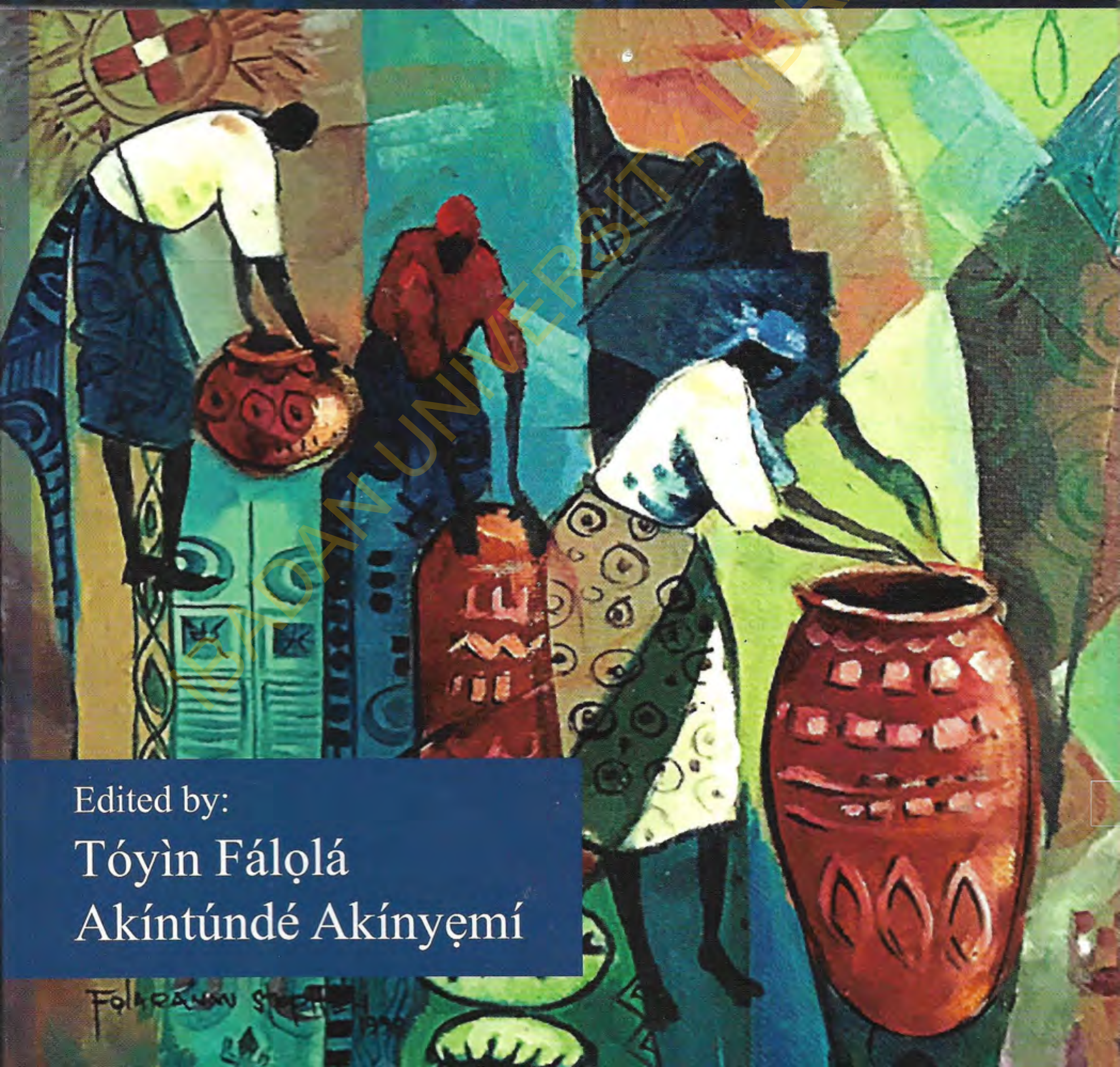
CULTURE AND CUSTOMS OF THE YORÙBÁ



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CULTURE AND CUSTOMS OF THE YORÙBÁ

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and
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AUSTIN, TEXAS

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Dedication

To four outstanding scholars who have contributed to
the understanding of Yoruba culture:
Wande Abimbola
Adeagbo Akinjogbin
Makanjuola Ilesanmi
Oludare Olajubu

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Chapter 64

Sexuality, Sexual Behavior and Gender Roles

Chinyere Ukpokolo and *Adéọlá Lameed*

Introduction

Every society and culture has a peculiar way of defining the human body in its sociocultural context, generating diverse meanings across human cultures and societies. This falls within the domain of human sexuality. This chapter examines sexuality, sexual behavior, and gender roles among the Yorùbá people of southwest Nigeria. The discussions in the chapter cover the pre-colonial period and how colonial encounters 'missionalization,' modernization, and globalization have shaped the Yorùbá culture in the areas of sexuality and sexual behavior. The influence of Islamic religion is also highlighted.

Conception and Communication of Sexuality among the Yorùbá People

Sex, among the Yorùbá people, is primarily assumed to be something that is sacred and reserved for adults, mostly acceptable within the confines of marriage. Sex is primarily for procreation. The people believe that God created man and woman to raise offspring, referred to as *àrólé* (one who sustains the family name at the demise of the parents). The World Health Organization (WHO) describes sexuality as "a central aspect of

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being human which encompasses sex, gender identities and roles, sexual orientation, eroticism, pleasure, intimacy and reproduction" (WHO, 2013). This chapter adopts this definition because it attempts to understand the interplay of sexuality, sexual behavior, and gender roles among the Yorùbá people of southwest Nigeria. Sexuality is experienced and expressed in thoughts, behaviors, fantasies, desires, beliefs, attitudes, values, practices, roles, and relationships. It is also reflected in language, greetings, behaviors, and regulations that guide human conduct.

Puberty, the onset of physiological development as indicated by the maturation of secondary sex characteristics, is designated in the Yorùbá language by the use of the term *ìbàlàgà*, which translates in English as "coming of age." The sign of puberty in males is the maturity of the sex organs and the gradual increase in body size. A female is said to have reached puberty when she has had her first menstruation. By this time, there is a visible increase in the size of her breasts. With the onset of puberty, young males and females are groomed by the corresponding sex parent in preparation for the role assigned to each gender by the culture, particularly regarding eventual marriage.

Sexual relationships were considered sacred in precolonial times, although this sacredness seems to have waned following colonialism and media globalization. As a result of this sacredness, direct verbal references to human sexual organs or sexual relationships are overtly conveyed in various euphemisms and descriptive words. In discussions, for instance, the female private part is referred to as *ojú ara obìnrin*, literally translated as "the eye of a woman's body," while the male organ is called *nǹkan ọmọkùnrin*, meaning "a man's thing."

Also, children are instructed on the culturally acceptable mode of sitting without exposing their private parts. Such statements as *Ẹ wo ìdí rẹ̀ ni ita*, meaning "look at his/her buttocks exposed" are often used to instruct children on the correct manner of sitting down. For a girl, such statements as *pa'tan mọ́, pa'tan mọ́; ọkọ rẹ n bọ̀*, meaning "close your thighs, close your thighs; your husband is coming." Statements like these depict the sacredness of sexuality and further reinforce decency, morality, and a sense of shame in children. By telling a little girl that her husband is coming, she is from childhood conscious of the significance of marriage to members of her society and the respect ascribed to the institution.

This sacredness associated with sex organs and sexual activities creates some difficulties for parents teaching their children sex education in modern times as sex and sex organs are not openly discussed. In traditional society, stories, gossips, folksongs, taboos, and tales were part of the ways sex education was passed on to children. The very act of sexual intercourse itself is not a subject for public discussion or one to be undertaken in the presence of minors except when they have reached puberty and are being prepared for marriage. The hallowed nature of sexual activities also necessitates that sexual intercourse be conducted at a specific time. For instance, sexual intercourse is never expected to take place during the productive hours but only at night since the day time is meant for serious work. The nocturnal timing of sexual intercourse between married couples also ensures that its sacredness is preserved in the privacy of the bedroom beyond the earshot of children and neighbors. The very act of sexual intercourse is never expressed in literal language but by the use of such euphemisms as *ìbálòpọ̀* or *àjọṣepọ̀*, which mean "doing together."

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Sexuality is also reflected in a person's dress. Women have one mode of dressing, while men have another. This is in contrast to the modern day practice where both men and women can wear the same style of clothing regarded as "unisex." Men wear *agbádá àti ṣọ́ọ̀rọ̀* while women wear *bùbá àti ìró*. In this area, too, the influence of Islamic religion is noticeable. Islam allows women to wear trousers and long gowns with a veil. This has been incorporated into Yorùbá women's dressing.

The woman plays an active role in the life of her children and the family as caregiver, nurturer, keeper of the home, and sex partner to her husband. The father figure is highly revered as the provider of family income and source of authority; hence, he is highly respected by the children. Children are often threatened with the words *Màá fi ẹjọ́ rẹ sun bàbá rẹ ti wọn bá dé* (I will report you to your father when they [he] returns). The use of a plural pronoun for the father is honorific and connotes the respect women are expected to give to their husbands in the culture even when they are close in age, or even in cases where the woman is older than the man. By contrast, the Yorùbá cultural practice refers to elders and superiors using a singular pronoun.

As the marriage system is polygynous, a man is entitled to more than one wife. He derives sexual pleasure and procreates with his wives. If he finds a lady he loves and has the capacity to care for an additional wife, he marries her, which adds to the number of wives in his household. In precolonial times, this cultural practice limited the occurrence of extramarital affairs in the society; adultery was strongly frowned upon though it still occurred on occasion. Thus, the term à*l*è exists to describe an extramarital affair. However, a child born to a man outside wedlock belongs to the man. Hence, the adage that *Obìnrin tó bí'mọ fún 'ni ti kúrò ní àlè ẹni* (A woman that has a child for someone is no longer a concubine).

Islamic religion entitles a man to have more than one wife, and this is highly agreeable in different African cultures, including the Yorùbá. Through formal education and media globalization, the influence of Western culture in Africa is also reflected in the attitude of young people to sex and sexual behavior in contemporary society. Young people openly express their love for one another, holding hands, cuddling, and, at times, kissing in public places contrary to Yorùbá traditional cultural expectations. Television, music, and films expose them to sex and sexual activities they never saw in their own households.

Sexuality and the Yorùbá Marriage Institution

In the precolonial period, on reaching puberty, young boys and girls went through puberty initiation rites. The period of circumcision was also the time to teach young boys about sexual intercourse and the responsibility of fatherhood. For the young girls, the belief is that without the removal of the clitoris, the girl would be very promiscuous. Hence, the tip of the clitoris needed to be trimmed. An uncircumcised woman lost her honor in the community and among the members of her age group. Despite the pain and health hazard associated with the practice, it was sustained in precolonial times and is still practiced secretly by some parents in traditional societies today. What is today regarded as Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) was actually a thing of honor in traditional society.

Once she reaches puberty, the young girl is taught the sex-related roles she is

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expected to play in her society. For instance, she learns about motherhood, housekeeping, womanhood, and what is expected of a wife. She also learns how to attract the attention of her husband and about the intrigues that occur among co-wives in order to gain the attention of their husband. The clamor for the end to FGM by gender activists would have been an aberration in traditional Yorùbá society prior to colonial contact. It is important to note that human sexuality in traditional Yorùbá society was the ideal to be expressed solely within the context of heterosexual marriage of two adults, a male and one or more females. Incest was a taboo; sexual attraction must be expressed outside one's group and so marriage is exogamous.

The concept of homosexuality was unheard of in Yorùbá traditional society. With the high premium placed on marriage and children, it would have been an aberration and contradiction to sanction any cultural practice that could legalize marriage without children. As marriage in the traditional Yorùbá worldview is considered a sacred institution, there are societal and cultural expectations of the intending couple. An intending bridegroom, for instance, is expected to possess characteristics such as industriousness, bravery, good health, agility, honesty, and good family heritage. A qualified bride is expected to be a good cook, well-behaved, industrious, and diligent.

In precolonial society, she was also expected to possess a round physique most typified by a narrow waistline and the storage of adipose fat in the arm and buttock region of her body. The round figure of an intending bride was perceived as an indication of the ability to bear children in marriage. Precolonial Yorùbá society also expected that an intending bride must preserve her virginity, known as *ìbálé* (intact), until her marriage. For that reason, a single lady is referred to as *omidan* (unpolluted water stream). A lady's virginity was confirmed by her husband on her marriage day. When this happens, the bride becomes a source of pride to her husband and to her immediate and extended families. The reverse is the case if the she had lost her virginity to another man. In that case, her family members must apologize for her shameful conduct and upbringing. The white sheet stained with blood from her first sexual experience is sent in a calabash bowl to her parents together with a huge sum of money and a hen to be used for sacrificial prayers for the new bride (Fádípẹ̀, 1970, 81–84).

In the course of history, the quest for premarital chastity has waned so much so that not much is said about the preservation of virginity until marriage in contemporary Yorùbá society. Rather, many parents pretend not to know that their children are involved in premarital sex. Rather, they hope that these children are able to prevent unwanted pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases. Interestingly, some mothers express happiness if their son's wife-to-be conceives prior to marriage, secretly using family *oríkì* (family praise poem) to appreciate their son for choosing a fertile wife and being able to impregnate a woman.

Young people who are engaged in premarital sex use different types of contraceptives and at times local herbs and self-medications to prevent conception and unwanted pregnancy. When these fail, some may consult quack medics for abortion, resulting in diverse complications and occasionally death. In precolonial times where premarital chastity was the norm, there was a kind of silence among young men who had already had active, sexual intercourse prior to marriage. The assumption was that

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women played key roles in the preservation of societal values; the preservation of virginity symbolized this role.

As already indicated, traditional Yorùbá society accommodates polygyny, which allows a man to have as many wives as his means allows. A woman, on the other hand, can only have one living husband. Polygyny was believed to be the prerogative the Creator conferred on men. The practice of polygyny is well institutionalized. It is expected of titled men, monarchs, and the wealthy to have more than one wife as another means of depicting their public status and wealth. The wife is not expected to call any male member of her husband's family by name. Rather, she calls them by certain coinages and pet names, which reflect respect for them as individuals and the larger household of her husband. Thus, such names as *ọkọ mi* (my husband), *olówó orí mi* (he that pays my dowry), *ìdí ìlẹ̀kẹ̀* (beaded waist), *eyín afẹ́* (golden teeth or wealthy teeth), among others are used to address male members of her husband's household.

Sexuality is also reflected through cultural practices. A male prostrates himself to an elder while a female kneels to greet. Although a woman is expected to give much respect to members of her husband's family no matter their age, seniority is also given premium rather than sex identity. For this reason, an elderly woman (wife) may earn more reverence than a younger man as he defers to her based on her age.

As indicated earlier, the concept of *àlè*, meaning lover, also exists in Yorùbá culture to connote extra-marital relationships, which involve both sexes, although it is strictly frowned upon when a woman is involved. An individual may be insulted with the statement *ọmọ àlè* (child of extra-marital relationship or concubine). On the other hand, an individual could jokingly among his friends proudly refer to someone as *àlè mi ni* (he/she is my lover). Certain Yorùbá proverbs depict the culture's recognition that, though extra-marital relationships exist, they must be discouraged. Such proverbs include:

Ìjà níí kẹ́hìn àlè (Extra-marital relationships always end in conflict)

Tí ilé bá ń tòrò, ọmọ àlè ibẹ̀ kò tíì d'àgbà ni (When there is peace in a family, the bastard [that is, the child of extra-marital relationship] there has not grown). In other words, the secret of extra-marital affairs cannot be hidden forever, as the offspring of such relationship is always of questionable character and will reveal himself/herself in time.

Obìnrin kan mọ àlè mẹ́fà. Àlè mẹ́fà kò mọ ra wọn (A woman knows her six lovers. Her six lovers do not know themselves). This suggests the "hide and seek" and deceit ful nature of extra-marital relationships.

Ọmọ àlè níí fi ọwọ́ òsì júwe ilé bàbá rẹ̀ (The child of a concubine uses the left hand to point to the father's house)

Proverbs, such as those above, point to the negative impact of extra-marital relationships on the individual, the family, and the society generally, and are intended to discourage such acts. However, rather than the practice abating, over time, it is actually exacerbated in the contemporary Yorùbá society.

As the traditional Yorùbá society is an agrarian society, polygyny allows men to raise numerous children who can assist with the cultivation and maintenance of large farmlands and thereby increase the material fortune of the family. Besides, the

cultural practice of multiple wives also helped to satisfy the sexual needs of men in a way sanctioned by the customs and traditions of traditional Yorùbá society, reducing the incidents of extra-marital affairs in precolonial society. Interestingly, women who suffer repressed or unsatisfied sexual desire often find fulfilment through other men, including those who may be lower in status than their husbands.

Conflicts among wives are common as each tries to gain the attention of their husband and possibly deny other wives from having access to him. Interestingly, the Ifá corpus catalogues some of the woes associated with polygyny as presented below:

> When they [wives] increase to two, they become envious;
> When they increase to three, they scatter the household;
> When they increase to four, they laugh derisively at one another;
> When they increase to five, they accuse one another of destroying their husband's fortunes;
> When they increase to six, they become wicked;
> When they increase to seven, they become witches;
> When they increase to eight, they blame one of their group for bringing bad luck to their husband;
> When they increase to nine, they accuse the eldest wife of using their husband's wrapper-cloth;
> When they increase to ten, they accuse one another of forcing herself upon their husband (Abímbọ́lá, 1968 as cited in Àlàbá, 2004).

To consolidate one's position in the home, a woman must bear children. A Yorùbá proverb states *ọlọ́mọ ló l'ọkọ* (the one that bears children is the owner of the husband). Thus, a barren woman does everything humanly or even spiritually possible to beget a child. Thus, children may become targets of attack from a barren woman and contribute to rivalries among co-wives.

Colonial influence and Christian religion in Yorùbá land have had the effect of institutionalizing monogamy as the new marriage "ideal" for the postcolonial Yorùbá man. Neither the Church nor civil marriage registry allows polygyny. The effect of the new norm on an average Yorùbá man in postcolonial era is that he seeks to satisfy his sexual needs by keeping concubines outside his home while the legally married wife may never be aware of such extramarital affairs. The children who result from such relationships usually present family problems, especially when children from such illicit affairs are brought to the man's home by his mistress(es) during his lifetime or after his demise.

The construction of sexuality within traditional Yorùbá society as an attribute of life to be expressed in the context of marriage has far-reaching effects on the flourishing and sustenance of the Yorùbá society. Apart from the companionship and erotic pleasures that couples are expected to give to each other, marriage in pre-colonial times was as a matter of necessity for the unmitigated reproduction of children, as children come from God and must not be rejected. There is also the societal conviction that they (children) are indispensable in the quest for sustainable life. This is in contrast to contemporary Western practice where married couples decide the number of children to have. The expression of sexuality is sanctioned in traditional Yorùbá society through

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the confines of marriage in which male fertility was virtually taken for granted; hence, there was greater focus on the female spouse regarding procreation. This is evidenced by the marriage rites that invoke special blessings upon the Yorùbá bride for fertility with the use of *ataare* (alligator pepper, which is a type of pepper distinguished by its many seeds) as a symbol of fertility.

A pregnant woman in pre-colonial and contemporary Yorùbá society receives traditional prenatal care from the *ìyá àbíyè* (traditional midwives). With the advent of Western medicine, she can also access Western medicine in an orthodox hospital. In order to ensure the mother's well-being and that of the unborn child, there were laws and taboos in place. Precolonial Yorùbá society forbade a pregnant woman from any outing when the sun was high in the sky or in the dead of the night. It was also a taboo for a man to have sexual intercourse with a woman when she was at an advanced stage of pregnancy. Men who indulged in it were, according to tradition, doomed to become wretched.

In contemporary society, Yorùbá people have adjusted to having the number of children they can care for, which is a consequence of the shift from an agrarian economy to the cash economy of contemporary times. Today, Yorùbá women employ contraception to space childbirth and reduce the number of children they have. The husband of a breastfeeding mother would usually abstain from sexual intercourse with the wife around this time, creating space for them to seek sexual satisfaction outside the marriage.

Divorce was uncommon in indigenous Yorùbá society. Various reasons accounted for this. First, prior to marriage, critical investigations were expected to have been carried out by members of the families of the intended couple to ascertain the type of family one was getting married into. To further ensure the security of one's child, the Ifá oracle was also consulted to seek information from the supernatural powers about what the future held for the couple if they got married. This is important because marriage in those days was between one family and another and not between two individuals.

Certain reasons for divorce included if the man died, became a thief, was a chronic debtor, or suffered from leprosy. According to Fádípè̩ (1970), "Women in traditional Yorùbá society often felt compelled and in fact did cherish a life time marriage to one man.… [M]en were not used to divorce in the olden days even when the bride was found unchaste on the bridal night" (81). Impotence was no reason for divorce as a wife could transfer her marital responsibility to an appropriate person within the husband's family. Even with the death of the husband or impotency, she was expected to still remain with her husband's family, and, in strict privacy, raise children for her husband through a friend or a family member. Thus, in most cases, an impotent man "bore" children of his own without people being aware of his health condition.

Interestingly barrenness was always associated with the woman rather than the man. According to Obijole (2011), in the king palaces, male eunuchs served as waiters while virgins devoted to the service of deities and shrines served as priestesses. The author argued that the forcefully and deliberately castrated eunuchs served as spies on the wives and concubines of traditional rulers to prevent their illicit sexual activities

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and ensure their faithfulness. Not all the waiters, however, were eunuchs. As Christian religion abhors polygamy and extramarital sexual relationships, barren women in contemporary times are under a heavy burden as husbands have no other culturally acceptable way of bearing children. Some men in such circumstances secretly raise children without the knowledge of their legally married wife or even marry another wife, leaving the wife with the option of facing the new reality or move out of the marriage.

Sexuality, Sexual Behavior, and Gendered Expectations

Any discourse on human sexuality in Yorùbáland cannot be complete without a discussion of gender arrangements in the Yorùbá world, as both concepts are intricately linked. Gender is the sociocultural and psychological patterning of the differences between male and female, and sexuality is a crucial component of that patterning. Much as the Yorùbá person in precolonial, colonial, and postcolonial eras lives in conformity with the roles assigned to him or her by nature, there is always the socially constructed view of gender wherein the society has certain expectations from persons based on their biological identity as male or female. Hence, there are norms and laws prescribing and proscribing persons from taking particular course of action base on one's gender identity. Such prescriptions and proscriptions among the Yorùbá can be gleaned from Yorùbá perspectives on puberty, the expression of human sexuality, marriage, reproductive health, economy, and other social aspects of life. From all indications, the Yorùbá world demands much from females with regard to sexuality. While polygyny was allowed for the precolonial men, polyandry was never practiced in the precolonial, colonial, or post-colonial periods. In cases of an extramarital sexual relationship, societal condemnation falls more on the woman. While FGM was aimed at curbing the female's sexual urge, a wife's promiscuity is curtailed with the placement of *mágùn*, literally translated as "don't climb," an effective magical charm. A suspicious husband used it on a cheating wife so that she and any other man she had sexual intercourse with faced dangerous consequences, such as sudden death or some other bizarre consequence for which the only remedy was public disgrace and the performance of certain prescribed rituals (Àlàbá, 2004: 11). Interestingly, while a suspicious husband can use *mágùn* on his wife, the reverse is not heard of in Yorùbáland.

Gendered expectation is also expressed in the overt differentiation of male and female bodies, especially in relation to the practice of religion. A menstruating woman in precolonial times, for instance, was prohibited from participating in sacrificial worship of Ọbàtálá, the Yorùbá divinity of fertility, considered the epitome of purity. Here, the biological status of the menstruating woman is seen in opposition to the purity that this deity represents. She is also not expected to enter into sacred places because her presence in such hallowed places is believed to render spiritual elements ineffective. Given the prominence of female deities, priestesses, and prophetesses in the pre-colonial Yorùbá pantheon, some of these taboos represent the dark side of women's position in the traditional Yorùbá culture.

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Against the fluid, postmodern construction of human sexuality that permits either implicit or explicit forms of sexual expression like premarital sex and homosexuality, traditional Yorùbá culture abhors such alternative expressions of sexuality. This abhorrence is expressed in the form of taboos and severe punishment. Given the traditional Yorùbá attitude toward sexuality, homosexuality in contemporary African society is, according to scholars like Essien and Adérìntọ̀ (2009), the antisocial effect of Western cultural infiltration into the African sociocultural space. Thus, in some communities, persons found guilty of incestuous relationships could be made to slaughter a goat, strip themselves naked, and then flog each other around the town or village with the raw legs of the slaughtered animal. This punitive measure was not just intended for ritual cleansing of the land, which was considered desecrated by such unholy expression of sexuality, it was also meant as a means of deterring other citizens from such antisocial expressions of sexuality. Such abhorrence have been carried over even to contemporary Yorùbá society; hence homosexual persons (gays and lesbians), have remained in the "closet" and unable to live out their sexuality within the socially constructed framework of life in the Yorùbá community.

Conclusion

This chapter examined the issue of sexuality, sexual behavior, and gender roles among the Yorùbá people. It is obvious that the society has its own conception of sexuality and how men and women ought to conduct themselves in social interactions. Islamization and colonialism have affected these conceptions in various ways. While Islamic religion does not frown at polygyny, which is also rooted in African culture, the Christian religion maintains that monogamy is the only form of marriage acceptable in human society. This has created a hypocritical life style among many modern-day African men who maintain both one wife and concubines at the same time. Despite the influence of Western culture through media globalization and culture flows that break national and cultural boundaries. Gay marriage and transgenderism remain strange cultural practices to the Yorùbáland people, though the Western world regards this as homophobic.

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A Yorùbá traditional hair stylist (*onídìrí*). Hair plaiting/braiding/weaving is customarily women's role-profession in Yorùbá culture. Photo credit: "Nigerian Hairstyle – Onídìrí," By the Madam – *Editor, 27/8/2016.* https://themadameditor.com/2016/08/28/i-am-my-hair/nigerian-hairstyle-onidiri/

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