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## Sexuality Brewed in an African Pot: A Personal Account of Paths of Sexual Maturation in Africa

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# Sexuality Brewed in an African Pot:

## *A Personal Account of Paths of Sexual Maturation in Africa*

Agbonkhianmeghe E. Orobator, S.J., Ph.D.



In one of the classics of African literature, *Things Fall Apart* (New York: Fawcett Crest, 1959), Nigerian novelist Chinua Achebe describes a set of parent-child relationships. This first is between a doting mother and her bubbly pre-pubescent daughter:

*It was not yet noon on the second day of the New Yam festival. Ekwefi and her only daughter, Ezinma, sat near the fireplace waiting for the water in the pot to boil. The fowl Ekwefi had just killed was in the wooden mortar. The water began to boil. . . .Ezinma was always surprised that her mother could lift a pot from the fire with her bare hands. "Ekwefi," she said, "is it true that when people are grown up, fire does not burn them?" Ezinma, unlike most children called her mother by her name. "Yes," replied Ekwefi, too busy to argue. Her daughter was only ten years old but she was wiser than her years. . . .Ekwefi turned the hen over in the mortar and began to pluck the feathers.*

*"Ekwefi," said Ezinma, who had joined in plucking the feathers, "my eyelid is twitching." "It means you are going to cry," said her mother. "No," Ezinma said, "it is this eyelid, the top one." "That means you will see something." "What will I see?" she asked. "How can I know?" Ekwefi wanted her to work it out herself. "Oho," said Ezinma at last. "I know what it is — the wrestling match" (pp. 40-41).*

Our childhood games played a crucial role in my own sexual maturation and, I believe, in that of many African children.

The second occurs between a domineering father (the novel's protagonist) and his effeminate pre-adolescent son:

*Okonkwo was inwardly pleased at his son's development. . . . He wanted Nwoye to grow into a tough young man capable of ruling his father's household when he was dead and gone to join the ancestors. He wanted him to be a prosperous man, having enough in his barn to feed the ancestors with regular sacrifices. And so he was always happy when he heard him grumbling about women. That showed that in time he would be able to control his women-folk. No matter how prosperous a man was, if he was unable to rule his women and his children (and especially his women) he was not really a man. . . .*

*So Okonkwo encouraged the boys to sit with him in his Obi (hut), and he told them stories of the land — masculine stories of violence and bloodshed. Nwoye knew that it was right to be masculine and to be violent, but somehow he still preferred the stories that his mother used to tell, and which she no doubt still told to her younger children — stories of the tortoise and his wily ways. . . .*

*That was the kind of story that Nwoye loved. But he now knew that they were for foolish women and children, and he knew that his father wanted him to be a man. And so he feigned that he no longer cared for women's stories. And when he did this he saw that his father was pleased, and no longer rebuked him or beat him (pp. 51-53).*

The connection between these excerpts from a work of fiction and the subject of sexual maturation in an African context may not appear obvious. That is the point: the issue of sexual maturation or psychosexual development often takes an indirect route. It is assumed rather than consciously defined, which may explain the paucity of useful literature on this topic in comparison with the situation in Europe and North

America. The topic of "sex education" in many African countries generates considerable unease and tension, especially in the time of the HIV/AIDS pandemic.

A brief caveat is in order: the continent of Africa comprises more than fifty countries and boasts myriad religious and cultural expressions and traditions. As a Nigerian I offer only a personal perspective on the issue under consideration, albeit many years of Jesuit formation have exposed me to a welter of Africa's rich and evolving cultures. That said, the question is: What are some of the paths of human sexual maturation in cultural milieus where sex and sexuality largely fall under the category of taboo?

To begin with, the paths of sexual maturation bifurcate early in life for boys and for girls. I will point out later on that girls are better served when it comes to the quality and practicality of the information available. Underlying these divergent paths is a rough outline of the stages of life or progression of maturation espoused by many African cultures. Every child born into the family has a distinct identity, but remains essentially an isolated minor (or, as some would say, a "monad"). Upon the attainment of adulthood one is expected to contract marriage ("dyad") and begin the onerous task of procreation ("triad"), in order to increase quantitatively (in number) and qualitatively (the life-force) the family and the community.

#### IN THE NAME OF A GAME

*If I hold her hand*

*She says, "Don't touch!"*

*If I hold her foot*

*She says, "Don't touch!"*

*But when I hold her waist-beads, she pretends not to know (A song from Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, p.112)*

The earliest recognizable stage of sexual maturation is that of the "games" we played during childhood. What I roughly translate as "game" covers a wide spectrum of recreational childhood activities that include dance, play and contests. Three elements characterize our childhood games: they involve a high incidence of physical touch, include boys and girls and largely are unsupervised by adults.

Our childhood games played a crucial role in my own sexual maturation and, I believe, in that of many African children. Because the games involve physical touch, usually they provide the first community-san-

tioned opportunity for exploring the makeup of the human body, in particular the sex organs. One of the tacit rules of childhood games is that children are allowed to touch one another without explicitly experimenting with genital sexual activity.

Some forms of dance will simulate sexual activity by wriggling the waist while both groups of boys and girls approach each other. In another kind of play an object is placed between the legs of participants, who are seated spread-eagled in a circle, while one member (either a boy or a girl) of the group makes the round, attempting to locate and retrieve the "hidden" object. In yet another kind of play, young boys and girls disperse in different directions, assigning to one member of their group the task of trying to discover their hide-out. The intervening period usually allows for boys and girls to engage in various forms of homosexual and heterosexual physical contact. At such times a child for the first time might feel a pre-adolescent breast or the erection of a pre-adolescent penis.

What truly is remarkable in the foregoing description of childhood games is that incidents of explicit sexual genital activity were quite rare. The community offered the child a safe and well-defined boundary to explore and discover the body in relation to his or her psychosexual development. Yet, like the games, this process happens literally in the dark: children may discuss and brag about their nascent pre-sexual exploits with one another, or compare the relative sizes of their genitalia or mammary glands, but they are never engaged in any sustained open talk about human sexuality by adults.

#### SEPARATE BUT EQUAL?

The situation changes when a boy or a girl reaches the threshold of adolescence. Usually a boy approaching adolescence has two sources of initiation into sexual maturation: socialization by circumcision (an affair organized by older male members of the community) and indoctrination by age groups. In cultures that still practice circumcision for teenage boys, this event ritualizes the passage from pre-adolescence to early adulthood. Besides being introduced into the ancient secrets and wisdom of the community, the initiate learns to understand the differentiation of gender roles and identity. After circumcision, his relationships with the maternal figures in his life undergo a drastic change. He is taught to keep a respectable distance

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from them. As we saw above, in the case of Okonkwo's son, these figures do not exercise the same influence on him as does his father or the paternal figures in his life (uncles and cousins). But this distance is fraught with a high degree of ambivalence; it is a combination of fear and attraction, violence and affection in relation to the female.

Because initiation rites tend to happen in age-specific groups, that is, within age sets or age grades, the pre-adolescent boy derives a lot of information from this context. The same would be true of cultures that do not practice circumcision as a form of socialization and initiation to adulthood. Much of this information garnered from age sets or grades is, however, based on speculation, and includes such myths as what happens when a boy's breast leaks fluid or he begins to sprout pubic hair, and when he experiences nocturnal emissions and morning erection. Here again a culture of silence relating to human sexuality allows little opportunity for separating fact from fiction with the aid of adult members of the community.

A brief excursus on the practice of masturbation offers a concrete example of how false information and sexual myths — of the types referred to above — can distort the process of psychosexual maturation.

The received notion among many of my pre-adolescent peers portrayed regular masturbation as a necessary and healthy practice to relieve the testes of the pressure caused by a continuous buildup of sperm. It helped, we assumed, to "empty" the testes and so prevented them from exploding. Today this perception of masturbation would seem fantastic, bizarre and plain derisory, but it proved arresting for the impressionable minds of many pre-adolescent peers. The corollary experience for the female rarely was considered, although we thought there had to be something similar.

From a developmental perspective this assumed belief about masturbation was an ill-conceived way of describing probably a phase of the complex path of

It is not uncommon for an adult male to be ridiculed on account of his presumed inability to father children.

sexual maturation, albeit ignoring the consequences of a compulsive, habitual practice later in life.

The situation becomes complicated when an adolescent who converts to Catholicism, as I did, encounters the rigid conception of masturbation as an intrinsically disordered act, the equivalent of a grave sin. Whether in the church or among one's peers, the adolescent becomes burdened by an overlay of conflicting messages. In the absence of a frank and mature discussion of the meaning of human sexuality, neither the confessional (the standard forum for dealing with the practice of masturbation for many Catholics) nor received peer group knowledge can help to resolve the tension and the anxiety characteristic of later masturbatory sexual quandary for the adult male (or female).

Still on the issue of initiation rites in Africa, it also is worth mentioning that the post-circumcision period is usually a time when young initiates experiment with various forms of culturally sanctioned genital sexual activities. Some communities are known to allow a form of incest to young neophytes.

To come to the girl's path of sexual maturation, some African cultures continue to practice various forms of circumcision by vaginal infibulation or clitoridectomy. Literature abounds on the danger associated with such acts of female genital mutilation. Without delving into the physical aspects of this painful and harmful operation, the underlying rationale offers a peek into how some African cultures understand the path of sexual maturation for girls.

At the stage when the girl has her first menstrual period, she discovers, with the help of her mother and aunts, the cycle of fertility and the possibilities of conception and pregnancy. This learning process could occur in the context of pubertal rites or as a proximate preparation for marriage.

Because a girl's mother (and the other female figures in her immediate environment) has her direct and

personal experiences upon which to draw, the information she passes on to her daughter tends to be more accurate and practical. In this instance, the young woman is less likely to be misinformed by her peer group. This is in contradistinction to the experience of boys, who tend to grow up with little knowledge and a baggage of misconceptions regarding the biology of sex, human sexuality and conception. Again, the dearth of open inter-generational and cross-gender conversations in many African cultures about sex and sexuality does not allow for the dispelling of such misconceptions.

#### THE AGE OF PERFORMANCE VERSUS THE ART OF FERTILITY

At the time of marriage, the sexual performance of an African male assumes a status of high value. In the same novel, Achebe quotes an African proverb that says: "Never make an early morning appointment with a man who has just married a wife." He goes on to relate the practice of reserving the frothy dregs of palm-wine for the bridegroom in order to enhance his sexual performance:

*At last the young man who was pouring out the wine held up half a horn of the thick, white dregs and said, "What we are eating is finished." "We have seen it," the others replied. "Who will drink the dregs?" he asked. "Whoever has a job at hand," said Idigo, looking at Nwakibie's elder son Igwelo with a malicious twinkle in his eye.*

*Everybody agreed that Igwelo should drink the dregs. He accepted the half-full horn from his brother and drank it. As Idigo had said, Igwelo had a job at hand because he had married his first wife a month or two before. The thick dregs of palm-wine were supposed to be good for men who were going into their wives (pp. 23-24).*

Preoccupation with physical sexual performance is a function of sexual maturation for an African adult male. It can become a moment of anxiety for an adult who has traversed the path of psychosexual development predominantly on the wings of misconceptions and inaccurate information about human sexuality. The reason for this anxiety derives from the fact that his ability to sire offspring in the family and the community will determine to a large extent his position and status within these groups. It is not uncommon for an adult male to be ridiculed on account of his presumed inability to father children.

In a parallel sense, fertility is a function of sexual maturation for an adult female in Africa. To draw upon another example in *Things Fall Apart*, Achebe mentions the practice of barren women and young wives sitting under a silk-cotton tree in the belief that the spirits that inhabit this tree will procure them children. If we take this along with another practice, where a live animal, usually a goat, is slaughtered in honor of a woman who has given birth to a succession of male children, it is easy to see the vital role that fecundity plays in the sexual maturation of an African woman. The anxiety that an adult male experiences at the time of marriage around issues of sexual performance finds correlation in the experience of an adult female. In many cultures, particularly those that still tolerate or practice polygamy, for good or for ill, her self-worth and status within her family of marriage depend largely on her ability to produce offspring.

However, unlike the adult male, the occasion of marriage offers the bride yet another opportunity to receive practical education relating to sex and sexuality within the context of marriage and childbearing.

#### THE CHICKEN OR THE EGG?

Halfway through his captivating novel, Achebe pens an intriguing flashback on the marital escapade of the principal characters of his story: the overbearing Okonkwo and his adoring second wife, Ekwefi:

*As they stood there together, Ekwefi's mind went back to the days when they were young. She had married Anene because Okonkwo was too poor then to marry. Two years after her marriage to Anene, she could bear it no longer and she ran away to Okonkwo. It had been early in the morning. The moon was shining. She was going to the stream to fetch water. Okonkwo's house was on the way to the stream. She went in and knocked at his door and he came out. Even in those days he was not a man of many words. He just carried her into his bed and in the darkness began to feel around her waist for the loose end of her cloth (p. 103).*

It often is alleged that Africans do not marry for love. Rather, love is a product of marriage. Is this the case of the proverbial chicken and the egg? Whatever value or meaning one assigns to love, the argument here is that marriage achieves validity and stability only when a married couple has achieved procreation.

"Validity" and "stability" then become the stimulus to love. This claim contains a deeper significance from the perspective of sexual maturation or psychosexual development in an African context.

Beyond the angst of performance and the anxiety of fertility and fecundity, for an African, the stage of procreation opens up the possibility of and opportunity for a successful resolution and integration of undigested messages and adversarial sexual energies accumulated over a long period of psychosexual development. Whether this can be recognized as an experience of love and friendship between two sexes whose paths of sexual maturation developed along separate lines remains open to interpretation. What can be said, though, is that in many African cultures, once a man and a woman have shown proof of procreation, they are entitled to a higher degree of esteem and then can look forward to a status of respectability as elders of the land. Thus, in the eye of the community, the attainment of respect bears the sign of a healthy and successful negotiation of the often-complex path of sexual maturation.

To conclude this short essay, the following points are worth reiterating. First, in attempting to offer a general description of the paths of sexual maturation that I consider recognizably African, I have drawn considerably on my own experiences. In that sense this description is limited because I come from a particular culture that cannot be said to be completely representative of all things African. Expectedly, the level of applicability varies from culture to culture. Yet I believe that what I have outlined above offers a perspective that would correlate well with many African situations. Second, I have deliberately avoided making a value judgment about these situations and practices. That is a matter for a separate discussion. Finally, much of what I have described above continues to undergo a radical transformation as the unrestrained access to outside cultural influences exposes African youth to myriad alternative paths of sexual maturation.



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