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

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In this exploratory essay, Ifi Amadiume, takes a critical look at the normative ("prescribed sexual practices") as well as counter normative alternatives ("subversive alternatives") to sexuality both in Africa and in other cultures as they relate to gender concepts and practices that address the problem of inequality and state patriarchy. One of the issues the essay tackles is the politics of control or ownership of access to women's bodies – with particular focus on the power of the midwife, the husband and father over female sexuality. "At all times and in all cultures there has been a lot of meddling with and fighting over women's sexual and reproductive organs", the author notes. The essay calls for an open discussion of these issues to encourage possibilities for resistance and change that is individual and systemic. "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", the author asserts.

Introduction

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 post-colonial African modernity. A perspective that encourages discourse on responsible sexuality without guilt, fear or ill-health is a welcome and courageous departure from stasis and regression that typify rigid orthodoxies or suffocating normativity.

Most discourse or advocacy work on the subject of sexuality in Africa has been centered more on prescribed sexual practices, either descriptive or critical, and not on subversive alternatives to encourage and open up possibilities for resistance and change that is individual and systemic. All cultures and religions regulate sex, yet permit some sexual freedom that can even be counter-normative; some more so than others. By 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 paleontologists, modern woman evolved beyond the biological sexual vulnerability marked by the visible red vulva and scent of her immediate cousin - the chimpanzee female - that cannot say no to chimp 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 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 to 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 atomization 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 to Access

Ownership to access is consequently a major problem that radicalizes 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 give rise to the power of the midwife or senior women that can be seen as women's response to these fears; hence the development of organized women's rituals to take control and protect women. Women have been culture inventors and ritual initiators since the beginning of human social history. Women being so organized results in 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 'no access' practice and involves the most radical extensive cutting; and 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 explains the puzzle over the seemingly 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 honor and infidelity, or a father's punitive measure to correct shame or ensure honor. 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 as 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 an 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 that support 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. This is the most radical and almost truthful claim in a symbolic sense because it directly rejects the idea of 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. However, some traditional African societies such as some ethnic groups in northern Mozambique, Zambia, and southern Tanzania practice what is variously called labia stretching or labia elongation or enlargement in their female puberty and initiation rituals, which is the opposite of cutting. We do not hear much about this practice or the experiences of sex in these African cultures.

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 solely viewed from the reasons stated above or 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 and this is not the whole story of sexuality in Africa.

Sexuality, African Traditions and the Post-Colonial

Discourse on sexuality usually centers 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 assumed superiority of knowledge about sex by urbanites and Western globalites over “uninformed” and “primitive” villagers or “traditionalists”. Practices constituting sexual abuse are the topics we know best as scholars, researchers and activists that are concerned with social justice. In this project, we have written negatively about what as feminists we perceive or read to be indigenous attitudes to sexuality. The truth is that we do not really know much about the actual acts of sexual intercourse practiced, and we have succeeded in trashing all women in Africa as sexually repressed, sexually inferior and sexually mutilated!

With more knowledge and more questioning and if we can also manage some love and respect, I believe that we can discover that we missed the ambiguity of representation in traditional sexuality. We missed a balanced understanding of the contradictions that this ambiguity presented. Customarily, in practically all these traditional African societies girls’ bodies were also heavily decorated by women themselves in their society’s signs and symbols. The point is that this elaborate and colorful decoration and beautifying makes the girls seductively attractive; regardless of normativity, and controlling cautionary statements and beliefs that feminists have focused on to argue women’s sexual inferiority in African traditions. Some might argue that instead of instilling fear of sex in young girls, they should have developed the use of contraceptives. Traditional contraception was practiced by married women and mothers through lactation in some societies and that enabled them to space birth. As we know, the health problems associated with contraceptive use suggest that modernity has not treated women’s bodies any better. Certainly, some use contraceptives by choice, but women are also forced to use contraception for population control. Equal attention should also be paid to the representation and symbolism of girls’ bodies in images and art to glean and understand both subtle and overt woman-centered cultural aesthetics of sexuality.

The late Senegalese novelist, Mariam Ba turns this prejudice on its head through the character of a grassroots woman Ouleymatou who uses traditional “gongo powder” and “suggestive wiggle of an African woman’s rump, wrapped in the warm colors of her pagne” (p.112), to seduce back the university educated and internationally traveled man that she loved and desired away from his equally educated white wife who had no love or respect for his family, friends or culture. In this plot of seduction, “it was Mother Fatim, the figurehead of the compound, who slipped Ouleymatou incense and aphrodisiac powders at night, with a knowing wink” (p.120). African educated elites are mistaken to assume to know more about sexuality than the illiterate masses or traditional villagers, 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 took on board sometimes quite thorough sex education; often using clay objects to demonstrate the act of sexual intercourse.

In the puberty ritual of traditional Ndembu society of Zambia, older women manipulated and widened a girl's sexual organs with fingers and inserted phallic objects in her vagina to teach her about sexual intercourse. In similar rituals, the traditional Masasi of southern Tanzania elongated the labia through massage and taught girls sexual movements to heighten sexual pleasure. The Tiv of Nigeria through scarification made various concentric and horizontal patterns (named sexual desire) on women's stomachs that they considered both cosmetic and also sex enhancing. In the marriage rituals of the Igbo of Nigeria, wives introduced newly weds to sexual intercourse in rites devised for this purpose. The Igbo do not approve of sex before marriage. Traditionally, the Igbo used charms, waist beads and silver or brass anklets to beautify the otherwise naked unmarried maidens. These bright and shining adornments are seductive in their tantalizing jingling and jangling musical sounds, but firmly signify denial of sexual access and even knowledge about sex before marriage. In contrast to the Igbo, in some societies the adolescent youth have knowledge of sexual pleasure without penetrative sex before marriage. This is true of many East and Central African traditional societies such as the Mbuti of Zaire who are very liberal about sex.

Mariama Ba's Ouleymatou's sophisticated seduction skills are obviously learned from her African traditions, not her elementary school French education. In Victorian English culture, women were not expected to experience sexual arousal, and these cultures were enforced on Africans by Christian missionaries and through modern Eurocentric education. These were not originally African practices. In many traditional societies, during initiation or marriage rituals the young women were taught how to physically prepare themselves for intercourse; including the use of rhythmic body movements that were enhanced by sounds and aids such as grass skirts, beads, body decorations, scents and incense, herbs and spices. Waist beads that previously signaled the message "don't touch" become sex aids after marriage. During seasonal rituals, ". . . *beautiful young Fulani girls entice the young men to join them in courtship dances.*" (See http://www.culturesontheedge.com/gallery/archives/ceremonies/photos/seas_content.html. Viewed on March 1, 2006)

In courtship and marriage rituals, while some traditional peoples exhaust themselves and everyone else with violent practices, others prefer peaceful means, and please with beauty and seduction as can be seen in this quote from the website link below, full of beautiful and colorful images of traditional African peoples and their cultural practices: "*The Surma people, who live in a remote corner of southwest Ethiopia, practice one of the most unique courtship rituals in Africa. Every year, hundreds of Surma men come together to perform wild and violent stick fights to win the hearts of prospective wives*". Unlike the Surma, who fight for women, the Wodaabe nomad men of Niger spend hours preening and

painting themselves for an all-male beauty contest. The women act as judges and select their husbands and lovers.

Bridal rituals also vary. Swahili brides receive beauty treatments for several days; their bodies are massaged with coconut oil and their hands and feet are decorated with henna. Wodaabe brides are covered with blankets and hidden in the bush throughout their wedding ceremony. Ndebele brides accentuate the voluptuous girth that their men so admire by wearing immense beaded hoops around their legs and hips”.

http://www.culturesontheedge.com/gallery/archives/ceremonies/photos/court_frames.html

(viewed March 1, 2006)

Some traditional cultures also teach their women how to prepare a fire in the bedroom or in the hearth and how to keep it burning so that it never dies. In the religions of the indigenous Bantu people of the Congo region, central and southern Africa, fire is seen as generative energy and is thus associated with women, sexuality and the creation of culture. In fire-theft mythologies, fire is often stolen by a male or males from an old woman who originally owned it. In the nubility or marriage ritual of traditional societies such as the Bemba of Zambia, the Ila of central Zambia and the Mbuti of Zaire, the last rites involve old women making the marriage fire for the bride or teaching her fire-making. When a marriage ends or if a wife dies, the new wife makes a new fire. In the same way that Igbo women of Nigeria celebrate sexuality through singing sticky mud songs and indulging in charged up fertility dancing during women-only sessions in marriage rituals, Bemba women of Zambia perform the women-only sessions by the ritual lighting of a marriage fire by old women twirling fire sticks on the inside of their thighs, singing scratch, scratch songs.

I am very interested in such rituals and there is a wealth of ethnographic data on this that we can harvest; and I would like to get a feed back on this 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 practicing customs that regulate women's sexuality. Due to this presence of 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 whereby women are cut by male gynecologists has raised a lot of political questions just like the cutting practices of traditional midwives. At all times and in all cultures there has been a lot of 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 woman herself in both body and mind.

In giving voice to women, a lot of progress has been made in recognizing 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 whom we are told chose to practice celibacy or felt called to do so, Muslim men married wives and experienced coital sexual pleasure. The Qur’an and the Hadith of the Prophet Muhammad like 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 destabilizing powers. The acknowledgement of sex provides liberal and progressive African Islamic leaders, clerics and activists a positive 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 post-colonial 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 and accepted 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 speak 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 correcting 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 raising class consciousness alone mitigates sexual abuse, although class envy might prove subversive in raising social consciousness in class struggle. You reject, condemn and criminalize 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 practiced or institutionalized 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 (*Ø* means he or she; *Ø 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 statuses.

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 cases of Hausa Queerness, showing the limitations of dwelling solely on the subject of sexuality without challenging disempowering hierarchical gender and class divides. However, both Igbo and Hausa languages 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; *Enyan*, 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, pose a challenge to orthodox views and approaches to sexuality and sex in all religions, cultures and societies. One of the benefits of African modernity, due to a different kind of housing as opposed to the openness of traditional dwellings, is the ability for the open minded and the adventurous to keep private how far partners go beyond the normative in their sexual enjoyment. Although the evidence is beginning to suggest that traditional African settings were not that inhibited about sexual enjoyment.

The opposite is perhaps true of Western societies where modernity means more freedom in sexual expression. Modernity's sexuality also poses it's

enchantments and seductions everywhere and are 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 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 the ambiguities and 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.

I am organizing a workshop and an edited publication on this topic and welcome useful responses and in-depth ethnographic research papers. Email address: Ifi.Amadiume@Dartmouth.Edu

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Reference

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