

Marriage and Changing Moral Values in Contemporary Nigeria

Dr. Onuche, Joseph

Abstract

One of the convergent set of behavior which all or at least, most Nigerians entertain and towards which their activities are directed is their moral view on marriage and its benefit to the community. Procreative marriage is valued highly and its extended family structure is more than just a structure made up of a set of people. it is ontological and a way of living together in harmony with all the forces of nature and sharing economic, social and spiritual responsibilities. We perceive intuitively that the natural sex partner of a human is another human, not an animal. The same reasoning applies to the case of homosexual behavior. The natural sex partner for a man is a woman, and the natural sex partner for a woman is a man. Any deviation from this is considered unnatural and unholy. This paper shall focus on the analysis of the moral value of marriage in tradition Nigeria viz a viz the present changes in moral value among Nigerians.

Introduction

Morality derives from the Latin word *mores* which means customs or people's values and traditions, people's heritage or ways of life and conduct in a given community. The term "morality can be used either descriptively to refer to a code of conduct put forward by a society or other group, such as a religion or accepted by an individual for his or her own behavior or normatively to refer to a code of conduct that given specific conditions would be put forward by all rational persons.

According to Sogolo (119), Nigerians and other black sub Saharan Africans, see morality as the total set of ethical-moral, legal-human rights values, customs or traditions which define, describe, promote, and defend a given society's or community's common good, sheared values and vision, their public ethos and the common pursuit of the good in order to achieve their full potential and civilization.

This public morality regulates the behavior and values of both the community and the individual who lives and achieves his or her full humanness within the community. These common values includes among others, history and language, rites, rituals and ceremonies, wisdom, philosophy and world views, religious beliefs and morality, ancestors and leaders, institutions of family, signs and symbols, clan and society as a whole (Waligo 6). Nigerian morality may be taken to mean a set of institutionalized ideals which guide and direct patterns of life of Nigerians (Sogolo 119).

Traditional Nigerian Morality

Traditionally, Nigerian moral values are values shared by a group of people and because these people are different in some ways from other human beings their shared values are also expected to be different (Sogolo, 121). Their moral values are the beneficiary values of collective family and community well-being. The people have a basic, ethical intuition that certain behaviors are wrong because they are unnatural. For instance, the Igala people perceive intuitively that the natural sex partner of a human is another human, not an animal. The same reasoning applies to the case of homosexual behavior. The natural sex partner for a man is a woman, and the natural sex partner for a woman is a man. Thus, people have the corresponding intuition concerning homosexuality that they do about bestiality that it is wrong because it is unnatural. Natural law reasoning is the basis for almost all standard moral intuitions. For example, it is the dignity and value that each human being naturally possesses that makes the needless destruction of human life or infliction of physical and emotional pain immoral. This gives rise to a host of specific moral principles, such as the unacceptability of murder, kidnapping, mutilation, physical and emotional abuse.

Many homosexuals argue that they have not chosen their condition, but that they were born that way, making homosexual behavior natural for them. But because something was not chosen does not mean it was inborn. Some desires are acquired or strengthened by habituation and conditioning instead of by conscious choice.

For example, no one chooses to be an alcoholic, but one can become habituated to alcohol. Just as one can acquire alcoholic desires (by repeatedly becoming intoxicated) without consciously choosing them, so one may acquire homosexual desires (by engaging in homosexual fantasies or behavior) without consciously choosing them.

Since sexual desire is subject to a high degree of cognitive conditioning in humans (there is no biological reason why we find certain scents, forms of dress, or forms of underwear sexually stimulating), it would be most unusual if homosexual desires were not subject to a similar degree of cognitive conditioning (Judith, 11-15).

Even if there is a genetic predisposition toward homosexuality (and studies on this point are inconclusive), the behavior remains unnatural because homosexuality is still not part of the natural design of humanity. It does not make homosexual behavior acceptable; other behaviors are not rendered acceptable simply because there may be a genetic predisposition toward them. For example, scientific studies suggest some people are born with a hereditary disposition to alcoholism, but no one would argue someone ought to fulfill these inborn urges by becoming an alcoholic. Alcoholism is not an acceptable "lifestyle" any more than homosexuality is (Judith, 15).

Though homosexuality is treated as unnatural, Appia,(45) maintain that homosexuality on the continent has been around since time immemorial and suggests it was Western missionaries, with their hard-line puritanicalism, who introduced the idea that it should be reviled. In his own view, Olusegun Obasanjo has been quoted as saying that homosexuality exist and that it is clearly un-Biblical, unnatural and definitely un-Nigerian." Robert Mugabe equally described homosexuals as unnatural, and were worse than "dogs and pigs", adding that it should be left to "whites to do that (have gay sex)".

Homosexuality has forced some people or group of persons into having a distorted notion of marriage and family in the name of modernity. Some see marriage as any kind of union including those in which procreation (the primary purpose of marriage) is excluded; a situation which if not checked can easily lead to a serious reduction of the global population or at worst lead to something close to the extinction of the human race.

By the same tone of distortion they talk of" families" which includes too much to the point of being meaningless- foster families, teenage families, ageing families, single parent families, homosexuals and lesbians.

In Africa, procreative marriage is valued highly. The Nigerian extended family is more than just a structure made up of a set of people. It is a way of living together intimately and sharing economic, social and spiritual responsibilities. It is a way of interacting to make the decisions required for everyday life for the collective good of the whole community. Individualism is completely unknown in this set up; and it is regarded as a selfish practice which should be rejected in all its forms. Community life is regarded as the secure form of preserving the natural family. Within this set up, marriage is seen as a union between two families and not between two individuals. This is what makes marital breakdown very difficult because problems are settled not between two persons but between the two families of the couples concerned. Their problems are seen in the light of the effects they have on the wider community and the marriage institution (Wiredu, 66).

Commenting on the effects of sexual deviance on the moral life of the Nigerian people, Mbiti (148) says; Nigerian people are very sensitive to any departure from the accepted norm concerning all aspects of sex. Fornication, incest, rape, seduction, homosexual relations, sleeping with a forbidden relative or domestic animals, intimacy between relatives, children watching the genitals of their parents (in the wide usage of the term), all constitute sexual offences in a given community. Heterogeneous marriage therefore is so much prized that it is regarded as a religious duty and responsibility. It forms the focal point where departed, present and coming members of society meet. It is the point of hope and expectation for the unmarried and their relatives. Mbiti finally submitted that "no normal person keep away from this dynamic scene of action" (148).

Looking at it from the view of African concept of personhood, Wiredu (67), is of the view that the high value placed on reproductive fertility is a necessary conditions for personhood. He went further to say, "So much is this the case that being married with children well raised is part of the necessary conditions for personhood in the normative sense. A non-marrying, non-procreative person, however normal otherwise not to talk of a Casanova equivalent can permanently forget any prospect of this type of recognition in traditional Akan society".

The only conceivable exceptions will be ones based on the noblest of alternative life commitments. Homosexuality is not included in this noblest of alternative.

Sexual Morality in Traditional Nigerian Society

In traditional Nigerian Societies, sex was not a subject much discussed. It was considered sacrilegious for adult to discuss matters regarding sexuality either with or in the presence of the young. Among the Igala, such discussion is called "**Abutabu**" (sacrilege or taboo). Similarly, it was unthinkable for young persons to talk about sex to the hearing of the elders. Whatever they needed to know about sexuality was casually told them as they grow and as warranted by the unfolding of their own physical and sexual development.

Moral standards in traditional Nigerian societies were absolute and parents had absolute control over their children, male or female alike. There was no pornographic intent involved in the scantiness of clothing. Sex was not to be indulged in for pleasure, even though it might be craved. The natural role of sex was purely procreative. As a result, sexual promiscuity was rare. Ape (65) is of the view that traditional Igala society was very strict, and anyone indulging in promiscuous activities earned the scorn of the community.

S.M.E Bengu (72) is of the view that this strictness about sexual matters made all sexual perversities alien to Africa. "These perversities," he insists, "have been imported into Africa through the cities with the whites as their carriers, since they were the creators of cities themselves". Although Bengu failed to define what constitutes a sexual perversion, this statement, enjoys the endorsement of most African purists. One need only consider the degree of tolerance accorded homosexuality, pornography, abortion and all manner sexual depravity in the name of human rights in the West and America. These perversities were almost unmentioned in traditional Nigerian society. For instance, Flora Nwapa (34-41) discusses the issue of prostitution and rejects it as bad for African women. "If prostitution is to be practiced she says, let it not be native women, but women of other lands to practice it".

Wole Soyinka (106), Nigeria's Nobel Laureate for Literature, depicts a scene where the traditional sexual morality is given expression. A grandmother brings pressure to bear on her granddaughter Dehinwa not to abort a child whether conceived in or out of wedlock and whether for cosmetic or any other reason. Dehinwa is here not being encouraged to be promiscuous, but rather to face up to her conduct. Here was an emphatic objection to any contemplation of abortion. Progeny was to be preferred in all circumstances above personal convenience.

A woman's worth of womanhood was accessed by her actual ability to bear children (Uchendu 187-197). Where she was unable to bear children, her esteem waned. Reflecting on the predicament of a woman that failed to bear children, John Munonye (99), says such a woman is like a kolanut tree that fails to bear fruit. Nigerian sexual morality from the above presentation abhors all form of sexual behaviour that does not promote the harmony of forces within the community.

Homosexual in Nigeria

Homosexual is presently an area that is increasingly generating great research interest. Looking at it from a Nigerian moral perspective, one of the points of contention is whether or not homosexuality are rooted in any direct or indirect way to traditional and indigenous Nigerian practices and belief systems. Is it merely a Western/foreign intrusion to Nigerian practices and belief systems? Do Nigerians in their traditional worldview accommodate homosexuality as understood today? Or are there any parallels in the traditional/indigenous beliefs and practices? Is it treated as sexual deviance? If so, how is sexual deviance and sexual deviants to be dealt with? These and many others more are the puzzles we face today.

As far as homosexuals in Nigeria are concerned, Nigeria is a hostile place for their life style. Anti-homosexual prejudices abounds. Nigerian President Goodluck Jonathan on 8th January, 2014 signed the same sex prohibition Act into law, banning homosexual practices. To put the extent of homophobia in Africa into context, there are currently 38 countries that criminalize homosexuality on the continent. This amounts to almost half the nations outlawing homosexuality in the world. In Sudan, Mauritania and Somalia convicted homosexuals face the death penalty under Islamic Shari'ah law. Leo Igwe (8) has argued that homosexuality has always existed among Nigerians from time immemorial, albeit subtly with strong social condemnation.

Those associated with it were viewed as perverted and were stigmatized. Though homosexual practices may have existed in Africa for so long a time, Nigerian scholars are unanimous in condemning the practice. Zacharia W Samita hold that, to a great extent, homosexuality as is been practiced today is foreign, Western or a manifestation of the disruption of the indigenous African socio-cultural, economic and even political fabric in the event of westernization in its various phases: slavery, colonialism, neo-colonialism, globalization (Zacharia 24).

In Nigeria, the principle of right and wrong behaviour is a communal responsibility. Consequently, homosexuality in its present form, is a modern western social construct and unacceptable within the Nigerian moral context. Nigerians prized its level of morality, family life, community life, sociability and solidarity highly. This is shown through its own way of educating its youth through initiation, stories, rites of passage, and so on. This could differ from one tribe to another or one culture to another, but the ontological meaning remain the same. In traditional Nigeria, talking openly about sex is a taboo. There is a kind of veil of secrecy surrounding sex. "It is a don't ask, don't tell belief". Sex is understood among Igala as something sacred therefore its deviation is or was a threat to the society structures and therefore regarded as a taboo. Sexual taboos are sexual practices that have been forbidden by the community because of their harmful and negative effects on community. These sexual taboos are for example incest, pedophilia, necrophilia, bestiality, and having sex with a menstruating woman, homosexuality and so on. The negative consequences of these taboos could be illnesses, disease, plagues on the community or mysterious deaths in the community (Ape).

Mbiti (102) holds that in Africa, sex is believed to be sacred. The main reason is that it is through men or women sexual power that he or she continues the creative work of nature and therefore in this sense he or she is in communion with the giver of life. Procreation he claims calls for the sexual act. It is through this act that the biological parents are able to participate, and it is therefore a sacred act; through it the traditional African becomes "we", for he is no longer alone. By the act of procreation, the individual becomes a creator, doing and continuing that work which the Creator started. It is a sacred drama in which the Creator is the central force, with man and spirits on both sides. Man must participate, otherwise there is no procreation." At the same time he or she is in communion with the ancestors who are life's immediate mediators.

Procreative sex is the basic and primary vehicles for preserving and transmitting the ancestral vital force and thus is sacred. For this Mbiti says "sexual morality was safeguarded by the structures of society, more than by individual personal responsibility. Sexual activity was the subject of much ritual symbolism. It was dramatized in dance and art, and was surrounded by many taboos.

Sexual activity was essentially a dialogue with the future". Sex taboos form a code of sexual conduct that is so highly respected that any deviation from it is deeply detested. The code stipulates the time and manner for having sex and also the persons with whom one may not enter into sexual relationship. The sacredness with which sex is held is so fundamental an idea that it is a necessary condition for understanding the high premium the people place on sex, and all the regulations and customs they place concerning it in marriage". Here the positive point is the stress on positive use of sex. That is procreation which is in accordance with nature's will as well as ancestors'. Therefore, because of this sacred dimension, non procreative sexual relationships are detested and regarded as taboos that have grave consequences.

This paper has pointed out that generally speaking, traditional Nigerian societies are explicitly inimical to same sex marriage. The study has proceeded to give reasons for such a stand, namely; our normative understanding of marriage as a union between a man and a woman, and our moral context, norms and values which is purely ontological. These no doubt has made homosexuality morally unacceptable. Nigerian morality is different from the liberal Western morality. It is a conservative and dynamic morality. As long as Nigerian morality remain conservative morality, homosexuality as it is been propagated today, will remain an aberration, deviant, unnatural and foreign.

It is equally true that Nigerian morality relate to the experience and values of the community as well as to the historical narrative tradition informing the essence and values of the community. It also has a dialogical narrative dimension, reflected in story, myth, ritual, custom, and proverb which does not only transmit the values, but also the vices which are to be avoided. Community in the Nigerian context is the basis for morality in that it guarantees the well-being of both the individual and the community. As long as a community moral dictates Nigerian individual morality, homosexuality will remain inimical.

Finally, it is worth noting that the moral and ethical framework of oppositions toward homosexuality and, for example gay marriage in Nigeria and most African and Western societies must be understood both from the process of institutionalism within Nigerian society and from the communitarian view of human being as a communal being.

These negative attitude towards homosexuality results from a mechanism within which, what is morally regarded as normal, sane, constructive and right, and what, in contrast, is not, depends on the institutionalization of moral reality". So what may be taken to be Nigerian moral values as distinct from Western values will be those "set of institutionalized ideals which guide and direct the pattern of life of Nigerians. By this analysis, homosexuality has failed Nigerian moral test.

Cultural Fallout and Consequences

It is common for communities to defend or excommunicated from the village as punishment for any offence considered as taboo by the community, committed by one of their members for it constituted high crime which offend the ancestors and has the capacity of bringing calamities on the entire family and or clan as a whole. Nigerians seek to understand and identify with the rhythm of nature rather than with their efforts to manipulate it. In relation, and communication with nature and other inhabitants of the earth, the individual finds his self-fulfillment in the community rather than in isolation (Gyekye 102). It is good for kinsmen to do so, most obviously because life can only grow in relationship.

To excommunicate oneself or be excommunicated from the community is to be dead. Life for him is found in relationship; energy is found in the midst of persons, beauty inheres in persons and wisdom is acquired through relationship with persons. If he (the traditional Nigerian) is rich, it is a collective richness and when and if the wealth is distributed and reaches everyone, leaving him no penny (kobo), all that he has left is collective poverty. For whom will the Nigerian be who in the midst of riches could watch his extended family suffer want and deprivation and yet have peace of mind?

This doctrine is very clear about its group philosophy, that the group constitutes the focus of the activities of the individual members of the society and that the good of all determines the good of each.

The fortunes of the individual are reflected in the lives of all other members of the community and each had a stake in the destiny of the other. In this communal philosophy, the individual affirms himself or herself, not by isolating himself or herself from others, but by constantly relating and exchanging with other beings.

Individuality is of no consequence, at least outwardly, in the interest of the clan. Individual's problems, aspirations and fortunes are jointly owned and shared. The individual because others are sharing life with others is what define the Nigerian as a person not some isolated static quality of rationality, will or memory. Personhood in the Nigerian spirit is attained as one participates in communal life. William (25), stated this fact as follows: A man without his family is like a lion without his teeth; he has the head and has the power but he cannot overcome his prey. A woman without her family is like a bird with broken wings; her ability to fly is inhibited. And worse yet, a child without his family is like a ship caught on a rough sea without a rudder. Perhaps we may add here that every department of life is affected by this thinking to the extent that alienation from ones surrounding amounts to rendering an individual impotent.

Conclusion

Moral standards in traditional Nigerian societies were absolute. Sex taboos form a code of sexual conduct that is so highly respected that any deviation from it is deeply detested. Emphasis is on the positive use of sex which is, procreation, which is in accordance with nature's will as well as ancestors'. In Nigeria, the principle of right and wrong behaviour is a communal responsibility. Consequently, homosexuality in its present form, is a modern Western social construct and unacceptable within the Nigerian moral context.

References

- Apeh, J.E. 1988 *Igala Worldview and Contextualization*. Biola: U.M.I. Press .
- Bengu S.M.E, 1975. *Chasing Gods Not Our Own*. Natal: Shuter and Shooter Pietermaritzburg
- Gyekye, K. 1997 "Tradition and Modernity: Philosophical Reflections on the Nigerian Experience". Oxford University Press. 102.
- Judith Reisman & Edward Eichel, *Kinsey, Sex, and Fraud*, Lafayette, Louisiana: Lochinvar & Huntington House, 1990.
- Mbiti, John S. *African Religions and Philosophy*. London: Longman, 1969.
- Munoye,John. 1987. *Obi,a Friend Warrior*. London: Heinemann Publishers
- Sogolo, G. 1993, *Foundations of Nigerian philosophy: A Definitive Analysis of Conceptual Issues in African Thought*. Ibadan: Ibadan University Press.
- Wiredu, K. 1980, *Philosophy and an Africian culture*. Cambridge: Cambridge University. Press.

- _____. 1983 "Morality and Religion in Akan Thought." *Philosophy and Cultures: Proceedings of the Second Afro-Asian Philosophy Conference, Nairobi, October/November 1981*". Ed. H. Odera Oruka and D. A. Masolo. Nairobi: Bookwise. 6-13.
- Nwapa, Flora. 1987. Idu London: Heinemann Publishers.
- Uchendu, Victor. 1965 "Concubinage Among Ngwa Igbo of Southern Nigeria". *Africa*, vol xxxv. No 2, 187-197.
- Wole, Soyinka. 1987 *The Interpreters*. London: Heinemann Publishers
- Zacharia S. 2004, *African Traditional Analysis. Same Gender Unions: A critical Analysis*. Nairobi: Uzima press.
- Igwe, Leo "Tradition of same gender marriage in Igboland". [www. IHEU/gay marriage in Igboland.org](http://www.IHEU/gay_marriage_in_Igboland.org). Viewed on June 20, 2009:1-5.
- William S. Hein & Co. 2007, "Sexual Orientation and the Law: a Research Bibliography Selectively Annotating Legal Literature through 2005". *American Association of Law Libraries*. 1-5.