



**AFRICA REGIONAL SEXUALITY  
RESOURCE CENTRE**

**2**

Understanding Human Sexuality Seminar Series

# **HUMAN SEXUALITY IN NIGERIA: A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE**

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## **Introduction**

On the 14<sup>th</sup> of July 2004, on the occasion of the celebration of the Fortieth Anniversary of the foundation of the Department of History, University of Lagos, Professor A. I. Asiwaju, a renowned historian called upon historians of Africa in general and Nigeria in particular, to get interested in all aspects of human existence. In the same meeting, a distinguished historian Professor Ade-Ajayi decried the lack of a sense of history in the Nigerian society.

*Perhaps, one reason why there is so much violence, aggression and instability in our day to day life is that we have so little consciousness of time perspective. We act as if there is only today, no yesterday, no tomorrow. We seem to care so little about the past. We have no enduring heroes and we respect no precedents. Not surprisingly, we hardly ever consider what kind of a future we are building for our children and our children's children (Ade-Ajayi, 2004: 2).*

Another eminent historian, Professor Jide Osuntokun summarised it succinctly: “history is everything”. In the light of these, I want to congratulate the Africa Regional Sexuality Resource Centre for remembering to start its seminar series on “Creating a Better Understanding of Human Sexuality in Nigeria” with a historical discourse, for as the Ibibio say, *ekpefre ntak, ntak atogho* – if the root is forgotten the root becomes angry.

Nevertheless, history has a way of marginalizing certain aspects of human existence. The history of everyday life outside political and economic manoeuvres is still to an extent outside the realm of history. But everyday life and its mundane content is what shapes the lives and indeed the history of a people. Sexuality is a part of everyday life. It defines the very essence of one's humanity including one's self-image, and his/her definition of being female or male, physical looks and reproductive capacity. Sexuality therefore is a fundamental aspect of human existence.

## **What therefore is sexuality?**

The African Regional Sexuality Resource Centre has adopted an omni-bus explanation of the term sexuality proposed by the World Health Organization. According to this definition:

*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 (ARSRC, 2003: 17).*

I will say simply borrowing from Jeffrey Weeks that sexuality is the cultural way of living out our bodily pleasures (Weeks, 2003). It is the manner we decide to or are conditioned to enjoy or deny our sexual desires. Sexuality has a lot to do with sex but is more than that as there are other processes and activities surrounding it. Although this should be a private matter, it has always remained at the centre of societal organisation. It contributes to human definition of the self and their relationships to others. Because sexuality is so encompassing, it has through the centuries influenced the family, the community and even the nation. Sexuality plays an important role in population politics of families and nations. Economic policies have been fashioned to suit sexuality and its consequences. Religious laws and a whole range of taboos have been webbed around the subject of sexuality. Thus, sexuality has throughout history been subject to manipulation and control by individuals and societies.

Sexuality and gender are intricately related so that it might be difficult to speak of one without the other. The term gender is normally used to describe the social condition of being female or male and sexuality is an important outcome of this dualism. It is in the interplay of this dualism in human existence that sexuality is traditionally conceived, expressed, experienced or repressed. Nevertheless, wherever there is a norm, there is always an alternative expression, which could be referred to as a misnomer. Therefore, in sexuality, though there could be culturally accepted expressions, there is always a form of resistance to what is culturally acceptable resulting in situations where draconian taboos and laws are used to repress such developments. But throughout history, sexuality has been

in a state of flux always responding to prevailing economic, political, social and health conditions. Thus, even in the Nigerian traditional society, sexuality has been in a state of change as a consequence of other developments in the society.

### **History of Sexuality**

The sociologist Kenneth Plummer rightly observed that, researching into the subject “sex” makes the researcher morally suspect (Plummer, 1975: 4). This desire to remain morally clean, has made sexuality in Nigeria a taboo subject not to be touched by respectable academics unless of course it has to do with the spread of diseases when it is discussed as a public health issue. Thus, Nigerian historians have conveniently marginalised sexuality to the realms of historical silence. This paper is therefore an attempt to bring sexuality into historical discourse in Nigeria.

Existing discussions on sexuality in Nigeria are centred around respectable themes such as marriage, which is the accepted and respected space of expression of sexuality. Apart from this, human sexuality in Nigeria is problematized in relation to demography, unemployment, urban decadence, prostitution and the spread of sexually transmitted diseases. Yet sexuality has more to it than reproduction, immorality and disease. The present paper will try to examine sexuality in all its ramifications. While examining the accepted norms of expression of sexuality it will survey the alternative even though culturally unacceptable expressions, which must have existed in the society.

For the historian trying to see sexuality in time perspective, there is a problem as written records are lacking. People also seem reluctant to discuss sexuality as if they do not want to give up something very dear to them. This has made me to think like Sigmund Freud that there might be some culturally unacceptable sexual expressions and experiences which people might have experienced but which they do not want to bring to the limelight. Therefore, the historian has to search

for new documents, interrogate old records, reinterpret existing works, and engage in oral tradition and the collection of personal and eyewitness accounts in order to put the sexuality in historical discourse.

One of those who helped to bring sexuality into historical discourse in Euro-American societies was Michel Foucault, who in his trilogy on *The History of Sexuality* conceptualised different aspects of sexuality in European societies (Foucault, 1988, 1990, 1990). According to him,

*Sexuality must not be thought of as a kind of natural given which power tries to hold in check, or as obscure domain which knowledge tries gradually to uncover, it is the name that can given to historical construct (Foucault 1990:105).*

With this, Foucault released sexuality from biology and opened a whole new field to critical analysis and assessment. Foucault's connection of sexuality to power also widens the scope of historical inquiry and construct. To him, power relations are formed in all relations where differences exist and where people relate to one another. In his analysis of power, Foucault shows that at different levels of power relations, there are dominating agents but power is not limited to any agent. To him power is ever-present and cannot be thought of as creating a division between those dominating and those being dominated. There is a fluidity between the dominating and dominated. But whenever there is domination there is opposition and resistance. The history of sexuality therefore, is the product of various forms of dealings, communications, influences and social interventions to control or enhance sex. Sexuality then is as well a product of history as an integral part of the historical process.

A historical approach to sexuality would stress the impact of social, political and religious practices and discourses which impacted on sexuality through the setting of sexual parameters, enhancement or limitation of sexual relationships and pleasures and the development of resistance to orthodox culturally acceptable sexual behaviours.

### **Orthodoxy in Sexuality**

Different societies in Nigeria had in the pre-colonial past developed ideas about sexuality which were culturally accepted as appropriate or inappropriate, moral or immoral, abominable or not abominable, healthy or unhealthy.

In most pre-colonial societies, sexuality was consigned to the realms of marriage. It was only under marital condition that sexuality was to be experienced. Outside this, it was culturally taboo to discuss sex and sexual matters. Sexuality was full of silence and discretions, for instance, between parents and children. Sexual discussions were clothed in languages, which were not explicit to the uninitiated.

To be appealing to the other sex (so as to be marriageable) a young man had to show that he had all the characteristics associated with a man. These included industriousness, bravery, good health, agility, honesty and good heritage (free born). It was expected of the young woman to be industrious, diligent, a good cook, of good behaviour, possess a rounded figure to indicate ability to bear children, be of good heritage. Though these were exceptional high standards required, it was not always met. They were required so as to exclude some unwanted people from the marital field so as not to spread their culturally unacceptable traits in the community. In spite of this, at all times men and women of lower qualities were able to marry. The constant change in the socio-political and economic conditions of pre-colonial and post-colonial Nigeria dictated in reality a more flexible approach to marriage which did not always meet the culturally prescribed norm. Thus freeborn could marry slaves and the less agile and industrious men could still find wives.

Having located a possible partner, a range of negotiations was entered into between the families of those involved. This could involve seasons of farm work, palm fruit harvesting for the proposed father-in-law till the final payment of dowry which now ended the acquisition process. With that, the man and his wife had rights to experience sexuality in a culturally sanctioned manner. Any deviation

from the norm of practice could incur the wrath of the gods and that of the society. The wife was supposed to be pregnant in the shortest possible time to prove the reproductive abilities of the married couple to the society at large. Thus though sexuality was supposed to be experienced privately by the married couple, it was constantly open to public gaze and control.

In the cultures of most Nigerian peoples, men could marry as many wives as they could afford. By this means, men hoped to increase the members of their households for economic and security purposes. The marriage of multiple wives also helped to satisfy the sexual needs of the men concerned in a culturally accepted manner. History has not yet uncovered what happened to the unsatisfied sexual desires of some of the wives and of effect of this on their mental health. A lot of helping out by the more agile older sons and relations must have taken place.

An aspect of marriage in Nigerian history worthy of mention was the disparity between the ages of brides and their grooms. Since it took a young man a long time to go through his apprenticeship to prove that he had what was required to get married, it was not possible for them to be married to their female age mates. This inequality in ages greatly defined the power relationship between married people which sometimes put the wife at a disadvantage in the power relations. In essence, she was not only to relate to her husband as a husband but also as her senior. Indeed, this practice is still prevalent in many parts of Nigeria especially in the North where under-aged girls are married off sometimes to men of their grandfather's age. The research revealed that such old men who could hardly perform sexually sometimes recruited their older sons to do the conjugal job on their behalf, claiming the children as their own. Some women also found partners to fulfil their sexual desires meaning that adultery was engendered by such marital conditions.

Indeed, this propensity of older men to acquire young wives led to wife scarcity in many pre-colonial societies that foetal marriages became rampant. This was found in Ibibioland (in south-south) Nigeria where a man could get engaged to a yet unborn child (Abaronye, 1997). If the baby happened to be a girl, then she would be regarded as married but would be nurtured by her parents till she reached the handing over age. This same practice was seen among the Esan (Okojie, 1994: 140) and among the Uneme (Harunah, 2004: 97).

Virginity was valued and there were various reward systems to honour a bride found to be a virgin. Some cultures such as the Edo culture required the newly married wife to confess any pre-marital relationship at the husband's ancestral shrine. In Etsako, older women stripped the young wife naked and checked the condition of the hymen to make sure that it was intact. Such confessions of pre-marital relationships were also required in some parts of Igboland where the bride was required to make confessions before the senior daughters of the village. It was a public shame if found guilty and required extraction of compensation from the man involved and a propitiatory rite. That virginity was so valued underscores the fact that the society recognised the prevalence of pre-marital sex whether by consent or by coercion. There was no requirement for the confession of pre-marital sexual experience by the man and research shows that most men had such experiences before marriage.

In the twentieth century, there was a progressive departure from the importance of virginity. Due to various influences such as older age at marriage, liberalisation of traditional society occasioned by colonial rule and western education, urbanisation and media influences and the fact that more and more young girls toyed with and lost their virginity before marriage. The trend is still on the increase although religious organisations and some NGOs are doing a lot to encourage young girls to keep their virginity for marriage or they would face hell-fire, disease or unwanted pregnancy. Thus, now, public shaming is no more a deterrent but hell fire and disease.

### **Alternative marriage practices**

Since marriage was the culturally accepted arena for expression and the experiencing of sexuality, there developed different methods of acquiring a spouse different from the ideal. Bride-capture was practiced in many Nigerian communities such as Akoko Edo, Igboland and Ibibioland. Sometimes parents of the bride were a party to this. If parents accepted a marriage proposition and collected gifts but were able to convince their daughter to consent to the marriage, then capture was arranged. Also bride capture took place where the economic condition or the excessive demands of the parents did not permit a young man to marry. In some cases, if a girl and a young man fell in love without the consent of their parents, a capture was arranged. It could also happen if the parents of the girl refused the proposition outright such as was the case in Umeme in Etsako when young men from Uzairue abducted beautiful girls from Umeme as brides (Shokpeka, 2004: 4). The moment a girl spent a night in the hands of her captor, then the parents were bound to negotiate a marriage because it was believed that she had been defiled and might be unable to find another husband. But sometimes such abductions could lead to serious consequences such as war or economic boycott of areas from which the abductors came.

Marriage between two women was prevalent in Ibibioland, Igbo land, Ishan, Edo, Urhorobo and Yorubaland but not in the present sense of lesbian marriages (Ajikobi, 2000:84; Amadiume, 1986). A married woman who had no children of her own could marry a younger woman and put her at the pleasurable disposal of her husband to produce children for the female husband. Also in families where the father died without a son, a daughter of the family could marry a wife to produce children to carry on the family name. From the nineteenth century there were rich single women who made their money through trade and sundry endeavours. These women married women who produced children for them so as to inherit their property (Harunah, 2004: 98). The wives served them

contributing to the expansion of their businesses and the children kept them company giving a sense of family.

The female husband could appoint a man of her choice as a consort to the wife who had to sleep with him whether she liked it or not. Some form of resistance to the choice of mates took place sometimes as some women ran away and abandoned the marriage. Alternatively the wife of the female husband could look for a man of her choice. However, in recent times, there have been problems concerning these women-to-women marriages. Sometimes, the biological fathers of the children want to claim them especially at the death of the female husband. At other times, the consort claims the woman and her children as his. This has resulted in much litigation in recent times.

In other instances, in some parts of Ibibio and Igboland a family without a son could retain a daughter to produce children for the family (Amadiume, 1986). Such a daughter was called in Ibibioland *ado-ette* (the one who marries the father). Nevertheless, there was no sexual relationship with the father. She decided who to have liaisons with, with the ultimate purpose of producing children, preferably sons. The traditional marriage between women is now a rarity because modern Nigerian law does not recognise marriage between women and appealing to this law, it is easy to override the customary law on the issue of the ownership of the children.

Sexuality as we have seen above had the ultimate aim of reproduction. Families used different sorts of marriages to enhance their numbers. Indeed, there is evidence that certain families encouraged marriages to certain types of women to produce an ideal type of children as defined by them. Tall, well endowed and agile women are preferred by some families while some prefer fair complexioned women. In Ibibio and Igboland, demographic depletion during the era of the slave trade encouraged multiple marriages and increase in the number of children per woman. This culture contributed to the high population of these areas in the

twentieth century (Northrup, 1978: 13). In this way sexuality was used to acquire manpower for economic, military, political and social bargains.

With the rise of the Nigerian nation, and the growth of the minority-majority politics, sexuality has been called to play a part in balancing the population. Indeed, a renowned professor of philosophy, Professor C. S. Momoh has constantly called on women from minority groups to have more children in order for their ethnic groups to compete more effectively in the politics of numbers carried out in the Nigerian federation (Momoh, 1991: 221).

On the other hand, the sexuality of Nigerians has been called to question as they are seen as contributing the overpopulation of the world. Indeed they have been called to question by Euro-Americans who claim being drowned by non-white populations of the world. This has led to a campaign for population control, a campaign, which some Nigerians took up with a lot of zealously without understanding its background. Thus, poverty, unemployment and all sorts of social problems were/are blamed on population, a result of untamed sexuality. Traditional sexuality, which provided avenues for illicit sex has been seen as the root cause of the rampant spread of HIV/AIDS in Nigeria.

### **Sex Appeal**

To look beautiful and appealing to the husband women made themselves or were made beautiful. First of all, in most communities, women with a certain degree of fullness of the body were considered beautiful and healthy. On coming to age and getting ready for marriage, girls in Ibibioland went through a process of fattening (Dioka, 1997: 87, 90-91). During this period the fattened received different exercises including the flexing of hip muscles, massage and cosmetic treatments to make her body luscious and more appealing. The exercises had a lot to do with the movements of the body especially the hips to make them flexible and agile for the sexual act which was seen as an important aspect of marriage. They were taught different moves and responses which enhance

sexual pleasure. They were taught to walk and talk in a more sensual manner. They were also given tips on how to run successful families (Abaronye: 56).

So, the fattening room was actually an institution in which girls received sexuality education. This practice was prevalent among the Ibibio, Efik and some Igbo groups. Among other groups there were different forms of initiation processes which introduced girls to womanhood. Till this period, young girls were supposed to be innocent and even walked about naked. Indeed the only thing they were generally told was that “any touch by a man would result in pregnancy” and had to be avoided till marriage. Most times, they could not fathom the real meaning of the “touch”.

Men also went through various forms of initiation processes to introduce them to manhood (Babatunde & Setiloane, 2004: 14-16). These consisted of activities to train bravery, hard-work, endurance, honesty and integrity. This was done through a period of apprenticeship in which a young man left home to stay with an uncle or any other man chosen by his parents. There he would learn more discipline and hard-work than was possible in his parent’s house. Manhood tests consisted in some parts of Ibibioland of the adolescent boys going animal hunting in the night. This was a serious test because they were exposed to wild animals and to the spirits. They had to stay in the bush until they were able to bring back an animal. If they brought back a leopard – an animal that threatened lives in Ibibioland in the pre-colonial days, the group was hailed as very brave. This night hunting also instilled team spirit in group because they had to depend on one another for survival.

In the riverine areas, the test of manhood was done by taking part in deep sea fishing which was a dangerous exercise but which men in the riverine areas must master. Men had to be adept in the different economic engagements of their people to show that they were capable of retaining a wife. Young men in Ibibioland were also initiated into the lower grade of the various societies such as

Ekpo and Ekpe (Abaronye: 49). This exposed them to the rules of these societies which played leading role in societal organisation and governance.

Among some Fulani groups, manhood was proved by receiving lashes in a test called *sharo* without showing any sign of pain. Prospective brides watched carefully to locate the men with good qualities. The more successful a man was in proving that he was a man, the more sexually appealing he was to the girls.

Even the aging men also tried to make themselves sexually appealing and more agile. Indeed in Ibibioland, some old men with means entered into a rejuvenation process called *Inam* - a fattening for old men (Abaronye, 112). They were secluded, fed with choice foods, massaged, and given cosmetic treatment of the skin. In the end, they came out looking younger, more viable and appealing. The *Inam* process was also thought to bestow spiritual powers which added to the social importance of such men and made them to acquire wives easily.

Another aspect of female sexuality worthy of mention was the pre-occupation with the clitoris. The significance of this organ in the inducement of female sexual pleasure must have been realized in the distant past. Among some Nigerian groups such as the Ibibio, Efik, Urhobo, Edo, Igbo and Yoruba, this preoccupation resulted in clitoridectomy ranging from minor removal of small amounts of flesh from the tip of the clitoris to almost complete extirpation (Babatunde, 1998). This was done to reduce sexual pleasure which was thought could encourage promiscuity.

It has always intrigued me as to who invented clitoridectomy. Was it the men or the women? Were men afraid of the sexual powers of women whose desires they could not meet and ganged up to tame them? Or were women afraid of that little organ which could give them so much pleasure and maybe put them into some form of trouble that they decided to cut it off on their own? Did the elimination of the clitoris actually make women less desirous of sex? This part of

the history of sexuality requires an in-depth research, for it is not enough to accuse men of a coup to curb female sexuality through the excision of a valuable part of their bodies.

The excision of the clitoris buttresses Foucault's argument that sexuality is not a "natural given" as it is negotiated in the society. A natural given was excised to enhance sex appeal because it was only women without it who were culturally and sexually approved by the society. Excision for the purpose of limiting female enjoyment defies natural law. Foucault discusses the factor of resistance wherever power is exercised. History has not yet uncovered whether there was any sort of resistance against this practice in the traditional society. Its abandonment by many in some Nigerian cultures was induced by colonial and missionary propaganda against its so-called barbaric nature. It was even made punishable. But this did not lead to its total abandonment as some groups continue to engage in it even till date.

An interesting finding is that most women I interviewed who were not circumcised although their culture demands that, claimed that their fathers were instrumental to saving them from the operation even though their mothers insisted on it. In the recent past, many people have made female circumcision a propaganda issue referring to it as mutilation to emphasise the victimhood aspect of the operation. A lot has been written, but with doubtful historicity, about the negative effects of this practice on the health of those involved. This is in spite of the fact that majority of those interviewed did not experience any adverse effects. In fact, in cultures where this was practiced, women felt a sense of dignity, completeness and sexual appeal and it was important to their self-image and self-definition. I would say that there is a need to search for better and safer methods of carrying out this operation than its outright condemnation since many societies still continue to carry out the operation.

In Europe in the seventeenth century, clitoridectomy was employed as a cure for a number of nervous diseases in women, which were believed to have been caused by masturbation. Though the clitoris was excised in western medicine to take away the sexual desires of women, today it is sometimes done to conform to the desires of their owners - as plastic surgery to improve the beauty of the organ and the sexual experience of its owner. Thus, in Nigeria for those who still feel the need for this operation, safer methods should be sought and the over-orchestrated propaganda against it should be redirected towards finding safer methods.

In most Nigerian cultures, male circumcision was carried out and is still being done. It is said that it is to make the organ beautiful and enhance hygiene. No cry has been raised against this practice even though it is also a form of mutilation!

### **Culturally unacceptable expressions of sexuality**

It has been said that it was only in marriage that sexuality was supposed to be experienced. Adultery was not allowed. In Ibibioland, adultery resulted sometimes in the payment of compensation but most often in sale into slavery. Adultery was regarded as a sin against the ancestors so the fees paid were regarded more as a propitiatory offering to the spirits of the ancestors than as compensation to the injured family. It was believed that a woman who committed adultery would die during childbirth or that her children would die. It was believed that a spirit called *Ekponkaawo* (the spirit of adultery) would claim her life or that of her children. A man who knew about his wife's adultery was supposed to expose her and claim compensations from her and the man involved. The husband was also to carry out cleaning rites. If not, *Ekponkaawo* would also claim him. This was also the case among the Igbo.

In the Yoruba culture, there was *magun* as a deterrent to adultery. This was some kind of African science, which made an illicitly copulating pair unable to part until certain rituals were carried out. In which case, they were exposed to the

ridicule of the society, and the woman to the wrath of the husband and his family. Some forms of *magun* could lead to death of those involved. But *magun* unlike *Ekponkaawo* was not a freelance. A suspecting husband had to invoke it. There were other such devices and spirits which put fear into men and women to make them desist from adultery. Nevertheless, *Ekponkaawo* did not afflict a man who committed adultery and I could not confirm that women could invoke *magun* on their adulterous husbands. So, men could express their sexuality more freely than women.

With the islamisation of some parts of Nigeria, adultery came under Islamic laws in which a woman proved to have been involved in adultery was stoned to death but the man involved might not suffer the same fate. Christianity also frowns at adultery but leaves the consequences to judgement day. This remoteness of expected punishment makes many Christians, who now condemn polygamy, to engage in illicit relationships - creating families outside their legal families.

But there were cases of approved adultery in the traditional society. In Ibibioland, a diviner (*Abia Idiong*) could appoint a consort for a childless woman. This man now had the right of sexual relationship with the woman until she was pregnant. After pregnancy, this relationship was to end. This was a clever way of the gods helping an infertile man to procreate. There were cases where the consort (*udo idem*) and the woman fell in love and continued the relationship beyond the culturally approved period. This used to end in serious fights which were sometimes fatal. This practice has been abandoned as there are now alternative methods of treating barrenness.

In some parts of Igboland, there were also cases of culturally permissible adultery known as *iko*. If a man had multiple wives he could allow a young interested man to have a constant relationship with one of his wives. The young man had to declare his interest and if the husband agreed to the proposition the young man had to present him with some gifts and pledge to work for him in his

farms. After such farm work the woman was supposed to serve the husband food with a clay pot as a sign of respect, while serving the lover with a calabash. But most times the content of the calabash was better than the content of the pot meaning that such women sometimes treated their lovers better than their husbands. There is a story in Ogwu Okwu in Nguru in Imo State that a husband who suffered this fate complained bitterly to friends that “you have come to Ekeada’s house where the content of the calabash is richer than the content of the pot”, meaning that the wife served the lover more generously than the husband. For the lover this was really a subservient type of relationship to the de-facto husband of the woman as he had to render constant services.

This type of practice was also prevalent among the Birom who live around Abuja. What could have made a man to approve of an open relationship between his wife and another man? Was it the hatred of the wife? Was it his acknowledgement of his inadequacy to satisfy the sexual and sundry needs of the woman? Or was it his need for labour? More research will certainly uncover interesting facts.

Exchange of wives is said to have been practiced among some Nigerian peoples. Among the Tiv, the entertainment of important visitors involved giving up a wife to sleep with the visitor. I was told that this practise is carried on to a lesser degree even to this date. This was seen as the highest level of hospitality. Also among some families in Ilorin, it is said that brothers were allowed to sleep with each other’s wives. Were the wives willing or were they conditioned by culture to be willing to enter into such arrangement? More research is necessary here. Even where adultery was not tolerated, cases of adultery seem to have been rampant and there seems to have been a whole lot of cover up in this area to save face.

Although it has been claimed by many that sexuality in the traditional societies in Nigeria was expressed and experienced only in the institution of marriage, the

present research shows that it was not confined to it. There was flexibility; sometimes it was culturally approved, but sometimes unapproved but tolerated. It can safely be concluded that the assertion that sexuality was expressed and experienced only in the marriage institution is ahistorical. This goes to buttress Legum's (1960:108) conclusions on cultural change that there is much that is new in the old and even more that is old in the new.

### **Sexuality and Food**

Food was a major aspect in the expression of sexuality. Certain foods transmitted sexual messages. For instance, sending groundnuts to a woman or vice versa carried the message of love and interest declaration. So that the Ibibio say "*mmansang asanga usung ima*" – groundnuts walks (prepares) the way of love. Women discovered that a well-fed man was amiable, easily pliable and agile. The common adage says that the way to the man's heart is through the stomach. Such food was usually the staple food of his area. For the pre-twentieth century Ibibio, it was pounded yam and an array of vegetable soups or "white soup". In the twentieth century with cassava becoming a staple food, some would prefer cassava *foofoo* with choice soup.

The famous vegetable soup known as *edikangikong* is erroneously feared by non-Ibibio and Efik as a love medicine which when eaten would tie the man to the woman who cooked it (Ikpe, 1994: 41-46). Since this soup can be very delicious, young men are easily hooked to it. Fish pepper soup prepared with certain herbs and spices could produce a snowball effect culminating in a pleasurable and satisfying sexual experience. Every culture seems to have such foods which could enhance sexuality. Among the Igbo, the *isi ewu* could achieve the same effect. The Bini prefer the *owu soup* with unripe plantain. Likewise, the ability of the man to supply the means by which the food could be prepared made him sexier to the women. Thus, to continue getting to the man's heart through the stomach, women had to constantly improve their cooking art and science to put in variety and make food appetizing and appealing enough to sensitise the body.

Food and its consumption sometimes became a sensual affair. Women, who were not masters of the cuisine, stood the chance of losing the attentions of their men to better cooks. So food was an integral part of sexuality.

Food continues to play important role in the expression and experience of sexuality till date. Today, girls need to be “tantalised” at Tantalizers or such fashionable restaurants to make them more amiable to the sexual experience. Recently, I heard a radio advert of a girlfriend asking the boyfriend to visit her but the man claimed inability to do so due to a busy schedule. The girl then announced that she was preparing *indomie noodles* for dinner and he quickly consented. This means that the interplay between food and sexuality is still important but with non-traditional foods becoming more important to some younger people.

The research found out that there are traditional herbs and plants which are performance-enhancing and which are constantly introduced into foods. The Hausa are supposed to be very knowledgeable about this and are supposed to peddle it under the name *burantashi*. This performance enhancers are supposed to work more for men than the women. Research has not yet discovered whether women applied any performance enhancers. Apart from their performance abilities, the after-effects of these herbs after prolonged used are not known. More research is required here too.

### **Taboos in sexuality**

It has been stated elsewhere that sexuality is not a natural given. It is negotiated in the society. The society decides which sexual practice is culturally acceptable even those practiced under the marriage institution. Those not culturally acceptable were placed tabooed.

It was a taboo to discuss sexual matters in front of children until they were ready for their passage into adulthood. Although children recognised the differences

between the genders, they were not supposed to know what the usefulness of such differences were for; except with regard to the allocation of household roles. They were aware that women brought forth babies but how that actually came about was kept a secret. Yet, research has shown that young children sometimes got to know their sexual side through self-discovery. Some pre-adolescent youths engaged in sexual exploration of self which the Ibibio refer to as *ukap*. This is a process of body exploration including the exploration of the genitals with the fingers. Sometimes, this took place between girls, between boys and between boys and girls.

Research shows that many children were caught in this act and given thorough beatings. Sometimes, they were introduced to it by older youths. Though forbidden and frowned at, some adolescent youths still engaged in secret touching and massaging of one another's erotic parts. This happened mostly during the moon-lit nights when young people went out to play. They were often under the watchful eyes of the elders, who sat around most of the times or soon fell asleep due to tiredness from the day's work. The young people always found opportunities to touch one another in a way to derive sensual pleasure. This could happen on the way to the stream to fetch water or take a bath, or on their firewood fetching sprees when adults were not around.

In order to stop this self-search and discovery from advancing further, there was another important taboo. In Ibibioland and some parts of Igboland, it was forbidden to have sex in the bush (Marshall, 1932: 41). It was believed that such an act would anger the gods and affect the fertility of the land adversely. A more plausible explanation would be that since the houses were always full of people, there was limited space and privacy in which illicit sex could take place. The bush would have provided a good and unlimited ambient for culturally unapproved sexual expressions and experience. This seemingly unlimited space must have been used very often for unapproved sexual expressions. These may have threatened the peace of the larger society by causing quarrels between the

families of the offenders. The bush must have provided a sort of privacy which allowed for the playing out of sexual fantasies in a way not possible in the houses with prying eyes and ears. It, therefore, required a draconian taboo to restrict the freedom of its use for the expression of sexuality.

Before the eighteenth century, contravention of the taboo required the death of the culprits. From the eighteenth century even to the early twentieth century, offenders were sold into slavery as punishment. With the establishment of colonial rule and the total abolition of slavery, the gods were made to accept some forms of propitiatory offerings. This taboo was found also in some parts of Igboland. In Ngor Ukpuala, it is said that when this abomination has been committed, it was announced to the village by the roaring of a lion in the night. This would alert the village to seek out the culprit. Such an incident is said to have taken place in 1998. (Dioka, 2004). Since the culprits refused to confess, some strange bees attacked them in their houses occasioning them to confess to their abominable deeds. This was followed by severe fines and propitiatory rites.

Having sex with a mother of twins was also considered a taboo. In Ibibioland. A mother of twins was regarded as a dangerous person who spelt doom for the society. Human beings, according to Ibibio wisdom, should have one baby at a time. Multiple births were seen as degeneration to the level of animals. Such babies were thought to be possessed by evil spirits and if allowed to live, they could multiply uncontrollably polluting the land and causing calamities. The mother of twins was ostracised in the forest and her babies abandoned to die. Though ostracised in the forest, many of them ended up getting pregnant and having children even in the forest. A taboo was necessary to prevent such acts since it was thought that men who had sexual relations with these mothers who had delivered twins might contract the twin spirit and pass it on to other women. The male culprit was killed to appease the gods. The mother of twins continued her life of isolation in the forest. With the possibility of earning good cash by

selling these women into slavery, the gods were appeased with lesser offerings bought with the proceeds of the sale.

Another sexual taboo among the Ibibio was having sex with a woman in mourning. This was a sin against the ancestors who could terrorise the society through different types of calamities (Marshall: 42). Similar to the other taboos, the culprits were either killed or sold into slavery. The sale of culprits into slavery was always a better option because it enriched the elders (Harunah, 2001: 55-56) and the gods were appeased with lesser offers.

The greatest of the taboos against sexual activity found among most Nigerian groups was against incest. This presupposes that incest was not a rarity, so there was need to curb it. The levels of relationships that could be considered incestuous differed from culture to culture. Among the Ibibio, Igbo, Edo and some Yoruba groups, this started at the level of kindred. Sexual relationships between people of the same kin, who were not culturally allowed to intermarry, was regarded as incest. Such relationships between members of the same extended family were also prohibited. Some groups only regarded sexual relationship between brothers and sisters and fathers and daughters as incestuous. Among the Yoruba of Kabba, marriage between cousins was and still remains an accepted norm. At whichever degree a relationship was regarded as incestuous, it attracted punishment and heavy fines. In Ibibioland, incest was considered an abomination against the land and was punishable by death, slavery or costly appeasement rites.

Incest has been a problem within Nigerian families, even in the traditional setting, although it is treated as if it does not exist. Since the death penalty and the slavery option are no more in existence, and since people are no longer threatened by the powers of the ancestors, there have been many cases of incest, sometimes with consent of both partners but sometimes with coercion in

the form of rape. These days it is treated as a family matter to avoid public shame.

Pre-marital sex for girls was a taboo but it happened from time to time resulting in pregnancies. It was a great shame for the family; for a daughter to have a child out of wedlock. Nevertheless, the Ibibio custom of according a special place for the children of the daughters of the land, *eyeyen*, extended to such children who were integrated into their mothers' families.

To hold sexual activities in the society in check, there were different levels of public control; for example, ridiculing and shaming. In Ibibioland as elsewhere, there were different organisations, which specialised in singing about the sexual transgressions of the people. One very active one was called *ekpri-akata*. It was a kind of secret society which operated in the night in the bush but near enough to the dwellings so people could hear their songs. Women's organisations also engaged in the control of the women and the maidens. In the 1960s, there was a wave of formation of dance groups known as *kongkoma*. These were groups of adolescents of both genders who wanted a moral revolution through dance. They sang of the sexual misdemeanour of other youths and urged them through songs to behave properly. These groups also fell into disrepute and disappeared as their method of dancing involved sensual movements of the body. It was as though they themselves engaged in sexual immorality.

### **Sexuality on Sale**

Another aspect of sexuality which constantly comes under discussion is prostitution. This has been attributed to promiscuity, poverty, unemployment, the get-rich-quick syndrome and general decadence in the society. It has been said that prostitution is a new phenomenon in the Nigerian society. Yet, research has shown that the profession has historical antecedents as the profession was

practiced in most trading states of Nigeria in the pre-colonial times. However, this increased with the increase in economic activities and urbanisation which provided anonymity which many need for this profession. Although this is seen as a part of the moral decadence of the society, the services of these sex workers have been in high demand in our urban centres. This underscores the need to make this profession safe on public health grounds. With globalisation, prostitution has reached a new dimension involving the trafficking of Nigerian women to all parts of the globe (Ismail, 1999: 7-10). We constantly hear that it is a multi-billion dollar business which benefits the members of the profession economically. But like any other profession, there are hazards which border on the health of the practitioners and their clients. Even on the campuses of our tertiary institutions sexual negotiations bordering on part-time prostitution is rampant (Ikpe, 2003: 41-55).

### **Same Sex Sexuality**

Closely related to the tabooed version of sexuality as discussed above is same sex sexuality. The general claim is that this did not take place in Nigerian communities in pre-colonial times. Yet, research has shown that though not an accepted norm, it was practiced by some rare minority in some parts of the country such as in Yoruba and Hausaland and is still being practiced till date. It is believed that this practice enhances the powers of success of those engaged in it; that is, it gives those who practice it powers to triumph against all challenges and gives them long life. Nevertheless, the men engaged in it are often married; sometimes to multiple women. So in modern parlance, they are actually bisexuals.

It is also said that in some parts of the country, there are male prostitutes who dress up like women and are patronised by male customers. They are supposed to dress up like women and speak like women in their dealings with their clients. Same sex sexuality is said to be prevalent among the men-folk although its

practice by the womenfolk cannot be totally ruled out. Same sex sexual activities have been reported in the boarding houses among secondary school students. Earlier in this paper, it was noted that youths in early puberty used to engage in self-discovery. Perhaps the prevalence of same sex activities might be an extension of this practice. Whether the students later grow up to be homosexuals, bisexuals or lesbians is not clear. There is need for more research here.

Nevertheless, bonding between same sex as close friends should not be confused with homosexuality or lesbianism. Douglas seemed to have made that mistake when she assessed the oral evidence collected by Lorde from an Efik-Ibibio woman as a confession to lesbianism. According to the woman:

I had a woman friend to whom I revealed my secrets. She was very fond of keeping secrets to herself. We acted as husband and wife. We always moved hand in glove and my husband and hers knew about our relationship. The villagers nicknamed us twin sisters (Lorde, 1984: 49-50 quoted in Douglas, 1999: 99).

To a European, a confession of going hand in glove and acting as husband and wife is a clear indication of lesbianism. But this sort of behaviour is normal in these parts between “bosom friends”. Although there is an expression of love it does not necessarily connote sex. Indeed if they were engaged in lesbianism, the villagers would have found another name for them instead of “twin sisters”!

### **Human-Spirit Sexuality Syndrome**

All over the country, there is a widespread belief in the existence of spiritual husbands and wives. It is believed that there are spiritual spouses who visit the human spouses especially in dreams or even physically to have sex with them. Some women even claim to find semen in their vagina on waking up. This belief has been given as one of the reasons why some people, especially girls do not get married because the spirit husbands or wives do not allow other men near them. Indeed, some believe that some people procreate with these spirit spouses in the spirit world although they are single in the human world. This believe is

deeply rooted in the cultures of many Nigerian people and there are various rites to seek deliverance.

One wonders whether these encounters with the spirit husbands and wives are not erotic dreams reflecting the sexual fantasies of the dreamer stemming from the subconscious. So the spirit spouses might actually be the “dream” spouses of the dreamers – the kind of men and women they actually consciously desire but cannot get them physically except in dreams. This aspect of human-spirit sexuality in the Nigerian culture requires more research.

### **Human-Animal Sexuality**

The culturally accepted expressions of sexuality are between female and male human beings. Nevertheless, from time to time, we hear of sexual expressions between human beings and animals. European visitors to Africa had alleged the existence of bestiality with apes and monkeys, an allegation we have always seen as expression of racial disdain (Douglas: 33). In recent times there have been stories of human-animal sexual expressions. Dogs and horses have been mentioned as mates for female humans. Just recently, it was reported in the *Sun* newspaper that a man was caught having sex with a sheep. Indeed, the origins of HIV/AIDS have been traced to some green monkeys who are supposed to have had the original type of the disease. The cross over to humans has also been associated with human-monkey sex (Harunah, 2003: 4-8). Though this African origin of HIV/AIDS has been refuted, it causes consternation what ill this new wave of bestiality might bring to Nigeria. Are these expressions of human sexuality or insanity? More research on the issue might uncover the extent of this insanity.

### **Black Sexuality, Nigerian Sexuality**

There have existed stereotypes regarding the sexuality of black people which have settled in Euro-American minds. Black people are supposed to be carnal, passionate, lustful, lewd, rapacious, wanton, lascivious and sensual. Although

there is nothing wrong with some of these descriptions, an image has been created that the Black man is sexually out of control. This image developed in the early days of European adventure in Africa when they found the freedom of sexual expressions in Africa diametrically opposed to the sexual repression which was fostered by Christianity in Europe. Thus, till date, the Euro-Americans regard black people as sexual super-humans who can turn any form of sexual fantasy into reality. No wonder the unlimited need of black women and men as prostitutes in Europe and America. Thus, black sexuality has been maligned and exploited through the ages from the era of the slave trade till date.

But are black people including Nigerians, lascivious, wanton, rapacious and lustful more than any other race? Has history not shown that there were various restraints on sexuality? Or is the exaggerated image of rapaciousness not a figment of the Euro-American mind that wanted to free its sexual self from the draconian restraints of Christian restraint?

### **Sexuality and the Cyberspace**

The invention of the Internet and its availability in Nigeria has influenced sexuality. Where parents are still unwilling to enter into any form of discourse with their children concerning sexuality, the youths have discovered the cyberspace as an arena where sexuality can be experienced, expressed and fantasized. So the cyber cafés are well patronised by youths, whose sole aim is to consume pornography and chat with some unknown women. Likewise, the easy availability of video films of pornographic nature has led to the increase in indirect sexual experiences. Even for adults, the fear of contracting diseases especially the incurable HIV/AIDS has led to an increase in indirect sexual experiences through films, internet and telephones. Thus, there seems to have been an increase in masturbation among such people.

It would seem that the indirect consumption of sex, is slowly influencing the traditional ideas about sexuality, especially among the youths. How this will impact on their human relationships in the future is not yet known. Can one speculate that maybe in futuristic times, this new development might lead to the death of sexuality in its traditional sense of a relationship between two human beings – male and female but sometimes between same sex?

Traditionally, the ultimate aim of sexuality was for procreation which required the union of male and female. Today, we hear of cloning which makes reproduction possible without the complicated union of male and female. One begins to wonder whether this is not a development that will lead to the death of sexuality in its entirety. Though this is in the field of historical speculation, I daresay that due to disease, technological development and developments in the medical and biological fields, sexuality is threatened even in Nigeria.

### **Sexuality and Power Relations**

It has been said earlier that traditionally, sexuality is to be found in the dualism of male female existence. In sexuality, power is constantly being exercised. Foucault has shown that in any relationship, power domination is not limited to any agent, as there is fluidity between the dominating and the dominated agent leading to changing roles in power relations. This variability in power relations has been noticed in human sexuality in Nigeria. Nevertheless, power domination was and is still tilted in favour of the male gender. The males had almost unlimited rights to express their sexuality while women had limited rights of expression except in marriage. Even in the expression of sexuality outside marriage, women have traditionally been at a disadvantage since they negotiate from weak economic positions; making sexuality, therefore, an instrument of dependence. Nevertheless, there were exceptional cases of women who negotiated from stronger positions because of their family heritage and their personal economic standing (Ikpe, 2003: 9). But in the real sexual relationship, women could easily become the dominating agents as the sexual act depended

on their consent. This is not to deny that there existed forced sexual relationships even within marriage. Thus, flexibility could be noticed at every level of power relations although this tilted more in favour of the men.

### **Conclusion**

It has been in this paper that sexuality was not a natural given but culturally negotiated in the society. Such negotiations resulted in flexible approaches to sexuality in which sexual expressions and experiences took place under an array of culturally accepted, tolerated relationships or even non- acceptable conditions. Whenever the expression of sexuality became a threat to the society, there were systems of control bordering on public shaming, ridiculing and taboos which attracted punishment, even when such control systems did not in themselves totally eliminate such expressions.

The writing of the history of sexuality shows concern for the present state of human sexuality. Since sexuality is so central to human well-being, the subject has entered into political discussions in the form of demography, public health concerns and human right. Some sexual expressions found in our cultures did not foster good health due to the prevalence of multiple partners in sexual relations. Thus, even at the beginning of colonial rule in the twentieth century, one of the health problems which confronted the colonial government was the spread of venereal diseases. The spread of gonorrhoea was seen as “the gravest medical problem” and the “curse of this part of the coast” (Schram, 1971: 191).

In the same way, at present the spread of sexually transmitted diseases including HIV/AIDS is a major health threat and a survival problem to Nigerians. So there is a need for us to re-examine our cultures, histories and habits to do away with those practices that are threatening the survival of Nigerian peoples today.

Nevertheless, sexuality, as defined by the Africa Regional Sexuality Resource Centre, is a central aspect of being human throughout life. But Professor Binitie in his discourse on the *African Mind and the Development Process* attacked sexuality as a factor of underdevelopment. According to him, the Nigerian serves three gods, the gods of food, sex and enjoyment (Binitie, 2003, 55). He concluded ominously, that the pursuit of enjoyment was the root cause of the fall of the great Roman Empire. With this, he tried to warn Nigerians about the ominous consequences of too unrestrained sexual enjoyment.

This paper has also demonstrated that even the most draconian of the taboos in Nigerian traditional societies did not prevent illicit sexual expressions and experiences. We have seen that even in the ideal marital conditions there were avenues for illicit sex, which were being exploited. It has been shown that traditional allowance for multiple partners, women to women marriages, and approved adultery all engendered sex with multiple partners. The effects of these on the sexual health of the people were apparent even in the early colonial period when venereal diseases were seen as a scourge. Nevertheless, in spite of the overriding health concerns, sex is meant for enjoyment and Binitie, with whom I agree to a great extent, has identified this as one of the gods Nigerians serve – that of food, sex and enjoyment. This being the case, care must be taken to ensure that sexuality is safe, respectful and responsible but remains enjoyable for us, our children and our children's children.

We must be worried about the negative antecedents in the history of sexuality in order to build a better future for posterity even in matters of sexuality. This will need a whole lot of rethinking, and negotiations as sexuality is not a natural given but a result of negotiation. It will require a whole lot of discussions and negotiations to create knowledge that can assist in charting a new course more relevant to our present situation. But such a new course will only have a chance in an improved economic condition, which empowers people to make informed choices to positively enhance their sexuality.

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