

Interrogating culture in addressing HIV, gender and sexuality

By Vivienne Kernohan



A religious leader makes a presentation.

When Dr Leigh Price, an expert on HIV and AIDS and culture, addressed the metaphor of 'Changing the River's Flow' for Southern Africa HIV/AIDS Information Dissemination Service (SAfAIDS), she explained: "The metaphor of a river is a reminder to be respectful of culture and to celebrate its richness and diversity, even if, at the same time, we agree that certain aspects of culture no longer serve us".¹

Perhaps the most surprising thing about the April Cross-cultural Learning Conference in Johannesburg, South Africa, was the aptness of the river metaphor for the task of responding to the confluence between HIV, culture and gender in Africa. It was also gratifying to see the receptive response from African communities, including many of their traditional leaders.

A key concept explored at the conference was that just as the molecules of a river, acting together, constantly reproduce or transform the rapids, waves and whirlpools, so human beings, acting together, constantly reproduce or transform our cultural norms. Cultural norms may seem to be static objects, but they are really processes. The conference sought to find out if there is evidence that cultural norms are indeed amenable to change. The answer was a resounding 'Yes'!

Speaker after speaker spoke of degrees of success in encouraging communities to examine cultural practices and identify those that contribute to the spread of HIV, or to the subordination and vulnerability of women.

Ironically, some traditional practices that are often considered suspect, especially when viewed through the Western cultural paradigm of human rights, may actually play an important role in reducing vulnerabilities. Virginity testing, for example, can be utilised by women and girls, who, in dialogues, have said they participate in it willingly, because they have decided to delay sexual debut and use their age-mates and the virginity testing as a mechanism to support their decision not to have sex. As a result, they also discuss their sexuality and their right to say no.

The definition of culture is complicated, and care must be taken to ensure that the term does not mean only 'African traditional culture', but that it also includes the many Christian and other religious and political leaders, educationalists and health workers and ethnic groups, each of whom operate within their own cultural standards. Suffice to say here that culture is all-pervasive. It is you and me and everything we do; or as UNESCO couches it, it is "ways of living, working and playing".

Culture also has one very special characteristic — that although it is always changing, it is often presented as a reason to resist change and people regularly hide behind it to justify promiscuity and other negative behaviours. Men will say 'I can't use a condom – it's not my culture', or 'homosexuality is not African'.

Many cultural practitioners agree that it is vital that we uncover those elements of culture that contribute to increased illness and death as a

result of HIV and identify those that contribute to its decrease. Culture must be viewed as a means of engaging communities in sustainable change processes with regard to HIV prevention, rather than as an obstacle or a problem.

As Chief Seke from Zimbabwe says, culture is necessary and diverse and should be respected, but "If a culture is killing its own people then it must be revisited". We can then embark on a process of engagement to discourage the elements that encourage the spread of HIV and encourage those that help reduce it.

However, culture and its practices as well as whether or not they contribute to the spread of HIV and to the subordination of women may only be defined and explored by the community that practices them. Only then can we understand what a cultural practice's purpose is as well as any value it may have for the people, and it is they who should determine whether it may be harmful because it encourages transmission of HIV, or harms the rights of women. Full involvement of the elders in any such enquiry is also vital.

This applies also to the cultural practices and beliefs that emerge around religions, which are often influenced by the culture in which the religion has evolved and have little to do with the core religious teachings.

Similarly, the origins of various traditional African practices that may now be considered 'harmful' in terms of HIV transmission have been lost or misinterpreted.

Patriarchy and homophobia

In Africa, the teachings of Christianity have been variously used to rationalise the subordination of women as well as becoming a powerful barrier to the acceptance of differences in sexual orientation. Biblical texts are often quoted to justify homophobic attitudes, with blithe disregard for the much stronger condemnation those same texts make on adultery — there are only six texts that relate to homosexuality and only one on lesbians but there are over 600 condemning adultery.

Nonetheless, 'small houses', a common practice whereby men have additional sexual partners whom they maintain in a second household, even raising families with them, are an accepted male privilege in many southern African households, at least by the men.

While there is little doubt that a culture of patriarchy, characterised by control over women's sexuality and the subordination of women, contributes to the transmission of HIV, the strong link between homophobia and the oppression of women, is less obvious. Societies (such as those in sub-Saharan Africa) that have strong taboos

against homosexuality also tend to be more sexist and misogynist.

The roots of the two are entwined in the region's socio-economic history, bedevilled as it was by colonialism, labour systems that traditionally encouraged the separation of men from their families and apartheid.

The sense of personal inadequacy experienced by African men under these socio-economic systems runs like a current under the dominant masculine behaviour that characterises southern African societies. It is expressed in a strict dichotomy between men and women; certain behaviours are encouraged — a boy must show strength, a girl should be caring and other behaviours are frowned upon.

These simplistic stereotypes reproduce assumptions about gender roles and sexuality and also often culminate in homophobia, because other sexualities fall outside the male-female dichotomy; thus to be manly is not to be like a woman — a womanly man is a gay man — therefore to be a man is not to be gay.

Accordingly, because of the dominance of male power relations in the region, it is important that anyone advocating for women's rights is aware of its links with advocating for freedom of sexual orientation. The risk and vulnerability of the nation increases when cultural attitudes cause individuals to be pushed to the margins for reasons of sexuality or gender.

The power of language

Another very powerful but often unacknowledged feature of culture is language, a key cultural lens, shaping both meaning and understanding much more powerfully than is often understood. We need to be sensitive to the meaning and ideologies conveyed through language. Words shape not only how we think, but our expectations and "new words, even if they sometimes sound clumsy, can make invisible oppressions in a culture visible for people to see and fight against."



Chief Seke of Zimbabwe (in hat).

Many years ago, when gender activism was in its infancy, a study was done among British primary school children asking what they understood by the term 'mankind'. The children all reported that it referred to men. Even when asked specifically if it also included women, the children replied, No.

This was the beginning of a new wave of political correctness. The automatic use of chairman was replaced with chairperson and Miss and Mrs were replaced by the rather awkward Ms, which prevented women from being classified according to their marital status.

Bantu languages perpetuate and entrench the traditional power relations in Africa with even greater thoroughness. Inherent in their structure are the keys to the patriarchal powerhouse that also increases women's vulnerability to HIV. For example, in the Shona language (Zimbabwe), in matters of marriage and sexual activity, men are literally the 'doers' and women the 'done to'. In common usage, the language does not allow for a woman to marry. She is married by someone, thus she is 'done to' - akaroorwa (she

is married by). The term for men is akaroora (he marries) – thus he is the doer. However, there is an alternative, though seldom used construction that refers to the couple as being married (vakaroorana).

The language structure supports unhealthy gender power relations which in turn, cannot be separated from the sanctioning of polygamous relationships in the region, or from homophobia. While closed polygamous households have actually been shown to have lower HIV risk, the modern variant, multiple concurrent partnerships (MCP) is, recent modelling suggests, a major driver of the HIV epidemic in the region.

Homophobia is likely another compounding factor, forcing men who have sex with men (MSM) into marriages, in order to protect themselves from being identified as gay. Interestingly, language also confirms the often denied reality of homosexuality within African cultures, since almost every African language has a vernacular term to describe it that can be traced back at least a hundred years.

Perhaps it is time for African gender activists to ensure that African languages also go through a language reconstruction process so that the language no longer belittles women. This can be done by opening up discussions with communities on the interpretation and meaning of specific 'language' with particular reference to HIV and gender and making efforts to change the words used to describe things. Such programmes that combine a culture and gender approach can influence the course of the HIV epidemic.

Reviving the culture of ubuntu

Let us remember too, that often the problem is not culture but rather its breakdown — enhanced by rapid urbanisation and poverty. This creates new problems for the many individuals who find themselves without traditional reference points and supports. We are all a product of culture – 'Changing the River's Flow' encourages us to build on culture's positive aspects and challenge its negative ones.



Participants watch a film on HIV and culture

Let us also revive the culture of care and support — ubuntu — to effectively deal with the stigma that surrounds HIV and to challenge the stigma towards those of different sexualities. As Desmond Tutu put it in 2008: “Ubuntu speaks particularly about the fact that you can’t exist as a human being in isolation. It speaks about our interconnectedness. You can’t be human all by yourself”.

It is a totally different world view from that informed by western philosophy and culture. Tutu elaborated on it further in March 2010, seeking to deal at the same time with the discriminatory beliefs entrenched in both Christian and African culture when he said: “Gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered (LGBT) people are part of so many families. They are part of the human family. They are part of God’s family...And of course they are part of the African family...”

There has been a breakdown of Africa’s social order. Let us follow Tutu’s lead and work to rebuild it in a form that meets the demands of modernity without sacrificing its vital essence. The introduction of parallel legal systems has contributed to the weakening of traditional sanctions and allowed ‘misbehaviour’ that would have previously been subject to powerful social sanctions, such as sugar daddies and extra marital intergenerational sex.

Previously, right up until the late 19th century, powerful social control mechanisms controlled sexual behaviour and familial relationships. These included beliefs about sexually-transmitted diseases; the consequences of sleeping with someone else’s wife or having sex during menstruation; as well as the pledging of girls to repay a family for a death; and the inheritance of a wife by a brother.

Obviously many of these social norms cannot be resuscitated in their previous forms. What is required is a system that recognises and encourages social disapproval protecting and actively seeking to adapt the valuable aspects of African cultures against Western assumptions and ideologies.



Participants clad in their traditional dresses.

This can include the strengthening of customary law by the reintroduction and reinforcement of traditional control mechanisms that regulate sexual activity through social sanction as well as fines, and the rejection of multiple concurrent partnerships which today are often sanctioned by a man’s family.

The South Africa conference demonstrated that traditional healers and chiefs can give their support to the cultural changes required for HIV and AIDS prevention for they are in the strategic position to reach large numbers of people.

Furthermore, programmes that work on the intersection of culture and gender with HIV, such as ‘Changing the River’s Flow’, can also influence the course of the HIV epidemic, at the same time improving the lives of women across the continent.

Such responses must of course be rights-based and evidence-informed, whether that evidence is numerical or quantity-based. They are likely to be more successful if they incorporate cultural events, music, drama, poetry and song as platforms for education.

Sharing the experiences of the ‘Changing the River’s Flow’ programme at the conference was inspiring for participants. We look forward to gathering more evidence from all the programmes that have been initiated, to prove that by changing the river’s flow, we also stem the tide of the HIV pandemic that is ravaging southern Africa. ■

Lessons learned

- Words shape not only how we think, but our expectations and “new words,...can make invisible oppressions in a culture visible for people to see and fight against”.
- The introduction of parallel legal systems has contributed to the weakening of traditional sanctions and allowed ‘misbehaviour’ that would have previously been subject to powerful social sanctions.
- Traditional healers and chiefs can give their support to the cultural changes required for HIV and AIDS prevention for they are in the strategic position to reach large numbers of people.

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An Oxfam Novib presentation at the conference.