



Who determines culture?

'This is African culture.' We hear it all the time, but what does it mean? Perhaps this is one of the times we need to go back to our schooldays. Remember the questions after a language comprehension extract? 'Who said this, to whom and why?' I suggest this because often what is considered 'cultural' is subjective. Let me illustrate my point with a true story.

A lady I have come to know quite well had been unemployed for many years. When she got a job her biggest desire was to put her son through traditional male circumcision. She would excitedly discuss her preparations for the big day. Understanding its importance, I shared in her joy completely. Until the day she mentioned that she had to purchase a case of brandy as part of the celebration. This would cost about 25% of her monthly salary! I tried to reason with her. 'Brandy can't possibly be essential ... surely sorghum beer would be more appropriate for a cultural ritual?' But no, my friend wanted her son, who was now nearly too old, to go through the ritual and didn't want to upset anyone. So how did brandy slip into this Xhosa ritual? And perhaps a better question is, who benefits from it?

Whatever your opinion of this story, one thing it does illustrate is that culture is not static, it evolves. It is said that the great King Shaka stopped group male circumcisions because they interfered with the training of his regiments – an example of rapid evolution of culture. Interestingly, male circumcision has been under the spotlight again, firstly because of complications of the procedure, and secondly because of recent data suggesting that it may reduce the risk of contracting HIV,¹⁻³ although the magnitude of the benefit is still debatable.^{4,5}

Another example is polygamy. While it was culturally permissible for a man to marry more than one wife, this was strictly controlled. Central to the system was that the older wife went into such a marriage knowingly. In addition, a man could only be polygamous if he could afford it – no poor man was allowed to marry more than one wife! The breakdown of the African family as a result of the apartheid migrant labour system distorted cultural settlements and is responsible for a lot of current dysfunction. But should African men who want to use culture as justification for involvement with more than one woman not also make sure they fulfil the cultural imperatives?

I will not attempt to define culture, but there are things we all identify as important expressions of it. Probably the most

important of these is language, that amazing human skill that can make us feel so many different things inside. I remember walking across a street after two years in a foreign land and hearing a loud greeting in isiZulu. I turned around to see a long-lost friend; we spoke as if time stood still. Let's hope that in future 'posh young Africans who can't speak an African language' will be considered an error of a society in transition. Some falsely believe that in order to be good at English, children should abandon their mother tongue. But exclusion does not equate with excellence. We can be good in many languages – like us oldies!

So who determines culture? It depends ... things like language are clearer and should be preserved. Other things like rituals are specific to communities and even families. Indulge me by allowing me to propose a simple two-question 'culture test': Is this important to a group of people? And does it cause harm?

If the answers to the above questions are an unequivocal 'yes' and 'no' respectively, then there is no problem. If there is any doubt, open and fearless debate is needed. Debate will not necessarily stop the practice, but may lead to modifications that limit harm ... a win-win situation. I am not suggesting for a moment that such negotiations are easy, but open rational debate – a thing South Africans do so well – would be a good start.



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