



**AFRICA REGIONAL SEXUALITY
RESOURCE CENTRE**

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Understanding Human Sexuality Seminar Series

**Understanding
Sexuality in the
Yoruba Culture**

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*July 29, 2004
Lagos, Nigeria*

INTRODUCTION

The two basic constituents of our topic are ‘Sexuality’ and ‘the Yoruba Culture’. Understanding these terms as they interrelate gives birth to this discourse.

We hereby adopt the World Health Organization (WHO) operational definition of ‘sexuality’ also adopted by the Africa Regional Sexuality Resource Centre (ARSRC).

It runs thus:

Sexuality is a central aspect of being human throughout life and encompasses sex, gender, identities and roles, sexual orientation, eroticism, pleasure, intimacy and reproduction. Sexuality is experienced and expressed in thoughts, fantasies, desires, beliefs, attitudes, values, behaviours, practices, roles and relationships. While sexuality can include all of these dimensions, not all of them are always experienced or expressed. Sexuality is influenced by the interaction of biological, psychological, social, economic, political, cultural, ethical, logical, historical and religious and spiritual factors¹.

The Yoruba culture, for the present purpose, can be defined as follows:

The aggregate of the ways of life of the Yoruba-speaking peoples of southwestern Nigeria and their kiths and kins elsewhere in the world. It is a continuum beginning from their subsistence, communal, agrarian life of the pre-literate and pre-colonial times to the capitalist, individualistic, free-enterprise life of the literate, colonial and post-colonial, modern times. In other words, a continuum of the traditional and modern aspects of the Yoruba culture provides a true picture of this concept. It is a dynamic phenomenon.

To understand thoroughly sexuality in the context of the Yoruba culture is to be objective, sincere and practical; either as a member of the group who has knowledge of the culture by acquaintance, or as an outsider who acquires a knowledge of the same culture by description. The author of this paper is a member of the group. He hereby appeals to outsiders to enjoy the ‘pudding’ by ‘tasting it’.

BEING HUMAN AS A YORUBA THROUGHOUT LIFE

A Yoruba, whether male or female, goes through life as an integral part of his/her society. He/she plays the roles assigned to he/she by Nature and by the society in

order to enjoy being human. He/she cherishes loving others and being loved by others; and abhors alienating others or being ostracised by his/her fellow Yoruba people. Hence, the Yoruba adage which says:

Ka rin ka po

Yiye nii yeni.

(To go together in life

Befits humans as creatures).

A song of benediction which corroborates the adage quoted above runs thus:

Olorun ma je n sAdanikangbele o.

Olorun ma je n sAdanikangbele o.

Adanikanje.

Adanikanmu.

Adanikan-gbe'nuu-palo-bi-eranko.

Olorun ma je n sAdanikangbele o.

(God, forbid it that I live alone in my house.

God, forbid it that I live alone in my house.

Eating alone.

Drinking alone.

Living alone in my living-room like an animal.

God, forbid it that I live alone in my house).

Now, this gregarious way of life necessarily involves interaction between the males and the females in the Yoruba society. A males-only or a females-only society is, therefore, a misnomer in the context of Yoruba life. That is why male and female toddlers play together in separate Yoruba compounds (*Agboole*); adolescents play together in the same manner outdoors and indoors as the weather and circumstances permit; while adults as well as elders also stay and play together using appropriate games and drinks during leisure². This comes after a normal day of toiling together, severally and individually, to earn a decent living; whereby they contribute their respective quotas to the running of the society.

THE YORUBA MARRIAGE INSTITUTION

To the Yoruba, the primary purpose of marriage is sustaining the Yoruba race through legitimate and responsible procreation. In the earliest times, great importance was attached to virginity. Fadipe (1970: 81-84) describes the said importance vividly thus:

In every division of Yoruba land great importance was attached to a bride being found Virgo Intacta, and this was the rule for both high and low alike. It has already been mentioned that two female members by marriage of the bride's extended family were detailed to remain with her until after the chief event of the 'bridal night'. These two women usually slept outside the door of the bridal couple's room on the occasion of the expected defloration. They would be straining their ears to catch any exclamation of pain coming from the bride; should she be found non virgo intacta, they seized the earliest opportunity of taking flight, even if it should be very late in the night with all the dangers which it held for those of their sex. It was not only these two but also the egbe (associates) of the bride who had to look after their own safety, for the reaction of the disappointed husband could be violent....

A bride, on the other hand, who was found virgo intacta was the cause of much rejoicing to her husband, and of rejoicing and self-congratulation to her parents and relatives. The white sheet smeared with blood was sent in a covered calabash bowl to her parents the first thing in the morning (in some cases even the same night) accompanied by a sum of money (now as much as a pound or a guinea) and a hen for sacrifice to the 'head' of the bride.

No sooner had modernity (literacy, colonialism, capitalism, individualism, etc) crept into the hitherto preliterate, subsistence agrarian, communal Yoruba society than this great importance attached to virginity waned and almost disappeared. But it did not tamper with the aforementioned primary purpose of marriage among the people. Pre-marital sex became acceptable. Happy is a fiancée who got impregnated by her fiancé during courtship. The wedding ceremony would be arranged judiciously to pre-empt the arrival of the first baby of the marriage. Most churches and mosques have been condoning this practice.

SEXUAL DIVISION OF LABOUR BETWEEN HUSBAND AND WIFE

In the days of yore, household chores were divided between the man and his woman accordingly. Fadipe (1970:87-88) describes it properly. He writes:

In married life it was the duty of the woman to do all the work connected with the household other than carrying out repairs to the walls and roof of their house or hut (if in a farm). To keep their house clean and in a habitable state was one of the wife's tasks. Not only must the floors be swept at least once daily; but, once a week, they must be treated with vegetable or animal dye-stuff, which has the effect of keeping the floors smooth and shining, and of preventing the generation of vermin. The preparation and serving of food is one of the most exacting of her duties, involving the chopping of wood, the grinding of pepper and onions and other condiments for the soup, as well as the actual cooking. In none of these steps does the Yoruba husband usually consider it his duty to lend a helping hand. Only if iyān (pounded-yam) had to be prepared and the wife is single-handed did the husband assist in preparing the cooked yam for the mortar while the wife did the heavier and more exhausting part of the work.

...Since by far the greater proportion of the population were farmers, the wives of farmers who knew no other trade but farming formed a single productive unit with their husbands. The husband did the work of hoeing the field, making the yam heaps and sowing. The wife assisted in reaping and in such work as husking and preparation for the market of reaped crops and of changing the form of some crops into a state in which they would be preserved. Where indigo plants grew on a farm, it was the task of the wife to pound them into balls for sale to professional dyers. Where palm trees also grew on a farm, the husband performed the laborious and exceedingly dangerous task of climbing its straight branchless stem in order to cut down the fruit. The wife converted the fruits into palm-oil and other by-products. Even though the farming husband and wife were mutually complementary as a productive unit, there was usually a more or less clearly defined understanding between them as to the division of the proceeds of their work. In the first place, the marketing of the products of the farm was done by the wife, the husband paying her a commission on proceeds. Next in the case of the extraction of oil from the palm fruit, the kernels of the fruits-almost as important a source of oil as the soft part of the pericarp which yields what is known as palm-oil- generally belonged to the woman, who after shelling them, sold them to the European factories for shipment to Europe.

The modern Yoruba husband and his wife remain as a complementary unit each contributing according to his/her earnings to the keeping of their home. Salaries and wages nowadays, for employees (men and women) replace the proceeds from the agricultural production of the earliest times. They share domestic chores as much as it is practicable.

CUSTOMARY OBLIGATIONS OF A YORUBA HUSBAND

According to Fadipe (ibid: 89),

Although a man was not entitled to the earnings of his wife, he was, according to customary usage, held responsible not only for protecting her against assaults and insults, but also for her debts. Cases of shiftless wives who could make no success of their trade and had to be re-started more than once with fresh capital were not uncommon. It was also a man's duty to care for his wife in illness, although the sentiments of kinship have made for the sharing of this responsibility, as well as the responsibility for protection between the husband and his wife's close relatives. Yet it remains true that the husband was the person held to be directly responsible for the care of his wife.

The status quo is still normally maintained by modern Yoruba couples. Any disruption to this arrangement or violation of this principle is a temporary estrangement.

EROTICISM AND PLEASURE

The Yoruba married man and his wife enjoyed the experience and expression of sexual pleasure legitimately. Extra-marital sexual intercourse was not encouraged. A woman could have a secret concubine but she was not permitted by custom to be living with him as her husband other than the one to whom she was betrothed. She could divorce her husband for habitual laziness, drunkenness, bad company (such as associating with burglars) and if he contracted an infectious disease but usually not because of impotence. She generally found someone among her husband's relatives to whom she transferred her attentions even though nominally remaining the wife of the man to whom she was married. If a woman's husband died before her, and she was still of child-bearing age, she was assigned to a member of his family. But if the man to whom she was assigned should prove unacceptable to her, she might seek divorce from her husband's successor. She would refund what was known as *ife*, that is, what was paid in the course of courtship. (see Fadipe, N.A. *ibid*, pp 90-91).

While the wife might have only one living husband, a man could have as many wives as his means would allow. The belief underlying this custom is that, the Creator, in His wisdom, has made it so. Hence the Yoruba song reproduced below:

Awa okunrin le laya mefa;

Ko buru;

Okunrin kan soso IOba Oluwa mi yan fobinrin.

(We men can each have six wives;

It is not bad at all!

It is to only one man that my God has assigned a woman).

The major effect of culture contact upon Yoruba marriage customs is that the marriage institution is in a state of flux as a result of the diffusion of foreign ideas and the quick process of economic growth. (See Fadipe, N.A. *ibid*, pp 91-97).

Some modern Yoruba Christians generally imbibe the foreign idea of “one man, one wife” by contracting Church or Registry Marriages (i.e. marriage under the Ordinance); and then go out to keep mistresses (concubines) or wives married neither according to Christian customs nor the Ordinance. They do this without letting the main wife know about it. When they die, the other women with their children come to the man’s family to declare and demand their rights. They are usually allowed to come and take up their own portion of his inheritance, which he might have included in his will. If he dies without having written a will, the elders in his family will use their customary discretion to share his property among all his children. It is not generally always easy to resolve the social complications generated by this ‘modern’ practice of “trying to imitate a foreign custom without being ready to carry the responsibilities inherent in it”³. Muslim marriage among the Yoruba of today is more realistic than this.

POWER AND SEXUALITY

In Yoruba cosmology, absolute power belongs to Olodumare, God, the supreme Being who resides at the apex of the spiritual hierarchy. Below him are the numerous *orisa*, divinities who work for Him as specific intermediaries between *eniyàn*, human beings and Him. Both males and females in the Yoruba culture have access to power, albeit relatively. However, the patrilineal lineage system practiced by the Yoruba gives apparent upper hand to the males. But in reality the males derive spiritual power from the females who, in their wisdom, prefer anonymity in most

cases. The main idea is that behind every powerful Yoruba man there is at least a woman – mother, wife or wives, concubine(s), and daughters(s). A case in point is that of Orunmila and Aabo, his wife. She ably assisted her husband to properly entertain Mr. Death, Mr. Sickness and Mr. Esu, his mischievous guests, in spite of Orunmila's financial handicap ⁴. For the powerful man to fall, he needs to lose the favour of his female supporters. This is exemplified by the story of Orunmila and his three powerful wives namely Emololo-abe-opo, Abeje-eru and Akorahun-omo-didan-didan whose preoccupation was to destroy his fortunes ⁵. Another similar story is that of Iku, Mr. Death and Olojongbodu, his wife who collected a bribe from her husband's enemies in order to divulge the secret of his invincibility ⁶. There is no known Yoruba cult, which has no female representative, not even the Oro, bull-roarer cult.

SEXUAL FANTASIES

Yoruba husbands-to-be and wives-to-be in the olden days were rightly excited about the expected sexual relations since they were not encouraged to engage in sexual intercourse before marriage. Yoruba children also enjoy sexual fantasies. They play occasionally by imitating adults: husband, wife, brother, sister in a fictitious married life. *Ekun iyawo*, nuptial chants, among the Oyo, Ibadan, Osun sub-groups of the Yoruba land address mainly the envisaged problems and prospects of wifehood and motherhood ⁷.

Promiscuity, based on sexual indiscipline is a means of expressing sexual fantasies especially among males who are erroneously looking for variety. They do not learn from the Yoruba adage which runs thus: *Oju la n do: obo were o yato* (What a man enjoys in sexual intercourse with a woman is her countenance: the virginal of a madwoman is not different).

SEXUAL VIOLENCE

Sexual violence is rare among the Yoruba. When it occurs, elders punish culprits accordingly. If for instance, a married woman denies her husband intimacy, the

elders will call her to order or appease her as the case may be. If a married man maltreats his wife, his elders will correct him firmly because they know that the wife belongs to the whole family; and alienating her may spell doom for the good image (name) of the family in particular, and their lineage in general.

Rivalry among co-wives is a veritable source of sexual violence in the Yoruba society. This is probably why Ifa, the Oracle divinity advocates for one man, one wife ideal situation because according to the oracle:

When they increase to two, they become envious;
When they increase to three, they scatter the household;
When they increase to four, they laugh derisively at one another;
When they increase to five, they accuse one another of destroying their husband's fortunes;
When they increase to six, they become wicked;
When they increase to seven, they become witches;
When they increase to eight, they blame one of their group for bringing bad luck to their husband;
When they increase to nine, they accuse the eldest wife of using their husband's wrapper-cloth;
When they increase to ten, they accuse one another of forcing herself upon their husband⁸.

Circumcision is done by trained experts among the Yoruba – for the good of both females and males. Female circumcision is not female genital mutilation in the Yoruba culture. It is meant to properly acculturate the females so that they behave properly like human beings. It was a common practice among the Oyo, Osun, Ibadan sub-groups of the Yoruba race in the olden days. Nowadays, the practice is dying out in those areas of the Yoruba ethnic group.

LIFE CYCLE AND SEXUALITY

From the cradle to the grave human sexuality affects the Yoruba person. When it is inside the womb, the foetus is given adequate care. If a pregnant woman's labour is short, the Yoruba believe that the baby is likely to be a male who is eager to come to the world having not much to carry along. But if the labour is prolonged the baby is believed to be a female who has to carefully pack and carry along many utensils for

a proper female life here. During infancy, the Yoruba child is called *ikoko*, or *alejo* (a visitor, guest); while the toddler or crawling child is referred to as *omo irakoro*, a baby who crawls. Puberty is referred to as *ibalaga*. The sign of puberty in males among the Yoruba is the maturity of the scrotum-eggs. When the two drop down properly in the bags, the boy is warned to get ready for fatherhood, if he dares to have sexual intercourse with a ripe girl. The girl's sign of puberty is the ripening of her two breasts. She would be warned to get ready to get out of her father's house because her two ripe breasts will attract the males one of whom will eventually woo her and carry her away as a wife.

During adulthood, Yoruba males and females play their respective traditional roles necessary for upholding the norms of the society. Every Yoruba person who deserves it receives assistance from peers, friends and relatives.

Special care is given by the Yoruba to the aged both males and females for obvious reasons: the need to receive blessings from the aged ones; and the Creator who has used them to nurture the young ones to adulthood. There is also the belief that whatever one sows one shall reap especially in the context of filial relations.

FORMS AND EXPRESSIONS OF SEXUALITY

Attire is a means of expressing sexuality among the Yoruba. Males use various types of *fila* (cap) to demonstrate to their female admirers their elegance; while the females tie their *gele* (head-gears) in various styles to attract the attention of their male admirers. Through the use of adornments, Yoruba males express their manliness. One thing they are known for in this regard is the shaving of their heads. They also file their incisors to create a fine gap as they smile to invite the attention of their female lovers. The females plait their hair in various styles to invite their male lovers and send various types of messages to observers. They rub their bodies with *osun* (camwood ointment); paint their nails with crushed *laali* leaves; adorn their eyelids with *tiroo* (galena), among other make-up, to remain always attractive.

Verbal expressions of sexuality come, as a rule, in euphemisms. The names of the sexual organs are not mentioned directly. For instance, the female organ is referred to as *oju ara obinrin* (lit. 'the eye of a woman's body') while the male organ is called *nnkan omokunrin* (lit. 'a man's thing'). Occasionally, of course, such as in certain festival chants and songs and in proverbs or aphorisms what is called obscene language is employed for literary/aesthetic effects.

Sexual intercourse and the methods of doing it is not discussed openly with children but it is taught to them cautiously at the appropriate time, in closed groups. Married couples also discuss and express it purposefully for procreation, mainly. Anxiety is not encouraged at all in this regard. That is why a bridegroom is usually politely kept out of the house while his newly wed bride is being brought in. He would be brought in to meet his wife after the ritual washing of her feet has been done.

Illicit sexual intercourse is not encouraged at all by the Yoruba culture. The pleasure in it is, like in eating, insatiable. Hence the aphorism *Enu ko mo mo-je-ri* (The mouth does not know 'I-have-eaten-once'). Therefore moderation, sexual discipline (continence) is the rule for a cultured Yoruba person.

Magun (lit. 'Don't climb'), the magical charm that the Yoruba use to control sexual incontinence, is no longer common. It was used to curb promiscuity in the olden days in Yoruba land. The implicit loss which over-indulgence in sexual intercourse may bring to a person is expressly taught by the wise elders who say:

Ikun n jogede;

Ikun n redii finkin;

Ikun k mo pe hun to dun lo n pani !

(The Big Squirrel is eating bananas (bait on a trap);

The Big Squirrel is savouring the sweetness;

The Big Squirrel doesn't know that it is the sweet thing that kills the eater !)

and,

Mo do o mo feree pa a

Ara lo n fabo si

(‘I screwed her almost to the point of killing her’

It is the body of the screwer that’ll eventually suffer).

CONCLUSION

Sexuality is central to Yoruba life. Both in the olden days and in modern times, the Yoruba culture emphasizes the necessity of experiencing and expressing this aspect of human nature legitimately. Illegitimate sexual relations are not condoned; but they occur as exceptions to the rule of sexual continence. Out of the trio of

(i) Customary marriage (ii) Christian marriage, and (iii) Muslim marriage, Christian marriage is the one that is most fragile and unstable; placing before the offspring of most couples a lot of difficult social problems, both while their parents are still alive and long after they might have passed on.

Although the prevalent form of human dwelling place in Yoruba land known as the compound, *agbo-ile* (lit. ‘a flock of houses’) is fast giving way to flats and duplexes or single family bungalow-houses, the gregarious nature of the people can still be maintained. This can be achieved if and only if the values attached to sexual continence and realistic complementary husband-wife relations are resuscitated nowadays.

EPILOGUE

Ralph M. Lewis, a sage of blessed memory once said, “The fundamental purpose of morality is to give dominance to those qualities of man which transcend his animal nature”. This is the focus of the Yoruba culture’s emphasis on morality, which includes sexual continence.

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