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# Learning Unit 11:

## Aids education in traditional Africa

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# Introduction

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*Imagine living in a world where disease and ill fortune are not merely the result of random events, or exposure to natural disease-causing agents, but where the cold with which you woke up this morning was sent to you. Imagine it was willed by some magical or supernatural person, or brought down on you by somebody who knows you and is jealous and therefore used supernatural powers (witches) to send the germ to you in order to harm you. Never again would you be able to sleep soundly, knowing that you had taken all reasonable precautions to avoid illness and misfortune. No, there is another set of rules-different powers to which you can fall prey, more powerful than the mechanics suggested by Western science.*

*This is the world of ancestors, witches, demons and magic. It is a world that ultimately cannot be fought with Western medicine, or as suggested in the Aids field, by merely using condoms. It can be fought only by stronger counter-magic. Powerful magical means that can be attained only by consulting a diviner or traditional healer who can identify the ultimate (supernatural or religious) cause, and prescribe the correct medicine or ritual that will be able to counter the evil which has befallen you.*

What is your **reaction** to the above passage? Are you sceptical or disbelieving? Do you think it may be biased in some way, or may be derogatory towards African culture? Or alternatively, do you think it may be a celebration of African culture and the acknowledgement that some traditional African communities may not yet have been “corrupted” by Western thought? How may your own beliefs and culture have influenced your reaction? These are all important factors that you should consider when doing this learning unit.

The following **indicators** may, however, guide you when you make up your mind:

- Various anthropological and scientific studies have strongly suggested that an alternative traditional African worldview does exist in Africa.
- This traditional African worldview is not necessarily shared by all Africans, but is more prevalent in traditional, non-Westernised communities.
- To deny the fact that traditional African communities may share a unique worldview may be an unacceptable form of cultural imperialism. The Western, non-magical worldview is not the only “acceptable” alternative.
- To assume that clients adhere to a specific worldview merely because they belong to a specific cultural group is a form of unacceptable stereotyping.

In view of the above statements, let’s think further: How would you feel if another person questioned your traditional or religious views? For example, how would you react if somebody from outside your community were to come and tell you that all your religious beliefs were not true? That you should forget all of them and substitute them with a new set of totally different beliefs – beliefs of which you have little understanding and which fundamentally reject your own traditional or religious beliefs? Would you not find such a suggestion preposterous and, even if you kept quiet, would you not perhaps reject the notion in your heart?

These are the realities Western or Westernised Aids workers, working in traditional communities in Africa, have to deal with. It is never as simple as merely substituting traditional beliefs for a new set of Western beliefs, or merely telling a traditional community that they should use condoms. The purpose of this learning unit is to explain the worldview of traditional African communities and how such a worldview may complicate Aids education.

## Key questions

Use the following questions as pointers to ensure that you retain your focus on the important issues in this learning unit:

- How is illness perceived?
- How is sexuality perceived?
- How are condoms perceived?
- What is the importance of community life?
- Can traditional beliefs be used in Aids education?

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## Key concepts

While working your way through this learning unit, look out for the following key concepts. Make sure that, after you have completed this learning unit, you know what they refer to and how they are used (or look up their definitions in the glossary):

<a href="#">Ancestors</a>	<a href="#">Immediate and ultimate causes</a>
<a href="#">Witches and witchcraft</a>	<a href="#">Polygamy</a>
Zamani (Swahili word meaning past)	Ripening of foetus
Exotic cultural behaviour	<a href="#">Virginity testing</a>

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## How is illness perceived?

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Jonny Steinberg's book *Three-letter plague* gives an account of how Aids influences a traditional community. It also deals with how illness is perceived: On page 15 the main character, **Sizwe**, explains his own belief of how he may have been infected with HIV:



*“Some people have maybe sent a demon to have sex with me: a demon with HIV. That is why I am scared to test. I think I will test positive.”*

Later (p 26) in a conversation with the author, Sizwe also tells how his friend Jake became infected:

*“How did you know it was Aids?” I asked. “The whole village thought his uncle had bewitched him”, he replies, “Jake had money and could be generous. He (the uncle) was jealous. And the rash in the crotch - it is a common means of witchcraft. The jealous one slips the muthi into Jake’s girlfriend’s food. The next time Jake has sex with her, he gets the poison.”*

Yet another supernatural reason for the cause of disease (i.e. Aids) is given on page 65. Here Sizwe explains to Steinberg a ritual which he observed:

*“It is a ritual for Simlindile’s cousin,” he explained. “He lives in East London. They have especially brought him back to Ithanga, to his ancestors, perform this ritual for him. They are slaughtering a goat up on the hill.”*

*“What is the matter with him?”*

*“It is believed that the problem is his late wife. She died last year. No sacrifice was made for her after she died. He went on to a new wife, and made no sacrifice for his old wife. There is a belief that if no sacrifice is made for the dead one, her spirit remains trapped. She cannot go to the other world. She possesses her husband and makes him ill.”*

*“What are his symptoms?” I asked.*

*“I saw him yesterday when he arrived. I know this man has Aids”.*

Now that you have seen in practice how traditional beliefs may impact on perceptions about diseases such as Aids, it is time to read the discussion in your prescribed book.

## Study



## Prescribed book: pp. 310-320

Study the following sections in your prescribed book:

**Introduction:** This gives an interesting account of perceptions of where Aids may have started in Africa: Juliana's disease.

**Section 11.1: Perceptions of illness.** Try to forget for a moment everything that you may know or believe about the causes of illness. Now submerge yourself in (or rediscover) a totally different set of traditional African beliefs with regard to the possible causes of disease:

- Ancestors and God, witches and sorcerers, pollution and germs. Click on the link to watch a video on the cleansing rituals of traditional healers <http://goo.gl/qDKV99>
- The important distinction between immediate and ultimate causes (Did you grasp the fact that everything, including diseases and misfortune, in the traditional African worldview, is ultimately related to the religious sphere, that is, attributed to supernatural causes?)



It is so easy to assume that all people share the same beliefs about the origin of disease. As you can see, this is not necessarily the case. Often people living in traditional African communities do not share the logic assumed by Western medicine and do not share a belief in its underlying principles. This may seriously complicate Aids education.

It is not only illness that is perceived differently – sexuality is also a much more loaded concept in traditional Africa

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# How is sexuality perceived?

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What do you think about when you think about sex? It is probably safe to assume that sex means different things to different people. It is seldom seen as merely a mechanical act of procreation. In Africa, sex and sexuality are closely linked to personal immortality. Childlessness is seen as one of the most severe burdens a person can carry, while many children are seen as a blessing. Any call to use condoms or abstain from sex therefore runs into big problems in traditional African communities.



## Study



## Prescribed book: pp. 320-323

Study the following sections in your prescribed book:

**Section 11.2: Perceptions of sexuality.** Do we really understand the context of sexuality in traditional Africa? How much of what we believe is based on stereotyping and prejudice – specially about African masculinity? How important do you think issues are such as personal immortality and the fact that there must be children to help in the homestead and fields? The way in which sexuality is perceived in Africa has important implications for Aids education.

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# How are condoms perceived?

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Why are people from all cultures sometimes so reluctant to use **condoms**, especially if their lives may depend on it? This is the question asked again and again by Aids workers worldwide and also in Africa. The simple answer is: condoms are a bother to wear, not always readily available and may reduce the pleasure of the sexual act. But if this were the complete answer, condom campaigns would have been so much easier.



Condom usage is often complicated by urban legends such as the supposed ineffectiveness of condoms in preventing HIV transmission (a belief that is totally untrue!) and by some political conspiracy theories. But what makes pro-condom campaigns even more difficult in Africa are various deep-seated cultural and religious beliefs, taboos and logic, which are often poorly understood by Western or Westernised educators.

## Study



## Prescribed book: pp. 323-325

Study the following sections in your prescribed book:

**Section 11.3: Perceptions of condoms.** It is important to understand why condom use in traditional African communities is often problematic. Did you take note of the following?

- Sex as the gift of oneself
- Unfounded fears
- The mistaken belief that the foetus needs a constant supply of semen to develop normally.

Although we have constantly advocated respect for traditional beliefs, it is nonetheless sometimes necessary to **challenge** harmful cultural beliefs if they are killing people.

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## ACTIVITY 11.1 - SEARCHING FOR LESSER-KNOWN CULTURAL BELIEFS

Search the internet for lesser-known cultural beliefs about sex and sexuality. Go to [Activity 11.1](#) and learn more about other cultural beliefs.


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# Importance of community life

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*“Through others I am”*

This is probably one of the best-known proverbs in Africa. It is considered extremely unhealthy not to be part of a community. Everything, even personal decisions, first needs to be discussed with the community. In South Africa this practice is called **ubuntu**. Click on the link <http://goo.gl/pVVdJT> to watch a video on Ubuntu. No Aids education programme in Africa can ignore the importance of the community and the role it plays in the everyday life of the African individual. 

## Study



### Prescribed book: pp. 325-329

Study the following sections in your prescribed book:

**Section 11.4: The importance of community life.** While reading this section, make a mental list of how Aids education, which focuses on the individual, may differ from education programmes in Africa, which should involve the community and which often need to use traditional healers as vehicles for change. Do you think that disclosure is still a problematic issue in Africa? Motivate your answer.

- Video on traditional healer at work. <http://goo.gl/3ResVg>



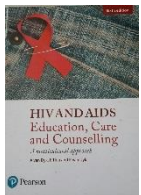
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# How can traditional beliefs be used?

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One of the biggest challenges in Aids education in traditional African communities is how traditional beliefs can be used in prevention programmes without belittling the beliefs of others – even when you differ from them. Great wisdom is required in accepting positive and even exotic practices and using them in such a way that they can become powerful forces in our fight against Aids. The challenge is to devise more creative ways of bringing the Aids message, with the utmost respect, also to traditional communities.

## Study



## Prescribed book: pp. 330-334

Study the following sections in your prescribed book:

**Section 11.5: Using traditional beliefs in Aids education.** Cultural beliefs require Aids educators to be more creative and to consider various possibilities of how they can be helpful in conveying the all-important message of prevention. This will most often involve embracing positive and so-called exotic cultural practices and these should be challenged only when they are really harmful or potentially deadly.

Songs play an important role in African culture as bearers of messages. How can songs be used as conveyers of the Aids message? How can technology be used to spread Aids health messages in Africa? Think of social media.

One example of where challenging culture may be essential concerns initiation rites which use the same spear (assegai) to circumcise all initiates. In such a case it is undesirable to challenge traditional circumcision as such, but you may, for example, try to persuade initiation schools to ask initiates to bring their own clean spears to the ceremony. Click on the link to watch a video on circumcision in the Eastern Cape – Xhosa community <http://goo.gl/CJ4KFp>



## ACTIVITY 11.2 - CONSULT FOCUS GROUPS ABOUT TRADITIONAL AFRICAN BELIEFS

Answer the questions about traditional African beliefs in [Activity 11.2](#).

You are now finished with this learning unit. Click on [Assessment](#) to do some self-assessment questions.

# Assessment

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## Study reflection

After completing Learning Unit 11 (Aids education in traditional Africa), you should have acquired the following knowledge and understanding and be able to:

- appreciate the unique worldview which is shared by many traditional African communities and which may differ from a Western worldview.
- agree with the fact that differences between cultures should be acknowledged and respected in Aids education and counselling.
- take traditional African beliefs and customs into account in Aids education or counselling.

## Self-Assessment 11



Now is the time to pause briefly and to assess whether you have acquired the necessary knowledge and skills. Click on the link [Self-Assessment 11](#) to do a few questions on this learning unit.

**You are now finished with the assessment. Go to Learning Unit 12.**

# APPENDICES

- Activities
- Self-Assessments
- Glossary

## ACTIVITY 11.1 - SEARCHING FOR LESSER-KNOWN CULTURAL BELIEFS

Although our focus in this learning unit is on traditional African beliefs about sex, it may interest you to search the internet for other lesser-known cultural beliefs about sex and sexuality in other traditional cultures. Google the words: “sex cultural beliefs” and link them to “Mediaeval Europe” or the “East” or any other traditional culture. Although it may not be possible for you to access all the sources that you find, it is nonetheless interesting to scan through all the many beliefs which often surround sex in traditional cultures.

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## ACTIVITY 11.2 - CONSULT FOCUS GROUPS

If you have access to and are trusted by a traditional African community, you may make an invaluable contribution by consulting various focus groups within the community about traditional African beliefs. Explain to them that you wish to consult them on possible ways in which existing cultural beliefs can be used in a positive way to convey the message of HIV prevention more effectively. Identifying positive ways in which tradition can be used may really make a big contribution in this field.

Try to answer the following questions:

- Which existing beliefs have the potential to be used in the Aids field?
- How widespread are they?
- Exactly how can they be used to prevent HIV transmission? Are they compatible with scientific findings about HIV transmission? (Please note: Many suggestions may be interesting, but may have no real positive effect on preventing transmission.)
- How acceptable will such traditional solutions be to community leaders, traditional healers and members of the community?

You are welcome to blog about interesting cultural beliefs that you read/hear about. Please remember that you should be respectful and not judgemental.

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## SELF-ASSESSMENT 11

### QUESTION 1

Research shows that condoms are not very popular everywhere in Africa, despite an increased awareness and knowledge of Aids. Which one of the following is the reason for resistance to condom use in Rwanda?

- (1) Ignorance about HIV and Aids.
- (2) Political conspiracy theories about condoms in Rwanda.
- (3) Cultural beliefs of Rwandans about condoms.
- (4) The belief that condoms are not effective.

### QUESTION 2

According to some African Christians, Aids is seen as:

- (1) punishment meted out by the ancestors.
- (2) God's punishment for immorality and sins.
- (3) being caused by witchcraft.
- (4) being caused by sorcerers.

### QUESTION 3

Which of the following represents an African perception of sexuality?

- (1) Sex not only serves a biological function in African societies. Sex also conquers death and symbolises immortality.
- (2) Sex is part of life.
- (3) Sex is taboo.
- (4) Sex means different things to different people.

[\[FEEDBACK\]](#)

## FEEDBACK 11

### Feedback Question 1

The correct answer is “cultural beliefs of Rwandans about condoms”. They believe that condoms prevent fertility and also that they cause all sorts of illness (alternative 3).

### Feedback Question 2

The correct answer is “God’s punishment for immorality and sins” (alternative 2).

### Feedback Question 3

The correct answer is “Sex not only serves a biological function in African societies. Sex also conquers death and symbolises immortality” (alternative 1).

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## Polygamy

Plural marriage or the practice of having more than one spouse at one time. “Polygyny” is the specific term used for having more than one wife (as mostly occurs in the African context), whilst “polyandry” refers to a situation where a wife has more than one husband.

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## Immediate and ultimate causes

The term “immediate causes” usually refers to natural causes, whereas the term “ultimate causes” usually refers to supernatural causes. Supernatural causes may include the action of God, ancestors, or magic.

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## Witches and witchcraft

Witches and witchcraft are often seen as causes of illness and mishaps in some traditional African communities.

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## Ancestors

Ancestors are those who came before us and who are deceased. Ancestors play a very important role in the daily lives of many traditional Africans and they are usually seen as benevolent spirits.

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## Virginity testing

Virginity testing is a traditional practice usually carried out on girls. Various methods are used to test if a girl is still a virgin. Gender activists believe that virginity testing is a violation of human rights. (More on this in Chapter 22 in your prescribed book.)

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