

Recognition of Customary Marriages Act 120 of 1998¹

[ASSENTED TO 20 NOVEMBER 1998]	[DATE OF COMMENCEMENT: 15 NOVEMBER 2000]
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(English text signed by the President)

published in
GG 19539 of 2 December 1998

commencement
(see s. 14 of this Act)

provisions	date	refer to
whole Act	15 November 2000	Proc R66 in GG 21700 of 1 November 2000

as amended

by	with effect from	refer to
Judicial Matters Amendment Act 42 of 2001	7 December 2001	s. 48 of Act 42 of 2001
Jurisdiction of Regional Courts Amendment Act 31 of 2008	9 August 2010	s. 11 of Act 31 of 2008 ; Proc R41 in GG 33448 of 6 August 2010
Recognition of Customary Marriages Amendment Act 1 of 2021	1 June 2021	s. 4 of Act 1 of 2021

ACT

To make provision for the recognition of customary marriages; to specify the requirements for a valid customary marriage; to regulate the registration of customary marriages; to provide for the equal status and capacity of spouses in customary marriages; to regulate the proprietary consequences of customary marriages and the capacity of spouses of such marriages; to regulate the dissolution of customary marriages; to provide for the making of regulations; to repeal certain provisions of certain laws; and to provide for matters connected therewith.

BE IT ENACTED by the Parliament of the Republic of South Africa, as follows:-

¹ This Act has been updated to include all available historical commencement details

1 Definitions

In this Act, unless the context otherwise indicates-

'court' means a High Court or a court for a regional division contemplated in [section 29 \(1B\)](#) of the Magistrates' Courts Act, 1944 ([Act 32 of 1944](#));

[Definition of 'court' substituted by [s. 19 of Act 42 of 2001](#) (wef 7 December 2001) and by [s. 10 \(2\) of Act 31 of 2008](#) (wef 9 August 2010).]

'customary law' means the customs and usages traditionally observed among the indigenous African peoples of South Africa and which form part of the culture of those peoples;

'customary marriage' means a marriage concluded in accordance with customary law;

'lobolo' means the property in cash or in kind, whether known as *lobolo*, *bogadi*, *bohali*, *xuma*, *lumalo*, *thaka*, *ikhazi*, *magadi*, *emabheka* or by any other name, which a prospective husband or the head of his family undertakes to give to the head of the prospective wife's family in consideration of a customary marriage;

'Minister' means the Minister of Home Affairs;²

'prescribed' means prescribed by regulation made under section 11;

'registering officer' means any person appointed as registering officer for purposes of this Act by the Minister or an officer acting under the Minister's written authorization;

'this Act' includes the regulations; and

'traditional leader' means any person who, in terms of customary law of the traditional community concerned, holds a traditional leadership position and is recognised in terms of the applicable legislation providing for such recognition.

[Definition of 'traditional leader' substituted by [s. 1 of Act 1 of 2021](#) (wef 1 June 2021).]

² Transfer of administration of and the powers and functions entrusted by ss. 2, 3, 4, 5 and 11, and the power to make regulations in terms of s. 11 from the Minister responsible for the administration of justice to the Minister of Home Affairs - Proc R24 in GG 41915 of 21 September 2018

2 Recognition of customary marriages

(1) A marriage which is a valid marriage at customary law and existing at the commencement of this Act is for all purposes recognised as a marriage.

(2) A customary marriage entered into after the commencement of this Act, which complies with the requirements of this Act, is for all purposes recognised as a marriage.

(3) If a person is a spouse in more than one customary marriage, all valid customary marriages entered into before the commencement of this Act are for all purposes recognised as marriages.

(4) If a person is a spouse in more than one customary marriage, all such marriages entered into after the commencement of this Act, which comply with the provisions of this Act, are for all purposes recognised as marriages.

3 Requirements for validity of customary marriages

(1) For a customary marriage entered into after the commencement of this Act to be valid-

(a) the prospective spouses-

(i) must both be above the age of 18 years; and

(ii) must both consent to be married to each other under customary law; and

(b) the marriage must be negotiated and entered into or celebrated in accordance with customary law.

(2) Save as provided in section 10 (1), no spouse in a customary marriage shall be competent to enter into a marriage under the Marriage Act, 1961 ([Act 25 of 1961](#)), during the subsistence of such customary marriage.

(3) (a) If either of the prospective spouses is a minor, both his or her parents, or if he or she has no parents, his or her legal guardian, must consent to the marriage.

(b) If the consent of the parent or legal guardian cannot be obtained, section 25 of the Marriage Act, 1961, applies.

(4) (a) Despite subsection (1) (a) (i), the Minister or any officer in the public service authorised in writing thereto by him or her, may grant written permission to a person under the age of 18 years to enter into a customary marriage if the Minister or the said officer considers such marriage desirable and in the interests of the parties in question.

(b) Such permission shall not relieve the parties to the proposed marriage from the obligation to comply with all the other requirements prescribed by law.

(c) If a person under the age of 18 years has entered into a customary marriage without the written permission of the Minister or the relevant officer, the Minister or the officer may, if he or she considers the marriage to be desirable and in the interests of the parties in question, and if the marriage was in every other respect in accordance with this Act, declare the marriage in writing to be a valid customary marriage.

(5) Subject to subsection (4), section 24A of the Marriage Act, 1961, applies to the customary marriage of a minor entered into without the consent of a parent, guardian, commissioner of child welfare or a judge, as the case may be.

(6) The prohibition of a customary marriage between persons on account of their relationship by blood or affinity is determined by customary law.

4 Registration of customary marriages

(1) The spouses of a customary marriage have a duty to ensure that their marriage is registered.

(2) Either spouse may apply to the registering officer in the prescribed form for the registration of his or her customary marriage and must furnish the registering officer with the prescribed information and any additional information which the registering officer may require in order to satisfy himself or herself as to the existence of the marriage.

(3) A customary marriage-

(a) entered into before the commencement of this Act, and which is not registered in terms of any other law, must be registered within a period of 12 months after that commencement or within such longer period³ as the Minister may from time to time prescribe by notice in the *Gazette*; or

(b) entered into after the commencement of this Act, must be registered within a period of three months after the conclusion of the marriage or within such longer period⁴ as the Minister may from time to time prescribe by notice in the *Gazette*.

(4) (a) A registering officer must, if satisfied that the spouses concluded a valid customary marriage, register the marriage by recording the identity of the spouses, the date of the marriage, any lobolo agreed to and any other particulars prescribed.

(b) The registering officer must issue to the spouses a certificate of registration, bearing the prescribed particulars.

(5) (a) If for any reason a customary marriage is not registered, any person who satisfies a registering officer that he or she has a sufficient interest in the matter may apply to the registering officer in the prescribed manner to enquire into the existence of the marriage.

(b) If the registering officer is satisfied that a valid customary marriage exists or existed between the spouses, he or she must register the marriage and issue a certificate of registration as contemplated in subsection (4).

(6) If a registering officer is not satisfied that a valid customary marriage was entered into by the spouses, he or she must refuse to register the marriage.

(7) A court may, upon application made to that court and upon investigation instituted by that court, order-

(a) the registration of any customary marriage; or

(b) the cancellation or rectification of any registration of a customary marriage effected by a registering officer.

(8) A certificate of registration of a customary marriage issued under this section or any other law providing for the registration of customary marriages constitutes *prima facie* proof of the existence of the customary marriage and of the particulars contained in the certificate.

(9) Failure to register a customary marriage does not affect the validity of that marriage.

³ Up to 31 August 2026 - GN 5483 in GG 51462 of 29 October 2024

⁴ Up to 31 August 2026 - GN 5484 in GG 51462 of 29 October 2024

5 Determination of age of minor

(1) A registering officer may, in respect of a person who allegedly is a minor, accept a birth certificate, an identity document, a sworn statement of a parent or relative of the minor or such other evidence as the registering officer deems appropriate as proof of that person's age.

(2) If the age of a person who allegedly is a minor is uncertain or is in dispute, and that person's age is relevant for purposes of this Act, the registering officer may in the prescribed manner submit the matter to a magistrate's court established in terms of the Magistrates' Court Act, 1944 ([Act 32 of 1944](#)), which must determine the person's age and issue the prescribed certificate in regard thereto, which constitutes proof of the person's age.

6 Equal status and capacity of spouses

A wife in a customary marriage has, on the basis of equality with her husband and subject to the matrimonial property system governing the marriage, full status and capacity, including the capacity to acquire assets and to dispose of them, to enter into contracts and to litigate, in addition to any rights and powers that she might have at customary law.

7 Proprietary consequences of customary marriages and contractual capacity of spouses

(1)(a) The proprietary consequences of a customary marriage in which a person is a spouse in more than one customary marriage, and which was entered into before the commencement of this Act, are that the spouses in such a marriage have joint and equal-

- (i) ownership and other rights; and
- (ii) rights of management and control,

over marital property.

(b) The rights contemplated in paragraph (a) must be exercised-

- (i) in respect of all house property, by the husband and wife of the house concerned, jointly and in the best interests of the family unit constituted by the house concerned; and
- (ii) in respect of all family property, by the husband and all the wives, jointly and in the best interests of the whole family constituted by the various houses.

(c) Each spouse retains exclusive rights over his or her personal property.

(d) For purposes of this subsection, '**marital property**', '**house property**', '**family property**' and '**personal property**' have the meaning ascribed to them in customary law.

[Sub-s. (1) substituted by s. 2 (a) of [Act 1 of 2021](#) (wef 1 June 2021).]

(2) A customary marriage in which a spouse is not a partner in any other existing customary marriage, is a marriage in community of property and of profit and loss between the spouses, unless such consequences are specifically excluded by the spouses in an antenuptial contract which regulates the matrimonial property system of their marriage.

[Sub-s. (2) substituted by s. 2 (b) of [Act 1 of 2021](#) (wef 1 June 2021).]

(3) Chapter III and sections 18, 19, 20 and 24 of Chapter IV of the Matrimonial Property Act, 1984 ([Act 88 of 1984](#)), apply in respect of any customary marriage which is in community of property as contemplated in subsection (2).

(4) (a) Spouses in a customary marriage entered into before the commencement of this Act may apply to a court jointly for leave to change the matrimonial property system which applies to their marriage or marriages and the court may, if satisfied that-

- (i) there are sound reasons for the proposed change;
- (ii) sufficient written notice of the proposed change has been given to all creditors of the spouses for amounts exceeding R500 or such amount as may be determined by the Minister of Justice by notice in the *Gazette*; and
- (iii) no other person will be prejudiced by the proposed change,

order that the matrimonial property system applicable to such marriage or marriages will no longer apply and authorise the parties to such marriage or marriages to enter into a written contract in terms of which the future matrimonial property system of their marriage or marriages will be regulated on conditions determined by the court.

(b) In the case of a husband who is a spouse in more than one customary marriage, all persons having a sufficient interest in the matter, and in particular the applicant's existing spouse or spouses, must be joined in the proceedings.

(5) [Section 21](#) of the Matrimonial Property Act, 1984 ([Act 88 of 1984](#)) is applicable to a customary marriage entered into after the commencement of this Act in which the husband does not have more than one spouse.

(6) A husband in a customary marriage who wishes to enter into a further customary marriage with another woman after the commencement of this Act must make an application to the court to approve a written contract which will regulate the future matrimonial property system of his marriages.

(7) When considering the application in terms of subsection 6-

(a) the court must-

- (i) in the case of a marriage which is in community of property or which is subject to the accrual system-
 - (aa) terminate the matrimonial property system which is applicable to the marriage; and
 - (bb) effect a division of the matrimonial property;
- (ii) ensure an equitable distribution of the property; and
- (iii) take into account all the relevant circumstances of the family groups which would be affected if the application is granted;

(b) the court may-

- (i) allow further amendments to the terms of the contract;
- (ii) grant the order subject to any condition it may deem just; or
- (iii) refuse the application if in its opinion the interests of any of the parties involved would not be sufficiently safeguarded by means of the proposed contract.

(8) All persons having a sufficient interest in the matter, and in particular the applicant's existing spouse or spouses and his prospective spouse, must be joined in the proceedings instituted in terms of subsection (6).

(9) If a court grants an application contemplated in subsection (4) or (6), the registrar or clerk of the court, as the case

may be, must furnish each spouse with an order of the court including a certified copy of such contract and must cause such order and a certified copy of such contract to be sent to each registrar of deeds of the area in which the court is situated.

8 Dissolution of customary marriages

(1) A customary marriage may only be dissolved by a court by a decree of divorce on the ground of the irretrievable breakdown of the marriage.

(2) A court may grant a decree of divorce on the ground of the irretrievable breakdown of a marriage if it is satisfied that the marriage relationship between the parties to the marriage has reached such a state of disintegration that there is no reasonable prospect of the restoration of a normal marriage relationship between them.

(3) The Mediation in Certain Divorce Matters Act, 1987 ([Act 24 of 1987](#)) and [section 6](#) of the Divorce Act, 1979 ([Act 70 of 1979](#)), apply to the dissolution of a customary marriage.

(4) A court granting a decree for the dissolution of a customary marriage-

- (a) has the powers contemplated in sections 7, 8, 9 and 10 of the Divorce Act, 1979, and [section 24 \(1\)](#) of the Matrimonial Property Act, 1984 ([Act 88 of 1984](#));
- (b) must, in the case of a husband who is a spouse in more than one customary marriage, take into consideration all relevant factors including any contract, agreement or order made in terms of section 7 (4), (5), (6) or (7) and must make any equitable order that it deems just;
- (c) may order that any person who in the court's opinion has a sufficient interest in the matter be joined in the proceedings;
- (d) may make an order with regard to the custody or guardianship of any minor child of the marriage; and
- (e) may, when making an order for the payment of maintenance, take into account any provision or arrangement made in accordance with customary law.

(5) Nothing in this section may be construed as limiting the role, recognised in customary law, of any person, including any traditional leader, in the mediation, in accordance with customary law, of any dispute or matter arising prior to the dissolution of a customary marriage by a court.

9 Age of majority

Despite the rules of customary law, the age of majority of any person is determined in accordance with the Age of Majority Act, 1972 ([Act 57 of 1972](#)).

10 Change of marriage system

(1) A man and a woman between whom a customary marriage subsists are competent to contract a marriage with each other under the Marriage Act, 1961 ([Act 25 of 1961](#)), if neither of them is a spouse in a subsisting customary marriage with any other person.

(2) When a marriage is concluded as contemplated in subsection (1) the marriage is in community of property and of profit and loss unless such consequences are specifically excluded in an antenuptial contract which regulates the matrimonial property system of their marriage.

(3) Chapter III and sections 18, 19, 20 and 24 of Chapter IV of the Matrimonial Property Act, 1984 ([Act 88 of 1984](#)), apply in respect of any marriage which is in community of property as contemplated in subsection (2).

(4) Despite subsection (1), no spouse of a marriage entered into under the Marriage Act, 1961, is, during the subsistence of such marriage, competent to enter into any other marriage.

11 Regulations

(1) The Minister of Justice, in consultation with the Minister, may make regulations-

- (a) relating to-
 - (i) the requirements to be complied with and the information to be furnished to a registering officer in respect of the registration of a customary marriage;
 - (ii) the manner in which a registering officer must satisfy himself or herself as to the existence or the validity of a customary marriage;
 - (iii) the manner in which any person including any traditional leader may participate in the proof of the existence or in the registration of any customary marriage;
 - (iv) the form and content of certificates, notices, affidavits and declarations required for the purposes of this Act;
 - (v) the custody, certification, implementation, rectification, reproduction and disposal of any document relating to the registration of customary marriages or of any document prescribed in terms of the regulations;
 - (vi) any matter that is required or permitted to be prescribed in terms of this Act; and
 - (vii) any other matter which is necessary or expedient to provide for the effective registration of customary marriages or the efficient administration of this Act; and
- (b) prescribing the fees payable in respect of the registration of a customary marriage and the issuing of any certificate in respect thereof.

(2) Any regulation made under subsection (1) must, before publication thereof in the *Gazette*, be submitted to Parliament.

(3) Any regulation made under subsection (1) which may result in financial expenditure for the State or regulations made under subsection (1) (b) must be made in consultation with the Minister of Finance.

(4) Any regulation made under subsection (1) may provide that any person who contravenes a provision thereof or fails to comply therewith shall be guilty of an offence and on conviction be liable to a fine or to imprisonment for a period not exceeding one year.

12 Amendment of laws

(1) Amends section 17 (2) of the Deeds Registries [Act 47 of 1937](#) by substituting paragraph (b).

(2) Amends section 45*bis* of the Deeds Registries [Act 47 of 1937](#), as follows: paragraph (a) substitutes subsection (1) (b); and paragraph (b) substitutes subsection (1A) (b).

13 Repeal of laws

The laws mentioned in the Schedule are hereby repealed to the extent set out in the third column of the Schedule.

14 Short title and commencement

This Act is called the Recognition of Customary Marriages Act, 1998, and comes into operation on a date fixed by the President by proclamation in the *Gazette*.

Schedule
REPEAL OF LAWS
(Section 12)

No. and year of law	Short title	Extent of repeal
Act 38 of 1927	Black Administration Act, 1927	Sections 11 (3) (b), 22 (1) to (5) and 22 <i>bis</i>
Act 21 of 1978	Transkei Marriage Act, 1978 (Transkei)	Sections 3, 29, 37, 38 and 39
Act 16 of 1985	KwaZulu Act on the Code of Zulu Law, 1985	Sections 22 and 27 (3)
Proclamation R151 of 1987	Natal Code of Zulu Law, 1987	Section 27 (3)