



AFRICA REGIONAL SEXUALITY
RESOURCE CENTRE

Understanding Human Sexuality Seminar Series 2

DISCUSSANT

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Comments on

A Postcolonial Scene: On Girls' Sexuality

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Dr Osha's paper advances six main issues. According to the author, the concept of sexuality is a colonial phenomenon and like a new religion, it stresses strict adherence to some basic principles which are power-driven and psychologically laden to the extent that we are made to believe that all our day- to-day activities are full of sexual implications. The six main issues of this paper are simply itemised as:

1. Sexuality is a fundamental human concept which is now ascribed a religious status and projected as a new invention
2. The problems of HIV/AIDS or other sexually transmitted diseases are constantly used as political tools to propagate and make people to understand and accept the concept of human sexuality
3. Sexuality has been used as a political tool to bring about a social order or promote a class interest and foster ideologies that are rather selfish, complex and problematic as has been the case in developed countries
4. The way the colonial masters operated to maintain civilisation and control, keeping in check "disturbing sexual energies" was a total display of their sexuality
5. The colonial system of oppression fostered modes of girls' socialisation through religion and legal codes which impacts greatly on girls' socialisation and sexuality today
6. In a heterogeneous country like Nigeria, female sexuality is a complex issue and cannot be universalised, due to the presence of socio-cultural, political and religious variations. "Consequently, the modes of socialisation and sexualisation a girl encounters will depend on which particular religions and ethnic framework she is inserted or finds herself".

The author suggests that there is enforcement of a single regime of sexuality in Nigeria in spite of the multiplicity of regimes of sexuality that already exist in the country. He further suggests that issues of sexuality should be left in the domain of experts familiar with the local situation.

I quite agree with the last issue raised by the author, but his assertion that sexuality is colonially-driven to my mind reflects an incomplete understanding of the very concept of sexuality. This is, perhaps, because the author concentrates on the perception that human sexuality is closely linked to colonial adversaries and a colonial heritage. Therefore, he does not fully examine the various factors that influence socialization as a process.

As Adepoju (2005) argued, and also in reference to the definition in Action Health Incorporated (2003); de Beauvoir (1989); Baso (1997); and Greenberg *et al* (2000), sexuality is part and parcel of human existence: its meaning, content and approaches may have changed over time, as is society itself and any dynamic aspect of human endeavour.

Having made these observations, let us now bring the issue of girls' socialisation and its influence on sexuality discourse in Nigeria into perspective.

The Concept of Socialisation

Every society, whether simple or complex has its own system of socializing its youths to actively participate in the society's activities for the common good. Socializing the youth for the purpose of active and good life has been and remains a great concern of every society.

There are many actors in the socialisation of the girl in both traditional and modern settings: Parents, family (both nuclear and extended), the community, educational institutions, peers and the media. We shall briefly discuss the role of

each of these actors and the impact of modernisation and socio-economic transformations on the socialisation process. In doing so, we shall draw attention to the diversity, continuity and changing configurations among religious and ethnic situations in various parts of Nigeria.

It is important to stress from the start that objectives and methods of socialisation may differ from place to place, country to country and people to people, and over time. That is, the situation is dynamic and evolving. Every child is made to appreciate his role as a member of his immediate and extended family as well as that of the community. The newly-born child immediately becomes the child of everyone in the household - uncles, aunties, cousins, and even friends and neighbours who in conjunction with the child's parent take responsibility to educate the child to be honest, respectable, skilled, cooperative and conform to the social order. Apart from developing the child's latent physical skills, intellectual skills and the understanding and promotion of the shared cultural heritage, high premium was placed on development of character.

Character Development

Traditionally, Africans place emphasis on character training. Every member of the society wants the child to be sociable, honest, courageous, humble and in good standing at all times. Among the Yorubas of Nigeria, for example, the child is acquainted with codes of manner, convictions, customs, moral values, ethics, myths, superstitions and local laws through various members of the household and the family's nuclear or extended members living in the same compound or neighbourhood. The child is often piloted, corrected or punished by the elders as occasion warrants. The child also benefits from observing the elders' attitudes and behaviours and also learns from the experiences of others.

Invariably, in this process of socializing a child, there is always a dichotomy, and a gender perspective differentiating the ways boys and girls are socialized. The girls absorb lessons of morality and good manners inculcated in different Yoruba

proverbs that are used daily and frequently to drive home practical truths about day-to-day events. They are acquainted with lessons that teach or promote the knowledge of hospitality, etiquette, hygiene, motherliness, submissiveness, and other social graces expected of women.

Nigerian parents, irrespective of their ethnic group abhor children that bring shame and dishonour to the family. In certain localities, parents make conscious efforts to test honesty, perseverance and truthfulness in their children by subjecting them to tempting situations. Any slight demonstration of 'masculinity' or self assertion by the girl is classified as bad character, anti-cultural, non-conforming and even rude. In fact, absence of any other type of education is tolerable as long as good character prevails.

While the family is usually the most important social system for a young child, the overall impact of the environment emerges from the balance among all these influences – cultural, economic, political, biological and psychological ebb and flow of day-to-day life. In fact, development results from a complex interplay among these children, family systems and the social environment which reflects both cultural blueprints of what is normal, what is abnormal, what is obvious and what is impossible.

These ethical values mirror a people's-shared assumption about how things should be done, about who should or can do what and about the norms for understanding how human and community development proceeds, without reference to the specific needs of the child. The child is left to learn by chance and personal experience. In most cases, vital information on sexuality and sexual relations are eliminated or restrained (due to socio-cultural taboos) until sexual maturation (coming of age ceremony in Nigeria, or *Dipo* in Ghana) or other personal encounters. When parents and the community operate in settings that demand conformity and emphasise obedience rather than self-direction as reflected in colonial ideologies and systems of oppression as mentioned by Dr.

Osha, they stifle independence, impair positive child development and impact negatively on the child's sexuality.

The socialization process of the girl-child is atypical of such cultural blueprints as it goes a long way to influence how we perceive the birth of a girl-child, her development processes, her place within her immediate family, her roles within the community and the nation, her rights, her image, her career, her negotiating power and relationships. This has been the position in most parts of Nigeria even before the advent of colonialism.

In recent times, socio-economic transformations have impacted greatly on the socialization process of the girl child. Urbanization and migration have increased the distance between extended family members, who traditionally provided sexuality-related information to young girls, leaving the task to parents who often feel uncomfortable playing the role. Family disintegration and displacement have led to more reliance on other socializing agencies such the school, the church or mosque, peer group and particularly the media - visual and audio visual, which have become the dominant cultural force in our societies today.

While only a minority of people read books, millions of people are exposed to the television. While television programmes can inform, educate and entertain; research has proven that, the high rate of violence in the television programmes has impacted negatively on human sexuality patterns and the girls are not left out of this. Poverty in all its ramification has pushed the girl-child into risky relationships and more daring activities such as sex-hawking, drug pushing, illegal cross-boarder trading and dangerous, clandestine trans-Saharan sex-trafficking to the developed countries.

All of these expose the girl to new forms of socialization and acculturation that greatly impact on her overall physical, biological and psychological state of being: her sexuality. The girl is forced to grow up quickly and in desperation. Apart from

the problem of possible alienation, self respect could be lost when her espionages yields nothing. In addition, her reproductive health could become endangered while relationships with family, friends and acquaintances could become strained. The present scenario has greatly changed the concept of sexual morality among girls. In fact one feels deeply disturbed seeing these things happen at this time of our social history, when many girls have become vulnerable to negative influences in the society.

Implications

In Nigeria, the traditional status of the girl-child, has significant effect on receptivity and acceptance of the subject of sexuality. Today, women are becoming more visible and form a significant part of the work force in Nigeria. The need therefore arises for girls to be empowered with life skills that will enable them cope with sexuality-related challenges. There is need to depart from the traditional viewpoint which uses one uniform moral standard to judge everyone.

In this era of culture dynamism and globalisation, human sexuality faces more complex challenges. Gender relations and communication have become highly significant in this age of HIV and spiralling teenage pregnancies

Contrary to mundane views about early childhood sexuality, research has shown that early childhood experiences are important to sexuality in Nigeria. Conservative views about sexuality, based on religion and culture, while still prevalent in some parts of northern Nigeria, is beginning to diminish in the southern parts. People are gradually coming to terms with the fact that sexual expression is natural and normal.

Sexuality information transmitted to girls has been mainly in the areas of gender roles for females and males with respect to:

- Responsible parenthood
- Pre-natal/post natal care

- Menstruation, menstrual care and hygiene

Most other information is usually left until marriage except the issue of virginity that is constantly drummed into the girls' ears.

Selected Background Reading

Action Health Incorporated (2003) Comprehensive Sexuality Education (Trainers' Resource Manual). Lagos: Action Health Inc

Adepoju, Adunola, (2005). Sexuality and Life Skill Education. London: PenPress Publishers

Basso, M. J. (1997). The Underground Guide to Teenage Sexuality. Minneapolis: Fairview Press

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Greenberg, J. S, C. E. Bruess and D. W Haffner, (2000). Exploring the Dimensions of Human Sexuality. Sudbury, Mass: Jones and Bartlett Publishers