

CULTURE, TRADITION AND GENDER: Let's talk about it.

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AT NEARLY EVERY forum when we talk about the various forms of women's oppression and the need for gender transformation, someone (usually male) tells us that some values and practices will be difficult to change because "it's our tradition". *Agenda* decided to analyse this oft-heard argument. But when we tried to think of people who are doing feminist research on this issue, we struggled - not only because we could not think of many names, but also because we began to debate several other related questions; such as what is culture, what is tradition and whose culture and tradition were we talking about anyway?

Layered complexities

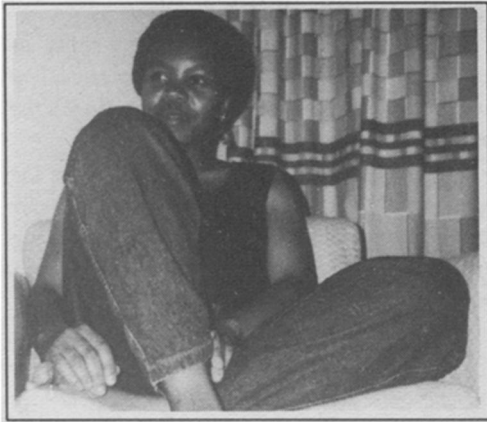
The content covered by the available literature seemed to suggest that in the South African context the concepts of culture and tradition were almost always applied to African ethnic groups so that in the popular political discourse tradition usually applies to the cultural continuities of one of the disenfranchised groups for example, the Xhosa, Zulu or Sotho traditions. An interesting trend was that the researchers writing papers on these topics were mostly white. What became increasingly apparent

to us are the layered complexities in the ways that culture, tradition, race and gender interweave in determining our daily lives and our reflections of those lives. So much of how we choose to live is an enactment of cultures and traditions which take gender specific forms.

Personal is political

We realised that the seeming minutiae of our everyday lives was the site at which these powerful complexities were lived out. What better way to present the issue, we thought, we could write about the impact of culture and tradition on our own lives! After all it is the re-evaluation of the personal that is at the centre of our feminist convictions.

This method is not new in feminist writings. Stanley and Wise (1989) in discussing appropriate feminist research methodology pointed to the need to take the everyday seriously. They suggested that part of the means to do this "lies within what is already available to us - our consciousness of ourselves as women and feminists within sexist society" (1989:200). In this article the members of the collective go into the personal in an attempt to reveal how deeply culture and tradition mould our lives and our reflections



thereof. Some of our readers may consider this method self-indulgent. But as feminists we should take seriously the need for any research to include as part of the process the experiences of the researcher as a person in a particular context. Most social science research and feminist research in South Africa, has been conducted by researchers who have failed to take account of their own role as active participants in the construction of the research process. As a consequence of this tendency we have the criticism of researchers who in the process of their research objectify the experiences of the oppressed. This should be avoided.

Initially, talking about ourselves, knowing that we were revealing aspects of ourselves for the purposes of publication was somewhat intimidating. Of course, the reader has to bear in mind that this account is a particular construction by women who currently identify themselves as feminist; so what follows has to be seen in a context of who each of these women are.

Who are we in terms of our cultures and traditions?

CHERYL:

"This is a difficult question for me since I have quite a mixed cultural heritage. Growing up with the awareness that I was classified coloured seemed to suggest that I should share some common cultural attributes with others in that

social category. I soon realised that this label masked a variety of cultural influences. I remember eating Afrikaner food like bredies, but there were also some Indian culinary influences. My paternal grandmother introduced us to putu and samp. I guess, though, that Christianity, in particular the Anglican religion, played a significant role in determining several of our traditions. Of course, money has an impact. My family and the surrounding neighbourhood was working class".

PAT:

"White, middle-class, fairly religious Roman Catholic background".

LOUISA:

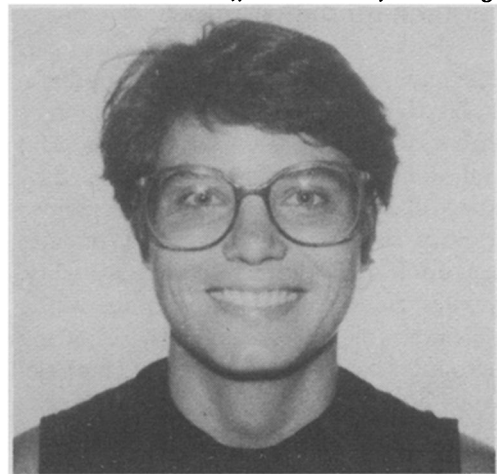
"I come from a middle class, Christian family which was exceedingly non-conformist with regard to cultural values and customs".

WENDY:

"Labelling my cultural heritage white, middle-class is the easy part, then a complex mix of bone china, barefootedness, symphony concerts and austerity in a sheltered nuclear family".

SUE:

"It has always been difficult for me to conceptualise what my 'cultural heritage' is because it is the dominant culture of the country and it appears so normal. Coming from a white, English-speaking, not particularly religious background from Natal it was easy to see the rest of society as 'other' and our ways as unquestioned and the norm. The difference arose from being



working class and the impact that having less resources and money than some of my friends had”.

DEBBY:

“South-African, English-speaking, but not English. My paternal family is French-Mauritian and there were strong cultural influences there mixed with the Roman Catholic religion which gave a sense of a large extended family, different food and traditions”.

FAYEEZA:

“Indian, middle-class, liberal Muslim background”.

XABSI:

“Culturally non-conformist - having a Zulu dad and a Xhosa mom led to us having a mixed cultural background. I grew up in a small village of Zulu speaking people, within a home context of Xhosa-speaking Transkei. There were contradictions about this but it has helped me identify with what I am most comfortable with.”

MICHELLE:

“My grandparents were emigrants from Lithuania in Russia, so I grew up as a second generation South African. By the time that I was born (I am the fifth child in a family of six), my parents had been able to take advantage of race privilege. I therefore grew up in a middle class orthodox Jewish family that placed a great deal of emphasis on education and on preserving a Jewish identity”.

Significant milestones

How should we structure our reflections on gender, culture and tradition in our daily lives? There didn't seem to be an easy way. So we selected some significant milestones which may be accompanied by specific traditions and customs across various cultural identities: birth, puberty and adolescence, career choices, sexuality, sexual relationships are some of the milestones that we discussed. The following account is based on tape-recorded material from a workshop in which the Agenda collective tried to examine how our cultures and traditions influence our lives.

On birth and giving birth

“There's always this long period of anticipation and wondering whether it's a boy or a girl and then at the news of the birth it's the first question we ask.”

“The kinds of comments on looking at the baby are always very gendered comments, for example on looking at the face if something appears to be a bit wrong people say ‘It doesn't matter if it's a boy.’”

On the issue of pink versus blue:

“it takes a lot to do your own thing because everyone else responds to that such as on seeing the baby in pink people say ‘What a cute little girl!’”

“Then there's the expectation about the



boy coming first. In our family there was always this thing about pity the boy came so late”.

“Ja, there are two girls in our family and everyone always said ‘shame there's no one to carry the name’”.

“Also it's important in the family that if it's a son then there must be a grandson, but if it's a daughter then it doesn't matter”.

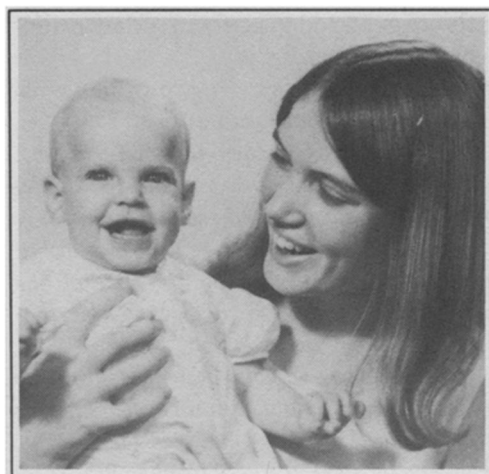
“In my experience ... the expectation was expressed in the form of excitement for the possibility of a boy coming into the family. With regard to the father of the child it was expressly said that the first child must be a boy ... he would have felt very proud with a boy.”

“We were four girls and a boy and it was always said ‘oh, your parents tried very hard’”.

"The interesting thing that strikes me when it comes to tradition around birth is that there are very distinct and very definite differences around gender in Judaism. When boys are born there are very definite ceremonies around circumcision which has a whole hoo-ha and then there's a naming ceremony and everybody's around and it's a whole special thing. Girls don't really have it. There are some people who have tried to institute a naming ceremony for girls but it's in reaction to what happens for boys."

Girls not valued

As we shared experiences and memories thereof, it became clear to us that undervaluing female infants is a phenomenon which all our cultural backgrounds have in common. From even before the moment of birth there are sets of expectations which are gender-specific. Not only are they different expectations, but they are accompanied by an evaluative component that is biased against women. It became clear to us that we each began life as members of a social category which is evaluated negatively. The impact of this on identity was illustrated in a study by Intons-Peterson and Reddel (1984). These researchers asked the parents of newborns to telephone friends and relatives to



announce their baby's birth. In 80 percent of the cases, the first question asked concerned the baby's sex. Questions about the health of the mother or the baby were eventually asked, but only after finding out whether it was a boy or a girl. Another behaviour which points to the significance of gender identity is the enthusiasm with which some people try to predict the sex of the unborn child. Pat recalled that when she was pregnant *"a lot of strangers would come up to me like in the supermarket and say 'oh, this is definitely going to be a boy' thinking that's what I wanted to hear. But they'd have all sorts of reasons like the shape."* Several research studies have repeatedly shown that merely knowing whether it's a boy or a girl changes people's expectations, judgements and behaviour towards the child. What we noticed among ourselves is that the significance of gender identity is evident from before the moment of birth with male infants being more valued than female infants; while the specific form may be expressed differently through different traditions, this is a cross-cultural experience.

Growing up as a girl

In many households where there is no paid domestic help, from a very early age

girls are expected to perform certain duties which are regarded as girls' work. This usually means assisting mother with childcare and household duties.

"I was four years old when my sister was born and I remember that I was expected to help my mother in the house. So while she did the washing I would look after my sister. That was looked upon quite favourably by the rest of the community. But I'm sure that if I was a boy that I wouldn't have had to do that."

"I think you actually become a substitute mother. In a big family like mine when I was at primary I used to bath all four kids. I used to put them in a queue. But I used to enjoy it."

These gender differences are often directly expressed in what may be called everyday wisdom. During our discussion Fayeze remembered something that her mother always says, namely, *"It's better to have girls because they stay close to one, not like boys."*

But these beliefs are not merely linked to gender. As we explored the issue further, it became apparent that what actually happens is not linked to gender per se, but depends on how one fulfills gender expectations in relation to sexuality, reproduction etc. In talking further about our personal experiences we realised that girls do not always stay closer to mother than boys - contact is usually maintained specifically where the offspring has married the 'right' partner and where they have had children. This is illustrated in the following account:

"In my situation the two daughters are the ones who haven't gotten married and that's been the most disappointing thing and in fact, the sons are the ones with grandchildren and this means that she's forged stronger alliances with the sons".

Menstruation

Any discussion on growing up as a girl would be incomplete without including the subject of menstruation. Matlin (1987)



pointed out that regardless of knowledge to the contrary, menstrual myths and taboos are maintained in many cultures, to differing extents. The notion that women's bodies are unclean during menstruation is still evident in certain traditions that are carried out.

Within the Muslim tradition:

"During menstruation for seven days you are associated with uncleanliness and then you've gotta have this ritual bath at the end of the seven days. You can't pray in those seven days".

"There's the same point in Judaism. Every month religious Jewish women are meant to have a ritual bath".

There is also pressure to hide the fact that we menstruate that seems to cut across cultural backgrounds:

"For sanitary towels to be left on the table after grocery shopping, I didn't like that. I'd go and hide them in the bedroom. I didn't want my brother and my father to see it".

"I remember a girl had to be sent to the shop to buy sanitary towels, not a boy. I remember my mother used to say: 'Go and buy biscuits, you know biscuits'".

"I remember where we used to stay in a little rural place, they'd always wrap the sanitary towels in brown paper whereas everything else they'd just give you".

Steinem (1983:338) speculated about how menstruation would be treated if it were a biological function unique to men:

"Men would brag about how long and how much.... Young boys would talk about it as the



envied beginning of manhood. Gifts, religious ceremonies, family dinners, and stag parties would mark the day... Street guys would invent slang ('He's a three-pad man') ..." (Matlin, 1987:113).

Through each of us relating our experiences, we were able to observe that each of us had participated in behaviours which keep menstruation hidden or invisible in our cultures. Perhaps this may be seen as consistent with the general invisibility of women in society.

The celebration of commitment (weddings, ring ceremonies etc)

An interesting observation was made that very often women who are feminists still behave according to sexist traditions when it comes to events like marriage. We have all been to weddings of self-identified feminists who have kitchen-teas, wear white wedding dresses etc. Why do these traditions persist? We looked at our own experiences. "I thought my parents were liberal, but when it came to lobola they were not. In fact, before we

were married the whole issue of my using his surname or both our surnames was discussed. It was a problem because he said that by using both surnames we were denying the whole concept of marriage, because when you get married you belong to his family. He had a problem because he felt that he can't explain that to his family why I am using two names. Well, I said, that from now on for us in our family and our children we have to choose between what our parents had done and whether we want to change it. That was a breakthrough when he agreed. But when we go to his parents it's a problem, I have to do what is expected - wake up early, make breakfast, clean-up".

"When we started living together, we wanted to make our commitment, I don't know why, public and real in some way. So we had a kind of ... in retrospect, I'd call it a commitment breakfast. It was a big jorl".

"I had to use excuses like I got married about a month after my sister, so I knew that it would be expensive for my parents to have that whole wedding. So they were quite pleased, but on the other hand they were quite upset. I found myself fighting battles with my mother who said: 'At least let me buy you a wedding dress.' ... Then keeping my name was another big thing. It took them really a long time to get over those things. But it actually made a big difference later because the next time when it is a problem is when children come. Even though they accept that you step out of certain traditions there are certain things that they use to get you back in, marriage is one of them, having children is another. I found that there were three separate times that I've had to break away: the first was when I was just growing up, the second was when I was getting married and the third was when I had children."

Why do we perpetuate certain traditions and cultural practices?

"What I've come to learn and realise very, very recently, is that all these moments are very significant moments in people's life-cycles and what these religious traditions and rituals do is





actually mark them and symbolise them in some way. They initiate people into different phases in their lives. What happened to me is that I began to interpret all as a problem because they were oppressive to women and only very recently I've come to realise is that part of them is that they give meaning - for example, baptism welcomes the child into the world - this raises the question of do we want to reinvent or recreate rituals that are less oppressive. Until we do so we may continue to rely on the old rituals, because those moments are powerful in our lives".

This point was powerfully illustrated in the following account:

"When we decided to get married we wanted to have something, but not a traditional wedding. It was then that we realised that we have very

few choices. A civil marriage somehow didn't feel right. Of course, both our parents wanted a traditional wedding. Afterwards, I thought that for them my having a traditional marriage was important for them because it was kind of an affirmation that they had done their duty as parents".

Conclusion

Culture plays a large part in what we become. It helps us to adapt to our environment and it gives us a sense of continuity with our past. However, as we talked it became increasingly clear that culture also functions to control and limit individual behaviour so that one conforms with the predominant values and norms.

Common themes

South Africans often speak about traditional African cultures, Indian culture and Western culture placing emphasis on the differences and distinctions. There is indeed diversity, but during our workshop we observed that we share several cultural similarities with regard to gender-related beliefs and roles. While there are differences in the specific practices, there are gender-related features that our backgrounds have in common; for example, the evidence that women are undervalued and anything



associated with women seems to be evaluated negatively. Another common theme is that from an early age women are held responsible for child-rearing and household work.

Challenging the norm

Challenging any of the cultural norms is a very difficult task which requires much courage. Each one of the collective members is able to recall instances in our lives when we tried to act in ways which contradicted the patriarchal norm. Every time this happens there are a variety of social institutions and individuals who act to control and limit our choices and behaviours. These institutions and individuals range from the legal, religious and educational systems to our parents, peers and lovers. We face the possibility of societal sanctions for behaving against cultural traditions; this may vary from the withdrawal of a loved

one's support to being blocked in achieving career goals. Clearly, women need one another's support in challenging those traditions which uphold and maintain our continued subordination in South African society. ■

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