

Sex, Custom and Population: A Nigerian Example

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Sex determines most of what happens in the rest of the social life of the Orling, a minority ethnolinguistic group in Nigeria's southeastern districts. Like in most so-called simple societies, rules on sexual conduct also govern such relational principles as marriage, descent and kinship. But here they go a little further than this because propriety or otherwise of sexual conduct is not limited to the acts of sexual partners. It affects also the status of children of such partners or those that may be socially connected with them at other levels. For example, a category of children that are called *gburati* [sing. *waati*] *e lakpe* (evil children), are in their category because they are held to be those who earn their condition as a result of unconfessed infraction of sexual rules by, usually, their parents. *Gburati e lakpe* include those of breach birth, those that cut their upper incisors first or those with such rare physiological condition as six instead of five fingers. The Orling society is patrilineal and patrilocal which facts seem to help in explaining why rules of sexual conduct place a heavier burden on women than on men. This paper makes the case that any policy on population that ignores local custom at the present stage of development in Africa may not deliver their expected impact. What is needed is a cross-disciplinary co-operation that will enable ethnologists, demographers, medical scientists, bureaucrats and so on to work together for effective results.

Overview

Sex is used in this article to refer to copulation or acts leading to or explicitly connected with it. It seems advisable to define the term since both in its technical and colloquial usage it is polysemous. For the term, sanction, I adopt the definition in Banard and Spencer (1996: 620), namely, "A reward for socially correct behaviour or, more commonly, a punishment for socially incorrect behaviour." For our present purposes it is, of course, the latter that is focused upon, except when such a reward produces an effect on another party that fits the conditions which this paper reports. An example of this is when a co-wife loses an entitlement to her rival as a punishment for unapproved sexual conduct. For the wife that gains from this event this is a reward and for the other this is a punishment.

Judged by standards of European or American societies, sexual strictures among the Orring are severe, and for our present purposes heavily weighted against girls and women. But from the perspectives of anthropology, such a judgment will be unfair. Each culture must be judged by the time and social circumstances that that produced it. I will like to elaborate on this in the section on analysis after I have described the practices that are the subject of this report.

To understand the Orring position it has to be noted that sex is seen in strictly reproductive terms. It is the cardinal strategy for recruiting members of the community. And the female is an important agent in this and must not do anything which in the knowledge of the culture-bearer is capable of threatening the order that regulates such a system.

The Offences

There are broadly two sexual offences. The one against *Lose*, the Earth force that is the central divinity of the Orring. The rest of the offences may be, for lack of a more appropriate term, called *loipos* (after, of course, the Greek). The motley of offences under the *loipos* category while being socially reprehensible are nevertheless not a direct affront on *Lose*.

The offence against *Lose* is itself of two types. One type of this can only be committed by an unmarried girl when she becomes pregnant before the *ikumenyi* circumcision rite of passage. *Ikumenyi* is the female circumcision and the concomitant ceremonies designed to help the healing of the wound and put the candidate in a comely state for the parade of the nubile age grade. Ordinarily the parade in the market square will take place about thirty days after the excision. Only part of the clitoris is excised and the rest of the vulva is left intact.

It is considered an honour to allow the blood from the clitoris to drip to the ground. In a sense, the candidate for marriage has made a blood pact with the guardian divinity of the group using her most vital possession. To understand such a commitment it is helpful to know that the pre-contact Orring was largely an insular endogamous group. By as recently as the 1930s the British colonial officer, Cook (1936), could still record their desperation to protect their culture against the influence of their more numerically superior Igbo within which they form an enclave.

A girl tries to remain chaste until this rite so as to be accorded the honour of dropping her blood on Lose's soil. Should she become pregnant before she has had the rite she is treated harshly. After a perfunctory cutting of the clitoris, the blood is prevented from reaching the ground directly. A large shard of earthenware is placed between her legs so that the blood drips into this object. When bleeding stops the shard is taken to the evil grove, *oseja*, and placed face up. An evil grove is communally owned and reserved for such or related rituals that are defensive of the interests of the group or their members. It is also used as the burial place of people that are considered to be unfit for a respectful funeral.

Although boys are circumcised, there is no equivalent treatment for them. A promiscuous boy may not suffer more than such discretionary reactions as gossips or manifestations of extra circumspection in the hands of those who deal with them. It may also be added that where a boy's paternity of an unmarried girl's baby is not in dispute he may be compelled to marry her or contribute to the material care of the child up until it is weaned. In the latter option, he will be recognized neither as the genitor nor the pater of the child, those biological and economic contributions of his notwithstanding.

***Lose* Offences -- Married Women**

A married woman is obliged not to relate sexually with any other person but her husband. If she does, this is considered an offence against the *Lose* divinity. The only exemption is with regard to widows but even this must take into account the provisos to be outlined below.

Such a blanket prohibition will be considered too extensive by the standards of some of Orrings' Nigerian neighbours. But it is against the cultural logic of the Orring that the prescription must be judged. Before colonization by the British, the Orring were so proud of their culture that they waged constant wars to protect it. The British colonizer met them fighting one of such wars with the Igbo (Cook 1935). In contradistinction to the acephalic Igbo, their centralized political structure had a monarch whom Cook described as a "deified personage".

The entire humanity in their worldview is divided into two: the Orring, which translates as the Wise Ones; and the *Ufufuu*, dynamically Outsiders or Strangers. It seems logical therefore that self-esteem should restrain the Orring from allowing potential *pollution* of their gene pool via liberal sex norms.

When one's husband dies, a new aspect of the norm comes to the fore. After mourning, pre-menopausal women have the choice of staying as widows of her late husband or re-marrying. If she chooses the former she will be expected to make more babies in the name of the deceased. The children in that category are known as *àsèḗsè*, those whose mothers got from afar; literally those that were trekked for. The children are not customarily disabled in any manner when it comes to the entitlements of legitimate members of the community. They are treated for all practical purposes as children whom the deceased biologically fathered by himself as the husband of their mother.

Levirate is unknown; indeed is tabooed. Permitted relations for this purpose must be outside the late husband's lineage. But members of the lineage, usually the closest kin of the deceased, will be consulted in the choice of the woman's paramour. This is for the obvious reason of ensuring that children of questionable character are not brought into

the lineage through such a liaison. The Orring believe that behaviour is genetical and is passed from those that are biologically responsible for a child to such offspring. It is of course always certain who the *genetrix* of a child is, if the matter is not always that tidy in the case of pater. So, for example, when a child whose *pater* is known to be well behaved is found to be delinquent such is always a source of suspicion on the part of the mother.

Again a married man whether his wife is alive or whether he is widowed is free from the type of constraints that apply in the women's case. This may be explained ethnologically on basis of the Orring marriage system. Marriage here is typically polygynous. It is expected that a man will have more than one subsisting marriages. As such any virile man who may afford it financially has, in principle, the same liberties as a bachelor that is looking for his first wife. When he is widowed and is still young it is not only permitted but it becomes more or less imperative that he should marry again.

Atonement

Atonement takes a form that is ethnologically remarkable in the premium it places on the nature of these categories of offence as harm to the corporate good of the community. A violation of a taboo on sexual relation threatens the social order by defying the rule through which brides are circulated and valid kin connections established among the Orring. Once the offence is uncovered the first step to atonement, and a very crucial one at that, involves in principle the participation of every member of the community. An ululation is raised in the special tone that is restricted to such an event. Everyone hearing it must pick it up and by so doing the sound goes round the whole of the community. Usually as it circulates the story associated with it goes along with it

even though the detail of that will take some time to reach the parts of the community that are distant to the locus of the tabooed act or the residences of the infractors.

The ululation serves three purposes: 1. publicize the offence; 2. demonstrate solidarity with the *Lose* divinity, and 3. condemn the action of the offender. The culture-bearers have explained to me that this ritual was salutary to the health of the offender and the fact seems hard to controvert going by the evidence. Before some members of the community converted to Christianity it was unthinkable to get anyone who will not join in that ritual ululation. Christians, however, now ignore this leading to a situation where some of the culture-bearers have complained that the imported scriptural faith provides a cover to weaken the society's autochthonous norms. Before the foreign religion took root here there have been occasions when those who succeeded in covering up the tabooed acts ended up volunteering confessions so as to have the benefit of the ululation.

Such problems as an expectant mother's extraordinarily difficult labour, her baby's teratogenetical features or even simpler deformities of the infant may be enough reason for a lady who has been hiding a tabooed tryst to confess. The Orring believe that tabooed sex can adversely affect not only the offender but also a child conceived after the event. A category of children that are called *gbuati* [sing. *waati*] *ẹ lakpe* (evil children), are in their category because they are held to be those who earn their condition as a result of unconfessed infraction of sexual rules by, usually, their parents. *Gbuati ẹ lakpe* include those of breach birth, those that cut their upper incisors first or those with such rare physiological condition as six instead of five fingers.

After the ululation there will be immolation to the guardian deity of the compound of the husband of the offending wife or widow, *Aliobu*. This aspect of the

ritual is restricted to the compound of the cocudoled man. In the event where the offence is committed in another Orring compound and therefore it is considered defiled as a result of the act a similar cleansing ritual will also be necessary.

The ululation aspect of the act applies both to the woman and her partner in the forbidden tryst. But in the patrilocal society it is only the woman that must provide the materials for the ritual cleansing of the husband's compound.

Modernity

The Orring inhabit the part of Nigeria that encountered Westernization relatively late. This has important implications for the tradition of this remarkable group. This is to be explained by the geography of the place. The outer of the two communities, the Eteji, is located about 200 kilometres north of the nearest Atlantic shores. Of course the first contact of the Europeans with the various societies was through the sea in the days when nothing more convenient than bush paths was to be found in most of these parts.

Communities on the banks of smaller waterways that linked the Atlantic got in contact with the Europeans earlier than those like the Orring that were farther away. By 1931 L. H. Shelton, a colonial administrator working in Nigeria's southeastern districts, was still writing on the modalities for establishing a British-designed local administration for the Orring group (Shelton 1931).

It was not until after the Nigerian civil war (1967 - 1970) that the Orring got their first university graduate. No one from the group has been a minister in Nigeria's central government. There is no Orring member of the clergy among the Catholics or the episcopal Anglicans that take a longer period to train priests although both have churches.

The fundamentalist evangelicals are flourishing and are a great attraction for those looking for alternatives to the Orring tradition. But all this is very recent development and a source of worry for those Orrings that are disturbed by acculturation.

During my stay with the community many of its members; male as well as female, lamented the deleterious effects of the contact with the Europeans. Quite remarkably for our present purpose the effect of this on sexual behaviour of women was frequently cited. There is the suspicion, however hard to prove, that one of the chief reasons why the churches hold such attraction for the womenfolk here is because it provides an escape for those of their members that might have fallen foul of the autochthonous sex taboos.

Discussion

Sex, sadly, is one of the least discussed subjects in socio-cultural anthropology. Sadly, because of sex intertwines with other cultural subsets at least in societies that anthropologists are interested in. Such pioneers of the discipline as Malinowski were no doubt aware of this fact as evidenced by his dedication of one of his reports on the Trobrianders, *The Sexual Life of Savages*, to it (Malinowski 1932). But the tantalizing treatment of the subject has frequently provided a good ground for good-natured banter such as Sillitoe (2006) recalled Henry Arthur Powell telling after reading it in his early days in the field.

One obvious reason could be the nature of the subject that does not lend itself to easy investigation due, of course, to its secretive nature. But another reason is also the possibility that the connection of sexuality with other domains of culture might have been overlooked. The reason for this might have been that in its focus on the broader canvas

of kinship the central role of sex in the management of this is given insufficient attention. The nearest we have come to this is in the speculations on the origin of descent types from Maine through Bachofen to Levi-Strauss. But in all that, it was not sex as such but the position of the male- and womenfolk in institutionalization or management of social types that is the issue.

Kelly's (2002) work on the Etoro), although essentially on witchcraft, contains prominent indicators of the potentials which study of culturally sanctioned sexual behaviour holds. The Etoro's view of sex impacts directly on the way they organize or negotiate other social relationships. Although no report is available at the moment on the matter, I have observed parallels in some aspects of his study and the social strategy of two other Nigerian groups, the Okposi Igbo, of which I am native, and the Nkalaha Igbo. For example, he reports culturally-prescribed abstinence for the Etoro at certain places and times. Among both the Okposi and the Nkalaha, on the eve of the pan-village fishing campaign involving the use of the fish-stupefying plant of the fabaceae family, *Tephrosia vogelli*, sexual relation is prohibited for all the men that will take part in this essentially economic activity.

Among the Igbo and many other Nigerian groups there is an important link between sex and magic or witchcraft. Belief in spiritual sex, comparable with quondam European versions in the shape of relation with succubus and incubus or to a degree in the Jewish Nephilim story, is widespread in Nigeria and is taken seriously by people who in other respects are considered Westernized. It is a crucial component in the doctrines of the burgeoning thaumaturgy-driven neo-Pentecostalist movements that is so popular among the youth and the working class. I am not sure that we can effectively account for

any other of a group's social domain until we can account for the sexual ideology of such a society.

The efforts of Gregory Forth (2004) in this direction must be noted. He has been studying this domain with particular reference to culturally sanctioned sex outside marriage among the Nage and Keo groups in the island of Flores in the Oceania. But again the focus is limited. In that study he investigates a form of culturally structured premarital and extramarital sexual relationship in that society. In Nigeria itself, Izugbara (2004) has been active in a related epistemic province but his otherwise resourceful investigations have limited value to anyone expecting a holistic treatment of the subject. He surveyed adolescents' notions of sex among the Ngwa Igbo. Although culture-based, nevertheless the inquiry lacks the more familiar ethnographic depth and is unable to identify the structural underpinnings for the phenomenon.

Anthropology owes itself and the consumers accurate repositioning of sex in its intellectual products. It is necessary to understand autochthonous sex ideology because like all cultural creations it dies hard. Besides how such may relate to other social domains, it is also crucial to understand the place of sex in each society in these days when due to the structure of plural modern nation states there are many demographic and health issues that connect directly to it. None of such issues: contraceptives or other forms of birth-control strategies, HIV/AIDS, female circumcision, to name a few, may be dealt with with ease or success unless we understand what autochthonous sexual ideology underpins the culture-bearers' attitude to them.

For our present purposes, this is far from the speculative. A number of studies already exist on the West African case in support of the suspicion that any attempt to

confront a problem of human reproduction, sexuality, or sex *qua* sex without taking into account the cultural ideology that regulate such is doomed to fail. After investigating the case of the Nsukka Igbo with regard to family planning, Okeibunor (2000: 47) concludes, “[C]ultural and subjective meanings attached to sexuality and gender as well as sex drives and enjoyment will no doubt impact on family planning practices.” Jack Goody (2000) citing some older works uses the term, **institutional variables**, to refer to such factors in the cases that have been studied in Africa and in pre-industrial groups in Asia, America and Europe. The challenge here is that such variables, including sex, are conceived differently and resolved differently in different cultures.

Anthropologists will be useful in such a context. Because to a great extent human groups negotiate the variables affecting their population in a manner that is culture-governed any policy on these that is designed to succeed will require some ethnological inputs. Of course other specialists are needed here too. There are roles for, for example bureaucrats, psychologists, philosophers, medical scientists, perhaps the media too, and the like. But the most futile that could be attempted in the context of contemporary Africa is to imagine that any population policy could work that ignores the impact of culture on human sexuality.

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