

Dwight S.M. Mutonono
*The Leadership Implications of Kneeling in
Zimbabwean Culture*

Abstract:

This paper considers the implications of public officials and church members kneeling to their leaders as a cultural expression of honor. Zimbabweans, like many Africans, kneel or crouch when interacting with people in authority. In traditional culture children are socialized to kneel to elders, and this becomes a deeply ingrained part of their way of life. While the practice of kneeling, even in private, is not as prevalent as it used to be, recently high-level Zimbabwean public officials have been recorded kneeling before authority figures. They justify their behavior based on culture. Church members do the same to their leaders and similarly justify their conduct as cultural behavior. This paper analyses and critiques this conduct, considering cultural changes to assess the leadership implications of continuing this practice in modern day Zimbabwe.

While the continued private practice of the culture is the prerogative of individual Zimbabweans and cannot be legislated against, the public expression of kneeling is now counter-productive. It is not achieving the original intentions of honoring the behavior's recipient. Because of abuse and possible interpretive misunderstandings, it should be stopped. Recommended ways of transforming the culture are given.

Keywords: leadership, honor, kneeling, Africa, Church

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Introduction

A strong part of Zimbabwean culture and socialization is the honoring of elders or those in power. The visible expression of this is to kneel in the presence of such people. The phenomenon of high officials, such as ministers of state or Supreme Court judges, publicly kneeling to their superiors in the social hierarchy is disconcerting, as is the same practice being done within the church.

This paper will analyze the possible effects of the phenomenon of kneeling before elders in the context of public leadership spheres and worship in the church. First, as a background to the issue being analyzed, specific instances of the occurrence of this phenomenon will be presented. The main content of the paper is divided into three parts: the cultural background and rationalization of the practice, the modernized Western view of the practice, and a discussion on what is an appropriate way to honor elders publicly. The implications of public kneeling will be considered before concluding with recommendations regarding the practice for the Zimbabwean context.

Cultural Background and Rationalization for Kneeling

A 2017 newspaper article named several government ministers and senior officials who have publicly knelt before former President Robert Mugabe and his wife Grace. The ministers and officials named in the article, and in some instances recorded and shown on television doing so are: Patrick Chinamasa, the late John Nkomo, Martin Dinha, Ignatius Chombo, Didymus Mutasa and Rita Makarau.¹

Rita Makarau, a Supreme Court judge, was the chairperson of the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission at the time that she was pictured kneeling before then President Mugabe. When asked, she defended her actions, saying,

"I have been brought up to say that when you are speaking to someone older than you kneel down. That's who I have been brought up [sic] and it was difficult for me to change just like that when he called me to his side," Makarau said, adding that she also finds herself kneeling when conducting her duties as a Supreme Court judge.

"I find myself kneeling to the chief justice if I have to speak to him. I can't get rid of that upbringing like I said. Even at work I find myself kneeling, maybe I need to go for training (to get rid of it)."²

The last sentence in Makarau's quoted words seems to indicate that kneeling is something she does reflexively, perhaps without even consciously knowing that she is doing it. This would be something deeply ingrained in her psyche and culture. In her view, stopping it would probably require training of some kind to change the behavior.

The phenomenon of kneeling in public is not limited to the political sphere. I have seen it on numerous occasions in religious gatherings. Women often kneel when serving food to their leaders, and as a pastor I have been a recipient of this kind of treatment. Though I have felt some discomfort, refusing the treatment might cause unnecessary offense and distract people's attention from the worship event. I have also felt inadequately prepared for the inevitable questions about why I am reciprocating a respectful action with a public insult if I try to change the behavior. I have seen the extremes of this when visiting a fellow pastor's office. The office culture, which they had established, is that the personal assistant does not speak to the pastor standing, she must be on her knees. Congregants of some mega-churches have publicly knelt to some of their prophets in places like airports or out in the streets. Gunda and Machingura relate one such instance, "Those who managed to evade the human wall made by Prophet Angel's bodyguards would kneel on the tarmac before greeting him."³ It is important to attempt to better understand the cultural background that results in such public behavior.

Zimbabwe has a number of different ethnic groups. These include the Shona, Ndebele, Tonga, Korekore, Ndau, Venda and Kalanga and other smaller groups. The cultures, in as far as the phenomenon of kneeling is concerned, are culturally similar within Zimbabwe, and though a Shona or Ndebele or other ethnic group might be mentioned in various sections of this paper, the ethnic group should be read as representative of Zimbabwean culture in general. This practice of kneeling in the presence of elders is deeply ingrained in all of Zimbabwean culture, and it is taught from childhood. Nicolson, in his review of Michael Gelfand's *African Background: The Traditional Culture of the Shona-Speaking People* says,

Within the family, respect for seniority and for the ancestral spirits are overriding concerns. Respect is shown by submission and the customs of avoidance, handclapping, kneeling or sitting at the appropriate times. In the kinship system as a whole, and in particular in the three types of procedure—the use of a third party (mediation), the giving of presents (reciprocation) and

the payment of money or possessions (compensation)—Professor Gelfand shows how the concern for maintaining protocol is almost obsessive. This perhaps explains the well-known Shona characteristic, avoidance of hasty decisions. He suggests that the slower tempo of life is deliberate and designed to prevent falling into error.⁴

Kneeling is therefore part of a broader scheme of showing respect for seniority and ancestral spirits. When the prophet is understood as a mediator between this world and the spirit world (replacing the position of the spirit medium or diviner in the African religious scheme),⁵ then kneeling in his or her presence is understandable. This is also the case, of course in the instance of kneeling before Presidents and the like as alluded to in the introduction.

The practice of kneeling is deeply ingrained, particularly among women who are supposed to kneel for men. Men would generally crouch in the presence of elders, but women kneel in the presence of men. My wife does not kneel when she gives food that she has cooked to me, but many of my friends who are culturally modernized in many other respects will have their wife kneeling as she gives them food. Omoregie describes the practice at the *kurova guva* (to beat the grave) also known as *kugadzira mudzimu* (to prepare the spirit)⁶ ceremony, a practice that also happens in burial rituals,

When the *varoora* [daughters in law] walk on their knees as they approach the grave, it is a sign of their respect both to the deceased and all members of the family. It can therefore be said that this action is symptomatic of their “inner feelings and attitudes” (of respect). This links well with what happens in everyday Shona life. When a young girl talks to an elder, she kneels down while young men crouch as a sign of respect.⁷

Children are socialized to kneel or crouch in the presence of elders. In a traditional Zimbabwean home, this is normal and expected. Not kneeling is showing deep disrespect to the elder. Given this context and background, the behavior described in the background section of this paper is perhaps more understandable. However, we are also living in a globalized environment in which the dominant culture is shaped by ideas from modernity and the ubiquitous attitude of Western superiority, that has prevailed since the time Africa was colonized, Christianized,

and encountered the Western world. Hiebert describes such prevailing attitudes this way,

Roughly from 1800 to 1950 most Protestant missionaries in India, and later in Africa, rejected the beliefs and practices of the people they served as “pagan”. ...*tabula rasa* the missionary doctrine that there is nothing in the non-Christian culture on which the Christian missionary can build and, therefore, every aspect of the traditional non-Christian culture had to be destroyed before Christianity could be built up... To become Christian one had to accept not only Christianity but also Western cultural ways. ... One reason was the emergence of colonialism with its belief in the superiority of Western cultures. ...Colonialism proved to the West its cultural superiority. Western civilization had triumphed. It was the task, therefore, of the West to bring the benefits of this civilization to the world... Christianity, civilization and, later, commerce (the three Cs) went hand in hand. Western civilization was spreading around the world, and it was assumed that people would become both Christian and “modern.”⁸

The attitude of Western superiority and tutelage of the uncivilized is still with us, and in instances like those being described in this paper can result in condescending narratives about African backwardness. Nevertheless, it is vital to focus on how some of these attitudes play out in the public arena.

Kneeling as Seen from the Widespread Western Modernity Perspective

Zimbabweans who are more modernized in their thinking, or are still traditional but non-conformist, will find the public kneeling displays by high officials abhorrent. I once had a discussion on this topic with a Masters level class in Harare and the exchanges became so heated and explosive I had to control the class. Some will tenaciously hold on to this part of their culture and nothing will change that position, even after shifting from their traditional cultural practices in many other respects. Culture changes to suit and adapt the new needs and values that come from mixing with other cultures. Some practices in any given culture, which were practiced a hundred years ago, are no longer compatible with today's norms and values and therefore get dropped in time, others survive even though their usefulness is questionable. In addition, it is important to note that Zimbabwe went through a colonization that was far more than a cultural exchange between equal parties.

As the quote above from Hiebert shows, many Christian missionaries and colonial powers saw nothing of value that could be built on in indigenous Zimbabwean cultures; the existing culture was to be destroyed and English culture would replace it. Cultural imperialism occurs when one party is stronger than the other and the stronger party coerces the weaker one to adopt its culture. In the public sphere this is especially true. Zimbabwe adopted Western ways of governance and protocol wholesale. Their structures are exactly the same as in the United Kingdom. However, in instances like showing honor and respect, the subdued Zimbabwean cultural instincts sometimes pop up and are judged according to expectations of the imposed colonial structures that they are at variance with.

The British Broadcasting Corporation had this perspective on the respectful behavior of Zimbabwean leaders towards past President Mugabe,

As in much of Africa, respecting your elders is ingrained in Zimbabwe's culture. And 93-year-old Robert Mugabe, a liberation fighter who became the country's leader at independence in 1980, is seen as the father of the nation. It explains the respectful tone used by opposition leader and bitter rival Morgan Tsvangirai when calling for President Mugabe's resignation. He said Mr [sic] Mugabe should step down "in line with the national expectation and sentiment, taking full regard of his legacy and contribution to Zimbabwe pre and post-independence."⁹

The respect shown to Mugabe even while he was being removed by a coup was fascinating. It was a very polite and respectful coup. Mugabe was publicly deferred to throughout. The army that removed him refused to say at any point that they were removing him, instead they were dealing with some criminal elements surrounding the president. The actual words that were used to describe the military intervention, as they called it, are,

Fellow Zimbabweans, following the address we made on 13 November 2017, which we believe our main broadcaster, ZBC and *The Herald*, were directed not to publicise [sic], the situation in our country has moved to another level.

Firstly, we wish to assure the nation that His Excellency, The President, of the Republic of Zimbabwe, and Commander in Chief of the Zimbabwe Defense Forces, Cde R.G. Mugabe and his family are safe and sound and their security is guaranteed.

We are only targeting criminals around him who are committing crimes that are causing social and economic suffering in the country in order to bring them to justice. As soon as we have accomplished our mission we expect that the situation will return to normalcy.¹⁰

The world will find the respectful behavior of Zimbabweans in public spheres to be counterproductive and unexpected. Opposition leaders are expected to be confrontational and candid, not respectful and deferring. Ministers of state should show respect, but this should be done in a manner that does not make the president unquestionable or look monarchical. How can a person who is submissive to the extent of publicly kneeling before a president then be able to differ with him? As for Supreme Court justices kneeling to a president, that would be scandalous and threatens the whole governance of political institutions, specifically separation of powers, in the country. This behavior is misaligned to the expected Western norms of a functional democracy.

When it comes to kneeling before a church leader, most Western churches would throw their hands up in horror at the thought of someone kneeling before them in a worship service or at a church related activity. While the idea of respecting elders and leaders is generally universally acceptable; the Zimbabwean tradition of kneeling, especially publicly to show respect needs closer critique, which is what this paper is attempting to do. The Zimbabwean Church needs to engage in the process of self-theologizing and contextualizing.¹¹ To lead the way in terms of handling culture, the Church needs to think clearly about how the Bible affects culture.

To recognize that theologies are done by humans in their contexts means that we must study human contexts deeply to know how they shape our thinking, and to seek the biblical message not through the eyes of our culture, but as it was understood by those who recorded it. We need to study human cultures to build understanding among them and to communicate the gospel in them in ways that transform them in the light of God's truth, beauty and righteousness.¹²

To contextualize the idea of kneeling as a sign of respect, it is important that it be examined under the overarching question of how Zimbabweans today should show respect to leaders and elders.

What Appropriate Ways Can Zimbabweans Find to Honor Elders and Leaders?

Here I need to first describe the cultural factors underpinning the practice of public kneeling before leaders. After understanding these factors, the possible ways in which the same meaning intended by the outward action can be explored. I will then consider the meanings that the outward act of public kneeling has, first for the participants, then second for the various observers, before discussing the most appropriate ways to show honor in today's context.

Cultural Factors Behind the Act of Kneeling

There are cultural factors at play in the observable action of kneeling in Zimbabwean culture. Anthropology helps to better understand what brings about such a phenomenon as that being discussed in this paper. Robbins talks about what he calls “the cultural construction of identity and social hierarchy.”¹³ Social hierarchy and/or gender identity are at play when people feel the need, even instinctively, to kneel in the presence of certain leaders.

Americans can move from one status to another and one relationship to another with different people, but in their minds remain essentially the same person.¹⁴ This is not the case with the Japanese, for example, who change the way they refer to themselves depending on the speaker's relationship to the listener. This influences how Japanese advertise on television. It is rude for Japanese, depending on who is speaking, to give an imperative like “drink coke!” “Japanese advertisers have a problem with *keigo* because actors should not give imperative commands (e.g., “drink Coke”) for fear of offending people. They solve the problem by using low-status people who are nonthreatening (such as clowns, coquettish women, or children) to issue the commands.”¹⁵ Robbins goes on to describe how traditional societies are organized,

In traditional societies, kinship is the central organizing principle—the main determinant of a person's social identity. Anthropologists working with traditional societies are often “adopted” by a family. This act, although also a signal of acceptance, serves the practical purpose of assigning an outsider a social identity through which others can approach him or her. To have no kinship label or designation in such societies is to have no meaningful place in the social landscape.¹⁶

Zimbabwe is a typical traditional society as described by Robbins. Most Zimbabweans in influential leadership positions grew up in a rural traditional environment, or are one generation from the rural-urban migration; that is, if they were not born in the rural areas, their parents were. Whether in church or society, leaders are referred to by kinship terms, such as fathers or mothers in Zimbabwe today. The conduct in the presence of these “fathers” and “mothers” is parallel to the cultural prescriptions regarding how one treats kin. Kneeling in the presence of a father or mother is appropriate, and as far as cultural expectations go, expected. Therefore, similar behaviors are expanded beyond the traditional kin group to other political and religious leaders.

Former president, Mugabe was referred to as the “father” of the nation. His wife, Grace when she entered politics as the leader of the ruling party women’s league, a position from which she attempted to eventually become the president after Mugabe, which resulted in the coup that removed Mugabe, took on the title “mother” (*amai*) of the nation. She was generally referred to as “Dr. *Amai*” in that period. What is notable is how she perceived that position and her role, even before publically angling for the presidency.

... Muchemeyi said: “Grace told an executive meeting that she is “already the President” and would not want to be appointed VP, as it was a lower post.

“The First Lady said I’m the wife of the President, I’m the president already ... I plan and do everything with the President, what more do I want, for now the position of the women boss is enough.”

Last year, Grace said Vice-President Emerson Mnangagwa and Phelekezela Mphoko took instructions from her.¹⁷

In Grace Mugabe’s mind, based on the traditional society’s kingship related stratification as described by Robbins, she was a “mother.” The next step in that process of thinking is to see the rest of the nation as her children, which is exactly what she did, placing herself above the Vice-Presidents in that stratification. She would expect people to kneel before her; publicly making high officials do that, and referring to them publicly as her children.

The *emic* and *etic* approaches that were first developed by linguist Kenneth Pike and used by anthropologist Marvin Harris are useful analysis

tools to interpret the effects of Grace Mugabe's thinking and conduct. They distinguish between meanings understood by actors (the people themselves, and in this case, Grace Mugabe) calling them *emic*, and *etic* which is what independent observers interpret as really happening.¹⁸ In her mind, as she went about her business, she was a mother to the nation and expected people to culturally treat her as that with all the protocols that go with it. Some probably did reciprocate in the expected manner and from the heart complied with cultural procedures like kneeling before her. However, though people publicly complied with culturally expected norms, the political events that transpired, culminating in the coup and the public utterances of these same people after the coup, reveals that perhaps outwardly people were kneeling, but inwardly they were not. If not at the level of the participants, then certainly in the eyes of observers, like the media, the interpretation (*etic*) of the meanings associated with the act of kneeling was not the same as Grace Mugabe's. In this sense, we must consider the meanings associated with the outward action of kneeling, especially in public spaces today.

Meanings Associated with Kneeling

A 2011 newspaper article recorded then Minister of Mines and Mining Development, Obert Mpofu responding to a question concerning the way he signed one of his letters to President Mugabe. He had signed it by describing himself as Mugabe's ever-obedient son,

"President Mugabe is my father, he is my father and the signing off as 'your ever obedient son' was not a mistake. When I go to see him I refer to him as baba (father)," Mpofu said amid laughter from journalists. "I don't drink (alcohol) and any decision I take is sober. I do things knowing they are good. I regard President Mugabe as my father," he said. Mpofu (60) said he also referred to his seniors and bosses as his fathers...¹⁹

While the newspaper article accused Mpofu of "bootlicking," his expressed motivation in doing what he did is that he genuinely regarded Mugabe as his father. So, if he was to kneel for Mugabe, it would be an outward expression of a heartfelt respect that a son gives to a father. Robert Strauss says,

In 1936, Ralph Linton introduced the terms *form*, *function*, and *meaning* to the field of cultural anthropology

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in his book, *The Study of Man*. Years later, anthropologist Charles H. Kraft ...rekindled interest in these concepts as he addressed communicating across cultures. He argued that the form/meaning distinction, if not the most important skill in cross-cultural communication, is one of the most important skills...

How are these terms conceptually defined?

- *Form* refers to any cultural element – a material object, word, idea, pattern, or ritual.
- *Function* is the intended purpose of that form in a society.
- *Meaning* is what the forms convey denotatively and connotatively... the associations which any society attaches to it.²⁰

Using this framework to analyze kneeling, it can be established that when done according to the cultural construct, the practice of kneeling (*form*) has an intended purpose of conveying respect (*meaning*). Zimbabwean journalists as shown so far in this paper are now questioning the practice at two levels. First, is the form still conveying the same meaning it did originally? While kneeling might be a show of respect in the heart of the one who does it, and the recipient of the action understands it that way; when done in public, the meanings that others associate with that act might be very different to what is going on in the hearts of the people who are directly involved. The world and even some Zimbabweans have very different understandings of what is happening. The contexts in which this is being done give very different meanings to the form than might be intended, thus the outcry from more modernized Zimbabweans, Zimbabwean journalists, and media from other parts of the world. The imported Western structures of governance that Zimbabwe has adopted interpret the kneeling of public officials to a President or other high office as dysfunctional governance systems. They see values like the need for accountability, impartiality, and justice, which drive the establishment of the structures that Zimbabwe adopted, at risk. How can a person who is showing such public displays of subservience possibly ask the tough questions to those in authority as their jobs expect of them?

Second, the journalists are questioning whether the form is still really aligned to the meaning in the hearts of those who ostensibly show respect in public, whether through kneeling or other outward forms of honoring. The second question is behind a critique of *The Herald*,

a newspaper that is widely regarded as a Zimbabwean government mouthpiece,

In August, the paper ran a typically fawning portrait of Grace under the headline “A Loving Mother of the Nation.”

“Loving mother, compassionate philanthropist, astute businesswoman, perceptive politician, remarkable patriot, these are all adjectives that can be used to describe the First Lady Dr [sic] Grace Mugabe,” *The Herald* gushed.

Less than three months later and in the wake of a coup that threatens Mugabe’s presidency and has seen both he and Grace expelled from ZANU-PF, her *Herald* portrayal was starkly different.

“Grace Mugabe lacked grooming and true motherhood as shown by her foul language,” the paper quoted the ZANU-PF’s youth wing as saying.

“We take exception to the vulgar language which had become part of Mrs [sic] Mugabe’s vocabulary,” it quoted a Youth League cadre as saying.

Zimbabweans, many of whom are devoutly religious and culturally conservative, often take offense at profanities.

The piece featured an unflattering picture of an unsmiling Grace - a sharp departure from the “loving mother” portrayal that included photos of her smiling and holding infants.²¹

The accusation is therefore that kneeling and other forms of ostensibly honoring leaders like writing glowing newspaper articles, or calling them mother or father, is nothing more than selfish and insincere attempts by those doing it to curry favor from the leaders. They do not really respect the leaders; they are duplicitous flatterers, sycophants or “bootlickers” as the newspaper quoted above describes it. The observed behavior not only of *The Herald*, but also those around the first family in the period just preceding the coup and just after was revealing. For some of them in the previous week were literally and publicly singing the praise of the Mugabes, and then they publicly denigrated them a week later. The sycophant narrative becomes difficult to deny.

Appropriate Ways to Show Honor

Having considered the cultural factors behind the act of kneeling and the possible meanings associated with it, I will conclude with recommendations of culturally appropriate ways that Zimbabweans can

show honor, especially in the public arena today. Changing the way people are socialized cannot be legislated, however the process of interacting with other cultures drives change, and a natural process is already happening. Many Zimbabweans no longer kneel in their homes as was done in the past. The practice may slowly be dropped as a natural process through interacting with other cultures and their alternative meanings of the behavior. It will however, continue in some homes and where parents choose to continue it, they must instill the value of true respect that lies behind the form.

Public ways of showing honor must truly serve and respect the leaders towards whom the public action is performed. What kneeling in public does to the image of the leader towards whom a person kneels should be considered. Is the act achieving the intention that should be at the heart of performing the action? That is both showing respect and honor to the recipient and making them respectable and honorable in the process? If the leader accepts this kind of public acclamation, the reciprocation should be to lovingly serve and honor those who humble themselves. It becomes a big podium, which is perhaps too big for a mere mortal human to climb.

The metaphor of leader as “father” and/or “mother” is likely not going to change much within the Zimbabwean leadership psyche. The question should therefore be, if leaders are like “fathers” and “mothers,” how can they be best honored in that role?

Kelley’s followership theory²² identifies five possible followership styles. The ideal follower is what he describes as the effective follower, who is loyal but holds leaders accountable to agreed vision and ideals. There are four other less ideal, yet possible ways to follow:

- Passive followers who uncritically do whatever the leader says.
- Conformists who are overly loyal to the point of sycophancy, pampering to the whims of the leader and culture.
- Alienated followers who were once loyal, but because of some conflict have become offended and cynical. They may still follow, but not wholeheartedly, perhaps even forming their own factions within the system.
- Pragmatic survivors are more concerned about personal interests than the vision. They do whatever is necessary and expedient for their own interests.

Kelley's model makes the vision and shared ideals of the leadership effort the final determinant of appropriate follower behavior. So, in the instance of holders of public office, the shared vision, which is the prosperity of Zimbabwe, should be the goal towards which all involved aspire. In the Church, the concern should be how the behavior brings glory to God and helps advance the Kingdom vision. Honor is an attitude that does not necessarily need the physical display of kneeling to be communicated. It can be shown in the following ways:

1. To loyally and consistently put in the best effort possible towards the success of the vision.
2. To lovingly and respectfully (even while kneeling if necessary) point out to leaders the dangers of some practices and how they deviate from the expressed vision and ideals.
3. Even within the parent/child leadership relationship, highlight, as a mature child within Zimbabwean culture would, leaders' wrong behavior and point out their error in culturally appropriate ways. It may be necessary to work with mediators as is done within Zimbabwean family structures.
4. Cultural practices must not take precedence over what is good for the family. Where kneeling is counter-productive and rather than bringing honor to leaders invites ridicule diminishing their public standing, it should not be done. If it is more honoring not to kneel in such environments, followers must not dishonor the leaders by kneeling.

The above suggestions would describe effective follower practices in the context of appropriate ways to show honor to those in public leadership, whether in church or society in Zimbabwe. The cultural practice of kneeling will likely fall away eventually and be replaced by Western influenced ways of behavior. To try to introduce or propose a new culture might be a possible solution, but because of the dynamics and ever changing character of culture, it will only be temporary. However, the cultural value of honoring leaders should be preserved, and these ways of showing honor, which are largely attitudinal and can be outwardly expressed in whatever way seems appropriate, should be the purpose or meaning behind the forms adopted. In the light of this discussion, these recommendations will be expanded as the implications are considered.

The Implications of Public Kneeling

Before speaking to public officials in society, the Zimbabwean Church needs to do a self-critique on the appropriate ways to honor elders and leaders in Zimbabwe. Is the practice of kneeling to leaders acceptable conduct especially during a worship service or in the general conduct of church life? The Bible generally has a negative view of people kneeling before humans, and even angels would not accept humans kneeling before them. Kneeling is linked to worship, and God is the only one worthy of such honor.

Religion has a very important role in shaping culture. Beliefs play a very important role in influencing practice, and any change of cultural practice should be informed by evaluating the intended meanings associated with the practice, as well as assessing whether the practice is still serving its original purpose. Morals for the Christian, that is, the understanding of what is good or bad, right or wrong, should ultimately come from what God says is right or wrong, good or bad. This makes the Zimbabwean Church central to giving guidance and shaping culture in this matter. The choice that the Church has made to accept people kneeling to leaders, especially in public worship sends a big message to the larger culture approving of the practice. If the church maintains this position, then she cannot do anything else but silently watch as society follows with the behavior.

If public kneeling in society in general continues, it places the society in a bad position when considered from the biblical perspective. The acceptance of this kind of conduct exalts leaders to a demi-god status and puts a heavy load on them because they are human beings, with shortcomings like every-one else. Stress comes because they know that the image they portray in public is far different from the reality of their human frailties, which they often know all too well. The feelings of superiority or being other, different, and exalted above everyone else, specially chosen and belonging to the realm of the gods can easily creep into the psyche. The more this happens, the higher the pedestal they are put on, and the inevitable fall from grace is just a matter of time.

Missiologically this practice should be understood as people dabbling in areas that biblically do not belong in the realm of mere mortal humans with all of their frailties. The Church should critique this culture and this requires maturity and self-theologizing. The Zimbabwean Church should seek to come up with relevant contextual theologies to give guidance to the nation in this area of kneeling before public figures.

Conclusion

This paper has analyzed the leadership implications of the practice of kneeling in Zimbabwean culture. The contexts of public leadership spheres and worship in the church were specifically analyzed. Kneeling to leaders and elders is a deeply ingrained part of Zimbabwean culture with the intention of honoring and showing respect to leaders. While the practice will probably not quickly cease in private practice, especially in the home, it is likely that even in private, it will become less prevalent due to influences from other cultures. Respect can be shown in many ways, and the paper has demonstrated that the outward practice of kneeling is not necessarily indicative of an inner attitude of respect.

After analyzing the issue, the following recommendations about the cultural practice of kneeling are suggested:

1. The Zimbabwean Church needs to lead the way in critiquing this cultural practice. As a mature Church, it should self-theologize and contextualize to address this issue and guide the society in biblically appropriate ways of showing honor.
2. The private practice of kneeling will probably not stop, but will gradually change, with more and more people no longer kneeling because of interaction with other cultures. The private practice should be left to the discretion of individuals.
3. The public practice of kneeling in church worship services or church-related activities should be stopped. The biblical precedent is that kneeling is reserved only for God. It is therefore inappropriate for people to kneel to church leaders and they should teach this and then refuse it, at least during public worship or church-related activities. Private practice of kneeling should be discouraged for the same reasons, but cultural sensitivity is needed in some environments. The discretion of the leader should be guided by the possible misunderstandings that this paper presents.
4. The practice of kneeling in public by high-ranking officials should be stopped. Though the intention may be right, and both the person who is doing it along with the recipient may have the same understanding of the form and meaning, the ideals of the cultural construct in which they are operating can be considered at risk due to their public behavior. How can a person who is so subservient hold the leader accountable, remain impartial, ask tough questions and

ensure justice is done? That kind of conduct belongs to a traditional or monarchical form of governance. It also puts stress on the leaders who are placed on a pedestal too high for human beings. Once on that pedestal, the eventual fall from grace is inevitable.

5. The hierarchical stratifications that go with showing respect need to be critiqued and a more egalitarian society should be the goal. Issues like gender roles, distribution of wealth, and the tendency to see a group of people like those with prominent leadership positions as better than others, need to be critiqued.

6. If Zimbabweans insist on maintaining traditional practices like showing respect through submission, avoidance, handclapping, kneeling or sitting at the appropriate times,²³ then it may be necessary to consider another form of governance that is more suited to the culture. The adoption of colonial systems of governance was inherited, but may not fit well with the culture in which it is being practiced. A new method of governance would need to be developed. This would be Ph.D. thesis level kind of work and is beyond the scope of this paper.

7. Finally, it may be necessary to train public officials so that they desist from kneeling in public as they might instinctively want to follow this practice. The training should primarily be based on biblical teaching and/or the *emic/etic* approaches and understandings of the concept of form, function, and meaning in cultural studies.

End Notes

¹ Farai Machamire, "The Kneeling Brigade's Swelling Numbers," *DailyNews Live*, October 2, 2017, <https://www.dailynews.co.zw/articles/2017/10/02/the-kneeling-brigade-s-swelling-numbers>.

² Machamire.

³ Ezra Chitando, Masiwa Ragies Gunda, and Joachim Kügler, *Prophets, Profits and the Bible in Zimbabwe: Festschrift for Aynos Masotcha Moyo* (University of Bamberg Press, 2014), 22.

⁴ J C Nicholson, "African Background: The Traditional Culture of the Shona-Speaking People," *International Review of Mission* 55, no. 220 (October 1966): 509.

⁵ Michael Gelfand, *Shona Religion* (Cape Town: Juta, 1962); M. F. C. Bourdillon, *The Shona Peoples: An Ethnography of the Contemporary Shona, with Special Reference to Their Religion*, Revised Edition, Shona Heritage Series, v. 1 (Gweru, Zimbabwe: Mambo Press, 1998).

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