



AFRICA REGIONAL SEXUALITY RESOURCE CENTRE

in Collaboration with

KENYA ASSOCIATION OF PROFESSIONAL COUNSELORS (KAPC),
Nairobi, Kenya

**Understanding Human Sexuality Seminar Series
(East Africa)**

Sexuality and Social Institutions with a Focus on Religion, Beliefs and Marriage

**Married Couples and The
Expression of Sexuality
During and After Middle Age**

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*Nairobi, Kenya
June 16, 2005*

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This account documents my reflections on marital life based on the experience of counselling couples and individual married partners in the context of a large urban setting ; that is Nairobi, Kenya.

It would be useful to start with a number of definitions:-

Sex: Sex refers to the biological characteristics, which define human beings ranging from female to male. (The term sex is often used to mean “Sexual activity.”)

Gender: Gender refers to those personal characteristics which are believed to differentiate one sex from another.

Sexuality: is the key word in this context and it is taken to mean the spiritual, emotional, physical, psychological and cultural aspects of relating to one another as embodied male or female persons. It involves our efforts to communicate, our acts of tenderness, and even our struggles to find each other again after an argument. In this sense we are being sexual –expressing our relational energy as women and men – all of the time.

Context

The context within which these reflections are taking place is that of a rapidly changing urban society. It is, thus, difficult to identify trends in the absence of statistical research. In addition, it would be sensible to avoid making generalisations because there are plenty of exceptions to whatever statement one may make. Nevertheless it is possible to look at increasingly similar examples of issues which are being presented in counselling and to see these as definite representations of realities within married life.

Traditional Attitudes to Marriage

Traditionally, African marriage is concerned with fertility, generativity and the passing on of life both within the community and at the level of the individual couple. It is situated within the context of family relationships as a whole; that is the husband’s relationship to his mother and his siblings and the wife’s relationship to her father, mother and siblings; and everybody’s relationship to the extended families and to the clan. The marital relationship is based on the roles that the man and woman are expected to play. There is no question here of equality between husband and wife but of mutuality. The generation of life was a matter of concern to the whole community and so there were sanctions against people who indulged in sex for selfish reasons. Sexuality was considered to be mysterious and sacred.

Other Influences On Marriage

The Christian concept of marriage and sexuality. The Christian concept of marriage has two aims - in the first place the procreation of children and secondly

the mutual love and support of the partners. Because of the separation between body and spirit for many centuries throughout much of Christianity (attributed in many ways to the writings of St. Augustine of Hippo in the fifth century) the pleasurable aspects of sex have been often associated with our lower nature and with concepts of guilt.

The Christian ideal in its turn has been overlaid with the modern attitude to sex as being an end in itself both within and outside of marriage. Sex in this case is mainly seen as the sexual act and everything surrounding it and the pleasure that is possible for both partners. Increasingly, where this attitude to sex is within a post Christian culture, the physical expressions of sex have become separated from guilt.

Misunderstanding

The possibility of misunderstandings, communication breakdown and a clash of cultures within the relationship is great. Question such as the following help to illustrate some of the issues involved:-

- What about mutual sexual enjoyment and pleasure for strengthening the bond between the couple? How acceptable is this for the partners? And if it is acceptable for how long in the marriage does it remain acceptable? Into middle age for example?
- How far, if at all, may a woman show her sexual needs to her husband? Is she allowed to initiate sex? A book on marital relationships among the Xhosa of South Africa States:
The wife obeyed her husband's demands for sex whenever possible, but custom discouraged her from showing open or direct interest in sex or to take the initiative in soliciting sexual intimacy from her husband. (Kisembo, Magesa & Shorter 1977)
- How acceptable is it for a couple to show outward signs of affection through touching and physical closeness? Does a man only show his love by looking after the financial and physical needs of his wife and children?
- How acceptable is it for a couple in their middle or later years to have sex at all?
- Why is it that men, particularly as they become older, tend to revert back to their inherited cultural beliefs regarding sex and sexuality in marriage? This can be particularly powerful in inter-ethnic marriage when issues of land and inheritance loom increasingly as the husband becomes older and death nears.
- Why is it that a woman on the day of her wedding changes from a lover with the sexual freedom and expression expressed by that description, into an object to be kept at home?

Changes That Occur

Some changes can happen immediately after the wedding, for example the woman changes from girl friend to wife and the husband from boy friend to 'one of the boys'. The wedding may be the last time they hold hands! The husband being one of the boys' now returns to the companionship of his male friends – particularly through the pub and bar culture.

The arrival of the first child changes the relationship from a twosome to a threesome with the possibilities of triangulation-rivalry for the wife's attention. The wife is now a mother, but the husband may not feel like a father. There is also at this point a possible change in the sex-life from romantic and mutually fulfilling to rushed and tense. The woman's need for sexual fulfilment may be suspect for the husband. "If my wife needs sex can I trust her?" The fulfilment of his needs may lead to "marital rape".

The arrival of more children may entrench the roles of mother and father at the expense of husband and wife as there is little privacy, time or energy for a satisfying sexual life. Even for the rich, living in a town house offers little opportunity for the couple to escape from children and extended family members. This militates strongly against intimacy. The lack of continuity in the sexual relationship can also take away the desire for sex on the part of the woman.

By the time of the middle years, habits have become long established. When do the middle years begin? This may begin in the mid-forties, when the eldest child completes secondary school. This could be the time for the couple to begin to re-discover the sexual fulfilment of their younger years, but the wife may feel she is less sexually attractive and have given up the effort to look attractive to her husband. For example, she dresses for bed in an old dress and puts a stocking over her hair. He goes to bed smelling of the day's sweat and of beer. Neither of them has the will to improve physical attractiveness for each other and they settle for what they have become used to. He may also settle for 'looking prosperous' rather than preserving his looks – unless of course he has found another younger woman. He might be more willing to explore different ways of having sex with another woman rather than with the wife.

She has given up on looking good for her husband – except perhaps when they are meant to look good in public as a couple. At home, therefore, there may not be much effort to have a satisfactory sexual life. The possible reasons are: a lack of privacy, their mutually poor self images, hang-ups around the idea of sex being enjoyable, lack of communication skills and, not least of all, sex as a taboo subject which may lead to embarrassment regarding sex talk even though both may want a change. Finally, the husband's occasional bouts of inability to perform will be compensated for by working extra hard and arriving home too tired to do anything except slump in front of the television.

The older years may be defined as the time from the mid fifties onwards. The concept of the couple having sex let alone enjoyable sex appears increasingly weird even obscene both to them and to others. Society can find it acceptable or at least understandable that a man at this age can desire a second wife or an affair on the side. The view that the married couple should not find each other sexually attractive is reinforced by a number of factors. For example, the children {now grown up}, who imply by their attitude that the days of sex should be over for

their parents, by the attitudes of young people who inevitably portray a *mzee* (an older person) as someone bent double and shuffling along with the support of a walking stick, by the local media with its extraordinary emphasis on sex only for the young, by the African view {based of course also on life expectancy statistics} that 55 and over is really old age where the only course open is retirement to the *shamba* and preparation for a religious death.

If the couple should have sex then it is likely to be secretive. The idea of experimentation and renewal of mutual physical love through touch and stimulation becomes unthinkable.

Yet couples have been known to enjoy in the middle and later years not only friendship, but also to re-discover the excitement and mutuality of physical closeness and the improved self image that goes with this. However, there are a great number of external and internal obstacles to overcome first.

Different Ways of Expressing Sexuality

Sexuality as was said at the beginning is the way two people relate to one another as embodied male and female persons. The expression of this sexuality takes many different forms according to which ever value or belief on influence is more predominant. Sexuality can thus express itself as:

The procreation of children – planned and agreed upon by the couple. The generativity of the couple may be enough in itself to give mutual pride and satisfaction.

It may also show itself as a cheerful and happy recognition of the mutuality of the roles of the man and the woman - with the man as the main breadwinner looking after the physical and financial needs of the family and the woman as the home keeper.

Sexuality may also express itself simply as companionship into old age with or without the expression of friendship and love in words and physical closeness. The taboos of some couples may stop the outward acknowledgement of their companionship except through living together in their mutuality of roles. This is a powerful but more traditional way of experiencing their sexuality and is usually more suited to rural rather than urban living.

Sexuality can also be expressed through mutually enjoyable sex throughout the marriage, expressed not just through intercourse but through the wish to fulfil one another's erotic and emotional needs. How far for example do the partners know and acknowledge each other's erogenous zones? [These are the parts of the body which make foreplay or just play so mutually satisfying even into the older years].

Whatever the kind of sexuality expressed by the couple in their life together it is wise for each to respect the need for space and individuality within the marriage so that the partners see each other as persons and not just as husband/ wife or mother/ father. ('And stand together yet not too near together, for the pillars of the temple stand apart, and the oak tree and the cypress grow not in each other's shadow.' (The Prophet, Kahlil Gibran). Such a relationship where there is positive

space demands mutual trust and true friendship. Unfortunately this does not seem to be very common.

CONCLUSION

However for the mutual enjoyment of these and other expressions of sexuality, the work must start at the beginning of the relationship through an agreement to communicate openly and regularly. In this way it is possible for a couple to be open to those changes in the expression of their sexuality which will be needed throughout their life together.

In this respect pre marital counselling can be of great help. The advice of parents, older relatives, pastors and teachers seldom touches the realities of married life in urban Africa where the tensions from the push and pull of the different forces influencing attitudes and behaviour can be devastating. Meetings of married couples sponsored by Churches and counselling centres can be very important in enabling couples to discuss openly these relationships and the changes that are needed through the years.

Finally 'Generativity' must now take on a deeper meaning that involves not only the bearing of children, but the couples' ability to go on generating new life for one another and between each other. This demands not only mutuality of roles, but also a great degree of mutual respect and equality. **How possible is this?**

Bibliography

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