

## MAMPHELE RAMPHELE AND XHOSA CULTURE: SOME INSIGHTS ON CULTURE, SELF-DETERMINATION AND HUMAN RIGHTS FOR SOUTH AFRICAN SOCIAL WORK

**I Allegritti**

University of Newcastle, New South Wales, Australia

**M Gray**

University of Newcastle, New South Wales, Australia

### ABSTRACT

*The authors continue the debate about indigenous social work following on from previous work where they identified the importance of culture in the indigenisation process (Gray & Allegritti, 2002, 2003; Gray, 2003). They suggested that it was important to articulate African culture and the way in which it differed from Western culture. To this end, this paper draws on the work of Ramphele (2002), which examines traditional Xhosa practices such as imbeleko and the power of the ancestors in African culture. Ways in which African men establish their identity and masculinity are explored and the implications of these cultural practices for social work are discussed. Using the example of self-determination, which in social work is said to be a universal value, the authors highlight the difference between a local cultural practice which stresses ancestral power and self-determination in social work which values individual autonomy. They point to the importance of universal human rights as a safeguard against unjust traditional ways and suggest that, since South Africa is a signatory to international human rights charters, African writers need to debate the justness of their traditional practices in an increasingly globalising world, especially those which impact on women in an unjust way.*

Two years ago Gray and Allegritti (2002) began examining the issues involved in developing indigenous social work practice and the way in which Western social work (said to be 'not relevant') differed from 'relevant' indigenous social work practice in South Africa. They argued that the difference between Western and African understandings of culture was an integral aspect of the indigenisation debate and that to advance the debate further, it was necessary to establish a framework for a clear and logical articulation of the values located in each set of cultures. They explored the notion of 'indigenisation as cross-cultural practice', noting the international literature on cultural diversity and the need for an extensive dialogue between cultural groups on principles, ethical norms and appropriate practice, if a truly cross-cultural world were to take shape.

In a subsequent article Gray and Allegritti (2003) further developed their ideas on cross-cultural social work and examined the implications of current thinking on culture for social work practice. They identified the need for African social workers to articulate the way in which indigenous cultures differed from 'dominant Western culture' as a first step in devising indigenous approaches to social work practice. Again they stressed the importance of cross-cultural or inter-cultural understanding within the indigenisation debate.

The relationship between culture and social work continues to inform Gray and Allegritti's research. Hence new material which might throw light on African cultures is of great interest in post-apartheid South Africa as it strives to become a global player on the world stage. Mamphele Ramphele's (2002) book *Steering by the Stars* presents an opportunity to develop further the

authors' understanding of African cultures. The book is based on research begun in 1991 which focused on the demographic composition of 48 households in New Crossroads, an apartheid township of Cape Town, and the health of 10- to 14-year-old children in her sample (Ramphela, 2002:25). In 1993 her research was narrowed down to 16 selected households. The aim was to track the lives of the children from adolescence to adulthood. The sample was carefully selected. One half of the participants was chosen on the basis of their 'extraordinary potential' and 'demonstrated leadership qualities', and the other half because they were 'high risk from families racked by domestic violence, alcoholism or any other sign of instability' (Ramphela, 2002:26).

One of Ramphela's central findings was that women play a crucial role in maintaining households, developing social networks and providing supportive bonds for the well-being of young children. While this was viewed as a positive finding, it nevertheless left Ramphela (2002:13) with a disturbing 'social question' which was: "...how does this set of social circumstances affect young men who are growing up without positive male role models? How do poor black men develop their identity and masculinity in the absence of adult male influence? Moreover, how do 'young' men develop the self-confidence to relate to women if women dominate the provision of so much of their everyday survival needs?" (Ramphela, 2002:13).

The authors thought that examining Ramphela's 'social question' might throw some light on the way in which South African cultures operate in the current context of increasing urbanisation, poverty and family dislocation. The authors found aspects of indigenous culture, primarily Xhosa culture, at work in a number of ways. For example, the Xhosa ritual of *imbeleko* is still popular because it maintains links with ancestors, while 'outmoded customs', such as leaving a child in the maternal home if the child is born before marriage, are still prevalent. What is particularly significant for social work and social work practice is that where there is a lack of certain resources, such as mental health or psychological services, there is a reliance on traditional and cultural practices, such as spiritual healers living in the community, which means that the discourse on the shift from tradition to modernity still remains a challenge for South African social work.

## **MAMPHELE RAMPHELE ON XHOSA CULTURE**

Ramphela's work provides some valuable insights into Xhosa culture. She points to the importance of indigenous languages and the power of storytelling as an influential tool in the transmission of cultural knowledge and wisdom, particularly between generations. Proverbs play a particularly significant part in the transmission of core values (Ramphela, 2002:143). Access to these cultural resources, however, is often undermined by processes of urbanisation, family dislocation, poverty and violence, which leaves children "...without the support they are entitled to from adults" (Ramphela, 2002:144).

### **Imbeleko**

Certain rituals and customs are also important in Xhosa culture. One such ritual is the practice of *imbeleko*. Since Ramphela's (2002:13) work is concerned with the 'social question' relating to models of masculinity 'in the absence of adult male guidance', it was decided to explore *imbeleko* in terms of its implications for young men and then in terms of its consequences for young women. *Imbeleko* usually takes place a few months after the birth of a new child. Its purpose is to 'introduce' the young male or female to his or her ancestors and to cement the ties of the clan by linking together the newborn, parents and ancestors (Ramphela, 2002:47). Everyone in the

community, from family to neighbours, comes together to observe the official entry of a new male into the overall family structure.

“An elder of the family on the paternal side formally summons the ancestors by pouring beer on the ground in the family courtyard and sprinkling snuff. He uses the family *isiduko* (clan name which is used to praise the members of the lineage) to implore them to shower their blessings on the child, and to ensure that her/his future is under their protection. Those assembled add their voices. The child is welcomed as a joint responsibility by the nuclear and extended family as well as the neighbours who join the celebrations” (Ramphela, 2002:47).

The failure to participate in *imbeleko* is viewed in a negative light. It is believed to make the child, and later adult, vulnerable to misfortune. “After all, if your ancestors have not yet been properly informed about your arrival, how would they be able to spread their protective wings around you?” (Ramphela, 2002:48). Personal setbacks and ‘misfortunes’ are often viewed as resulting from a family’s failure to carry out the ritual of *imbeleko*. Should the ritual actually have been omitted, “...the family often arranges a belated ceremony. It is never too late to make amends with your ancestors” (Ramphela, 2002:48).

The importance of respecting one’s ancestors and maintaining links with them is also mentioned by Nelson Mandela (1994) in his autobiography *Long Walk to Freedom*. Neglecting one’s ancestors not only brings ‘ill-fortune’, suggests Mandela (1994:13), but it invites ‘failure in life’ as well. If one dishonours one’s ancestors in some way “...the only way to atone for that lapse was to consult a traditional healer or tribal elder, who communicated with the ancestors and conveyed profound apologies” (Mandela, 1994:13).

While it is customary for the father to provide “...the name and introduce the boy to ancestors” (Ramphela, 2002:47), in the absence of the father other male members may carry out the ceremony. This includes male members on the mother’s side of the family, such as uncles, by whom the baby boy is ‘introduced’ to his ‘maternal ancestral lineage, assumes their surname, and *isiduko*’ and “...the child becomes the responsibility of his ... mother’s brothers, one of whom, usually the eldest, is charged with the principal obligations of watching over the child for its entire life” (Ramphela, 2002:48). From a cultural point of view, then, there is a pathway for young black men to find their identity and their place in the family structure as well as their location in the larger social structure. The practice of *imbeleko* links young males with their spiritual roots. It connects and confirms their relationship with their family of origin and thus establishes a firm foundation for their identity.

## Circumcision

Another traditional practice for young men is the Xhosa initiation ritual of circumcision (Ramphela, 2002:56). It is usually undertaken when a young male reaches eighteen years of age and when he is considered physically and emotionally mature enough to endure and benefit from the experience. It is a significant cultural ritual and a crucial rite of passage which is critical to the development of masculinity. Ramphela (2002:57) points out that:

“(Being) initiated into manhood is about responsibility, it’s about discipline, it’s about being respectful. You get to know that even an eight-year-old is a person, you should respect that. You grow not from going through initiation *per se* but from becoming more mature ... Initiation is a ritual based on the importance of instilling

discipline and fortitude in the face of physical pain and emotional strain. But it is also an opportunity for older men to teach the young how to be real men.”

So, circumcision provides a cultural medium in which young men leave behind their previous notions of adolescent selfhood and learn to take on an adult identity based on notions of responsibility and some discipline. It also gives them an adult status within their families and communities. As Mandela (2000:30) points out, “...for the Xhosa people, circumcision represents the formal incorporation of males into society.”

Ramphele’s (2002) analysis of the Xhosa rituals of *imbeleko* and circumcision is important. It confirms an ongoing attachment to the reproduction of a South African identity. Her insights about culture are vital because they tell us that young black men still value and **use their cultural ways** to shape their masculinity in a post-apartheid and increasingly globalised South Africa.

Young women also pursue cultural practices, such as *imbeleko*. The ritual link with ancestors is still strong, because it is believed that ‘your ancestors take care of you’ (Ramphele, 2002:70). Respect for Xhosa tradition and custom is strong and rituals remain an integral aspect of contemporary life in South Africa. This situation is unlikely to change in the immediate future because young people still ‘identify with their ethnic culture and customs’ despite the personal pain or contradictions this may bring in their individual lives (Ramphele, 2002:70). Ramphele (2002:70) gives the example of Pumla, who “...cannot conceive of herself as an autonomous being outside of this ethnic identity”. Here Ramphele (2002) betrays her own ignorance of the link between individuality and culture or ethnicity. Culture is not something that can be taken off or remove like a cloak. People are **embedded** in their culture and its rituals, practices and ways of doing things. The fact that young people still engage in *imbeleko* is a testimony to this fact.

Ramphele (2002:70) does concede that “...changing customs is difficult for communities and individuals **where the customs are central**, particularly when the greater society denies them human dignity, as happened during the apartheid years.” Since economic change has not accompanied political change in South Africa and because ‘there are few alternatives’, individuals continue to cling to their customs and beliefs. This situation is likely to continue because men, who hold most of the power, are unlikely to initiate change (Ramphele, 2002:70). Here you have the crux of Ramphele’s (2002) argument. Cultural practices still have a strong hold on individuals and communities as they negotiate their way from traditional ways of doing things towards a modern existence. And while there may have been a political transformation in the country that many regard as a ‘miracle’ (Sparks, 2003), it has not been accompanied by an economic transformation for the majority of black South Africans. While they remain in their present position, they will continue to hang tightly to their cultural ways.

### **Impact on family life**

The Xhosa practice of *imbeleko* is the most significant cultural ritual to be addressed in Ramphele’s (2002) work. Not only is it central to the formation of gender, the development of masculinity and femininity or manhood and femalehood, but it continues to influence family relationships, in particular those between children and their biological mothers. The separation of mother and child is often an outcome of *imbeleko* and the reason is as follows. “The *imbeleko* ritual places limitations on the movement of children between families. A child born before marriage is expected to stay in his/her mother’s family. Even if the mother gets married later on, the child is to remain behind in her natal home” (Ramphele, 2002:66). While cultural practices such as *imbeleko* were originally ‘intended to create harmony within families’, contemporary

gender relationships are incompatible with this traditional practice. Today 70% of all births in South Africa are 'out of marriage' (Ramphela, 2002:68) and the separation of mother and child is a social concern. Most of the young people in the New Crossroads study felt that *imbeleko* was still practised "...because a child needed to 'belong' to the father's family. Without this sense of belonging the child would be adversely affected under the adoptive father's rituals. This view suggests that a male-dominated culture takes little account of the importance of mother-child relationships in cushioning the child against adversity" (Ramphela 2002:69). A contributing factor for the separation of mothers and children was the migrant labour system in South Africa.

"Often mothers had to separate from their children because of the migrant labour system which forced many women to live fractured lives divided between their rural homes and their husband's places in Cape Town. These places often prevented family life ... The migrant labour system expected African women to divide themselves into faithful wives who ran a rural household and mothers who nurtured the children that would become the economy's unskilled labour force" (Ramphela, 2002:65).

Tension within family structures developed as husbands were united with their wives only one month of the year. Often men ended up with two families: one in the urban area and one in the rural region. From 1970 onwards many women "...joined their husbands in urban areas, even if it meant leaving their children with relatives. Saving their marriage was seen as a long-term insurance policy for themselves and their children" (Ramphela, 2002:65).

### **The question of outdated customs**

The separation of mother and child is seen by Ramphela (2002:155) as an example of 'adherence to outmoded customs'. While this Xhosa custom might have been good policy when the rate of births outside of marriage was minimal, today this practice is socially and culturally 'inappropriate'. Some of the negative consequences include lack of trust between adults and children, poor emotional development, identity crises and uncertainty (Ramphela, 2002: 155-157). Perhaps the most extreme example of an outdated custom or cultural practice is one that results in violence or death. Ramphela (2002:160) cites the example of witchcraft in the Limpopo Province. Here "...many women, particularly widowed women, are regularly brutally murdered by their own sons and close relatives who blame them for their own misfortunes" (Ramphela, 2002:202, see also 160). Powerlessness, illiteracy, low levels of education, and fear are cited as the reasons why some South African men look for explanations for their misfortunes in the supernatural world (Ramphela, 2002:161). And while witch-hunts are not specific to Africa, as Ramphela (2002:161) rightly argues, the issue has reached 'alarming proportions' with a "...protective village ... established by authorities west of Polokwane, to accommodate those fingered as witches." Cultural practices, such as those discussed above, do not take place in isolation. They are located in a socio-economic and political context. The Xhosa culture is situated in what Ramphela (2002:103-122) describes as 'spatial apartheid'. It is constituted by historical processes, such as the transition from traditional society to modernity, exclusion, a lack of individual recognition, authoritarian social relationships inherited from the former colonial rule now resulting in a culture of violence, gangsterism and crime. Added to this scenario is 'absolute poverty', described by Ramphela (2002:21) as living on one US dollar per day. Lack of resources is a common factor for "...people living on the edge of survival" (Ramphela, 2002:142). Where the lack of resources translates into absence of services, such as psychiatric or psychological services necessary to deal with the effects of social and cultural transformation, there is often a strong reliance on traditional or cultural practices (Ramphela, 2002:110). This is the case at New Crossroads, where Xhosa

spiritual healers are dealing with mental health issues, such as depression, panic-anxiety, mental exhaustion and a sense of helplessness (see also Swartz, 1998).

### Youth, culture and dislocation

Exploring Ramphele's (2002) analysis of the youth of New Crossroads in more detail, it becomes apparent that many young black South Africans feel dislocated in the new South Africa. Displacement takes the form of no longer being totally embedded in their traditional culture **and not yet** accepted and integrated into the new post-apartheid South Africa. What is often lost from sight is that, while South Africa has undergone a political transformation, the shift from apartheid to post-apartheid, this political miracle has not been accompanied by an economic miracle. The rainbow nation has "...a double-decker economy - its First World sector and its Third World sector - and what is working for those on the upper deck of this economic bus is not working for those on the lower deck" (Sparks, 2003:332). The analogy of the double-decker economy is a useful metaphor, because it shows where people are located economically in the new South Africa. Sparks (2003:332-333) points out that the new globalised economy of South Africa 'places a premium on skills' and that:

"[T]hose at the top of the bus have skills, while those on the lower deck do not. Which means that while those on the upper deck are prospering, growing numbers of those down below are unemployed and rapidly becoming unemployable – and if nothing is done about it South Africa faces the socially dangerous prospect of this unemployment becoming generationally repetitive. The children of unemployed will themselves be unemployable."

But there is 'a further troubling feature to this double-decker bus' argues Sparks (2002:33).

"Those on the top deck are a multiracial group. It used to be a whites-only deck, but now it is integrated. They are all getting on pretty well, working together, making money together, their kids going to the same schools and universities. **It is a rainbow deck.** But those down below are nearly all black ... there is no stairway from the lower deck to the upper one. If you are unskilled, you cannot climb up to the top of the bus."

The youth of New Crossroads are located on the bottom deck of the economic bus. They are part of the black community that has not been integrated into the rainbow nation economically. Sparks (2003:337) reminds us that 'black empowerment has not increased black employment'. Unemployment continues to be the biggest social problem at New Crossroads and would undoubtedly contribute to the formation of gangs and criminal activity in the area.

Perhaps the clearest example of dislocation is found in Ramphele's (2002:14) description of gender relationships in South Africa. Discussing male and female relationships, she points out that men "...feel trapped in a **social dynamic** that has **failed to provide them with the tools** to negotiate relationships with women that go beyond women meeting their psychological and emotional needs." Clearly, some traditional cultural ways have been eroded and are no longer working in the new South Africa while, at the same time, new ways to negotiate relationships have yet to be found.

### Some insights for social work

Ramphele (2002) presents valuable material on the way in which traditional culture still serves to provide identity and meaning to young people's lives as they struggle to find a footing in the rainbow nation. Perhaps Ramphele (2002) did not realise the usefulness of her account in showing

that traditional culture is still alive and well, and how the customs of *imbeleko* and circumcision are still vital in some people's lives. She also shows how some women have been able to negotiate their way between the traditional and modern. While modern, urban 'role model' black women can choose to go back to their communities and participate in cultural rituals with their elders without sacrificing their autonomy and individuality, many black women in traditional rural communities do not seem to enjoy such autonomy. Clearly any social work practice needs to take into account that a majority of black South Africans would be living largely within their traditional cultural ways, mores and understandings and that, while there might be an expectation to adopt modern ways and practices, it might be that South African social workers will be working between cultures for some time yet. Work on culture and social work in South Africa seems to suggest that cross-cultural social work still needs to remain a priority. Clearly, where culture and custom impact on the humanity, dignity, safety and well-being of individuals and communities, then the issues of self-determination and human rights also come into the picture, as the final discussion in this article will show.

### **Individualism and self-determination**

The international literature on indigenous social work is replete with examples of the ways in which individualist Western social work values are at odds with the collectivist values of traditional cultures and local cultural practices. Does this apply in South Africa? For example, is the belief in the power of the ancestors and the cultural practice of *imbeleko* compatible with social work values relating to individual autonomy and self-determination, or are these values at odds with ancestral pre-ordination? Clearly, self-determination is of central importance to the social work value system and discussions about self-determination in the social work literature imply that it is a universal value, even though its application in Western contexts has been the major focus (Biestek & Gehrig, 1978; Kassel & Kane, 1980; Levy, 1983; Perlman, 1965; Spicker, 1990). Self-determination flows from a particular ethical stance where, given that individuals have the ability to reason and make choices, they should exercise their right to choose for themselves. In most situations social workers would do their utmost to preserve and to facilitate the client's right to self-determination, their purpose being to encourage clients to make their own choices to the maximum extent that the situation and their competence permit. In Western society the right to self-determination expresses the conviction that people should be in control of their destinies. Hence peoples' rights to make their own decisions and choices are the cornerstone of the moral framework to which democratic Western societies are committed. This right to self-determination is the key to other rights and privileges, such as confidentiality and privacy. Since clients have the right to self-determination, the implication is that they should be encouraged to exercise this right, that they are responsible for their actions and for the realisation of their desired goals. In fact, in social work decisiveness is applauded and indecision is frowned upon. How does this cohere with the collective values of many African cultures, where tribal customs preclude individual choice and autonomy?

The Western individualistic tradition links autonomy with self-respect and is based on an enduring belief that helping in social work, whether at the individual, group or community level, cannot be done effectively without due regard for people's capacity for self-determination and independent and autonomous action (Gray & Stofberg, 2000). The self-interested choices of individuals are limited only by the minimal preconditions that they act in accordance with societal norms, that they do not harm others and that they do not interfere in other people's lives against their will. In Giddens's (1991) theory of reflective modernity, the notion of the 'reflexive self' and 'pure relationships' coheres well with Western social work's view of the individual as a rational, freely choosing and autonomous, self-determining being. Inherent in this thinking is the notion that

individuals can successfully mastermind their own lives and relationships, and that morality is possible without religion. With this kind of freedom comes responsibility now, in Giddens's terms, for life planning. Oppression is not located in some sort of external structure, but in the freedom and hence responsibility this brings to make the right choices. Thus, says Giddens (1991), individuals negotiate their relationships and a good relationship is one which provides for self-respect, individuality and mutual self-disclosure, and also provides room for growth. It is mutually satisfying and sustaining and freely chosen. Giddens (1991) presents his 'pure relationship' as an ideal type, which relies on self-understanding and reflexive questions about the extent to which the relationship helps people to be the way they want to be and the best that they can be. Hence commitment is contingent upon the extent to which the relationship is perceived as self-sustaining and mutually satisfying.

Giddens's (1991) notion of the reflexive autonomous individual, who is largely responsible for his or her own fate and life choices, is quite consistent with social work's value system, but are these modern notions compatible with African culture, where traditional practices still play a role today in view of the absence of social work services? Given the scarce resource allocation to social work practice in the poor areas in South Africa, which Ramphele's research seems to suggest, it is likely that such tensions will remain in place for some time to come. Since social work in South Africa is largely an urban-based profession, could it be that it is more compatible with urban values and lifestyles? And do questions of relevance have a different meaning in more rural or traditional communities? Or could it be that those on the top of the bus have self-determination and autonomy, while those on the lower deck do not? Do all people in South Africa enjoy the same human rights or are rights applied selectively, such as affirmative action for some but not for others? Clearly questions such as these have an impact on the way in which people are able to enjoy self-determination and autonomy and exercise life choices.

There are many examples of contexts where the Western value of self-determination is at odds with local culture. For example, Ejaz (1991) drew attention to Eastern and traditional cultures where emphasis is placed on collective rather than on individual interests, and on the achievement of individual aspirations via group fulfilment. Research shows that poor and uneducated people tend to have a different worldview from that of their social workers. Consequently, they tend to be dependent and fatalistic and, as a result, social workers tend to be directive with these clients (Nimmagadda & Cowger, 1999; Ow, 1991; Reid & Shapiro, 1969; Shaw & Shaw, 1997).

Several Asian studies have noted the willingness of Asian clients to take advice from an educated social worker (Ejaz, 1991; Nimmagadda & Cowger, 1999; Ow, 1991). Indeed it is seen as the social worker's duty as a learned person to impart knowledge to the less informed client. While individualism is not disregarded, dependency is not seen as threatening and clients generally trust their helpers. Consequently, in these contexts social workers tend to slip into the guiding role expected of them, despite the fact that most of them have been educated in the Western casework tradition. In fact, "...taking a non-directive, passive role in the casework situation, might leave the Indian client wholly dissatisfied" (Bannerjee, as cited by Ejaz, 1991:139).

### **Culture and human rights**

Another important theme in Western social work literature is that of human rights (Ife, 2001). Universal human rights conventions call for universal ethical standards. Can they and should they override local cultural practices? While this article does not attempt to answer this complex question, Ramphele's (2002) work does embrace the theme of universal human rights and their implications for local cultures, particularly her notion of outmoded customs. She clearly believes that there are positive and negative traditional African cultural ways which exert a strong influence

over the lives of many people. While the practice of *imbeleko* and the power of ancestors could be seen as positive aspects of culture, matricide is not. Thus the practice in the Limpopo Province where young men are known to murder their mothers, because a 'woman who succeeds without the aid of a man is regarded with suspicion', is not only a criminal act but also a violation of the human rights of women in South Africa. Yet despite South Africa's Constitution based on universal human rights charters, the Limpopo government exhibits "...ambivalence toward dealing firmly with issues related to 'customs' and there is almost an unspoken fear that such firmness may be interpreted as an assault on 'African culture'" (Ramphele, 2002:160). Ramphele (2002) is not sympathetic to the maintenance of cultural ways when it comes to issues like this arising from patriarchal practices. She claims that "...eliminating gender inequality is essential to sustainable development..." and that

"...Definitions of masculinity and femininity based on traditional norms are unhelpful to families on the edge of survival in the new South Africa. For one thing, they limit the possibilities of young people modelling themselves on successful adults. A bolder step needs to be taken to free men and women from the shackles of traditionalism that have become dysfunctional in a modern society" (Ramphele, 2002:161-162).

Ramphele (2002:13) is critical of the "...male-dominated ethos that permeates all South African cultures". She links it with outmoded patriarchal traditional cultural practices which impact negatively on relationships between men and women and which are no longer sustainable in South African society.

"Traditional practices and customs that are dysfunctional to modernity and the democratic approaches embodied in our Constitution with its non-racial gender equity ideals need to be identified and challenged ... African culture should not be seen as an exception in this instance as this can only impoverish it and lead to its eventual demise" (Ramphele, 2002:163).

While culture might change with developments in society, as Ramphele (2002) so eloquently shows that it must, so too do social workers need to learn about specific cultures in order not only to be responsive to them, but also to be agents of change in helping to eradicate criminal, unfair and discriminatory practices which are being sustained in the name of custom and tradition. Customs and traditions which lead elderly women to be brutally murdered by their sons are negative and outmoded. They have no place in the kind of African culture social workers would want to perpetuate within a human rights context. In the light of the changing nature of the family, there are other customary practices that need revision such as those relating to children born out of wedlock, where the child belongs to the father's family (Ramphele, 2002:68).

While negative patriarchal practices where women die at the hands of the men who are supposed to love them happen in many Western countries, in South Africa they need to be seen against other alarming statistics. South Africa has the highest incidence of rape in the world; it is reported that one woman is raped every three minutes. Most alarming of all is the high incidence of child rape and child sexual abuse. What is it about South African society which leads to social problems of this magnitude affecting women? Besides universal principles to protect the sanctity and dignity of life, the South African Constitution enshrines women's rights. There have been great strides in empowering women and opening up opportunities for them in politics and in business, so why this anomaly? Why are women's rights not being implemented across all cultures?

Clearly cultural issues are extremely important in social work practice and social workers need to know and understand the culture of the clients they work with. Culturally sensitive practice

appears to be a major issue in indigenous social work. More broadly than this, there are questions about social work's Western values, as the example of self-determination shows. How universal is this value and how important is it to social workers in their daily practice? While some would argue that it does not mirror what social workers do, even in Western practice (Shaw & Shaw, 1997; Spicker, 1990), others point to the alternative without it, where people could be manipulated and controlled by powerful social workers (Gray, 1995, 1996). This debate has implications for the broader question of cross-cultural social work. As the case of Rwanda showed most starkly, sometimes international rights must take precedence over unjust traditional ways. Perhaps African writers need to debate the justness of their cultural practices in an increasingly globalising world, especially since South Africa is a signatory to international human rights charters. As Ramphela (2002) so graphically shows, there are both positive and negative aspects of culture, as well as outdated customs inconsistent with practices associated with modernity, which emphasises human rights and social justice.

## CONCLUSION

Despite the importance of cultural practices in establishing gender identity in South Africa, Ramphela's study showed that young black people from New Crossroads feel dislocated in post-apartheid South Africa and that political transformation has not been accompanied by the economic opportunities needed to make them feel part of the new South Africa. She also found that when divorced from the mainstream of society and lacking access to social resources and services, they tended to fall back on their traditional ways. Thus cultural practices like *imbeleko*, circumcision and the power of the ancestors have remained important in the lives of Xhosa people (and more broadly than that, since there are similar beliefs and practices in other African cultures). However, there is also a new generation of young people who have grown up in urban townships without strong connections to African cultural ways, though this did not appear to be the case in Ramphela's study of the young people of New Crossroads.

Looking at the implications of such findings for social work, one needs to recognise the tension between traditional values and cultural ways which stress collective interests and ancestral powers, on the one hand, and the individualistic values of reflexive modernity which stress self-determination and autonomy, on the other. These values are central to social work and the whole notion of human rights rests on them. A human rights culture – a liberal concept – rests on people's entitlement to certain kinds of goods, services and treatment as a safeguard against injustice. It has worked well in South Africa to empower certain sectors of the population, especially those who have gained entry into the economic system and labour market. But with unemployment effectively running at nearly 50% and half of its population remaining poor, inequality has deepened with political transformation. The most disadvantaged are the rural poor (Steinberg, 2002) – most often steeped in traditional customs – and those who remain largely outside the reach of urban-based social work. Claims of social work's irrelevance will persist for as long as this situation pertains, unless it is agreed that social work deals mainly with those with access to social services rather than those at society's margins. However, as Ramphela's study shows, even urban-based black people follow traditional ways and social work with its Western values and practices will be working between cultures for some time to come – at least until people find their identity and footing in the new rainbow nation. As Sparks (2003) so eloquently shows, this applies only to those at the top of the bus. And even for some young people at the top of the bus, economic privilege borne out of family wealth does not guarantee them a firm footing in the new South Africa. We are talking here about young white males, many of whom can be found seeking their fortune abroad.

So where does social work situate itself in this scenario? It would be contended that the clients of social work are people often embedded in traditional ways, perhaps pursuing outmoded customs which social workers have a duty to address given the high priority they place on human rights and social justice. Ramphela's research shows that there is a role for social work in challenging outmoded customs and traditional patriarchal ways, particularly those which lead to violence and abuse against women and children. There would appear to be particular problems with some young men in South African society, especially those dislocated by political transformation who still define their identity in traditional ways. Thus both culture and gender issues remain at the forefront of social work.

In conclusion, drawing on Ramphela's findings to enhance and expand our understanding of the issues of culture, tradition, modernity and social work in South Africa, in this paper the authors have attempted to build on their earlier work on the importance of culture in the indigenisation process. Ramphela's (2002) work is presented as an articulation of African culture and the way in which it differs from Western culture. In particular, it examines traditional Xhosa practices such as *imbeleko* and the power of the ancestors in African culture as well as ways in which African men establish their identity and masculinity. The implications for social work of these cultural practices were discussed. Using the example of self-determination, which is said to be universal, the authors highlighted the difference between local cultural practices which stress ancestral power and collective interests, and the value of self-determination and individual autonomy in social work. They drew attention to Ramphela's notion of outmoded cultural practices which are out of step with universal human rights and the potential of human rights to counter unjust traditional ways, such as patriarchal practices which disadvantage women, and suggest that, in an increasingly globalising world in which South Africa is a signatory to international human rights charters, African writers need to debate the justness of their traditional practices, especially those which impact on women in an unjust way.

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*Dr Inta Allegritti, Lecturer in Sociology, University of Newcastle, New South Wales, Australia.*

*Prof Mel Gray, Department of Social Work and Head of the School of Social Sciences at the University of Newcastle, New South Wales, Australia.*