



AFRICA REGIONAL SEXUALITY
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A Postcolonial Scene: On Girls' Sexuality

**Sanya Osha Ph.D.,
Centre for Civil Society,
University of KwaZulu-Natal,
South Africa**

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Introduction

Religion is not dead. Not even in the Western world which in fact is where the new religion began. The new religion is sexuality which like all other religions thrives under the shadow of fundamentalism. The resources of this fundamentalism are not always spiritual as in more conventional religions. The power of sex pervades everything and not even babies are exempt. The sexualisation of everyday life is now complete and this can be observed through the power and medium of advertising, which is fully sexualised; a mere soft drink advertisement is an apt occasion to make a sexual statement. An advertisement for a deodorant might easily be confused for an endorsement for a particular kind of underwear. Indeed the marketisation of sex and sexuality has become a widespread advertising strategy in many parts of the globe. Sexuality is the new religion of the world and HIV/AIDS is just one of its modes of sacralisation. And sexuality may be perhaps the most powerful religion known to humanity since its penetration of all spheres of life is total; conventional religion, the state and the nation, the family and the virtual communities engendered by the new information technologies are all completely penetrated by the new religion which in actuality is as old as humankind itself.

Reconceptualising Socialisation

Before I begin the discussion of girls' sexuality and its modes of socialisation, I think it is necessary to reflect on the various ideological inflections of the topic, that is, the contexts in which it can be reconceptualised beginning from the title. This is supposed to be a reflection on "girls' socialisation and its implications for the sexuality discourse in Nigeria." I must say that being a male, I felt a certain tinge of hesitation, a certain necessity to deconstruct my subject-position. Gender and sexual empowerment is now being argued to be gender neutral and that it ought to be goal of all who struggle for emancipation for various forms of structural oppression. And then I felt consoled by the fact that I have written on related topics such as African forms of feminism and that as bell hooks, the African-American feminist and activist has argued, the project[s] of women's empowerment has got to be as broad-based as possible; that is, it is essentially a collective effort that must involve the participation of men. This theoretical injunction, I find quite consoling. And then even in developmentalist industry which promotes many of the ideals of the Bretton Woods institutional paradigm, the argument has been advanced that real development can only come about if development plans and policies involve the participation of women at various levels. In other words, the

emancipation of women from multiple forms of structural oppression is not for the benefit of women alone. Rather, it is an effort that has the possibilities of granting greater meaning and relevance to the very idea of freedom at the broadest and deepest possible level. And so for this reasons, I have chosen to offer a few words on girls' sexuality and a few reflections on its sociopolitical and cultural implications.

Unpacking Sexuality

First and foremost, the very concept of sexuality needs to be unpacked. Sexuality, we would recall, is a modern invention as Michel Foucault, the French poststructuralist philosopher argues (see his three volumes entitled, *History of Sexuality*). Foucault posits that the modern discourse of sexuality formed an integral part of the bourgeois Enlightenment project. In other words, the discourse of sexuality in its modern inflection arose out of serious concern about the European social body. In order to secure proper functioning of the social body, specific disciplinary mechanisms had to be enforced. There was the Malthusian fear of population explosion. An unruly and undisciplined underclass constituted a threat to law and order and to society at large (Scott, 1998). So it was agreed that the site of sexuality was where to begin the quest for sociopolitical order. Of course the constitution of this particular sociopolitical order had important cultural implications that came to have much wider global effects. Even the question of social health is directly linked to the question of sexuality.

So in its modern Enlightenment conception, sexuality is essentially a political project that was meant to serve as well as project specific class interests. Of course this cannot be the only genealogy of sexuality available. Regimes of sexuality, as we would have seen, are essentially political projects that reflect specific class interests and biases and which eventually go on to acquire specific hegemonic features. Thus, the notion of sexuality always invites its conceptual unpacking and it is in many respects very ideologically loaded and also a highly problematic concept. Indeed in our discussions of sexuality in Nigeria- be it male or female- we must bear in mind that it is highly ideologically loaded and also a quite problematic concept.

Sexuality and Colonialism

In the history of colonialism, the idea of sexuality maintains a very important part and function. Colonialism and indeed a wide variety of Western imperial projects reconfigured the discourse of sexuality in ways that in contemporary times, the history and event of colonialism cannot be divorced from close readings of sexuality. At many moments and at many levels, colonialism and sexuality formed parts of a single project, that is, the project of Western imperial domination (McClintock, 1995, Nagel, 2003). The colonial project involved the conquest of foreign lands and peoples and within the context of that epochal process, within those processual dynamics, tropes of sexuality came to possess ominous implications. Multiple structures of characterisation, subjectification and construction evolved from the institution of the colonial order.

In essence, few well-known binary models typified the entire colonial event: black/white, active/passive, logical/emotional and for our purposes, male/female. Under the colonial scheme of typification the white subject is active, logical and usually male while the colonial other- to employ a somewhat Fanonian term- is black, passive, emotional and feminised even when he is male. So within the dominant ethos of colonialism, the female sex maintained a denigrated position in the structure of hierarchiarisation. The White male was the master of not only the colonial world but also the entire universe and all other subjects were feminised even when they were male but not white and when they were also white but female.

The spread and penetration of global capital, that is, the financializaion of the globe is also central to this pervasive trope of feminisation. A few passages from a volume on African sexualities edited by Signe Arnfred capture the sexual dimension of colonial quest: ... "*King Solomon's Mines*, written in blood by the dying explorer Jose Silvestre, and later guiding the male hero Alan Quatermain and his comrades in their quest to find the hidden treasure, and to penetrate and conquer the land. The map itself underscores the sexual nature of the quest" (Arnfred 2004: 61). And then; "In order for the white man- whose prototype is the colonizing male- to maintain civilisation and control, disturbing sexual energies had to be held in check" (Arnfred 2004: 63).

The colonial order transferred this logic of structure, classification, subjectification and domination to the postcolonial state which failed to critique this specific form of structural

oppression. Theorists of the colonial/postcolonial have begun to address the incomplete nature of the projects and processes of decolonisation (Amadiume,1997; Oyewumi, 1997). In addition to the project of political and economic decolonisation, we have to consider the equally important project of sexual decolonisation. The history of the colonial female figure is directly linked to the vast project of colonialism itself and this history in the postcolonial moment still maintains a certain colonial logic. This is so because the postcolonial state -in addition to various oppressive patriarchal structures-remains largely unreconstructed.

The Postcolonial State

In essence, a reading of girls' sexuality must take into account the history of colonial oppression, its multiple legacies and the modes of socialisation it fosters. I would argue that the postcolonial state needs to be sexually deconstructed as it still maintains a certain sexist colonial logic. So at the level of the state, we have to contend with perhaps the highest form of structural oppression. Needless to add, the mode of socialisation this structure engenders does little to foster the production of female subjectivities and hence freedoms. In addition to reproducing the logic of colonial oppression, the postcolonial state has added new forms of oppression to its arsenal. The colonial event is certainly not the only point of entry to begin a discourse on postcolonial sexuality but it has, I think, a very useful methodological and conceptual value that situates the topic within a very significant historical context.

The relationships between colonialism and sexuality have been explored by several scholars who have been able to demonstrate the centrality of sexuality not only to the imperial project but also to the formation of colonial sexualities and identities in ways that continue to reverberate even within the postcolonial moment. Thus, colonialism as a broad political project usually formulated elaborate approaches to, and discourses on, sexualities in the colonies. To construct its various regimes of sexuality, the colonial order maintained an economy of terror that was largely adopted and syncretised by the postcolonial state. However, as I mentioned earlier, this is just one regime of sexuality among several competing regimes.

Ethno-Religious Discourses and Sexuality

In a complex country such as Nigeria, it is difficult to universalise the problem of female oppression. Variables such as culture, ethnicity, locale, religion and so on matter in order to better conceptualise the problem. The variants of Christianity- orthodox and Pentecostal- have various regimes of sexualisation (*acculturated sexuality*) and socialisation. I do not think it is the time and place to discuss these various regimes. First, space is a constraint. And the extreme ideological nature of those regimes is another problem. Many of our recent political problems have a decidedly religious dimension. The introduction of the *Sharia* legal code in as many as twelve Northern states of the Nigerian federation has transformed the entire national political landscape in ways that are still unfolding. Under the introduction of the *Sharia* code, a state of political flux has been created in which older regimes and forms of socialisation and sexualisation are being radically redefined. In this kind of cultural and political context, the very meaning and construction of sexuality can be expected to change and in many ways, they have changed.

At this juncture, I would argue that we cannot have a national, universalised reading of sexuality in Nigeria. Instead, we can have multiple readings and constructions of sexuality that accord with the differences and complexities of the phenomenon. The point is that a particular regime of sexuality under Islamic law and culture exists just as there are other regimes instituted and supported by various Christian denominations. There is secularised, global regime of sexuality and there is also a regime of sexuality that has not entered the domain of modernity, that is, one that has rescripted the project and discourse of sexuality in a modernist Foucauldian way. In other words, I have identified four broad categories or regimes of sexuality- I am sure there others- that are likely to influence the construction of a girl's sexuality since they constitute the sociological universes she is likely to encounter. Indeed, the kind of regime of sexuality that a girl adopts and supports depends on the specific context and mode of socialisation to which she is subjected.

What this reading of sexuality in Nigeria suggests is a deconstruction of a national sexual agenda, that is, an agenda that constructs and enforces a single regime of sexuality in Nigeria and to acknowledge the fact that there is a multiplicity of regimes of sexuality in existence within the country. There is the need to acknowledge the presence

of difference[s] and that this entails a particular ideological and democratic stance. It is difficult to maintain and provide support for the categorical, that is, a Kantian conception of sexuality in Nigeria for the reason of national complexity and diversity.

There are different orders of sexuality in Nigeria as I mentioned earlier on and I will reidentify some of them in the following manner; the postcolonial nationalist order of sexuality which takes its impetus and its ideological muscle from the very fount of colonialism; the regime of sexuality fostered by the *Sharia* legal code; the regime fostered by various Christian denominations – orthodox and Pentecostal; and a global secularised regime of sexuality. I would not dispute there might be more in existence. Consequently, the modes of socialisation and sexualisation a girl encounters will depend on which the particular religious and ethnic framework she is inserted or finds herself. Within this context, we cannot assign a national homogenous conception of sexuality to all the sections of the nation. In conceptualising the notion of sexuality, the fact of diversity needs to be recognised and this is inflected by variables of religion, culture, ethnicity, to a lesser extent, region and of course the postcolonial state. All these variables in varying degrees and in various ways affect the forms of sexuality, sexualisation and the modes of socialisation that they invite.

The complexity of the phenomenon of sexuality was brought to the fore recently in Nigeria during the aborted Miss World Beauty Pageant (2002). A certain section of the country held the view that the beauty contest should not be staged because it will constitute an affront to their religious sensibilities. Another section of the country did not see anything wrong with it. The dichotomisation in many ways took the form of a religious split. On that occasion, the federal government elected to forestall the crisis by cancelling the pageant even though the wife of the President had been intimately involved in the preparations for the beauty contest. Underlying the conflict, that is, the crisis, is a gulf within the national understanding[s] of sexuality, epistemologies of the body, pleasure and aesthetics in which both religion and fears of the patriarchy played a prominent part. In addition, two competing epistemologies of the body jostled within the public domain; one that stood for an aesthetic of concealment and enclosure and the other, which upheld an aesthetic of postmodern revelation and disclosure. We cannot ignore this specific sociopolitical and cultural matrix and also the particular history from which it emerged as it affects directly the question of a girl's sexuality. Given the

variations in the schema by which we may talk about girls' sexuality in Nigeria, how do we begin to erect the categorisations that pertain to sexuality? This, I think, ought to be the project to which scholars of sexuality should address themselves. By way of suggestion, there is no single way to conceive or construct sexuality as the determinants of our history, cultures, religions and ethnicities indicate.

North-Muslim's Perspectives

At this juncture, it is perhaps necessary to discuss some of the features of these various determinants of sexuality. The organisation of sexuality under Islamic law is obviously different from its perception in most regions of the Christian South. I would not venture to offer an analysis of sexuality in Northern/Islamic Nigeria for the very reason I do not think I am equipped with the vocabulary to do so. I employ here, the Wittgensteinian notion of the language-game to characterise a form of life that exists according to its own specific mode of address. The point would be to discover that specific mode of discourse and see if any universal implications can be teased out of its content. But I must also admit that the very notion of a hegemonic Islamic North is often problematic and in many instances falters. Indeed there are specific para-sociopolitical logics and injunctions governing issues of affect, marital life and modes of socialisation and which receive their founding principles from tenets contained in the Holy Koran. Now, we have to ask ourselves, would we be fair in engaging those forms of life without an assiduous understanding of Islam not only as a religion but also as a complete way of life? I would think not.

South Nigerian Perspectives

Let us now see how this works in the predominantly Christian South of Nigeria. We can talk more comfortably of modern sexuality here. Apart from secular values having a greater foothold here, there are more and often competing discourses of sexuality to be found in this region. But the modes and articulations that shape their trajectories are another matter entirely. I would contend they are at present in a state of flux and this effort, I mean, this seminar is part of the effort to describe the ways in which they are being articulated and by which such articulations can be further entrenched. In the Christian South, one would think that sexuality is mediated by a number of influences beginning with the postcolonial state, various Christian denominations- ranging from fundamentalist sects to more liberal cosmopolitan ones- the site of the city as a place of

various self-stylisations and self-imaginings and of course influences that stem from the global as a result of tourist activity and different kinds of migrations. These are very broad parameters but they reflect the multiple inflections of sexuality that can occur in this particular context. Indeed there are many inflections of sexuality and perhaps this is not the place to discuss them. But the possibilities for various constructions and discourses of sexuality are many. Even influences from traditional culture mediate the constructions of urban sexuality. Accordingly, it has been noted that “Jane Guyer developed the conceptual framework of *polyandrous motherhood*, which captures the particular life situation of the unmarried mothers in a more fruitful way than does the concept of ‘prostitute’ which reduces them to immoral sexual beings: ‘Polyandrous motherhood’ is a liaison consisting of women “cultivating co-parental ties with more than one father of their children” (Haram 2004: 224). The concept of polyandrous motherhood is influenced by a variety of pressures; tradition, modernity, urbanity and cosmopolitanism- in ways that refuse any water-tight or absolute schemas. It is new as well as old in the same breath since it partakes of both at the same time.

More than anything else, it is the urban and cosmopolitan inflections of sexuality that enable us to conceive of sexuality in the way we are now. This mode of address represents a certain globalised conception of sexuality that has been disseminated by a variety of flows-people, ideas, products, services and advertising techniques- and which empower specific notions of sexuality as universal. We must read the possible colonial dimensions of these flows, that is, the possible coloniality of their logics and also the technologies of domination that they enable in order to know what relations are possible within the structures and hierarchies of power. This is why I mentioned earlier that the critique and unpacking of the very concept of sexuality should be the first task and is perhaps the most important one.

We need to avoid the temptations to universalise regimes of sexuality in Nigeria, that is, the temptation to decontextualise the concept of sexuality as a phenomenon. If we concede that there are various regimes of sexuality in existence and that they invite different modes of socialisation then we also accept that we are broadening the very notion and script of democracy. In order to understand contemporary sexuality in Nigeria, there is the need to revisit the history of colonial oppression to understand its construction[s] of sexuality within the colonial epoch itself and beyond it into

postcoloniality to determine the ways in which the colonial logics of sexuality have been disabled, enabled or reproduced. This approach is certain to provide us with a historicity that we should find useful as a methodological strategy.

Concluding remarks

What I have done here is to suggest an analytical framework with which girls' sexuality, and indeed, the general economy of sexuality within Nigeria may be discussed. The first mistake would be to attempt to universalise or conceptualise as if it has a singularity, a homogeneity that would not admit of multiple inflections. The second would be not to identify the ideological environment within which conceptions of sexuality are analysed and thereby enforce an ahistorical, non-specific mode of discourse for something that wishes not to be addressed in that specific way and that is still questing to find a mode of address that it finds suitable. In other words, to talk about girls' sexuality or any kind of sexuality for that matter in a postcolonial context such as this, there has got to be a historical deconstruction of the very notion of sexuality itself and then also the ideological biases within which it is constituted. Without this kind of critical posture, just as forms of structural oppression against women continue to thrive, the conception of sexuality may become prey to hegemonic forces that prescribe its trajectories even before it (the concept of sexuality) acquires independent form and even when they (hegemonic forces) are not in its interest.

In essence, the way[s] in which a girls' sexuality may be constructed in contemporary Nigeria and the modes of socialisation that accompanies that process of sexuality would depend on variables of culture, ethnicity, religion and to some extent region. Also the ideological underpinnings that mediate these various determinants are also important in the way in which we perceive, talk of and mobilise discourses of sexuality. If we grant that variables of culture, ethnicity, religion and region are some of the broad categories by which a girl's sexuality might be constituted, what does this mean in epistemological and sociological terms? Certainly it implies we have hardly begun the important task of describing the various forms of sexuality to be found in Nigeria. Nigeria being a very complex and diverse country has over 250 ethnicities that advance different notions and practices of gender relations that invariably have implications for the formations of sexual identities. We need to interrogate the dynamics at work within these various ethnicities to determine how they contribute to, and/or depart from, a general economy

of sexuality. Obviously, this is an effort that requires contributions from a wide range of specialists- sociologists, anthropologists, psychologists, philosophers and different kinds of present day sexologists. One is pleased to conclude that the effort has been initiated.

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