

# BEING AND SEXUALITY: AN ANTHROPO-THEOLOGICAL STUDY OF SEXUALITY AMONG MODERN AFRICAN CHRISTIANS

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## Abstract

This is an anthro-theological study of sexuality among modern African Christians. Thus, the study examines the concept of sexuality among modern African Christians by seeking to extend the frontiers of knowledge on the topic. It is observed that African Christians carry two identities; Christianity and traditional culture-bearer. These have far-reaching effects on the people socially and religiously as the two have in it, the concept of moral rules. Data indicate that African societies, at various points, construe sexual relationship as a sacrosanct factor in their image of an ideal society, and a respectable phenomenon, which every member of the society must adhere to the rules guiding it. The study notes that on one hand, modern African Christians are faced with the challenge of expressing sexuality and its different colourations within the confine of Judeo-Western Christianity bequeathed to them by Western missionaries, and on the other hand, they are confronted with expression of sexuality within their traditional cultural norms. Methodologically, the study uses documented ethnographic data from anthropological studies of some notable African societies and biblical exegesis. It is clear from the study that in Africa, sexuality is attached with high level of sacredness, especially in traditional communities, which have come under heavy doses of westernization, *sinoization* (Chinese influence) and globalization. Findings show that Christians in Africa are dissected and torn between two worlds of Westernized Christianity and traditional African culture, out of which they are forced to forge a new identity.

**Keywords:** Africans, Anthro-theology, Christians, Sexuality, Traditional societies

## Introduction

Our knowledge of human sexuality can be enhanced by intermix of anthropology and theology because human beings are sexual beings and religion impinges on their sexual activities. The paper is exploratory and discursive, as it seeks to extend the frontiers of discourse of anthropology and theology on human sexuality by focusing on modern African

Christians. The interconnectivity of anthropology and theology is capable of making meaningful contributions to the discourse on humanity and its beliefs. Scholars like Davies Douglas (2002) and Robins (2006) have highlighted the relevance of such studies. It is germane in this study because human sexuality portends great discussion for scholars on African culture, African Christians and Christianity in general. The study notes that African Christians are invariably torn between competing interests on human intersexuality both traditional and modern that impose severe demands on them, which are more pronounced among modern African Christians. They are confronted with ideologies/philosophies and existential realities such as homosexuality, gay/lesbianism and transgender issues on one hand versus their deeply rooted traditional ethos on the other hand. They are also contending with variants of biblical perspectives, westernization and globalization, which are currently exerting great influence on them. In addition, there are unending buffeting with media onslaughts, which present conflicting ideas on sexuality among Africans.

The study observes that the concept of sexuality is losing its traditional normative meaning among Africans in general, a fact, which affects African Christians. In this light, Alimi,(2015) a well-known Nigerian gay and gay activist asserts, “If you say being gay is not African, you don't know your history”. To show the “unAfricanness” of gay/lesbianism, some African countries have criminalized same sex relations. This forces Arimoro (2018) to ask, if criminalization of same-sex relations is a protection of African culture? It is therefore, imperative to examine the unfolding sense of sexuality and ultimately male and female relationships within Africans who profess Christianity. Viewing from all angles in this paper, the origin and development of humanity, one thing had remained constant in all, sex and sexual relationships remain the core of which the reproduction of human beings rest.

The focus on African Christians is justifiable because, they form a sizable population of the world. Africa is home to the largest Christian population numbering circa 685 million. It is estimated that by 2025, there will be 760 million Christians in Africa, according to projections of the World Book encyclopedia. Christianity has many faces in the continent, a fact derived from healthy syncretistic modus operandi of African religionists. Scholars state that there are extensive syncretic tendencies in African religions in general. According to Mbiti (1992: 15), this is a blessing indeed, as “when Africans have converted to other religions, they often mix their traditional religion with the one to which they are converted. In this way they are not losing something valuable, but are gaining something from both religions”. And according to Riggs (2006:1), although a large proportion of Africans have converted to Islam and Christianity, these two worlds have been enculturated by Africans to suit their preferences and traditional orientations.

The study uses written ethnographic data collected in some African cultural settings and biblical exegesis. The paper explores the opinions, attitudes and discernible practices among modern African Christians on human sexuality. To bring the study into proper perspectives, the paper discusses the traditional tenets of human sexuality within Africa and notes that these tenets have come under deep pressure from foreign religions and modern media. The study notes that what might be the pristine believe of Africans about human sexuality has been largely subsumed under Islam and Christianity and heavily influenced by modern media.

### **Gender roles and sexual activity in the African perspective**

According to Tamale (2011: 11), “sexuality and gender go hand in hand; both are creatures of culture and society, and both play a central and crucial role in maintaining power relations in our societies”. The various dimensions of sexuality that Tamale mentions – including 'sexual knowledge, beliefs, values, attitudes and behaviors, as well as procreation, sexual orientation, and personal and interpersonal sexual relations' (ibid, 11-12) – all have gender specific connotations and implications. In as much as the foregoing issue is contemporary, it is nonetheless important to be aware of the long history of contestations over sexuality and gender in Africa. It has been pointed out by scholars like Ndjio (2013) and Oyewumi (1997), that during the colonial period, both missionaries and colonial administrations were concerned with policing African practices of sex, intimacy, and relationships, and with reshaping their underlying cultural values and meanings, as part of the mission of “civilising the natives”. In Oyewumi's opinion (1997: 8), polygamy and traditional initiation rites were among the most contested issues at the time but were embedded in a broader sexual politics of promoting Victorian values of 'decency' and 'morality,' as well as of a patriarchal gender politics that domesticated women's bodies while formalizing men's public roles. On the other hand, Ndjio (2013 :128) points out that,

In the postcolonial era these gender and sexual politics were framed, no longer in a narrative of being “good” colonial subjects, but in a narrative of African identity and authenticity: It is through the 'nationalization' of the sexuality of its citizens that, in many African countries, the post-colonial state has managed to draw boundaries between Africans and Westerners, citizens and strangers, authentic and deracinated Africans, good and bad citizens, loyal and disloyal subjects.

This nationalization of African sexuality was undergirded by a heteronormative-reproductive ideal. That is why Msibi (2011: 54–77) thinks that in recent years, with the globalization of originally Western notions of lesbian and gay identities and rights, this ideal has taken explicit anti-homosexual proportions such as expressed in the popular notion of homosexuality being “un-African” and a “Western invention”.

Indeed, issues of homosexuality, lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender, rights, and sexual diversity more broadly, have become serious contemporary challenge in Africa. In as much as these are incumbent, Africans presumably, prefer to tow the line of religious or theological motif for male and female. In traditional Africa, gender roles and sexual expressions are mostly held to be of divine approval, thus, in essence one is a male or female based on what the creator had ordered. It is also expected that males and females engaged in approved sexual relations, lest the deities be offended. According to Ige (2016), to the traditional African life, celibacy is a taboo. It is usual in traditional African society to conceive of sexual expression to mean intimacy and copulation, which, are strictly carried on between male and female. However, ethnographic studies indicate that such acts as same-sex relationships are known in traditional African communities, though they are not given general approval. It is such that though copulation is oriented towards male-female, however there are reported cases of homosexual activities among the different ethnic groups in Africa, (Ajibade, 2013; Mkasi,

2016; Nyansi, 2013). This study observes that homosexuality is “unAfrican”, for the simple reason that no African culture and society, gives it societal acceptance, rather it was/is frowned upon and considered unethical and as a deviant behaviour. Even in the throes of modernization, westernization and globalization, homosexuality has still not been accepted as a normal sexual behaviour in many African communities. It is noted that Africans usually have reasons why they get involved in sexual activity. For instance, in Nigeria, Ige (2016:42) tells a story from the Yoruba perspective:

Among the Yoruba race there is a myth of a man who lived many years ago called, *Agbontosa*. According to this tradition, *Agbontosa* lived a very careful life in order to please *Olodumare* (Yoruba name for God) so that at death *Olodumare* will place him in the “good heaven” (Orunrere) a place the people believe to be blissful as opposed the “heave of Pot-shed” (OrunApaadi) that is believed to be a place of torment. By being careful, he never wanted to commit any sin; so he decided never to have sex, for he saw sex as evil and therefore lived a life of celibacy, and also cautioned himself from other vices that may discredit his person from God and the society. For this, he was well respected and revered by the people. Eventually *Agbontosa* died and was buried without marriage.

After the death of *Agbontosa*, the Yoruba community felt he had not done well, they felt he had truncated *Olodumare's* plan and purpose for his life while on earth. This could be one of the reasons traditional Yoruba society values marriage and child bearing against living a celibate lifestyle.

A general observation indicates that Christians in Africa are born into traditional societies that have assigned and approved roles for the sexes, though details might differ from one culture to another. Christianity has largely left these roles unchanged, although there is gradual erosion of many traditional ethos. Thus, it can be stated without equivocation that traditional African societies have delineable roles for the sexes, depending on the various cultures. In most cases these are sanctioned by custom. This paper observes that, irrespective of media onslaughts, biblical injunctions and opinions of modern preachers, majority of African Christians are still culturally bound in their gender roles and sexual expressions. However, as data from fieldwork of this study show, existential reality reveal that gender roles are often not adhered to in some cases, due to political, socio-economic situations in both African communities.

In the light of the above general observations, it is over ambitious to talk of “the African sexuality” as there are various understanding of sexuality among the different ethnic groups in Africa. Even more, so within the same ethnic group, there are noticeable differences in sexual matters. The study explores four of such ethnic groups, which have sizable Christian populations and examines their traditional tenets on human sexuality, namely Yoruba, Igbo, Luo and Ashanti.

The Yoruba, in general, hold that male and female genders are creations of *Olodumare* (Supreme Deity). Everything in nature is made *ako* (male) or *abo* (female). According to Akande, *aworo* (chief priest) of Ogidi, “*t'akot'aboniadaileaiye*” (the world was created male and female). Scholars such as Fadipe, (1970; Oyesanya, 2020; Damehin, 1993; Alaba, 2004; Caldwell, 1991; Irinoye, 2005), assess the Yoruba traditions and agreed that human genders,

sexuality and sexual organs are oriented to male-female relationships. For a proper understanding of Yoruba understanding of human sexuality, ifa corpus *OsaOgunda* gives insight on human sexuality as eternal destiny by which creation is ordered to be irrevocably male and female and sexual expressions are to be so tailored.

The Igbo believe that male-female is the order of the created world. They also believe that human sexuality is oriented between male and female. Scholars like Amadiume, (1987), Ukpokolo, (2010), Uram, (2019), treat human sexuality among the Igbo as traditional and immutable. However, due to exigencies, there are admissible variations which are approved by tradition and sanctioned by sociological needs. Thus, the practical evidence of same-sex marriages among the Igbo women for sociological reason, has been noted and discussed by Uram (2019).

Among the Ashanti, scholars observe that male-female orientation is the agreed form of sexual orientation and gender is aligned along these two. According to Asare, (2014), the Ashanti maintain strict codes on human sexuality. Clark, (1999) opines that Ashanti basic understanding of human gender is as male and female and the sexual orientation is always limited to these two. The Luo conceive gender as strictly male-female. They see these genders as ordered by the Creator. Human sexual usage is accepted only within the confine of male-female relationships. Obiero, (2010) in “Sex, Consent and Power” asserts in his critical study that the Luo believe that humanity is strictly ordered along the male-female genders.

### **Biblical perspectives on human sexuality and gender**

Christians tenets of human sexuality traditionally take its orientation from the Bible where it is believed that human genders are ordered by the Creator to be male and female and that human sexual expression is oriented to be male-female copulation. The writer of Genesis (1:27), says, “male and female he created them”. This is the root of Christian understanding of human genders and sexuality. The Bible provides details of sexuality in various forms. From the pages of the Bible there are narrations bordering on such themes as exploration of the beauty of the human body, and its sensuous nature. Also, in its genres are to be found stories of incest, polygamy and women who married rapists. It is also taken as given in the Bible that immutable sexual roles were assigned divinely and so are the approved orientations for the sexes. The exact meaning and nuances of these terms were not clearly elaborated in it, but the general picture is that the Bible gives approval only for male-female relationships.

While it is true that the Bible states that sexuality and sex were created by God, yet texts on variations found in human beings have not been clearly noted. The biblical discourse of human nature, sexual identity and gender are tailored towards males and females and does not tell us about another possibility of exhibiting human sexuality. Though nature and archaeological data revealed that hermaphrodites, bisexuals, lesbians, cross-dressers, etc. existed at the biblical periods, which the biblical authors ought to be aware of, but they were ignored. Amidst these scenarios, yet no approval was given to same-sex relationships in the Bible.

### **New trends in sexual orientations among African Christians**

The study notes that despite the general ban of other forms of sexual activities outside male-female relationships both in traditional African culture and the Bible, the study identifies the presence of “new” sexual orientations among African Christians. The study identifies three prominent forms of “new” sexual trends among African Christians, namely cross-dressing, gay/lesbianism and *transgenderism*. Cross-dressing is used here to refer to the practice of males and females who choose to dress like the opposite sex as a normal way of dressing. This is different from dressings at theaters and for religious purposes. Gay/lesbianism, is here defined as the sexual orientation and practice of sexual expressions of human beings towards their own gender instead of the opposite gender. *Trangenderism* is construed here as the permanent change of one's gender through medical surgery to become the opposite gender.

Taking Nigeria as a case study, the paper notes that few youths of Christian background have become popular cross-dressers. They make public their new orientation on social media. Names of eleven most popular cross dressers in Nigeria obtained from <https://ke.opera.news> are Booga Barbie, Pleasure Suarez, Remy Lekun, James Brown, Onyx Godwin, Jay Buggati, Iche, JP Blush, Josh Agai, Jay Boogie, Denrele and Bobrisky. Their names, apart from the last, point to a Christian identity, though it is superfluous to be categorical on religious affiliations among African youth in the current clime. An important anthropological point to be noted is that, they are domiciled in the southern part of Nigeria where Christianity dominates. In the northern part of Nigeria, where Islam is more pronounced no cross-dresser or transgender or homosexual has openly made such confession, though studies indicate the presence of homosexuals in that part of the country (Lashima, 2021). In general, cross-dressers are coming out in the Christian dominated areas of Africa.

Lesbians and gays present a different picture from the above. While some Africans are coming out and freely expressing their lesbian sexual orientation, the fact is that they have not been well tolerated in almost all parts of Africa, with the clear exception of South Africa. They are confronted with disdain, abuse and even threatened with death. In Nigeria, the social media also identifies popular transgender of Nigerian origin as Stephanie Rose, Miss Sahara, Noni Salma, Rizi Xavier Timane, Mandy la Candy, Bryan Nwakoro. They are however domiciled in Europe, due to the fear of molestation in Nigeria. Buchi, however lives in Nigeria.

### **Convergence of African culture and biblical perspectives on human sexuality and gender**

The study reveals the striking similarities between traditional African cultures and the Bible on human sexuality, gender roles and sexual expressions. It can be stated as of first importance that both cultures have hallowed traditions of sexuality. Africans have traditional tenets on sexuality and gender, that are hallowed and scholars like Asare, (2014), Obiero, (2010) and Ukpokolo (2010) have elucidated the themes. These are coded in their culture, sayings, proverbs, songs and drama and dances. The Bible in its narratives also presents what can be called approved basic norms of sexuality and gender.

The paper identifies and explores the convergence of traditional African perspectives and biblical understanding of human sexuality and gender, and points out that they are closely

related and are oriented towards the same purposes. The study surmises them under these themes: (i) male-female intersex, (ii) meant for procreation, (iii) enjoyment, (iv) companionship, (v) music and pun. The study opines that the two have similar perspectives on human sexuality, though each has traits that are peculiar:

**(i) Male-female intersex:** Africans in general hold that humanity is sharply divided into male and female. The Yoruba say, “*tiako, ti abo niadaile aye*” (male and female is the order of creation of the world). This is the same opinion from the Bible and orthodox Christianity, as the Bible states, “male and female he created them” (Genesis 1:27). However, human reality shows that there are admissions of abridgment of the sexes that are normal in biology but traditionally called aberrations which contradicts the two sharp divisions. The *genderisation* of humanity into male and female is so sacrosanct in traditional African culture and in the Bible, that known abridgment or hybridization of these forms of human sexuality is usually hidden and despised.

**(ii) Procreation:** Traditional African societies believe that human sexuality is importantly meant for procreation. In a culture where celibacy is discountenanced, the inability to engage in procreative activities is considered a great crime against the lineage and community. Individuals in traditional African communities as norms are expected to contribute to the continuum of his/her lineage by using his/her sexuality to increase the population. This same idea is found in the Bible, where the Creator states “increase and multiply, fill the earth...” (Genesis 2: 28). Exegetically, it is generally agreed that human sexuality was ordered for human procreation, which imposes a duty on human beings as willing co-creators, (Woggen, 1981; Huber and Graybill, 2020). This duty is so sacrosanct in the Bible that dereliction of it was considered a major crime. The case of Onan who engaged in *coitus interruptus* was considered a mortal sin against the community of Israel, (Genesis 38) and was punished with instant death.

**(iii) Conjugal rights:** Another aspect of human sexuality found both in the Bible and traditional African societies is that sex is a conjugal right to be engaged by a man and woman and it is meant for human enjoyment. This is stated in *oduOdi-Meji of Ifa*. Due to this factor, moral rules were imposed on the society to guide and moderate its usage among the population. Thus, both the Bible and traditional African norms assert that sexual activity must necessary take place between men and women, to the total exclusion of mating with animals or effigies. Heterosexual relationship is the approved form of mating in African culture, (as specifically stated in Ifa oracle) and also by the Church. The Catholic, Code of Canon Law, (CCC, 1055), defines marriage as “a covenant of man and woman”, who are obliged to conjugal rights.

**(iv). Companionship:** Human intersexuality was considered to be made in such a way as to enhance companionship and friendship. Intersex friendship is considered necessary for the growth of the human society. According to Ifa, in *oduOsa-Ika*, and *oduOdi-Meji*, Olodumare (God) frowns at same sex relationships. Ifa states that, at a stage which was very early in human history, women conspired to withdraw into “women community”, however, that at the intervention of Orunmila, a Yoruba principal deity, women started paring themselves up with

men. By the following year, they have started giving birth to children and then began to multiply in number”. The Bible equally enjoins companionship as a factor of male-female relationship. According to Genesis (2: 18), “It is not good for man to be alone”, hence the Creator formed a woman as a companion of man.

**(v) Music and pun:** Human sexuality has been used and it is being used as a means of entertainment. People compose songs and lyrics in traditional African societies about genders, beauty, sexual parts, lusciousness, and even abusive songs on sexual offenders, and sexual deviants. The Bible contains sensuous lyrics such as the book Song of Songs, which has explicit scenes of intimacy, lyrics of beauty and sexual expressions.

### Summary and Recommendations

The paper examines the dilemma of Africa Christians in the face of modern influence on sexuality. It studies the convergence in traditional African societies and the Bible on human sexuality. The study opines that the two cultures share striking simulacrum on human sexual tenets. Thus, due to these similarities and the demands by both cultures as discussed above, an African Christian would be at home with his/her sexuality either as an African or and as a Christian. The study also reveals that Christianity in Africa and indeed all religions on the continent are exposed to new trends in intersexuality and in the roles of the sexes. The study underscores the fact that some African Christians are expressing radical sexual orientations, which befuddled their communities. The presence of westernization and its education, globalization and its media have brought new trends to sexual orientation in public among African Christians, which are termed unconventional orientations. These trends are alien to the moral rights of African parents' guidance on wards as they grow up.

The paper observes that another way in which modern African Christians are expressing their sexuality in new forms is in their dressing and general lifestyle. Also, new words have entered African lexicon, like same-sex marriage, cohabitation, trial marriages, and even gay bishops/priests, etc., which are now common in conversations and acts than hitherto experienced. The study notices on-going obscurantist notions of sexuality such that words like maleness and femaleness as applied to dressing and occupations are converging and no longer clear-cut. The study underscores that clear cut terms like males and females are being challenged by Christian transgenders and cross dressers. The activities of cross-dressers and transgenders and lesbians are generally under doses of foreign influence. Modern African Christians and church ministers at liturgical, private and public functions adorn revealing clothes. It can be stated that in comparison with their Muslim counterparts in Africa, modern African Christians are more daring in dressing.

The study surmises that under the claims of globalization and modernism, the activities of gays and lesbian and transgender are characterized by more openness than hitherto. The issue of public approval versus disapproval remains contentious in Africa for homosexuals and transgender. The paper concludes that traditional African culture and the Bible have similar cods on human sexuality. The inroads of modernization, westernization and globalization have brought sharp cultural shocks to African Christians who are forced to contend with their sexuality and its expressions.

In view of the Biblical and African concept of sexuality among Africans, and the subsequent modifications by the colonial agents, the following recommendations are made for proper curbing of the contemporary challenges of sexuality among African people:

- I. Sex and sexuality matters should be handled by matured and responsible African parents in order for them to properly teach their wards the do's and don'ts about sexual relationship. Obaje (2020: 1) thinks that male and female, especially young people in Africa need sexuality attention and guidance of parents to help them transit to adulthood. This is because there are so many unAfrican and inaccurate messages about sexuality almost on a daily basis. Parents who are traditional custodians of African morality must gear up with the task of guiding oncoming African generations.
- II. The Church and educational institutions should incorporate sexual issues in their teachings at certain stages to help the African youth learn proper things about male and female sexuality and its implications to the individual and the society.
- III. Religious bodies and the custodians of African traditions should wisely soft-pedal the taboo placed on the knowledge about human sexuality to help young Africans come out of their hiding place on the issue of sex and sexual relationship and appreciate such in line with the traditional value system.

### Conclusion

Against some Eurocentric imagination that the majority of opposite sex relations in Africa would have resulted to indiscriminate sexual activity especially premarital sexual union, there are indications of strict unwritten rules, which usually guide and enforce discipline among African Christians. For instance, in some East African societies where a foreigner may define as having a strong passion for sex, there are indications that failure to adhere to the rules that guide sexual union was an offence against even the society as a whole. According to Okafor (2018), "the openness with which sexuality is expressed does not necessarily mean that sexual activity is indiscriminate among the African societies especially, in the Eastern part. The problem arises where sexuality is evaluated using foreign moral formulation".

Male and female sexuality and sexual relationship have shown up as a physiological cum cultural phenomena. It is physical because it is a naturally occurring urge for pleasure. Again, it is cultural because Africa happens to be a human society which has created for itself a moral value system that determines how individual members of the society participate in any form of relationship or activity especially as regards to sexual relationship. Hence, sex and sexuality in the subconscious mind of Africans has the concept of taboo and sacredness in connection with sexuality. Allowing the imposition of more foreign devastating moral value on African society in the name of cultural globalization, will reduce the African societies to a mere conglomeration of lower infra sentient beings without culture.

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