



AFRICA REGIONAL SEXUALITY
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DISCUSSANT

CELESTINA O. ISIRAMEN (PH.D)

**Head, Department of Religion and Cultural studies
Ambrose Alli University
Ekpoma, Edo State**

Sexuality And Spirituality In The Nigerian Context:
A Critical Assessment Of Religious Laws, Their
Ambiguities And The Way Forward.

Comments on

**Sexuality And Spirituality: Possible Bedmates In The Religious
Terrain (With Implications For Understanding Human Sexuality In
Contemporary Nigeria)**

AYANTAYO, J.K. (PhD) and Akintunde Dorcas Olu (PhD)
**Department of Religious Studies
University of Ibadan**

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Introduction

My discussion of this paper begins with my choice of the above title which I feel soothes my line of discussion. In discussing the body of the paper, I must begin by thanking the presenters for a job well done. They have exposed us to an in-depth knowledge of the background of sexuality and spirituality.

Like the presenters rightly mentioned, the Nigerian is naturally an embodiment of spirituality. There is actually no dividing line between the spiritual and the secular in the Nigerian society. Thus, the conscious and the sub-conscious experiences of the Nigerian is imbued with religion. According to Oduyoye (2001), in Africa “culture is imbued with religion and religion is used to under-gird and validate culture”. This is why the understanding of sexuality and spirituality in the Nigerian society must necessarily begin with religion. To the Nigerian, “sexuality and spirituality have always been joined and interwoven from the beginning ...” (Bob Francouer, 2004).

Be that as it may, it is pertinent to also draw attention to an aspect of the religions that the paper seemed to have glossed over. This is the fact that, in the Nigerian society, while the dominant religions have clearly spelt out the divine origin of sexuality, its nature and purpose, as aptly noted by the presenters, these are also potent instruments in the separation of sexuality from spirituality especially in the attempts to control behaviour.

My discussion of this paper focuses on the power of religions in their integration and disintegration of sexuality and spirituality. It is, in the assessment of the ambiguities of religions in relation to sexuality and spirituality vis-à-vis globalization that the importance of my discussion of the paper can be properly visualized.

Religious Laws and Sexuality

The presenters have rightly spelt out the facts concerning religions as the basis of sexuality and spirituality in the Nigerian society. The ideas about the origin, purposes and uses of sexuality are grounded in religious teachings. Therefore, I am not going to bore you with repetitions by going over these again. I will therefore go straight to the next sub – heading.

Religious Ambiguities

The focus of this section can only be properly appreciated against the background of an accurate understanding of what sexuality and spirituality are about. Sexuality is defined as the “capacity for sexual feelings; a person’s sexual preference” (Soans, 2001). And Longman (1995), defines it as “the things people do and feel that are connected with their desire or ability to have sex”. And like the paper presented rightly pointed out, sexuality involves “erotic energies” and this is not just about having sex, it is about “living” (Blackburn, 2005). It involves intimacy between two people including touching, looking into each other’s eyes, and so much more. The ultimate consummation of sexuality is love-making which bestows upon the lovers the experience of a spectacular breakthrough to the “Infinite beyond.... What begins as duality and polarization, within time, climaxes as a shared soul – merging and experience of Eternity...” (Lonny Brown, 2005).

Thus, the integration of sexuality and spirituality cannot be fulfilled in mechanical conjugal love – making but in total openness to love that transcends into an ecstatic union and a mystical experience of orgasm. This leads to healing of tensions and emotions as well as self –enrichment and fulfillment.

The three religions discussed in the paper accept that sexuality is more than physical love – making. I am however, bothered that in their attempt to control behaviour in the Nigerian society, they have reduced sexuality to mere physical action geared towards procreation. While the presenters emphasize that these religions teach sexuality to be God's gift to the human race for enjoyment and fulfillment, they ignore the fact that these religions again, paradoxically, in their teachings on sexual morality preach sex negativity. Thus, religious teachings become ambiguous in this regard. This point can be well understood against the background of an assessment of the three major religions that are practiced in the Nigerian society as narrated by the presenters.

African Traditional Religion

The presenters have carefully drawn attention to the sacredness of sexuality as God's gift to humans as taught by African Traditional Religion. But here and there, are religious taboos against sexuality. In an attempt to avoid the wrath of the gods, people are forced to perceive sexuality as something unspiritual. This is especially bad for women, whose burden it is, to bear the brunt of the discriminatory enforcement of religious taboos on sexuality. Here, patriarchy becomes an instrument of sexuality inhibition. Most of the taboos against pre-marital sex, extra-marital sex, open talk about sex, amorous sexual advances are mostly enforced on women. For instance, traditional religions generally permit males to have as many concubines as they wish outside of the very many wives they could possibly have. A man who is able to achieve this is considered virile and in total control. This makes me to begin to wonder about what the religion actually means, when it condemns adultery.

Right from the cradle, the girl-child is taught to be extremely secretive about issues of sexuality. She is taught that in marriage, her major concern is to satisfy her husband's sexual orgies. Since she is considered not to have sexual feelings, her consent is hardly sought before marriage is consummated. Many girls are given out in marriage to very old men who already have many wives and who care less about the sexual satisfaction of their wives. Circumcision is enforced on young girls and women to diminish their sexual drives. To women, sexuality is therefore something shameful that can desecrate the body.

Under these circumstances, women become sexually passive in marriage. In this kind of relationship, sexuality becomes mechanical devoid of any spiritual experience. It is devoid of love, empathy, ecstasy and total union of heart and body especially as the orgasm of the female is definitely irrelevant. Even the man who is permitted by religious laws to have sex with as many women as possible cannot appreciate the full meaning of sexuality in its spiritual height when he does not put into consideration the feelings of the woman. The woman is not empowered to exercise sexual freedom by deciding who, when and how to have sex. In this patriarchal entrenchment, sexuality is reduced in African traditional culture to mere mechanical conjugal action geared towards procreation.

Christianity

Here again, like the presenters pointed out, sexuality is understood as interwoven with spirituality. However, the presenters conspicuously avoided the Old Testament in their paper. The Old Testament is replete with stories of sexual debasement of women just like the African traditional religions.

Although the New Testament condemns polygamy, the burden of patriarchy is again apparent. Paul teaches that sex is good for both man and woman. But the Christian men have continuously capitalized on Paul's admonition to women to be submissive to their husbands, in their reduction of sexual relationship to master/servant relation. The Christian doctrine on virginity and chastity are mostly applied to the woman. She alone bears the burden of shame and stigmatization associated with pregnancy outside marriage. These are all absent from the paper. The reduction of sexuality to mere glandular stimulation in Christendom is exemplified in my short story below:

This true life story was told to me by a pastor's wife who is being harassed sexually by her husband in the name of Christianity. This woman was forced to complain to me out of extreme frustration. She started by telling me that her heart beats fast at the sight of her husband. She said her husband uses her like a sex machine. Apart from the fact that he intimidates her with religious teaching of total submissiveness and non-denial of sex to him, she is even more confused when she hears the teachings that women must not starve their husbands sexually in the church and Christian women seminars. She is never given breathing space from sex by her husband who employs various techniques for his satisfaction without caring about the emotional involvement of his wife. He often commands her to kneel and continue to suck his penis until he ejaculates into her mouth. Although her husband knows that she detests this act, he makes her understand that the essence of his marriage to her is to satisfy his sexual drives and that God has ordained it so.

As pathetic as this story is, many couples are experiencing this kind of sexual relationship. Sexual relationship devoid of love and affection is mechanical and unsatisfactory and it is worth mentioning in a paper of this nature.

Islam

Islam spells out several sexual behaviours as taboos and enacts several stringent punishments against "unholy" sexual behaviour as pointed out by the presenters. But they failed to mention the fact that in Islam, sex is fraught with fear and its discussion is openly avoided. The notion that sex should be an exceedingly joyful experience for both males and females is absent. In Islam; sex means the enjoyment of a female's body. The man is both the actor and the decision maker in matters of sexuality. The sexual enjoyment of the women is completely irrelevant and a man's orgasm is an absolute necessity. Ghazali (1997) writes about the woman thus: "she should prefer her husband to herself and before all her relatives. She should keep herself clean at all times for her husband to enjoy her whenever he wishes ...". Again, thus says the Qur'an "...your wives are a tilthe unto you; so go to your tilth when and how you will" (2.223).

Islam encourages child marriage and having sex with a minor. A man is permitted to marry four wives at a time and to have as many concubines as possible. Islam again

condemns adultery but permits the man to have coerced, unbridled and limitless sex with women taken as prisoners and infidels in the following Qur'anic verses: 23:1-6, 70:25-34. Therefore, the Islamic law against adultery is certainly targeted at women. Any woman caught in the act of adultery is either lashed 100 times if unmarried, while married women are stoned to death for the offence. Here, the ambiguity of religious teaching on sexual morality becomes apparent.

Manifestations of sexuality by the Muslim woman is totally considered unholy. She is not permitted to make sexual advances because only whores are expected to do so. But ironically, Islam permits men to have sex with infidels who (because they are not Muslims) are likely to express sexuality in a form considered "unholy". No wonder, Muslim men are fond of having so many concubines because of their sexual styles which a well – cultured woman is not permitted to express in Islam.

To conclude this section, I must say that the ambiguities of various religious teachings concerning sexuality and spirituality are obvious. The three religions examined above clearly accept that sexuality is spiritual in origin and manifestations but they deny its spiritual essence by reducing sexuality to mere mechanical sexual escapades. In this sense, patriarchy assumes a major obstacle to the integration of religion with spirituality.

When sexuality is celebrated uncaringly, (as Nigerians are forced to do by their religious understanding), the mystical experience of orgasm, healing and ecstasy are debased into something that is dirty and dishonorable. Sexuality and spirituality are integrated in the total experience of sex that transforms one from the level of lower animal to the height of the divine. This is the spiritual essence of sexuality which is mostly absent in sexual relations in the Nigerian context. As Griscom (1992) puts it "ultimately to have sex using only the genitals is an empty, flat and one dimensional exercise of isolation. It will not continue as a part of human expression because there is something stirring that is seeking an alignment of heart and soul..." The presenters were obviously subjective in their paper.

Globalization

I totally agree with the presenters on the issue of the negative influence of globalization on the Nigerian sense of sexual morality. Homosexuality, lesbianism, bestiality constitute aspects of sexual perversity in the Nigerian cultural milieu. In fact, I cannot fathom any way in which sexuality can be integrated with spirituality in any of these sexual forms. The biological structures of the vagina and penis make mating between opposite sex as the only appropriate means of sexuality expression. Thus, Nigerians must be careful in accepting hook, line and sinker whatever the West has to offer in the name of civilization.

Be that as it may, the contemporary Nigerian cannot afford to continuously misunderstand and misrepresent sexuality in the name of religion. In the global campaign for sexual rights and sexual freedom, I think the attention of Nigerians should be focused on breaking down all patriarchal, hierarchical religious structures which have diminished the spiritual meaning of sexuality over the years, and which have served to explain sexual morality only in terms of sexual enslavement of women and to portray men as sexual maniacs. These unhealthy sexual relations are totally unacceptable. Understanding and expressing one's sexuality in its proper manner will

aid the maintenance of happy and healthy relationships with others in the family, the society and by extension the entire universe.

The Way Forward

It is obvious that globally, religions are losing their credibility in dealing with sexuality and spirituality. This is because of the manner in which religion is applied to such issues. However, the value of religion to the Nigerian is so much that it would be detrimental to totally ignore religion in matters of sexuality. In fact, any solution that does not derive from religion can hardly make impact on a religion-conscious people like Nigerians.

Fortunately, there are aspects of the various religions that can be explored to advantage in this regard. The central focus should be love and egalitarianism, which are values emphasized by these religions but that are often ignored due to male chauvinistic tendencies. But with this shift, comes an understanding of love as consciousness rather than feelings for an object of love or something finite. This paradigm of love is one of partnership rather than a dominance/submissive form of relationship. Genuine love devoid of sexual discrimination is the ultimate integration of sexuality and spirituality.

Based on these, I suggest the following :

- The engagement of religious scholars in sexuality counselling
- The integration of sexuality education in the curriculum of schools, seminaries and other community settings.
- The enactment of an Act or a government policy against sexual injustices often perpetrated against women.
- The waging of continuous war against sexuality bondage by concerned NGOs.
- The enactment of government policy statement on indulgence by Nigerians in sexual perversions common in the global trend
- Education of women on their sexual rights as human beings.

Conclusion

While I agree with the presenters that religions are important instruments in the enforcement of sexual sanity in a society, it is, however, obvious that the three major religious traditions in Nigeria must undergo revolution in their pattern of teaching. Sexuality is worth its meaning only when it is valued against the background of individual self-satisfaction and self-enrichment. The absence of these in sexual relationships in Nigeria has resulted in tensions, hatred and violence within and outside the homes.

Finally, I suggest that rather than losing credibility totally on matters of sexuality, the leaders of these religions must emphasise love and egalitarianism which already form aspects of these religions. The leaders must also work to dethrone patriarchal influences, the bases on which the religions are seen to be teaching sexual morality wrapped in ambiguities, discriminations and the enforcement of mechanical, sexual relations devoid of spiritual fulfilment. This is the only way by which these religions can freely emphasise the integration of sexuality and spirituality which is the essence of this God's given gift.

By making your partner's ecstasy your own, one is able to achieve unity through duality. Giving and taking will merge and the two become one. This, I believe should

be the essence of religious teachings on love and egalitarianism with regard to sexuality.

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