have come out of ancient Jewish tradition, which are discussed in Tool 3 and Christianity has adopted these. Do you think they are factually true? Does it matter if they are not? What is the purpose, do you think, of the creation myths in society?

Read the following two creation stories and talk about them. One is from Malawi and the other from KwaZulu Natal in South Africa.

The Kaphirintiwa Myth of Creation

In the beginning there was Chiuta (God) and the Earth. Chiuta lifted the sky. Below him was the earth, waterless and lifeless.

One day dark clouds filled up and covered the sky. Lightning flashed and claps of thunder rent the air. The sky opened and in a great shower of rain came down Chiuta, the first man and woman, and all the animals. They landed on Kaphirintiwa, a flat-topped hill in the mountains of Dzalanyama.

Afterwards the ground where they landed turned to rock, and footprints and the tracks of many animals can be seen to this day. The man's footprints are larger than the woman's and you can see the imprint of the hoe, a winnowing basket and a mortar. Plants and trees grew on the earth, yielding abundant food and God, the humans and the animals lived together in happiness and peace.

One day the man was playing with two sticks, a soft one and a hard one. He twisted them together and accidentally invented fire. Everyone warned him to stop but he would not listen. The grass-land was set alight and there was great confusion.

Among the animals the dog and goat ran to the man for protection, but the elephant, the lion and their companions ran away full of rage against him.

The chameleon escaped by climbing to the top of the tree. He called to God to follow him but Chuita answered that he was too old to climb. When the spider heard this he spun a fine thread and thus lifted God to safety.

So God was driven from the earth by the wickedness of the man and as he ascended he pronounced that henceforth the man and woman must die and shine forth in the heavens.

Zulu Creation Story¹⁹

In the beginning, there was a large swamp called Uhlanga. One day, the Sky God, called the Great One, descended from the heavens and approached Uhlanga. "Will you marry me?" he asked the swamp.

"Of course," she responded. And from their union, the whole world was created. Shortly after the marriage, the Great One noticed two types of coloured reeds growing in the swamp. He picked one of each colour and announced, "From these reeds, I shall make humans!" He made one man and one woman. These two humans became the ancestors of all the people on the earth.

The Great One wanted to give gifts to his new humans. He thought about what they needed most. "My creations need light!" the Great One said, and he hurled the sun and moon into the sky. Still not satisfied, he cried out: "Let there be animals in the forest and birds in the sky! Let there be insects in the grasses and fish in the seas!" And as he cried out their names, these creatures came into being. Finally, he commanded, "Let there be water, so that my creations can drink! Let there be fire, so that they can cook their food!" And his words brought these things into existence, as well.

The Great One proudly observed the world he had created. He decided that he would give humans one more gift. He summoned Unwaba (pronounced oon-WAH-bah), the chameleon. The Great One said: "Make your way down the tree that connects heaven to earth, and deliver this message to the people: 'No living things that I have created will ever die.'" "As you command," Unwaba responded, and he began his journey to earth. However, the chameleon saw no need to hurry. "It is best that I go slowly down these branches, so that I do not fall and injure myself," he thought. "And it probably won't make a difference if I stop for a while to nibble on these delicious plants."

¹⁹@Teachers' Curriculum Institute Early Humans 65

Meanwhile, the Great One had reconsidered his final gift to the humans. He decided that he did not want life on earth to go on forever, after all. He called for Intulo the lizard, and said to him: "I have changed my mind. Go down to earth and deliver this message to the people: 'All living things that I have created will eventually die'"

"And go quickly, because once my word is spoken to the people, it cannot be changed!" "I shall leave at once!" assured Intulo. "I shall race to earth as fast as I can!" Intulo scurried down the tree that connects heaven to earth. Breathlessly, he called the people together and announced, "The Great One has said: 'All living things must eventually die. All people, all animals, all fish, all birds, and all insects in time will become nothing.' This is the message from the Great One."

Later, after Intulo delivered this message, Unwaba the chameleon finally arrived on earth. He, too, called the people together for a meeting. Unwaba proudly delivered his speech to them. "The Great One has said: 'All living things that I have created will never die'. "The people looked confused. They began to mumble among themselves. Finally, one man shyly stepped forward and said, "But just a short while ago Intulo the lizard told us that all living things will die!"

"Oh dear!" Unwaba said. His voice shook as he spoke. "I have arrived too late! The word of the Great One was spoken to the people, and now it cannot be changed. I am afraid that because of my tardiness, all living things will have to die! Oh, I am so sorry!"

Thus, the lives of all the world's creatures eventually end.

- In which ways are these stories similar to each other, and to the Genesis stories in Genesis 1, 2 and 3 (see Tool 3)?
 - What was the earth like before creation?
 - Who was made first - man or woman?
 - Both stories explain the end of the innocence of people, or when humans no longer lived in an ideal relationship with God. In the Bible (Genesis 3), this is called 'the Fall'.
 - How did the first people live before the Fall?
 - Who initiated the Fall in each story?
 - What happened after the Fall?
 - How would this creation story have affected what Malawian people and the Zulu people would have believed about men and women, and God?

