



**AFRICA REGIONAL SEXUALITY RESOURCE CENTRE**

In Collaboration with

***HEALTH SYSTEMS TRUST, SOUTH AFRICA &  
UNIVERSITY OF FORT HARE***

Understanding Human Sexuality Seminar Series

*“Culture, Femininity and Sexuality”.*

***African Writer’s Expositions  
of African Sexuality in their  
Story Lines***

Z.N. Mfono

*University of Fort Hare  
South Africa  
September, 2006*

© ARSRC 2006

***The views expressed in this presentation are solely those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the ARSRC or any organisation providing support***

## **AFRICAN WRITER'S EXPOSITIONS OF AFRICAN SEXUALITY IN THEIR STORY LINES**

Human sexuality can be defined as the expression of sexual sensation and related intimacy between human beings, as well as the expression of identity through sex and as influenced by or based on sex (Wikipedia Encyclopedia). In contrast to other cultures, Africans have yet to come up with openly articulated guidelines on sexuality, its philosophical and religious underpinnings, as well explicit boundaries of its expression. The Chinese, Japanese, Hebrew, Roman, Greek, Arabian, Persian and Indian cultures created erotic works directed at celebrating sexuality as an enjoyable and intense part of life (McCormick, 1992). Western sexuality and its expression on the other hand have remained on firm religious leash, and Freud and Foucault spearheaded their psychological and sociological analyses. African contact with Western societies, which veered between reticences and elaborate analyses of sexuality, has so far failed to entice Africans into engaging in similar analyses of their sexuality.

African oral traditions may have contained useful expositions on this important subject, but oral traditions have the inherent weakness of suffering from inaccurate transmission over time, and ultimately disappearance, in contrast to the enduring power of the written word. In being both recalcitrant and suspicious of Western religious guidance, African sexual expression has over time remained least understood, and with the unfolding of the world Aids scenario that reflects Africa as the undisputed epicenter of the pandemic, the most debated sexuality in the contemporary scene.

Caldwell et al (1989) put forward arguments that draw attention to the foundations of African sexuality in the unfolding African Aids scenario. They juxtaposed African sexuality against what they described as the Eurasian foundations of sexuality, and concluded that African sexuality is at the heart of the Aids drama. Contrasting views (Alhberg, 1994 and others) however located the perceived 'problems' in African sexuality on the corrosive effect of the colonial and Christianization experiences of

Africans. These apparently opposing debates however are in agreement concerning the role of African sexuality in the spread of Aids in Africa. A brief discussion of some of discourses on human sexuality now follows.

The Kama Sutra (Danielo, 1994) which evolved from Indian religious and philosophical thought addresses itself to the subject of sexuality with a reassuring openness about the fact that sexuality is a natural gift to be cherished. It simultaneously imposes boundaries as well as virtue on sexual expression, thus providing almost unequivocal guidelines to responsible enjoyment of sexuality by both men and women, each individual being considered a human species chain link that must reproduce before fading away. The Proverbs also contain valuable guidelines for human living, but present a predatory view of female sexuality and its powerful potential of shattering the integrity of innocent males (2:16-22). The Islamic religion appears to share this predatory view of female sexuality in prescribing dress codes that as far as possible shield selections of the female anatomy that might be sexually provocative to males from public view. Conversely to these views of female sexuality, there are yet extreme positions that regard women as sexually innate beings that require male initiation of sexual activity between the sexes. The views on sexuality appear to be as diverse as the cultures and religions that conjure them.

In his discussion of African religion, Mbiti (1986) makes no explicit reference to sexual expression, but emphasizes the importance of marriage and bearing of children in African culture, as well the flow of life through the individual that comes through childbearing. Those to be born are described as the buds in the loins of the living, and through marriage their germination and sprouting is made possible. Reproduction is viewed as neutralizing death. The omission of discussion of sexuality as an element of reproduction in Mbiti's work on African religion is consistent with the African reticence on the subject and an overall neglect of the subject of sexual expression that is one of the most pervasive forces in the lives of human beings.

The Wikipedia Encyclopedia on Human Sexuality notes that cultures present substantial views on their sexuality in their literary, visual arts and popular culture. African writers

as well have braved through the African collusion to keep the dynamics of sexual expression under a carpet of silence. A selection of African writers' works is used in the following discussion to provide some images of the unwritten codes of African sexuality observed by these writers in their societies during the colonial and post-colonial periods. Might their stories be purely fictional? In the preface of his literary work that is used in this paper, Beti (1981) points out that while the priestly figure given prominence in his work was fictional, the Africans who "swarm" in the pages of his book were taken from life, and no incident depicted in the book is inauthentic. Saadawi's selected narrative on the other hand was created from her professional work experiences. The reality content of the other works cited in the discussion is unknown but has high probability when viewed from the African cultural perspective. The authors cited in the discussion are listed on the table below, along with the sexual subject matter the selected texts from their works speaks to. The content which the selected authors present on the various subjects in their works follows, and an evaluation of the sexuality scenario depicted is considered against the African Aids scenario and other agreements on sexual and reproductive health matters in contemporary societies.

**Selected African authors' images of post-colonial African sexuality**

	Subject	Selected author
Sexual expression utility by gender	Reproduction	B. Emecheta, 1979
	Mutual sexual enjoyment	B. Emecheta, 1979
	Coerced/Manipulated Origins	M. Beti, 1981
	Transactional	N. Saadawi, 1975
	<b>Gendered prerogatives</b>	M. Beti, 1981
Sexual Boundary lines	Age	B. Emecheta, 1979
	Marriage	B. Emecheta, 1979
	Blood ties	O. Sembene, 1983
	Existing rights	M. Beti, 1981
	<b>Gendered prerogatives</b>	M. Beti, 1981
Sexual Relationship Durations	Transience	M. Beti, 1981
	Durational	B. Emecheta, 1989
	<b>Gendered prerogatives</b>	
Philosophical/Religious underpinnings of the above		J.S. Mbiti, 1986

## **1. ON USE OF SEXUAL EXPRESSION**

### **1.1 Use of sexual expression with reproduction as the primary goal**

African sexual expression that is directed primarily at reproduction is viewed as located in marital relationships. In her narrative, Emecheta (1979) however located sexual expression both within and outside marriage. Its goal in marriage was reproduction, and when this goal was delayed or frustrated, the marital union weakened and finally dissolved, with the husband partner pointing out that he had no time to waste his precious male seed on a woman who is infertile, and had to raise children for his line. This statement emphasized the reproductive goal of sexual expression in that context. The woman's reproductive failure on the other hand was so humiliating to the woman that she challenged her *chi* (which seems to be a counterpart of guardian angel) with,

‘Oh my *chi*, how could you bring me down so low?’

On returning to her family, the rejected woman explained to her father that she wanted children to look after her in her old age. The girl's father subsequently found another suitor for her, whose looks and job she so intensely despised that she sometimes taunted him and threatened to return to her home during her first pregnancy. But her husband admonished her that the gods had legalized their marriage through the pregnancy, and that her traditionally principled father would not accept her to his home in the state she was in. The couple had a lasting marriage into which nine children were born, two of whom died at infancy. The value of the marriage to the woman appears to have come from the fact that it gave her children she badly wanted.

### **1.2 Sexual expression with enjoyment as the primary goal**

Emecheta's narrative however also encompasses sexual enjoyment outside marriage, in a relationship between a respected polygamous chief and a young woman, in a passion which, according to the chief's friend ‘...woke the very dead...’ Although this relationship was not primarily reproductive in its intent but was aimed at sexual enjoyment, its reproductive outcome was welcomed without trepidation, both by the parties, as well as by wider society. Sexual expression in that context was based on mutual affection, consent and enjoyment.

### **1.3 Sexual liaisons arising from initial manipulations, coercions and negotiated transactions**

Sexual expression in Beti's narrative is pervaded by initial cunning manipulation of women by a male overseer who commanded power over them. He operated as an agent for various male friends, and after an initial sexual encounter with each woman, he engineered the taking over of the relationship by the man who desired the woman. One of these relationships eventually developed into a passionate mutual sexual enjoyment by the parties, and Beti's story line develops around that relationship. Another turned out to be an outright deception of the woman, with promises of marriage, which irreparably damaged the woman's relationship with her fiancée. While the liaisons brokered by this cunning manipulation offered women reprieve from the heavy tasks of *sixa*,<sup>1</sup> it is not clear whether mutual bonds and mutual sexual enjoyment developed in these relationships, but various benefits for the women engaged in them came forth. Sexual expression in the relationships discussed above was basically transactional for the women, they traded sex for various benefits as a survival strategy, and the men were predatory and exploitative of the situation women found themselves in.

### **1.4 Outright transactional sexual expression**

Saadawi's Firdhaus escaped from mistreatment in a marriage into which she was coerced, and having nowhere to go was rescued by a male stranger, whose feigned sympathy turned out to be coupled with sexual exploitation, which was shared by his friend. Firdhaus was again rescued from this predicament, this time by a female prostitute, who initiated her into prostitution, where she made a roaring financial success which ushered into stylish living. Her fortunes were ruined when she murdered a pimp, who insisted on becoming her manager in the business, faced trial and was condemned to death. Sexual expression in this context was once more a survival strategy for the woman, enjoyed by the willing male partners who could afford the service. The dividing line between this form of sexual expression and those discussed above is probably on who controlled the

---

<sup>1</sup> Residential hostel to which women were committed for 3-4 months by their fiancées, for the church to prepare them for marriage

transaction, and the prostitute appears to have had much more control over the use of her body than the other manipulated women. It was this control she killed a pimp to retain.

In Beti's narrative, an old woman complained

'... our best looking and most respectable girls throw themselves at strangers as ugly as sin...,  
And why? Just money! Money! Ah, what a world!'

The old woman's husband retorted that women are like children in their desires.

### **1.5 The gendered prerogatives of sexual expression**

Males often gain access to positions which provide them opportunities for manipulating women into sexual liaisons against their will. One of the women at the sixa explained to the priest that:

...In giving Raphael the sixa to direct, you as good as said to him: "Here are your wives: they belong to you. Do with them as you will."

## **2. THE SEXUAL BOUNDARY LINES OF AFRICAN SEXUAL EXPRESSION**

### **2.1 The age boundaries of African sexual expression**

In Emecheta's narrative, the heroine's husband married a girl who was the same age as his teenage daughters. In Beti's narrative, the server was nearly fifteen years when he was seduced by one of the sixa girls. However, this was never found out. It is not clear whether there are acceptable upper and lower age boundaries for African sexual expression.

### **2.2 The marital boundaries of African sexual expression**

Both Emecheta and Beti put no marital boundaries for sexual expression in their narratives. Beti pointed out in his narrative that most men slept with their girls for years before bringing them to the sixa. The outcome was that the priest had to baptize many babies born to unmarried mothers at each of the mission stations he visited, charging their parents a higher fee for this service.

Marriage in both narratives is polygamous, and imposes no constraints on the husband from having sexual relationships outside the marriage. Married women also could not object to their husband's sexual liaisons with other women. In Emecheta's narrative, the chief whose senior

wife died while he was frolicking with a young woman defended himself by stating that his wife was too mature to be 'sore or bitter just because last night with Ona I amused myself.' Beti's narrative is equally dramatic, as the wife of the priest's cook tracked down and physically attacked her husband's girlfriend. An older woman however reassured the cook that he was rightly annoyed by the wife's behavior, pointing out,

...In my time the wife had no cause to fight if her husband's friend was just an unmarried girl like this one.

The Christian prescription against married men having extra-marital sexual relationships was firmly countered in this altercation between the priest and his cook in Beti's narrative:

Cook: Look, Father, I was never married to that other woman.

Priest: But have you slept with her or not?

Cook: Yes, Father, indeed I have. But what does that prove? It proves nothing except that my wife has recently delivered. ... we blacks, when our wives have given birth leave them alone for a good year. That's how it is with us and I can't do otherwise. ... I know some people who've tried to bring up their babies on powdered milk, but it all turns out badly.

### **2.3 Existing rights as sexual expression boundary lines**

This requirement applies largely to males, whose fights when they consider their sexual rights violated are potentially deadly. Women's sexual rights are trivialized, and they are socialized to contain their anger and not entertain too much attachment to husbands. Beti's narrative gives an account of a physical attack on the priest's cook by the fiancée of his girlfriend. Village men witnessed the fight nonchalantly, probably relishing the fact that the offending party was being overpowered, until they thought his life might be in danger, and in intervening remarked to the assailant that it was legitimate to correct a man, but not to kill him. This statement carried an endorsement of the conduct of the assailant.

## **2.4 Blood ties as the sexual expression boundary line**

In Sembene's narrative, it is not African tradition but the Islamic faith that mobilized a community against a member of respectable standing in their community who committed incest with her daughter, with a premarital pregnancy outcome.

## **2.5 The gendered prerogatives of sexual boundaries**

The assumption of African tradition that women can suspend their sexual urges for two or more breastfeeding years, while men either can not, or will not, does not have sound rational grounds. It is also hard to defend the male prerogative to sexual rights while women's rights in this regard are trivialized.

## **3. The Duration of African Sexual Relationships**

Emecheta's narrative is based on a core marital relationship that lasted for the duration of the lifetimes of the couple. However, this was a second marriage for the wife, whose first marriage broke down because of infertility. Beti's narrative ends with the cook deciding to take his girlfriend as a wife. The relations between him and his first wife were badly strained because she attacked his girlfriend physically, and later attacked him too. The cook's wife used Christian principles on the exclusiveness of the sexual rights of the parties to a marriage. The traditional African principles on the other hand appealed to her husband.

Women's marriages in African tradition extend beyond the lifespan of their husbands because when a husband dies, his wife is inherited by his surviving brother, along with the sexual rights left behind by the dead husband. Emecheta's narrative thus develops into a scenario in which the heroine's husband inherits two wives from a deceased brother, and later in life marries an eighteen year old girl.

African women's reactions to polygamy vary enormously. It appears that more educated women find it difficult to welcome a third or more sexual partners into the marital relationship. Ba, in a long letter to a friend who walked out of her marriage when her husband married a second wife

provides insight into the downside aspects of polygamy for women.

### **3. The gendered prerogatives of sexual duration**

In African marital traditions, marital dissolution means that the woman is left childless, because African marriages require the payment of bride-wealth, which entitles the husband and his family to the children in the event of a marital dissolution.

#### **A discussion of the images of African sexuality presented above**

Sexual expression amongst Africans appears to take place primarily in the quest for reproduction, but also in the quest for the pleasurable sensations it provides, and these two goals prescribe the nature of the sexual relationship couples get into. Marriage appears to be the path for reproductive use of sex, but polygamy amongst Africans suggests the extensive desire amongst couples to combine sexual pleasure with its reproductive outcomes. Tradition imposes no pressure on African males to remain sexually incontinent while the wife is recuperating from the ravages of childbearing and also nursing a baby, and the sexual incontinence Christian religion encourages is considered an unrealistic option. Even non-penetrative premarital sex which reduced pre-marital childbirths in some African societies is not mentioned in the context Beti provides an image of. Overall, the traditional boundaries on the African male's sexual expression are few and may have weakened with time.

Despite the high incidence of polygamy, married men still compete with unmarried men for sexual access to women outside marital unions, in their desire for sexual pleasure that is not tied to reproductive outcomes. Beti's narrative suggested extensive use of manipulation of women and use of power in the engineering of sexual relationships. The scenario of large numbers of unmarried mothers was however not considered problematic in the society concerned, since, according to Beti, '...we blacks are all damned for simply loving children too much.' A much more serious consequence of this extensive manipulation of women into transient sexual relationships emerges in Beti's narrative as the spread of "the disease" in the sixa, with the consequence of one man ending his sexual involvement with an affected woman and finding a new sexual partner. This simple reaction indicates the very weak understanding underlying the spread of sexual transmitted diseases in African communities, including Aids, and how women's

powerlessness makes them objects of manipulation to meet the endless demands for their bodies by males.

Traditions have very powerful resilience against change. Beti's narrative demonstrates how the Christian value system which militates against multiple sexual partners, whether inside or outside marriage found unequivocal rejection amongst males. This, along with the cunning manipulation of the sexual integrity of young women produced a cesspool of venereal infections, endless fights, and subterfuges to bluff the hopelessly naïve and incompetent priest. These aspects of sexual expression probably play themselves out in the contemporary African Aids scenario and might be constituting the contemporary African sexual dynamics that make sub-Saharan Africa the epicenter of the Aids pandemic.

According to the recommendations made at the 1994 Cairo Conference on Population and Development, men as the leaders in their societies must spearhead changes on issues affecting their societies, especially aspects like women's reproductive health, and reproductive rights. Only African men can turn the African Aids scenario around, through thinking out of the restrictive 'box' of tradition.

## **References**

- Ahlberg, B.M. 1994. 'Is there a distinct African sexuality? A critical response to Caldwell'. *Africa* 64 (2), 200-241.
- Ba, M. 1980. *So Long A Letter*. Oxford: Heinemann.
- Beti, M. 1981. *The Poor Christ of Bomba*. (Translated By Gerald Moore). Ibadan: Heinemann.
- Caldwell, J.C., Caldwell, P. and Quiggin, P. 1989. 'The social context of AIDS in sub-

- Saharan Africa'. *Population and Development Review* 15(2), June 1989, 185-234.
- Caplan, P. (editor), *The cultural construction of sexuality*. New York: Tavistock Publications.
- Danielou, A. 1994. *The complete Kama Sutra*. Vermont: Park Street Press.
- Emecheta, B. 1979. *The Joys of Motherhood*. London: Heinemann.
- McCormick, D. 1992. *Erotic Literature: A Connoisseur's Guide*. New York: Continuum Books.
- Proverbs, 2:16-22.
- Saadawi, N. 1983. *Woman at Point Zero*. London: Zed Books.
- Sembene, O. 1980. *White Genesis*. London: Heinemann.
- United Nations. 1994. *Programme of Action Adopted at the International Conference on Population and Development*. New York: United Nations.
- Online:
- [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Human\\_sexuality](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Human_sexuality). 2006/09/17