

Spiritual Content of Yoruba Concept of Sexuality and Sustenance of Family Values through Eko - Ile (Home Training)

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Abstract

This paper examined the spiritual content of the Yoruba concept of sexuality and the implications it has for the sustenance of family values by use of *eko ile* (home training) which parents are expected to provide for their children as they prepare them for good citizenship. It is observed that most complaints about bad behaviours of young people in the contemporary African society are blamed on the lack of this cherished aspect of parenting. Inability to provide this training either because the parents do not have it or that the challenges of the time make it impossible for them to do so has resulted into a degeneration of family values in the society and almost every aspect of life; spiritual, social and moral. Traditional values and cultural norms are slowly but steadily phasing out with an alternative that permits lose control in family and community structure. The paper therefore recommends for parents to have a rethink and retrace their steps to forestall further degeneration by practicing and teaching their children *eko ile* that assign responsibilities with sexuality in view for the total development of society.

Keywords: Spiritual content, Yoruba, Concept Human Sexuality, Sustenance, Family Values

1. Introduction

Sexuality occupies a prominent place in the thinking and discussions of human persons irrespective of religious, racial, economic, social and educational backgrounds; it has also been subject of continuous exploration and promotion, particularly with respect to sex. In Africa for instance, most streets and markets in the towns and villages are flooded with salesmen and women who without any fear advertise different kinds of drugs and herbs for improving sexual performance or solving problems associated with malfunctions. Continuously, new herbs and methods are explored to get better expression of sexuality. The continuous patronage of the services of these salesmen and women could only imply the importance which Africans attach to sexuality.

Concerns about sexuality becomes worrisome when it is observed that certain contemporary sexual practices reduce people to be less than the image of God, they are created to be. Situations where for instance, human beings are slaughtered like animals and their bodies offered for ritual activities make discussion on sexuality very relevant. Again, the ways people particularly use their organs for pleasure is cause for concern. As an example, a 44 year old religious leader (deacon) was reported to have slept with a 7 year old girl using his spittle to lubricate her vaginal to have his way (Olaluba, 2016). Also, an ex-soldier killed his girl friend because of some text messages he saw on her phone that suggested unfaithfulness in the relationship (Owuamanam, 2016). These developments exert pressure on human conduct and reduced sex to something commonplace.

The focus of this work is the spiritual content of Yoruba peoples' conception of sexuality and how it contributes to sustenance of family values by use of *eko ile* (home training) which parents should provide for their children. The question sought to be answered is; how should the spiritual content of Yoruba concept of spirituality influence the fostering of *eko ile* for sustenance of family values among young people and prepare them for future good citizenship? The paper agrees with the theory expressed in the Yoruba saying that, *omo ta a ko ni yio gbe ile ta ko ta* meaning a child not given home training would eventually sell the house built as security by the parents. It opines that parents in the contemporary society need to re-examine their expected roles of preparing their wards for good citizenships as it is observed that most complaints of inappropriate conducts by young people in the society are usually traced back to the lack of *eko-ile*. In this paper, spiritual content refers to ideas and materials within the Yoruba understanding of human sexuality that are intellectually interesting, challenging and worthwhile connected with things non-material but spirit. A description of the Yoruba people and concept of human sexuality are given in another part of this work. Sustenance refers those aspects of Yoruba concept of human sexuality, the application of which supports healthy social interaction while, family values are the acceptable principles and practices that are worthwhile and important among Yoruba people for good living. Discussions proceed with conceptual clarification on human sexuality.

1.1 Conceptual Clarification on Human Sexuality

Human sexuality is an issue which, at least for religious people is believed to have crowned the creative act of God and set in motion the process of procreation through secondary means. It is perhaps the most difficult issue confronting man in all of history due to issues which emerge from man's thinking and actions about it. It has been like a puzzle and mystery to which man has either attempted to repress, believing its' too powerful and dangerous or allow freely reign as source of pleasure and a game to play (Cosgrave, 1979). Among the emerging issues from

people's thinking and actions on sexuality are procreation, contraception, celibacy, marriage, adultery, casual sex, flirting, prostitution, homosexuality, masturbation, seduction, rape, sexual harassment, pornography, bestiality, and abortion; all of which are expressed in fantasies, desires, beliefs, attitudes, values and practices (Alaba, 2004). A common denominator among these issues is the search for and attainment of sexual pleasure or satisfaction and procreation which are things people naturally use some of their body organs to achieve.

Sexuality has been defined variously to mean, the condition of interpersonal relationship between male and female which may be associated with or leading up to, genital union. To a large extent, it is behavioural compatibility, gratification and personality conflicts especially between male and female, as individuals or collectively ("Sexuality" Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy, <http://www.iep.utm.edu/sexuality>). From the Christian perspective however, it is God's design, a sacred wedding gift to human beings and a divine idea in creation that brings together two spiritual beings (Cosgrave, 1979); a man and a woman into a mutual relationship that is accountable to God. Therefore, expressing it outside marriage constitutes an abuse ("Human Sexuality, <http://www.tellingthetruth.org>). Humans are created to be relational beings and sexual pleasure is the pinnacle of that relationship. Christianity teaches purity in sexual acts and condemns immorality in marital commitment. Sex is a human problem as well as a gift of the creator to be seen as invitation to communion; its' understanding pervades all theology, ethics, and understandings of spirituality (Nelson, 1990).

Human sexuality therefore, is everything that constitutes an individual to be identified as a man or a woman influencing their entire personality and life in many significant ways and conditions individual maturity and social integration. It should be noted that the actual differences between men and women in our culture is not necessarily innate or immutable. They are due partly to social and cultural conditioning that apportions certain qualities or characteristics as being typically masculine (strength, initiative, logical reasoning) or feminine (sensitivity, warmth and submissiveness) (Fehlman, 1990). Human sexuality is psychological as a means to express sexual sensation, related intimacy and fullness of love between a man and a woman and biological as the means through which a child is conceived and the lineage is passed on from one generation to the next therefore, it is holistic, involving the body, mind, and spirit.

2. Literature Review

Literatures reviewed cover the areas of Yoruba people, spiritual content in their concept of human sexuality, family values and *Eko Ile* (home training).

2.1 The Yoruba People

The Yoruba people fortunately have been subject of studies by different scholars. Scholars like Fadipe (1970), Idowu (1974); Lloyd (1974), Gugler and Flamagan (1978), Atanda (1980); Awolalu (2001); Alaba (2004) and Ajayi (2005) have written on different aspects of the Yoruba people to indicate the richness of their traditions, culture and religions in contributing to human knowledge. Yoruba people are largely found in the western part of Nigeria being one of the three tribes that have the largest population in the country; others are the Hausa-Fulani and the Igbo. They could also be found in West African Countries like – Togo, Benin Republic, Ivory Coast, Ghana and Liberia. They are generally agrarian and expressive people who celebrate colourfully major events in their lives (<http://www.cometonigeria.com>). With a population of about 40 million which constitutes about 21% of Nigeria's estimated over 186 million people, they have a long history of being urbanized (<http://en.wikipedia.org>). Among the Yoruba people sexuality pervades practically every aspect of their existential practices.

2.2 Spiritual Content in Yoruba Concept of Sexuality

Yoruba concept of sexuality consists much of spiritual content and this is discussed below.

Only the Supreme Being – God is not sexual - Only the Supreme Being – God who is creator, never procreated directly through sexual intercourse. Every other created being is connected with sex in one way or the other; the deities, Spirits – human, ancestral, natural or ghost are sexual in nature (Familusi, 2009). Of course, Yoruba African Traditional Religious practices provided the hierarchy for worship of beings; first is the Supreme Being -God, next are the Deities followed by the Spirits (Idowu, 1974). God is eternally self-subsisting, omniscient, omnipresent and omnipotent who at the same time is *Olorun* (owner of heaven), *Eleda Orun oun Aiye* (The Creator of Heaven and the Earth), *Olojo Oni* (Owner of today), *Awamaridi* (One whose origin is unsearchable) (Imasogie, 1985; Awolalu, 1981).

Deities and Spirits marry and have children - Yoruba believe that deities and spirits exist according to their sexual status. It was stated, "after the arrival of the divinities (on earth, *sic*) human population increased at Ife in two ways. The divinity married among them and gave birth to the lineage of men who later become the divine ruler" (Wande, 1976). An *Ifa* corpus that is authoritative on this belief states *sinmi titi, lawo sinmi titi; sinmi jinna lawo sinmi jinna; Adifa fun Orunmila nlo reefe; Ojunro mi omo Orisa Igbo Wuji*, (Elubuon, 1998) which translates "Escort me too long; Escort me too far; Ifa priest of too far; Ifa priest of too far; Ifa divination was performed for

Orunmila the day he went to marry *Ojunromi* daughter of *Orisa Igbo Wuji*.” *Ojunromi* was the beautiful daughter of *Orisala*. Again, certain Yoruba myths hold that divinities married and bore children for instance, *Odoje* was daughter to *Orisala* (Elubuon, 1998). There was also the story about Yoruba origin which stated that Sango was once a King in Oyo and he married and had children with *Oya*, *Oshun* and *Oba* other female deities (Atanda, 1980). This claim of deities giving birth to children also appears in an Edo-Benin myth which holds that, *Olokun* and other divinities are the sons and daughters of the Supreme Being sent to earth (Imasogie, 1985).

Even though divinities are held as sexual beings, they are still revered as wise beings endowed with power to detect wrong acts and restrain anti-social behaviours though such acts are shrouded in secrecy (George, 2001). The divinities perform this task by possessing their human agents who play the roles of diviners and mediums to unravel secret wrong doings (Mbiti, 1978). The essence is to regulate and maintain moral order in the society. Sexuality is important in distinguishing spirits and so listed *Yeye Odo* or *Yemoja* popularly referred to as ‘mammy water’ (Rojas, 1994).

Spirits marry human persons who bear children into spirit world - Spirits are said to have ability to inhabit every area, object or creature and nothing created is without a spirit of its own. They can even appear physically as abnormally tall, fat or slim beings because they are “personification of natural force” (Awolalu, 1981) and ghost spirit of deified ancestors (Idowu, 1974). Yoruba believe some of these spirits marry human persons and could be the male or female partner in the relationship. This concept is presented as *Oko Orun* among the Yoruba meaning ‘heaven husband’ who is in the spirit world. This idea is corroborated by the statement “the belief in existence of spiritual entities as part of the realities in the world of men is of immemorial antiquity” (Adewusi, 2008). Such marriages involve sexual intercourse between the partners (the human being and the spirit) but it will not produce children into the physical world. Children may be raised in the “spirit world” with the resultant effect that the human partner would be unable to produce children into the physically world. This issue has caused problems among couples having difficulties with bearing children. In certain churches it forms a major prayer point that “every spirit husband or wife die in Jesus’ name” (Olukoya, 2012; 2006).

Wandering Spirits and sexuality - There is the belief in *Abiku* (born-to- die children) who are wandering spirits that specializes in mischievously displacing fetus of pregnant women to be born in order to die again. It is traditionally held that this company of spirits undertake in turns to carry out their mischief. *Abiku* deny their parents the basic desire among Yoruba parents that their children give them a befitting burial after death and this failure will turn them into ghost spirits (Oyetade, 2004). *Akudaaya* is another form of belief in spirits which holds that people who had not completed their allocated time to spend on earth before death cannot go to heaven but incarnate back into life to complete the remaining time. On incarnation, they go to live in places they feel none of their relatives and familiars would discover; there, they would live normal lives, marry and do everything that normal persons do including marrying and having children. But the very day that a familiar person comes across them they disappear along with all their personal effects.

Cultic grouping and sexuality - Yoruba tradition seems to assign certain cultic grouping according to sex. For instance, the witches cult is restricted to women hence, the cognomen *eyin iya mi osoronga at’apa jori, atedo jokan, atidi joronro*; meaning ‘osoroga mothers who eats the head from the arms, eats the heart from the kidney and eats the bile from the anus’ (Jemiriye, Accessed June, 2016).

Sexuality and purity of Worship Leaders - African Traditional beliefs and practices are essentially wrapped up in religions which have proved to promote stability and creative innovations within the society. The worship of gods usually demands leadership by those who are sexually pure and where female priestesses are allowed, they are usually virgins who have never compromised their sanctity. It is believed such individuals are the ones that attract the blessings of the gods but those who commit secret sins are punished (Ajayi, 2005). This indicates that sexual purity is cherished among divinities as honourable just as Apostle Paul admonished in Heb. 13: 4. Sexual infidelity is frowned at and the women particularly are restricted to be married to only one husband whereas the men can marry many wives; an idea expressed in the song *Awa okunrin le laya mefa ko buru: okunrin kan soso l’Oba Oluwa yan fobirin* meaning ‘we men can each have six wives, it is not bad at all; it is only one man that my God has assigned a woman’ (Alaba, 2004). This is a concept that encourages polygyny and disparity in human rights.

Sexuality and spirit of ancestors - Ancestors are believed to be strongly connected with the continuity of lineages, hence the Yoruba common prayers for new wives *Ori yio sin O* meaning ‘the head will escort you’ referring to spirits of the ancestors who are believed to be unseen guests at every wedding programme involving their descendants. There is also the prayer, *Iyawo yio finu se oyun, yio fehin gbomo pon*, meaning “the new wife’s womb will carry pregnancy and her back will carry babies.” This is in view of the fact that every normal person must be sexually active *adaape* meaning he or she is created complete. Whenever there are difficult challenges; to reflect the connection between the ancestors gone ahead and the living; the individual prays *Baba mi, ma sun lorun*, literally meaning, “my father do not sleep in heaven.”

Sexuality, differences and gender roles – sexuality among Yoruba determines to a large extent the kind of roles that men or women play at home, social gatherings, choice of vocation until recently when barriers seem to be giving way to equality in every aspect of life. Female sexuality is often socially oriented toward love and marriage

but for a male it is genital oriented and relief of sexual tension through ejaculation (Fehlman, 1990). This is because in normal males, sex drive is a powerful biological and emotional force that is often difficult to control satisfactorily. Often adult males do achieve sexual gratification independent of love and commitment rating sexual intercourse as the most important feature of marriage but women tend to rank it lower while rating their security, that of the home and children as most important elements of their marriage.

Sexuality and vocational choice - Even though some vocations are done by both sexes still there are those peculiar to sexes. For instance farming *Agbe* is practiced by both sexes but the men focus on cash crop cultivation which are more difficult- cocoa, rubber, cotton and sometime yam while, the women deal more with easier crops like tomatoes, vegetables, okro and pepper. Traditionally women will not be palm wine tappers *ope dida*, black smith *agbete*, carpenters *gbenagbena* or hunter *ode*, but engage in being beauticians' *onidiri*, petty traders *alate*, travelling -roaming-sellers or trader *alajapa* and cloth-loom weaving workers *alaso hihun*, dyeing *pipa laro* and sales *oja tita*. It should be noted that a man will not normally be a beautician -*onidiri*- as it is a woman's world, but all these have given way in contemporary times. People now follow the popular dictum "what a man can do, a woman can do better."

2.3 Family Values among the Yoruba People and *Eko Ile*

Family values among the Yoruba people are entrenched in *eko ile*- home training as an inherent parental responsibility which is also shared by members of the entire community. Trainings can be informal or formal and it cover cultural greetings and actions, decency in language and dressing, respect for the elderly, knowledge of cultural norms and practices, history of a persons' clan and family structure, riddles, stories and proverbs that teach wisdom, vocational choices and communality; all of which are reflected in sexuality. Informally, it takes the forms of storytelling, gossips and conversations, folk songs. Formally, sexuality education is carried out through cultural practices in plays, dances and arts, cultural beliefs, in taboos, in religious practices and involvements in various performances. Practices like *ekun iyawo* (bride's praise song/chant) and *idana* (engagement) celebrations are taught to enhance grasp of cultural distinctive and language proficiency.

Other forms of formal training include greetings when boys are taught to *dobale* lay flat on the floor-prostrate, while girls are required to *kunle* kneel down. To inculcate a sense of decency little children are jokingly taught to cover their sexual organs by commenting *ewo idi re nita* meaning 'look at her/his buttocks outside.' Little girls are told, *patan re mo oko re nbo* meaning 'close your thighs your husband is coming.' Stubborn children are always threatened by the use of the father figure in the expression '*ma fi ejo re sun baba re ti won ba de*' meaning 'I will report you to your father when "they" come.' It should be noted that "*won*" is plural but used to address a single person who is senior and in this case - the father. Such use enhances the masculine authority figure of the family head, which again is in itself an extension of the concept of sexuality. Educating children for chastity strives to achieve the objectives of (a) maintaining a positive atmosphere of love, virtue and respect for God's gift of life; (b) help children understand the value of sexuality and chastity while, sustaining their growth through enlightenment, examples and prayers; (c) help children understand and discover their own vocation and responsibilities in marriage and commitment to sexual purity in harmony with and respecting their attitudes and inclinations and the gifts of the Spirit (Alaba, 2004).

In spite of context, contemporary parents find difficulties in giving children an adequate preparation for adult life through *eko ile*, particularly with regard to education in the true meaning of sexuality. Reasons for the difficulty are many but include postmodern perspectives on society hitherto underplayed but which influence societal dynamics in various ways like cherishing of value systems generally independent of historical antecedents and dressing codes (Olaniyan, 2015). It also include a general decline in laying of emphasis on the cultural respect for fundamental values that permeated and served to protect and maintain decency in social conducts among people in communities in the past. This decline of traditional models in larger human communities has left children deprived of consistent and positive guidance.

3. Implications of Spiritual Content of Yoruba Concept of Sexuality for Parents in Sustenance of Family Values

In view of the spiritual content which Yoruba concept of sexuality contains, it is important that parents recognize the awesomeness of the responsibilities they have toward sustenance of family values within the society. Their responsibilities extend to God - father of all spirits, to whom the accounts of stewardship of parenting must be rendered; to the unseen Spirit-beings who participate in moral preservation of society and are interested in its' continuity; and to the society for raising responsible individuals who can be relied upon for future leadership in religious, social, economic and every spheres of societal life. Their failure to carry out responsibilities expected of them is failure of the system and consequently the society. Parents should see procreation of children to bring new life into the world as a supreme achievement and therefore should not trivialize their responsibilities. It is when parents properly play their roles that the quality of young person's characters improve and by extension the society enjoys the benefits of having more enlightened citizens to contribute to the development strides of the

nation (Olaniyan, 2012).

It is observed that the various training which children should be given are not made available again for lack of time and shifting priorities. As a matter of fact most of the young contemporary parents lack the *eko ile* expected to be given the children. As consequence, it is now difficult to have a trusting relationship because almost everybody is looking after personal gains. Children and young people now hardly respect and follow advises of elders; many are not interested in honest and hard labours rather, they want quick path to success and accumulation of wealth, preferring pleasure at all cost than having a good name. The fear of God and respect for the opinions, religious views, and right of others to life and fair share of the wealth endowed countries is not respected. There is increasing divorce rate and criminal practices to “make it.”

From a biblical perspective, it is therefore suggested that parents must by example teach their children the fear and worship of God (Deut. 6: 4-9); how to establish personal relationship with members of the opposite sex as a powerful antidote to loneliness, isolation and getting out of oneself into the life of others (Prov. 4: 1-3; 5: 1-6; 22: 6); traditional ways of dressing that avoids nudity; teach profitability in non-criminally infused transactions; decency in public and sexual practices and being selective in media adverts to be watched and group of friends to make because, bad communication corrupt good manners (Prov. 22:6; 1 Cor. 15: 33; Eph. 5: 15-20), and avoid the propensity to be materialistically minded. The aim is to facilitate and promote love as a basic and essential good in human nature and life.

Men and women are to complement each other at all levels (Eph. 5: 25-23), because it is when they love and work together that contributions are made most to their own and society’s development. They should respect the differences between sexes to enrich and enhance each other because it is in a good interpersonal relationship and atmosphere of love that personal fulfillment in life is achieved (Cosgrave, 1979). The traditional mother’s role model of love and homeliness and that of the father as provider and authority figure should be reinforced regularly with acts of prayers, appreciation and forgiveness (Prov. 1: 8-11; 3: 1-5; Eph. 6: 1-4; Col. 3: 1-7). The traditional family patterns of communality which ensures a person may never be alone for a second from birth to death is to be encouraged through participation in all matters of sexuality like the community betrothal and issues related to marriage. Children should also be taught their history and what the culture determined as sexually permissible. According to Awoniyi (2014) they must be instructed about the taboos entrenched in their cultures for promotion of morality. Furthermore, the government should foster the teaching of refined cultural norms and practices in schools at junior levels.

4. Conclusion

This paper examined the spiritual content of Yoruba concept of sexuality and how it influences traditional parental roles in sustenance of family values by application of *eko ile* – “home training.” Parents are responsible for preparing children for good citizenship for the society but it is observed that complaints about bad behaviours of most young people among the Yoruba are blamed on the lack of *eko ile* ‘home training’ which parents are unable to give either because they do not have it or are too busy to do so. There is therefore, the need to have a rethink and retrace steps to forestall further degeneration within the society by practicing and teaching those good aspects of culture that assign responsibilities for total development of society and individuals.

Olaniyan (2016) while commenting on character development says it is an act of God’s grace to the end that people would serve God and humanity. Educational programmes should therefore be a fusion of the objectives of education and lessons drawn from the spiritual content of culture; bearing in mind that education will never change unless the citizens intentionally frame issues and set in motion practical tools and strategies to realign education with the vision they have for their young people.

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