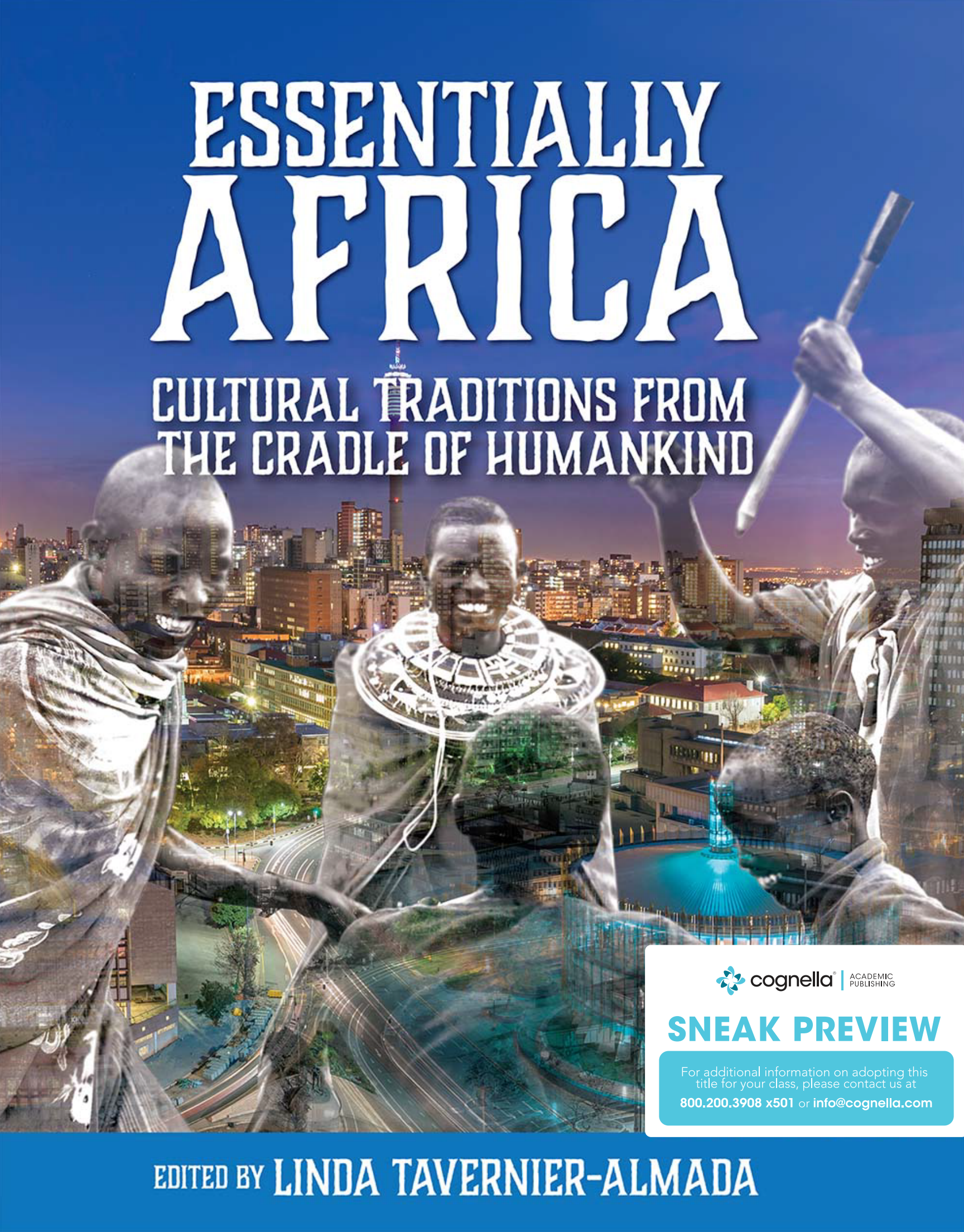


# ESSENTIALLY AFRICA

CULTURAL TRADITIONS FROM  
THE CRADLE OF HUMANKIND



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EDITED BY **LINDA TAVERNIER-ALMADA**

# Essentially Africa

**CULTURAL TRADITIONS FROM  
THE CRADLE OF HUMANKIND**

Edited by Linda Tavernier-Almada



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# PREFACE

LINDA TAVERNIER-ALMADA

## CULTURE AND SOCIETY IN AFRICA

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The recent economic growth in various African countries has gotten accolades from several reputable journals. A 2013 edition of *Harvard Business Review*, for example, stated, “Africa’s Time Is Now.” The uptick of interest in Africa has created parallel growth in efforts to better understand and appreciate the cultural principles of the people living in different regions across that continent. However, despite the healthy level of independent articles published about various aspects of African culture, the penury of books that bring together a selection of articles on African traditional cultural performances is a somber reminder of the previous lack of interest the Western world had about anything African. However, in a global economy where studies have shown that the African continent will hold the world’s largest and youngest population in the near future, economic and policy decisions about different African social groups will occupy an overwhelming space in the minds of future decision makers. Therefore, it is fundamental for educators to expand their students’ commonly linear formulaic study materials to more holistic ones that help them understand the cultural strings that encircle and intuitively interconnect most African peoples. Understanding the nuances that separate or reconcile different African people is fundamental to the education of those who seek broad collective relationships with them.

This anthology presents a collection of articles on the cultural traditions and performances from different countries across Africa. It presents a remedy to faculty who teach the subject of Africa having to assign several separate articles to supplement primary linear-type textbooks. The search for these articles is stressful and time-consuming for faculty members, who are often already overwhelmed with various other tasks.

The choice of which articles to select was primarily based on the underpinning interconnectedness of the message expressed in each cultural performance. Articles that favored contemporary cultural traditions with similar undercurrents across various African countries topped the list of choices. Before publication, the articles were presented to two hundred students to evaluate ease of understanding and enriching

value. Each article was chosen based on whether it inspired students to learn more or the students conveyed that the article had taken them on a fascinating cultural journey.

The rising excitement about Africa is fueled by the prevailing understanding that six of the world's top thirteen fastest-growing economies are in Africa, with two of the continent's countries placing in first and third place. Furthermore, the 2015 United Nations estimate shows that by 2050, Africa's population will be 2.4 billion,<sup>1</sup> outnumbering China's 1.4 billion. Currently, the continent has the fastest population growth in the world. Even more interesting for Africa is that current studies show that by 2050, more than a quarter of the population in the developed world will be age sixty or older. However, by the middle of the twenty-first century, Africa will have the youngest population in the world.<sup>2</sup> The surge for knowledge on Africa is also based on the presence of 1.6 million African-born individuals living in the United States.<sup>3</sup> The US numbers are low compared to those of Europe, where approximately 8 million Africans or people with at least one African parent now live—with 3.5 million in France alone.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, according to the US Census Bureau, Africans in the United States now have the highest cumulative college graduation rate of any group, including that of the Asian “model minority.” When the status of the new model minority is combined with the group with the fastest-growing economic status and the youngest populations, many African people will likely also gain tremendous market buying power.<sup>5</sup> Given this combination of changes in Africa and on the global stage, articles that show living cultural traditions were the first choice for this collection. Hence, with the exception of only one article from the 1970s and two published in the 1990s, all the articles chosen were published during the first two decades of the twenty-first century. They were selected from various academic fields because it is imperative that today's students learn that true knowledge is as interdisciplinary as people are diverse. Although the primary purpose of the book is to facilitate teaching a course in African culture, the readings can also be used in a course on global studies, marketing, folklore, anthropology, and history.

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1 United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division, “World Population Prospects: The 2015 Revision, Key Findings and Advance Tables” (Working Paper No. ESA/P/WP.241, United Nations, New York, 2015).

2 Ibid.

3 US Department of Commerce Economics and Statistics Administration, US Census Bureau, “The Foreign-Born Population in the United States: 2010” (American Community Survey Report No. 19, US Census Bureau, Washington, DC, 2012).

4 Catherine Borrel and Bertrand Lhommeau, “Être né en France d'un parent immigré.” Institut national de la statistique et des études économiques, 2010. [http://www.insee.fr/fr/themes/document.asp?ref\\_id=ip1287](http://www.insee.fr/fr/themes/document.asp?ref_id=ip1287).

5 US Department of Commerce Economics and Statistics Administration, “The Foreign-Born Population in the United States.”

The world has so turned toward Africa that it is now imperative that individuals who plan to be part of tomorrow's global market acquire knowledge of its people that is not solely based on superficial visits or touristic journeys. Too often, individuals who actualize policy or economic decisions about African nations have no substantive knowledge about the important cultural undertones that guide how various African people see themselves. This frequently leads to flawed international policy decisions, with long term negative implications for the whole continent. Hence, readings that allow future decision makers an inside look at some of the traditional cultures that have impact on the thoughts of people on the continent is imperative. The articles chosen for this anthology should not be looked at as simple cultural performances but as samples of performed exchanges that contain signifiers that link people across the continent. Students should be encouraged to analyze each article for its synthesized cultural subtexts, its shared values, and the common normative ethos that connects various African populations.

The arguments supporting or rejecting the synthesis between tradition and modernity are constant, either in African discourse or discourse about Africans. However, the reality is that currently, traditions and modernity are extensively intertwined at all social levels in Africa. The reciprocal relationship between tradition and modernity, which is part of all African life today, is undeniable and colors all aspects of policy and economic decisions. However, to understand an African country's traditional culture is fundamental to understanding certain aspects of how policy decisions are guided by more than just aspects of the global market or world events. Addressing financial development and being an honest broker in Africa must be preceded by knowledge of African subtexts, which are present and vivid in their traditional performances. This book allows us to think about the link between oral cultural traditions and modernity. Great African thinkers like Sylvain Bemba, Sony Labou Tansi, Ahmadou Kourouma, and Léopold Sédar Senghor saw African heritage as needing to provide no excuse to modernity. They understood the connectivity between modernity and tradition. That understanding did not see the values of African cultural traditions as conservative or retrograde, but rather as modernity flushed with humanitarianism. These authors fully understood that present-day Africa cannot be understood without knowledge of the complex and rich traditions that has been passed down orally for generations on the continent.

The material in this text allows students to truly connect to some underlying aspects of everyday thoughts in African family, political, and economic lives. Subtle cultural messages in these traditions, although not directly observable, often guide both lay Africans and their leaders. To some degree, the continuity of African cultural

traditions even impact the decision-making processes of those Africans long separated from the continent.

The articles in this book present cultural expressions from specific regions and people, but they also embody beliefs that are shared and understood across the different national borders. The book is user friendly, and anyone outside of academia can enjoy it. Each chapter has several articles that are introduced with a preface that links them to a broader African mind-set. The selection draws on work from various disciplines. The four chapters are divided in broad social categories: Rights of passage, marriage, courtship, and sex; religion; kinship; and art, music, and dance. Although intended for undergraduates of all academic levels, the content is also relevant for graduate courses.



SECTION I

Courtship,  
Marriage, and Sex



*Marital traditions are multifaceted in Africa, and the ceremonies that surround them run from the simple to the complex, and from the much ritualized to basic no-fuss affairs. In most regions in Africa, courtship and marriage traditions involve elaborate ritual dance displays, like the Samburu Seduction Dance that is depicted in the first Section I opening image (left). However, to be clear, even the least ritualized marriages in Africa tend to involve traditional clothing and performances. As seen in the second image in Section I (right), even when they live in very modern African cities or foreign countries, many young Africans choose to follow their region's culture specific wedding fashion to keep with tradition.*

*Left: Sambuaru Seduction Dance  
Right: Expression of Zulu Wedding*

# INTRODUCTION

## LINDA TAVERNIER-ALMADA

**T**he African continent is the second largest in the world, and it contains the oldest history of our human species. Today Africa is home to fifty-seven countries and more than 1 billion people,<sup>1</sup> who belong to three thousand or more different ethnic groups, and account for a greater variety of cultural traditions per region than any other place on the planet. It is therefore not surprising that marital traditions and customs vary greatly from one region of the continent to the next, with a great variety of courtship customs, wedding ceremonies, and sexual practices. Marital traditions are multifaceted in Africa, and the ceremonies that surround them run from the simple to the complex, and from the much ritualized to basic no-fuss affairs. However, to be clear, even the least ritualized marriages in Africa tend to involve traditional performances. Currently, due to consistent exposure to more “modern” lifestyles, many African marriage or premarriage traditions are coming under criticism or simply being diluted or deleted completely from communities.

Marriage structures run the gamut in options throughout the African continent. The selections in this section include prearranged and love connections; patrimonial or matrimonial lineages; two adults or young girls with adult males; “bride kidnaping”; husband wives, one wife or several, as in polygamy, and so on. This list of possible types of African marriages does not even begin to discuss the various types of wedding rituals or the specific marital or premarital sexual practices that exist in different regions. One aspect of African marriages is fundamentally uniform throughout most of the continent; they are never simply the union of just two individuals. African, marriages are generally about the full immersion of two whole families, and often even the members of two whole communities, into each other’s lives. However, in various regions on the continent, many of the traditional marriage structures are undergoing drastic changes. The changes, affect some of the less-desirable aspects of African wedding traditions that were often harmful to women. However, changes are also occurring in African marriage traditions that were beneficial to women and to the broader communities.

African marriage traditions are culturally a world apart from Western ones, which have the expectation that from the wedding day on, the family that is coming together

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<sup>1</sup> Central Intelligence Agency. *The World Factbook 2011*. Washington, DC: Central Intelligence Agency. <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/index.html>.

is composed of just two individuals—“the couple”—hence, two future parents and their future children. Throughout the African continent, marriages are social contracts that join various members of the community for a lifelong relationship. African marital structures often involve lots of people who come together to provide the marriage with an integrated protective and supportive unit. The simple two plus two formula, two parents and two children, practiced in societies with European values are extremely conservative when compared to the extensive number of family members that are often considered as part of the *immediate* African marital union. Both before the European aggression against African people with slavery and colonization and after, African marriages were understood as communal not individual affairs.<sup>2</sup> Those considered as family in these marriages are sometimes close friends, community members who were frequently around the new marriage couple’s homes when they were growing up, religious leaders, and even employers. The question to ponder when looking at most African marital units is never how many people are part of it, in one way or another, but rather, is there anyone in the community who is not?

Currently however, with a younger generation that belongs to a global communication network, which exposes them to the Western family formula, more Africans are turning toward the nuclear types of marriage structures that emphasize detached and isolated “couple-only” family arrangements. Additionally, with about 40 percent of the African population now living in urban areas,<sup>3</sup> the extended family tradition is not only less desired, it is also becoming less realizable. The marital structure, which allowed family members and friends to help each other with various aspects of life struggles, is no longer readily feasible now that young couples are moving to distant cities. For example, relatives or friends of the couples can no longer provide help with childcare, which had previously been essential and beneficial contributions provided by extended family members for the smooth function and progress of young families.

The free counseling and guidance provided by members of the extended family to help couples negotiate through rough times are now also having less effect, because they are being delivered via impersonal phone lines or Internet connections. Currently, divorce attorneys are used to quickly handle solutions to marital disputes that would previously have been deescalated by the elders in the family, who usually focused on finding ways to bring the couples back together. These divorce attorneys put quick ends to marriages that older family members would often have attempted to guide toward peaceful resolution and reconciliation. The data published in Statistics South

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2 Eugene L. Mendonsa, *West Africa: An Introduction to Its History, Civilization and Contemporary Situation*. Durham, NC: Carolina Academic Press, 2002.

3 Central Intelligence Agency, *The World Factbook 2011*.

Africa's Community Survey 2016, for example, shows the divorce rate in that region as having gone up by 3.4 percent since 2013, with 37.1 percent of that coming from the black African population.<sup>4</sup> In parts of Nigeria, the divorce rate has had such a spike that some local governments created countermeasures to prevent divorce. This upward trend in divorces has not yet permeated all African communities, but one can expect that it will as more Africans move to urban areas and as they stay connected to the global Internet community.

As Africa becomes increasingly a part of the global network, where values and norms are fluid, changeable, and exchangeable, the people of the continent must decide which traditions to keep or forgo. Some premarriage and marriage traditions, which had for much of Africa's history been accepted as normal and had not previously been questioned, have become the subject of extensive scrutiny from both the international community and Africans themselves. Traditions such as the circumcision of young girls are now being pushed back throughout Africa. Other cultural activities in premarital life that affect young girls are also coming under fire. Almost all the cultural practices that involve young girls being forced into relationships that they do not want are now also under a microscope. For example, the type of prearranged marriages that involve very young girls being forced to marry men who are often three or four times their age are under fire from both the international community and from Africans themselves.

Arranged marriages are legal in thirty countries that are part of the African Union. They were traditionally used to place people together to maintain or raise the social or economic stature of one of the two people in the marriage, or to join families together for some other form of social mobility. However, certain aspects of these marriages are now being challenged. In many cases, brides in these prearranged marriages were found to be fifteen years old or younger.<sup>5</sup> In a 2011 press release, UNICEF estimated that every day at least thirty-nine thousand underage girls are pushed into prearranged marriages.<sup>6</sup>

One in three regions with prearranged marriages have been recorded as having higher levels of uneducated women than regions where women marry at a more mature age. Research by the Royal Tropical Institute showed that prearranged marriages had a fundamentally negative impact on how much schooling girls receive.<sup>7</sup> For example, 33 percent of the young girls from Senegal and 25 percent of those from Mali who

4 Statistics South Africa, *Community Survey 2016 Metadata*. Pretoria: Statistics South Africa.

5 UNICEF, "Child Marriages: 39,000 Every Day," press release, March 7, 2013. [http://www.unicef.org/media/media\\_68114.html](http://www.unicef.org/media/media_68114.html).

6 *Ibid.*

7 Plan UK, "Independent Progress Review of DFID PPA Funding—Building Skills for Life Empowering Adolescent Girls through Education" (Global Report, prepared by the Royal Tropical Institute, 2012).

were interviewed for the institute's report identified the workload in their marriages as the most important factor that was responsible for them having to leave school.<sup>8</sup> The United Nations Population Fund has characterized marriages that involve children as a violation of a child's human rights, yet in sub-Saharan Africa, over 4 million girls are married before they reach their eighteenth birthday.

At the local level, all forms of prearranged marriage—even when the people involved are of age—are being challenged by young Africans, who classify them as transactions instead of unions of love. Many young Africans who work and live in Africa's developing urban areas have their own apartments, own their own cars, pay for all their own bills, and no longer depend on their families for financial support. Those who do not are either too young to make the move or are financially unable to do so. Most young African women, as with young women everywhere, dream of pursuing their education, traveling, and living life on their own terms. For the most part, these young Africans are the ones framing the debate against prearranged marriages.

Lately, one of the oldest marriage traditions, "bride kidnapping," has also come under extensive criticism—both from Africans and the international community. Bride kidnapping is believed to have started as a solution for young men and women who wanted to marry but could not get their parents' consent. Regardless of how the practice started, bride kidnapping is now a tradition that is seen as detrimental to the well-being of young women. Makho Nkosi argues that currently, bride kidnapping is a patriarchal weapon used by some men to force women into marriages with men they would otherwise never desire.<sup>9</sup> These abductions are usually not done with the girl's consent. However, often they are done with the consent of the young girl's parents. Nkosi states that women in these marriages lose all their power and are forced to live a life of complete submission.<sup>10</sup>

Many girls in these types of marriages are forced into them before the age of 15. A research by United Nations Population Fund found that kidnaped girls are most often subjected to various forms of physical abuse such as rape, beatings, and sometimes death. Caroline Sweetman states that the often completely unequal power relations in these unions indicate that the older husbands have absolute control over all aspect of the marital sexual activities.<sup>11</sup> Girls that find themselves in these marriages often end up suffering from severe psychological trauma from being doubly victimized and

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8 Ibid.

9 Makho Nkosi and Thabisile Buthelezi, "The Nature and Causes of Bride Abduction Cases in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa," *Stud Tribes Tribal* 11, no. 2 (2013): 161–78.

10 Ibid.

11 Caroline Sweetman, *Gender, Development and Marriage*. Oxford: Oxfam GB, 2003.

marginalized if they return home.<sup>12</sup> Because they are conditioned from a very young age to know that women need to obey their husband without question; satisfy their sexually needs, regardless of the brutality that accompanies it; and see beatings as rightfully given, these girls return home is seen as unacceptable by most families who originally accepted a bride kidnaping arrangement.<sup>13</sup>

Although older women in these communities continue to see this tradition as a part of their culture to be preserved, younger ones are pushing for it to change or stop completely. In South Africa bride kidnaping, called *ukuthwala*, is facing serious challenges: It is now described by the government and the media with criminalizing words like *illegal kidnaping*, *rape*, and *abuse*; all acts that are legally deemed criminal in the region.<sup>14</sup>

Certain African marriage traditions that are the opposite of those from the West but are not visibly detrimental to the communities are also facing pushback from the younger population. For example, in some African countries, children do not gain their inheritance from their fathers, but from their mothers. That is fundamentally different than the patriarchal system that spans Western cultures. Such traditions predate the advent of paternity determinant tests. Because there were previously no written documents to prove one's paternity, the concept was that it was best to do the inheritance through the mother, since it would always be clear who the mother was. These marriage inheritance structures are still prevalent in some regions of countries like Guinea-Bissau, Namibia, Senegal, and Gambia. However, with the exposure to Western patriarchy, matrilineal marriages are now more and more being challenged; interestingly it is now men of all ages in those communities who are raising this issue.

On the other hand, all is not lost to modernity. Various marriage traditions, reaching far back in African history, continue to be followed with great enthusiasm by many young and old people alike, even while they live modern lifestyles. For example, the Ethiopian bride-painting ritual or the Kenyan henna tattooing of brides ritual are very old traditions that have very different meanings for the people who practice them, but are still fundamentally welcomed by both the older and younger members of the communities, in both the rural and urban areas.

Another marriage tradition that seems to have found a happy place in modern life comes from the Zulu people in South Africa. The practice is called Lobola, and it

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12 Beth Osnes, *Theatre for Women's Participation in Sustainable Development*. New York: Routledge, 2014, 157. Philip Cafaro and Eileen Crist, *Life on the Brink: Environmentalists Confront Overpopulation*. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2012, 249.

13 Paulos Milkias, *Ethiopia*. Santa Barbara, Calif: ABC-CLIO, 2011, 225.

14 *Ibid.*

involves the negotiations of a bride's price.<sup>15</sup> In this negotiation, the families involve do not to speak of the actual wedding until the bride price is set, and this must be done in a formal written document. Although Lobola is not and has not been a requirement for marriage since 1932, it is still actively practice and is of great importance to the Zulu people, both from the older and younger generations.<sup>16</sup> The custom of bride price dates as far back as 3000 BCE, and was practiced by the various ancient cultures.<sup>17</sup> However, currently, the traditional process of setting a bride's price has merged with modernity through a tool that most young people connect with immediately. Young men are now are actively participating in this traditional practice by using a software application (an app) that allows them to calculate for themselves what the bride is worth. The brides in turn are now also able to establish their own cash worth with this very modern software. Traditionally, the Lobola price was paid with livestock. However, with this new application, developed by Robert Matsaneng, a 26-year-old South African developer, Labola is now firmly part of the 21<sup>st</sup> century's cash transactions that are calculated by a technological application.<sup>18</sup> Although the Labola tradition is in essence still problematic and still raises many questions in terms of gender equality, specifically for poorer families who have difficulty raising the bride price,<sup>19</sup> the new bride price application does seems to be making the traditional process in this type of marriage a fun endeavor for young Zulu who wish to marry.<sup>20</sup>

Hence, there are many traditional marriages in Africa that are currently being challenged by various groups, but there are also many fundamentally traditional forms of marriages, such as body painting for beautification of brides or marriages that require a bride prices, that have—at least for now—transcending the test of time and modernity.

## IMAGE CREDITS

Fig. S1.1: Copyright © Depositphotos/dtemps.

Fig. S1.2: Source: <http://www.nairaland.com/2302279/10-beautiful-african-traditional-wedding>.

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17 Sambe Ngutor, "The Effects of High BridePrice on Marital Stability." *Journal Of Humanities and Social Science*. 5 Dec. 2013. Web. 19 June 2015.

18 Thuso Khumalo, "Lobola App Gives South African Bride Price." *DW.DE. Deutsche Welle*, 27 Feb. 2015. Web. 01 June 2015.

19 Jean Ensminger and Jack Knight, "Changing Social Norms," *Current Anthropology*; Feb 1997, Vol. 38 Issue 1, p1–24, 24p

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