

HUMAN SEXUALITY IN AFRICAN THOUGHT AND THE HIV/ AIDS SCOURGE

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Abstract

One major problem confronting mankind in contemporary time is the HIV/AIDS scourge, which is largely attributable to sexual contact. Given this reality, researches of various kinds have been carried out on the subject matter while several measures have been put in place towards minimizing the rate at which the pandemic is transmitted. This paper discusses human sexuality in African thought with attention paid to the benefits accruing from African sexual ethics and dangers inherent in some cultural practices in respect of HIV/AIDS. It is recommended that the aspects of African culture, which emphasize the sacrality of sex should be imbibed while those practices that may aggravate the spread should be discarded. This is expected to reduce the rate of the spread of the virus that causes AIDS in Africa, where the spread is rife and which is our focus in this work.

(Key Words: HIV, AIDS)

INTRODUCTION

The issue of sexuality cannot be ignored in any culture given its unique role in human existence especially in the matter of procreation. This is not to say that sexuality is all about procreation. Its sensitivity and sacrality are as a matter of fact undeniable. For this reason, all forms of sexual immorality and perversion are detested in moral context; hence the term 'sexual ethics'. It is ironic that unethical sexual practices have continued to defy solutions in spite of several efforts made towards ensuring sanity, a consequence of which is the HIV/AIDS pandemic, which is largely a product of sexual relation. In the words of Mbiti:

In African societies sex is not for biological purposes alone. It has—also religious and social uses. For procreation and

pleasure sex plays an important and obvious role in any normal marriage and in any society of the world. There are African peoples among whom rituals are solemnly opened or concluded with actual or symbolic sexual intercourse between husband and wife or other officiating persons (Mbiti, 1976: 146).

In Africa, there are laid down rules guiding sexual behaviour, which are both universal and relative in view of cultural diversity. However, a strong inference can be drawn that sexuality is an ethical issue in traditional Africa. For instance, adultery, rape and prostitution are strongly detested. Thus abiding by the rules is a fundamental factor in reducing the rate at which HIV/AIDS is spread. On the other hand, some cultural practices regarding sexuality such as polygamy and wife inheritance are possible ways of spreading the virus that causes AIDS. That is why we see sexual ethics/practices as being challenged by the reality of HIV/AIDS. Therefore, in this paper we shall discuss African ethics and practices in relation to the scourge. Previous studies on the subject matter are largely characterised by one sided argument. Such works have either emphasised the sacredness of sexuality or condemned African cultural practices. In order to avoid this, we shall focus on a synthesis of these divides by establishing the positive and negative influence of African rules guiding sexuality on the control of HIV/AIDS.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The issues of sexuality and HIV/AIDS scourge have been variously discussed by scholars. For example, Kayode gives a synopsis of African ethics on sex with emphasis on the rules guiding the sexual conduct of married people, nursing mothers widows and cultic functionaries. According to him, sex is beneficial as it restores union and strengthens relationship on the other hand, sexual starvation is a risky venture (Kayode, 1986: 51-59). Adherence to the foregoing rules will ensure sexual discipline, which is a major way of controlling the spread of HIV/AIDS. Farley (2006: 17-47;207-231) opines that sexual ethics are problematic because it is not easy to determine what people actually believed and did in the distant past in the matter of sexuality coupled with the fact that sexual ethical theory has been predominantly formulated by men while women's experiences are largely unrecorded. It is believed that there is connection between sexuality and justice. Therefore there is a need for norms such as not doing unjust harm, free consent, mutuality of participation and equality of commitment on the part of partners. Also discussed are same -sex relationship, divorce, negative aspect of sex, remarriage and the context for just love, which are marriage and family. This work is no doubt a compendium of global sexual ethics as it focuses on the classical Greece and Rome, Judaism and Christianity, African culture and Islamic ethics on sexuality. Lanre-Abass believes that Islamic marriage practices have implications for the transmission of HIV virus as polygamy is an acceptable form of marriage in Islam. This assertion is premised on the fact that this form of marriage involves multiple sexual partners. Thus it is to be expected that sexual infidelity will be rife among men

and women thereby leading to heterosexual transmission of HIV/AIDS more than other forms of infection (Lanre –Abass, 2006: 146-152). Her recommendations regarding the proper conduct and adherence to Qur’anic injunctions are apposite and beneficial to humanity. All the aforementioned works have treated sexuality from different perspectives. Our present attempt will significantly contribute to scholarship in the area of pointing out the positive and negative effects of African sexual practices in respect of HIV/AIDS scourge.

AFRICAN SEXUAL ETHICS: A SURVEY

Africa is a continent with many different peoples, each with its own cultural histories, kinship structure, ritual and moral codes. This has made generalisation a difficult task in this discourse. However it is pertinent to remark that certain issues in sexuality are as a matter of reality supra-cultural. According to Kayode, in traditional Africa:

It is certainly not easy to talk about sex. This is probably because it is not customary to do so. Most African parents never talk about sex relation to their children. As far as they are concerned this is a realm considered completely a taboo (Kayode, 1986: 51).

The foregoing quotation lends credence to the earlier claim that sex is a matter of sacrality. In most African societies, it is stressed that sexual relation should be decently conducted with the rightful person (husband and wife/wives) and at the rightful place. Ansah is affirmative that:

Sex taboo forms a code of sexual conduct that any deviation from it is deeply detested. The code stipulates time or manner of having sex and also the person with whom one may or may not enter into sexual relationship (Ansah, 1989: 249).

What can be gathered from the above is the fact that sex should be an affair of married people. In other words, it is their exclusive prerogative. It follows that the question of pre-marital sex does not in anyway arise. Therefore an unmarried individual who becomes sexually active is understood as going beyond his limit into an area that only married people may enter (Ansah, 1989: 250). Among the Yoruba of South-western Nigeria for example, virginity is (was) the glory of a young woman. Thus the maiden who loses it prior to marriage loses her pride and glory and is a shame to her family (Idowu, 1982:157). In the past the practice was that a husband who found his wife chaste at marriage would go to the bride’s family early in the morning following the consummation of the marriage with a white piece of cloth stained with blood, which was a proof that their daughter retained her glory until marriage bed. But if the woman had lost her virginity, a symbolic message of a piece of yam cut into two or half-full keg of palm wine or water to show that she was not found full at marriage (Abogunrin, 1989:278). It was equally customary for some members of the two families to stay outside the married couple’s

room and strain their ears to catch the exclamation of the pain coming from the new wife during what was supposed to be her first sexual experience (Fadipe, 1970:25). The shame that used to go with loss of virginity was better imagined than experienced. Consequently, unmarried people (maidens) who wanted to avoid it had no choice but to abide by the rule that forbade pre-marital sex. That this practiced is no longer observed today is a fact (Dopamu and Alana, 2004:160). However, this development is not our focus in this work.

Among married people, faithfulness is a cherished virtue. In other words, sexual immorality is detested. Thus, the wife is expected to be faithful to her husband (Akintola, 1999:182) while the man with several legitimate wives has the backing of the custom to have sex with all of them. Harlotry is forbidden while an adulterous woman is regarded as a murderer. Among the Ewe of Ghana, it is a taboo for a husband to have sexual relation with another woman on the same bed that he shares with his wife. The same rule applies to the wife. This is to make for intimate bedroom relationship in order to enrich the ties between husband and wife (Ansah, 1989:254). Where sex is performed also concerns some African people given its sacredness. Therefore having sex in the bush, on the farm or on the bare floor is a taboo. In Yorubaland for example, it is believed that if this rule is violated, and a snake crawls over the place, the woman will become barren while the man will be impotent. No matter how unscientific this may sound, the dignity associated with sexuality is being protected.

On the issue of time for sexual intercourse, traditionally the day is set aside for work; hence, sex is to be carried out at night. Ayantayo (2002:56) opines that since sex is a secret and private affair, it should be done privately so that children are not exposed to sexual matter at a wrong time (Ayantayo, 2002:56). For this reason sex is supposed to be a nocturnal activity. An unconfirmed consequence of having sexing the day time is that if it results to pregnancy, the woman will give birth to an Albino, practices such as rape, homosexuality manifesting in gayism and lesbianism, and having sex with animals are not only taboos in Yorubaland and many African societies, they are regarded as mental illness (Abogunrin, 1989:280).

Violation of sexual rules used to attract severe sanctions and punishment. Corroborating this Mbiti says that "When adultery is discovered it is severely dealt with: in some societies the guilty person (particularly a man) would be whipped, stoned to death, made to pay compensation or have his head or part of his body mutilated (Mbiti, 1976:147)." In Yorubaland, those who committed incest were severely punished; they would first of all be stripped naked, palm fronds would be tied round their waists and each of them would hold a foreleg of *Obuko* he-goat. As they danced to the drum beaten for them, somebody will be flogging them. This was not merely a punishment but a ritual to appease the gods. The shame that used to go with it was a strong deterrent to likely offenders (Familusi, 1998:68-69). Also among the Mende:

It is forbidden for a man to have sexual intercourse with his wife's sister or any of her relations. It is believed that any person that violates the law of incest will be punished with sickness. Usually, such a person has a sense of guilt after breaking the law, and he must immediately confess to the

priest who is the only person that can prevent or cure the sickness that may follow the breaking of the law. The sin is not only the concern of the guilty parties, but also of the members of their family in the neighbourhood, and the offenders are ritually washed publicly and beaten by the officiating priest (Awolalu and Dopamu, 1979:216).

These traditional forms of sanction have been overtaken by event; and they are similar to the Old Testament as well as Sharia penalty for sexual immorality. No matter how harsh they might appear to be, the fact can not be denied that their use contributed in no small way to sexual discipline in the past.

Abstinence when necessary is another factor in sexual behaviour among Africans. This means that for one reason or the other some people may/must not engage in sex. Traditional priests and priestesses are refrain from sexual relations when performing ritual roles in order to ensure their efficacy. On the other hand, women are regarded as unclean during menstruation, thus having sex with them is considered an abominable act. Widows on their part must abstain from sex for a specific period of time, which varies from one community to another while widowers may have sexual relations at no regulated time because they may have more than one wife, or they may decide to remarry after a while.

The points we have discussed so far to a great extent confirm the sacredness of human sexuality in traditional African societies. They all appear to be universal contrary to differences in the tradition, which can only be explained in terms of ethical relativism. To people from different cultural background, such customs are a threat to the universality of sacredness of sex. For example, among the Baro of New Guinea, a groom is not permitted to approach his young wife until she has borne him a child by a special sib-friend of his father (Kayode, 1986: 54). This is buttressed by Farley that:

Gender roles are reinforced through traditional puberty rites, and the traditional religious education that precedes them. Initiation includes an introduction into the secret of sexuality, shaped to accord with the expectation of womanhood. Boys and young men are taught that they both need and have a right to sexual intercourse with girls and women. Sexual experience for most of them likely begins after initiation and marriage (Farley, 2006:81).

It is further held that

...while family arranged marriages have served communities and societies, they have also

sometimes fostered extreme forms of coercion with regard to girls and young women. Child marriage is one of these. In order to assure continuation of the family line when there is only one son, a little boy's father might propose marriage (for his son) to a girl's family. If the proposal is accepted the girl is given to a relative of the boy's family for marital sexual relation until the boy is old enough, at which time she is required to join him (Farley, 2006:85).

POLYGyny AND SEXUALITY

As earlier noted, African culture allows a man to have two or more wives. Several reasons have been advanced for this and that is why it was prevalent in the past. According to Labeodan, polygamy "Raises the social status of the family concerned. It also increases corporate existence. Polygamy is a source of labour and an economic asset. Polygamy is believed to reduce unfaithfulness and prostitution especially on the part of the husband (Labeodan, 2005:27)." This is true to an extent as a man whose wife is nursing a baby may find it difficult to refrain from sex during the period. However, this is not to say that polygamy has completely exterminated marital unfaithfulness. In Joseph William Egyanka's opinion, open marriage is better than secret concubinage (Ayegboyin and Ishola, 1997: 122). Oshitelu claims that:

Traditionally, polygamy had the function of catering to form the sexual needs of men and of minimising the chances of promiscuity and prostitution. More importantly, polygamy helped to satisfy the need and the desire of having large family, while at the same time keeping the fertility rate of women at low level. Polygamy also catered for the childless union and offered a kinder solution than that of divorce when a wife was barren. Polygamy was a form of security and a guarantee of prosperity for a large family, which was necessary for farming activities to provide for basic needs. Most importantly, polygamy helped to stabilise the institution of marriage and the family through multiple alliance with several families. It helped to strengthen the bonds of society and broaden the circles of relatives and associates (Oshitelu, 2007:117).

Supporting one of these points, Kayode says:

African couples traditionally refrain from sexual relation particularly when the woman is nursing a child. It is believed that suckling child may suddenly loose weight... if the mother does not refrain from sexual intercourse. For this reason, men could have

more than one wife in order to prevent temptation (Kayode, 1986:56).

This practice affords men the opportunity of having sexual affairs with many women though such affairs is not devoid of legality since they are married to those women. There is no denying the fact that this may implicitly lead to extra marital sexual relations as some men may not be satisfied no matter how many wives they have, hence the rule of chastity is loose on the part of men as women are expected to be calm when their husbands are found to have been involved in extra-marital affairs. Ebenezer Obey, a Yoruba musician says that

Okunrin le ni aya mefa

Ko buru

Okunrin kan soso

Ni Oluwa yan fobinrin

A man can have six times

It is not bad

But to one man only

God appointed a woman to marry (Dopamu, and Alana, 2004:162).

Extramarital affair is known as concubinage. Interestingly enough, it is not peculiar to African Society. Solomon, a king of Israel is said to have three hundred concubines besides seven hundred wives (1 Kings 11:3). There is no law in Africa forbidding men even where women too can engage in it, they are expected to be discrete (Farley, 2006:81). It is often said among the Yoruba that “*Akii moko omo tan katun male omo*”, which is translated as it is not proper to know one daughter’s husband her concubine, nothing is however said about the son. The jealous nature of men in respect of sexuality led to the use of *Magun* – ‘don’t mount’ a Yoruba traditional magic against sexual promiscuity to prevent, expose or punish a promiscuous woman, her lover or both. This is of various types. Ogunsakin - Fabarebo identifies twenty three types of magun, some are destructive while others are preventive; but the main reason for making use of it is to guard against sexual immorality (Ogunsakin-Fabarebo, 1998:9-20). This method of curbing sexual immorality needs to be viewed with objectivity as it may not completely be beneficial. The reason is that the man who places on his wife may equally be involved in extra marital affairs. It follows that if his wife is prevented by the use of *magun* and the husband continues to have affairs with other women, the spread of the virus cannot in any way be prevented. It is equally a risky venture as the concubine of a man’s wife may place on him. Thus the legitimate husband could become a victim. On a more sensitive note, the fact that this mechanism is an exclusive preserve of men further confirms African culture of male superiority, which is an issue for feminists. The question is how do women prevent their husbands from being involved in extra-marital affairs? Looking into this is a matter of expediency because one expects that

ensuring marital faithfulness on the part of spouses should be mutually exclusive. The point that is being made is that while efforts could be made to ensure sanity in matter of sex, the objective may not be achieved if all parties involved fail in their responsibility regarding this. A moral burden arising from the foregoing is the fact that an innocent person may face the consequence of another fellow's immoral and act. Also the use of *magun* in a way assumes a privilege for males in the sense that while the female is sanctioned for adultery, the same act is construed as proving the valour of the male (Olademo, 2009:104-105).

To conclude our discussion on African ethics on sex, it needs to be mentioned that cultural practices regarding sexuality abound. For instance, wife sharing, that is, the giving of one's wife to a guest is a form of hospitality where this is a norm and in some communities in Africa, when a young man dies his wife's sexuality still belongs to his family (Farley, 2006:86). Hence, she could be made to undergo ritual cleansing, which involves having sex with a man designated or self-identified for this purpose, after which she is obliged to abide by the custom of wife inheritance or levirate marriage thereby continuing her conjugal relationship with her husband (Farley, 2006:86). Also in some African cultures, an old man is fully entitled to find a young woman to make his blood move again and in other cultures, a post menopause elderly woman graciously seeks a young woman for her husband.

AFRICAN SEXUAL ETHICS AND THE HIV/AIDS SCOURGE

This section discusses both the positive and negative implication of African sexual ethics for the prevalence of HIV/AIDS. The menace of HIV/AIDS is one of the most researched social issues in recent time. Thus, it has been viewed from different perspectives by scholars and what seems to be their consensus opinion is the incurability of the disease at least for now. However with the availability of effective drugs HIV infection is no longer viewed as a fatal disease (death sentence) but a manageable chronic illness (University of Ibadan, 2008:1-2). It is generally believed that one can be infected through unprotected sex with an infected person, injection or contaminated blood, from an infected mother to her child during pregnancy, birth or breast feeding and less commonly, through artificial insemination, skin graft and organ transplant. It has not been established that it is transmitted through mosquito and other insects bite, sweat, tears, urine or every day casual contact ((University of Ibadan, 2008:1-2). HIV/AIDS is a global reality; the rate at which people are affected is alarming and the effects are not negligible. For instance the prevalence rate in Nigeria is put at 5.6 percent while about 6.1 million people are living with HIV/AIDS (<http://www.nigeriahivinfo.com>, 2011). How can African sexual ethics help in stemming the tide of this problem and what are the possible ways of its aggravating the spread?

As established in the preceding section, sexual immorality is detested in African society. It follows that African sexual ethics is a veritable tool for the control of the spread of the virus if all the do's and don'ts are religiously observed. But this can only work when the infection is through sex. This point is germane because there are other ways of getting infected. Therefore,

the law that forbids pre-marital and extra-marital relationship is beneficial. However, the one-sidedness of the law of fidelity in marriage is a stumbling block towards achieving this objective. The fact that there are many unmarried people who are HIV positive (largely through sex) suggests a non-compliance with the rule that makes pre-marital sex a forbidden practice in many African societies.

The use of *magun* to curb sexual promiscuity is another way of controlling the spread. This depends on the type. In this respect, *magun akiriboto*, which is used in sealing the private part of a woman and *magun teso*, which makes a woman untouchable to other lovers except her husband will in no small way ensure abstinence from pre-marital and prevent extra-marital sex respectively, which main sources of infection through sex. On the other hand, several other forms of *magun* may not prevent the spread in that as long as sexual intercourse takes place getting infected cannot be completely ruled out no matter what happens to the victim(s). Those who do not want to become victims of *magun* especially the type that kills will definitely avoid extra marital sexual affairs. This is also a way of preventing the spread. Without any doubt, traditional sexual ethics in Africa is a model for the control of HIV/AIDS; we therefore recommend its application even in the face of civilization.

Our discussion of relativism in respect of sexual ethics reveals some practices, which are imbibed in some cultures and as a matter of fact, they are possible ways of contracting HIV/AIDS. These practices are not to be viewed as sexual immorality; it is a matter of culture, but they could be counter productive. Let us examine some of them in relation to the issue being discussed. Where child marriage is a custom, there is the possibility of people being infected. If the girl is given to a relative of the boy for sexual relation until he is old to do that, the virus may spread because the HIV status of the man may not be ascertained before he is assigned that role. Thus if the young girl gets infected the real husband will ultimately fall victim. Also where it is cultural for young men to have sexual experience before marriage, the possibility of infection is on the high side as such would expose them to having to having multiple sexual partners.

Widow cleansing involving having sexual affair after the death of a husband could be a risky venture as far as HIV/AIDS is concerned. According to Luo custom in Kenya, the ritual must be performed no matter how old the widow is, even when a widow was not cleansed before her death, a mentally deranged man or a stranger would be hired to have sexual intercourse with her in death. The resilience of this practice could be a death sentence for a living widow as it may lead to HIV infection. An experience of a young widow is reported by Reggy Mammo as follows:

When my husband died, I refused to be inherited, in spite of the harassment from my in-laws. But six years after my husband's death, I received a message that my father-in-law was seriously sick and I should go home quickly with the children. When I got there the in-law was waiting for me. They told me that if the old

man died, I would be blamed for the death. Then, they took me into a room and brought a stranger to me, a fisherman. We brought him to cleanse you, they told me. They left me in the room with the man; they stood outside the door. I beg him to use a condom he refused. He came to me with a brute force. Afterwards, I got venereal disease; I vowed never to go back (Ressy-Mamo, 2005:53).

This is one of many victims of cultural practices and HIV/AIDS. What can we say about wife sharing as a form of hospitality? What is the HIV status of the guest who is to be entertained according to the dictate of culture? Obviously, the foregoing practices have lost their relevance to the reality of HIV/AIDS. This work is not an attempt to condemn the culture of any group of people. However, what is risky in any practice needs to be pointed. One of the attributes of culture is dynamism (Edo, 2005:5), hence the need to look into them in the interest of humanity.

Polygyny, which is a norm in traditional Africa has also been identified as an agent of transmitting the virus, (Lanre –Abass, 2006:47). Since it is customary for men to have more than one wife, their having multiple sexual partners is established. It follows that the more they have, the higher the risk of infection. Apart from the fact that having more than one wife does not stop some men from having concubines, women themselves could contribute to the spread. As noted by Labeodan:

In spite of the fact that AIDS is real, most women still get into polygamous marriages. In most cases, these women do not live in the same house with other wives.... And because the husband does not come visiting all the time, there is tendency for the wife to have other sexual partners. Most of the time these women are married to men old enough to be their fathers and as a result, their men cannot meet their sexual needs, they therefore look for younger men who can satisfy their sexual urge. At times in spite of the number of wives the man has, he is not still sexually satisfied, he has what we refer to as concubines, which is known as *Ale* among the Yoruba in Nigeria, *Ruhaya* in Tanzania, *Suria* in Swahili and among some other Kenyan (Labeodan, 2005:29).

The inference that can be drawn from the above quotation is that the transmission of HIV/AIDS is exacerbated by concurrent multiple sexual partners for every one infected. A hypothetical scenario of diffusion in such situation is given as follows:

Mr Tafa is married to Nonye, Binta and Titi who is his latest and is favoured above other wives. Nonye and Binta are both neglected sexually and materially. They have to take care of their kids and their personal needs. Nonye told one of her friends what is happening in her home that since their husband married his latest wife, he has not been paying attention to herself and her junior wife Binta, this friend then advises (sic) her to take a boyfriend. Nonye decided to follow her friends' advice, but unfortunately the boy she picks (sic) is HIV positive. She gets (sic) infected without knowing. Titi took ill and during this period Mr. Tafa came back to his two senior wives, he got infected by Nonye and passed it to Binta and later to Titi who passed it on to the child in her womb (Labeodan, 2005:29).

While we are not oblivious of the traditional justification for Polygyny, the risk of HIV/AIDS should be our concern in contemporary time.

CONCLUSION

This paper has discussed African ethics on sex as it relates to HIV/AIDS, for which a cure is yet to be found. Whereas, sexuality to the issue of procreation among other uses. Therefore, it will be fool hardy to feel unconcerned about the pandemic. To a great extent, African sexual ethics is relevant in controlling the spread of HIV/AIDS. Thus it is recommended that African tradition regarding the sacrality of sex should be revived. In the light of this, pre-marital and extra-marital sexual affairs should be discouraged. Concerning pre-marital sex, the recently introduced ATM (Abstinence Till Marriage) hypothesis is in the interest of all and sundry. Unfortunately, in some quarters, this is a virtue of the past. Factors such as indecent dressing, pornography, peer influence, (supposed products of civilization) that have contributed to the prevalence of sexual immorality should be addressed. In other words, there is a need for moral regeneration on the part of every body. Interestingly enough, many Africans have embraced Christianity and Islam, which in no way encourage sexual immorality; the teaching of these religions in respect of sexual purity needs to be intensified.

If culture is a way of life, it must not be destructive. The various cultural practices on sex that are possible ways of spreading or contracting HIV/AIDS should be revisited. When necessary the risky aspects should be discarded. Intimating traditional people with the risk that such practices involve is imperative so that distinction will be made between the aspects of culture that are beneficial and harmful. It is expected that the rate at which people get infected will reduce

considerably if African sexual ethics is discussed, understood and imbibed with objectivity and reality.

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