

Sexuality, African Religio-Cultural Traditions and Modernity: Expanding the Lens

The practice of sexuality in Africa presents many difficulties to researchers and scholars due to the ambiguity of beliefs and attitudes in traditional cultures and religions. Sexuality is even more problematic in the received world religions and global popular cultures of postcolonial African modernity. A perspective that encourages discourse on responsible sexuality without guilt, fear or ill-health is a welcome and courageous departure from the stasis and regression that typify rigid orthodoxies or suffocating normativity. Most discourse or advocacy work on the subject of sexuality in Africa has been centred more on prescribed sexual practices, either descriptive or critical, and not on subversive alternatives to encourage and open up possibilities for resistance and change. All cultures and religions regulate sex, yet permit some sexual freedom that can even be counter-normative, some more so than others. Through this exploratory essay I hope to encourage an open discussion that considers the normative as well as counter-normative alternative sexuality as they relate to gender concepts and practices that address the problem of gender inequality and state patriarchy.

Sexuality in the post-matriarchy

In our symbolic relationship to the animal world, elephants can be seen as women's other cousins in ancient matriarchal traditions. A female elephant cannot be penetrated unless she grants access; she signals her readiness by urinating. Elephants are therefore not sexually vulnerable to the male like chimpanzees are. According to palaeontologists, modern woman evolved beyond the biological sexual vulnerability marked by the visible red vulva and the scent of her immediate cousin, the chimpanzee female, who cannot say no to male penetration when she is in estrus or ovulating. The modern woman's vulva is inverted and unlike the chimpanzee female her ovulation is hidden from the male gaze and nose. Evolution, ritual and culture enabled early modern human females to reconfigure their

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sexuality through collective ritual control in ancient matriarchy, based on the logic of female solidarity and matriarchal kinship. They owned their sex and said yes or no together when it mattered. Yes or no about sex also translated into yes or no on major social issues about which women could invoke collective strike action. Like capitalism, post-matriarchal social developments are marked by a patriarchal control and oppression of women that has functioned through the fragmentation and atomisation of women. Women have more individual choices and freedoms, but less collective power. Does this suggest that modernity has rendered women more vulnerable as individuals?

Ownership of access is consequently a major problem that radicalises our discourse on sexuality because, logically, it points to the question of subjectivity and choice as opposed to objectification, possession and forced penetration. In traditional societies, strategies of refusing forced penetration gave rise to the power of the midwife or senior women that could be seen as women's response to these fears, hence the development of organised women's rituals to take control and protect women. Women have been cultural inventors and ritual initiators since the beginning of human social history. Women so organised may possess structural power, but in the case of the practice of female circumcision, it also has the negative repeated generational violence of rituals of Female Genital Cutting (FGC) in some societies. The surgical practice of cutting and stitching up results in enclosure that we might call a no access practice and involves the most radical extensive cutting. The midwife controls access or holds the key to open up for child delivery and stitch up again for sex.

Male power over female sexuality

A power shift from the collective strength of women to a post-matriarchy presents new contradictions in the power of the midwife, the husband and father over female sexuality. The fragmentation of women and a new form of patriarchal dominance readily explain the puzzle of the sexual subservience of wives in modern society, their sexual competition with daughters and younger females, and why men are now said to be the main proponents of FGC and other means of control in modern post-matriarchal society. Under a patriarchal domination we hear statements that demonstrate a husband's sense of insecurity about the question of honour and infidelity, or a father's punitive measure to correct shame or ensure honour. These punitive measures can also extend to uncircumcised women in societies that do not practice FGC. Such attitudes are current and global, and demonstrate possession and possessiveness, for example covering women and daughters up and not letting them out of sight! We should recall that in European traditions, knights who served their nations in war locked up their women with chastity belts and went off to war with the key! They even hid away some of their women and daughters in faraway castles. Some of their kings even had a wife hanged or her head cut off on account of alleged infidelity. In many ways male sex controllers or sex gatekeepers must have envied the power of the midwife. They have behaved towards their women in similar ways at all times in history and across cultures.

Just as some social statements expose extreme patriarchal control, some of the reasons that are expressed in beliefs and traditions for the practice of FGC equally show ignorance about the complex biology of the female sexual and reproductive organs in cultures that practice FGC. Some reasons, such as the fear that the clitoris and labia might grow too big, or get in the way, show surprising knowledge of the potentials of the female sexual organ for self-pleasuring or pleasure by

others. Thus, the most radical and almost truthful claim in a symbolic sense is the rationalisation of FGC as a counter to sexual equality for girls. The fear that the clitoris would grow to equal a male penis therefore has some truth, but is biologically false since in maturity the two organs do not look alike, even in instances when an individual has both male and female sexual organs. Sex as pleasure is counter to fundamentalist or purist thinking that insists on sex as sin, sex as duty, sex as marital right and sex as male domination. When viewed solely from the perspective of the ramifications of FGC, sex would incorrectly seem mechanical and only for male gratification and female procreation for which a woman is simply a depository. This simply restates and reinforces the perspective and practice of male power over female sexuality.

Sexuality, African traditions and the postcolonial

Discourse on sexuality usually centres on practices and beliefs that take place in different situations involving movements between urban, rural and international geographical and cultural locations. It is an unequal discourse in which there is an assumed superiority of knowledge about sex by urbanites and Western globalites over 'uninformed' and 'primitive' villagers or 'traditionalists'. This is often a false premise given the fact that age-appropriate sex education that is not only limited to religiosity, disease, pregnancy and abortion prevention is not taught in the school curriculum. In contrast, the curriculum of group rituals of traditional village bush schools at times took on board quite thorough sex education, often using clay objects to demonstrate the act of sexual intercourse. In some societies the adolescent youth have knowledge of sexual pleasure without penetrative sex before marriage. In many cases, during initiation or marriage rituals, the young women are taught how to physically prepare themselves for intercourse, including the use of rhythmic body movements that are enhanced by sounds and aromatic sex aids such as grass skirts, beads, body decorations, scents and incense, herbs and spices. Some traditional cultures also teach their women how to prepare a fire in the bedroom and how to keep it burning so that it never dies. I am very interested in such rituals and there is a wealth of ethnographic data on this that we can harvest. I would appreciate feedback on

this topic from other scholars, researchers and contributors.

Many traditional cultures seem to have traditional ways of talking about and teaching about sexual pleasure, while at the same time they practise customs that regulate women's sexuality. Due to this ambiguity, the claim that the sole purpose of such controversial practices as circumcision is purely to reduce female sexual desire and ensure virginity and fidelity is too simplistic. It is also misleading to claim that the only reason for reducing the size of the vagina in the practice of FGC is to increase the man's sexual pleasure. Any form of touching or cutting women's private parts with the knife as we now know is harmful and unnecessary. In modern times many women undergo episiotomy for childbirth and are sewn up again. This practice of cutting women by male gynaecologists has raised a lot of political questions just like the cutting practice of traditional midwives. At all times and in all cultures there has been much meddling with and fighting over women's sexual and reproductive organs. The advance of capitalism has also seen the intensification of strategies and efforts to control the woman herself in both body and mind.

In giving voice to women, progress has been made in recognising the right of grassroots people to their cultures and similarly the right of women to be proud of and identify with their chosen religions. It does not mean the end of the work of demystification and deconstruction. Criticism can be combined with education that points out gender oppression in the various theologies and reveals those positive messages that can arm the oppressed with subversive knowledge for challenging systems of oppression. Islam, like Christianity, developed into mainly a patriarchal religion that is built on traditions, injunctions and interpretations of male founders, Imams and jurists. Unlike the virgin men of Christianity, especially the Catholic hierarchy, Muslim men married wives and experienced coital sexual pleasure. The Qur'an and the Hadith of the Prophet Muhammad, as with the sacred books of Eastern religions, contain detailed statements on all kinds of sexual practice. Many are of course orthodox, but at least the founders of Islam, like African traditionalists, accept that eroticism and sex exist, even if the presentation is ambiguous in also presenting its polluting, disturbing and destabilising

power. The acknowledgement of sex provides liberal and progressive African Islamic leaders, clerics and activists with a positive and useful resource for a forward movement in matters of sexuality. It also means that they can enrich the received religions by introducing more realistic, vibrant and passionate traditions from indigenous African cultures.

Erotica and sex have always posed ambiguities in both African traditions and postcolonial modern cultures. The Water Goddess generally known as 'Mammy Water' in some African traditional cultures might occupy an ambiguous category in the counter-normative in the traditional cultural lens. She could be used to describe exceptional beauty and eroticism, but she also embodies characteristics and attributes that might disturb what is socially and culturally expected in adult and mature women. Efforts would therefore be made at correction to live up to social expectations. In the more complicated sexual freedoms of modernity, Mammy Water takes on an even more encroaching presence as a subversive seductive sexuality and materialistic enchantment that speaks to the inhibitions of cultures and religions and at the same time the lure and illusions of capitalism itself in matters of class and race.

With the advance of capitalism the discourse on sexuality takes on the complexity of the intersection of gender and class and in some contexts race as well. Raised class consciousness does not necessarily lead to the eradication of sexual abuse. In tackling the problem of sexual abuse we need to distinguish between class struggle and the targeting of innocent girls and women. A class perspective raises the problem of musical chairs and has resulted in a vicious cycle of perpetuating violence and abuse by a successor class, rather than the desired correction of a system by dismantling it and deepening democratic processes and institutions. Sexual abuse takes place in all classes, although economic factors compound the vulnerability of girls and women of the lower classes. For this reason, I do not think that raised class consciousness alone mitigates sexual abuse, although class envy might prove subversive in raising social consciousness in class struggle. You reject, condemn and criminalise sexual abuse regardless of the class of the perpetrator, but aspire to a better class in the social ladder, encouraged

and backed by the principle of equal opportunities for all.

By further advancing analysis and discourse by interrogating the intersections of sexuality, gender and class, we can also investigate the very nature of social and state power. In history and across cultures, some societies have practised or institutionalised flexible systems of cultural gender that have enabled and encouraged prominent female presence in positions of power and authority, regardless of biological sex. I can illustrate this with two contrasting examples. The Igbo of southern Nigeria do not distinguish between male and female subject and object pronouns (\emptyset means he or she; $\emptyset ya$, means it is him or it is her in Igbo) and this allows us to see and address a woman occupying a role typically seen as male without language restrictions and stigma. In contrast, the Hausa of northern Nigeria have quite strict grammatical gender rules and encode gender differences in subject and object pronouns and in verb construction, etc., (*Ya* means he and *Ta* means she; *Ya zo* means he came and *Ta zo* means she came; *Shi ne* means it is him and *Ita ce* means it is her in Hausa). In practice and structurally, this has supported a rigid gender hierarchy in roles and status.

In the Hausa gender configuration, it is not surprising that the same gender

hierarchy in which masculinity is seen as superior to femaleness is reproduced in Hausa Queer culture and community, showing the limitations of dwelling solely on the subject of sexuality without challenging disempowering hierarchical gender and class divides. However, Igbo and Hausa, and also Yoruba, in contrast to the English use of 'Man' to speak for all, use the non-gendered collective terms (*Nmadu*, person and *Ndi-Nmadu*, people in Igbo; *Mutum*, person and *Mutane*, people in Hausa; *Eyon*, person in Yoruba) that support our aspiration to inclusive human dignity, equality and social justice.

Expanded knowledge about the body and its chemistry, and similarly about the brain, poses a challenge to orthodox views and approaches to sexuality and sex in all religions, cultures and societies. One of the benefits of African modernity is the ability to keep private how far partners go beyond the normative in their sexual enjoyment. The opposite is perhaps true of Western societies where modernity means more freedom in sexual expression. Modernity's sexuality also poses its enchantments and seductions everywhere and is tackled in different ways. A broader perspective that includes exposing contradictions in the normative and interrogating dominant oppressive norms through counter-normative

alternatives seems to me a most interesting approach for a forward-looking engagement with the discourse on sexuality as it provides a challenging and critical window on how to view sexuality historically and cross-culturally in a changing world. At best, it is a perspective that enables the transcending of the boundaries of normativity or the dominant discourse and at the same time takes on board a gender-inclusive reconfiguring and restructuring of society and state power.

What we need here is more comparative work to expand our sex knowledge about positive messages from cultures, religions, literature and science. We need to work with a broad perspective that subjects the rigidity of the normative to a critical evaluation that presents a more progressive alternative in the face of the challenges of social change.

Finally, I would like to report that I am organising a workshop and an edited publication on this topic and would welcome useful responses and in-depth ethnographic research papers.

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