

PORNOGRAGHY IN POSTCOLONIAL NIGERIA: AN OWAN (EDO) TRADITIONAL RESPONSE

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Abstract

Sexual morals vary across culture, religion and historical periods. This is evidenced in the various norms set by different societies, religions and ideological groups on what is perceived as permissible sexual behaviour. This paper reviews the phenomenon of pornography in postcolonial Nigeria. It seeks to evaluate the 'porn tradition' of the modern world order vis-à-vis the traditional perception of sex and sexual morals in Owan (Edo) society. The expository cum evaluative approach was adopted. The paper came up with the findings that; (i) human sexual expression in Owan (Edo) traditional society is seen as a sacred activity that takes place within the domestic preserve of marriage for the basic purpose of promoting the vital force (life); (ii) the Owan (Edo) people consider the explicit/public portrayal and exhibition of sex and sexual organs for the sake of sexual arousal as not only dehumanizing, but also a taboo that invites calamity; (iii) pornography is not only addictive, it is a teacher/instigator of sexual crimes and other indecent sexual behaviours; (iv) pornography in Nigeria is a by-product of western intrusion into African culture. The paper thus suggests among other things that (a) positive African traditional values on sex and sexual morals should be inculcated on young people right from the home; (b) there should be strict enforcement of laws that censor or prohibit the indiscriminate production and/or sales of pornographic materials in postcolonial Nigeria. It is believed that these will help stem the tide of the wave of pornography in postcolonial Nigerian societies.

Keywords: Pornography; Postcolonial Nigeria; Human Sexuality; Owan tradition; Reawakening of Traditional Sexual Morals.

Introduction

In recent years, cultural conflicts over sexual expression have become an important subject in the current clash of civilization. This is confirmed by the contending paradigm on what constitutes rightful sexual behaviour in modern societies. Human sexuality consists of a broad range of behaviours through which human beings express sexual sensation. Sex itself is intrinsically a moral act;¹ it involves the body, mind and spirit. Hence, most traditions/cultures consider it proper only within marriage, otherwise it can be destructive². For this reason, these societies set limits through social norms, taboos, moral/religious guidelines as well as legal constraint on what is permissible sexual behaviour.

There has been growing concern in postcolonial Nigeria about young people's exposure to sexual content through television and other electronic and print media. This is evidenced by the proliferation of nude pictures/films and other sexually explicit materials, which end up in the hands of minors. Among the by-products of pornographic consumption in modern Nigeria is the way people, especially women, now roam the streets of the society in revealing clothes which can barely clothe a toddler. There is also the increasing cases of rape and other forms of sexual crimes in our modern societies. Again, the growing rise of lesbians, homosexuals, pedophiles, etc., cannot be said to be unconnected with the upsurge of pornography and sexual permissiveness in postcolonial Nigeria.

Many are of the view that the issue of pornography is the private affair of the pornographic consumer which is meant to cause no harm to anyone. They contend that pornography is another way of expressing one's right to sexual freedom. On the otherhand, many others have cried out that pornography is an aberration of African sexual moral values³.

In spite of modernization and the influx of Western ideas, certain primordial convictions still endure among the postcolonial Owan people of Edo State in southern Nigeria⁴. Pornographic expression in Owan (Edo) society to this day, evokes an attitude of contempt from its populace. They frown at the explicit portrayal of human sexuality for public view and condemn it as the height of moral decadence in the modern world. The Owan people attach much sanctity to human sexuality. In the view of an Owan person, sex and sexual expressions are sacred, hence, it should not be indecently portrayed or abused in any way. Therefore, pornography or any form of indecent sexual expression is not just seen by the traditional

Owan (Edo) people as dehumanizing; it is considered a taboo that invites calamity⁵.

In the light of the above, this study takes an ethical evaluation of pornography in post-colonial Nigeria. This is done from the standpoint of the advocates for human sexual freedom and the traditional perception of human sexuality among the Owan people. The study reveals that pornography as perceived by Owan people, is an abuse of human sexuality; it is un-African, addictive, harmful and a bane to the socio-ethical well-being of individuals and groups in the society. The study thus suggests a reawakening and re-enforcement of traditional sexual morals in postcolonial African societies. This would go a long way in helping to stem the tide of pornography in Owan society in particular and Nigeria in general.

What is Pornography?

Etymologically, the word “pornography” is derived from two Greek words - *porne* (*prostitute*) and *graphein* (*to write*). In this Greek context, it means “the writings of harlots or prostitutes”;⁵ or as Cline⁶ puts it, “the depictions of the activities of whores” intended primarily to promote sexual arousal. The term “pornography, over the years, have been defined variously by many scholars as they express their varying views on the subject matter. The Compton’s Encyclopedia and Fact-Index⁷ defined pornography as the presentation of sexual behaviour in books, pictures, or films solely to cause sexual excitement. It is the explicit portrayal of sexual subject matter for the purpose of sexual gratification. Flood⁹ defined pornography as sexually explicit media that are intended for sexual arousal. He went further to explain that Sexually explicit materials are materials that show ‘human genitals’ and sexual activities in an unconcealed ways. Flood also described pornography as a poor, and indeed, dangerous “sex-educator” that misinterprets the true meaning of sex and sexuality to its “unfortunate students” who are mainly young adults and children¹⁰.

Pornography in Human Society: A Historical Overview

Although little is known about the origins of pornography, it is as old as written records. Pornography is a graphic display of human sexuality that can be traced as far back as any other sign of human intelligence. Rock paintings and petroglyphs (engravings in rocks) demonstrating coitus between ancient people together have been

discovered by early researchers¹¹. In his book “A history of Prostitution from Antiquity to the Present Day” George R. Scott¹² stated that the first pornographic drawing was made by the cave man, and dates back almost a thousand years prior to the discovery of the first written document. Even though pornography existed then, it was mainly used as instructional materials and not primarily for sex attention. Moreover, these stone age carvings may have been just as erotic as today’s internet porn¹³.

Robert Weiss¹⁴ noted that the art work of many historic societies such as ancient India, Greece and Rome, reveal erotic images that serve varying degree of purposes. The word ‘porn’ from which pornography is coined, is a Greek word meaning “indecent pictures”.¹⁵ The people of ancient Greece painted such frescos (pictures) on the walls of their brothels, where such pictures served as wonderful advertisement for homes where women sold their love for Greek money. Scott¹⁶ added that 18th-Century Europe used pornography as a vehicle for social and political protest. In this regard, they depicted the misdeeds of royalty and other aristocrats, as well as those of clerics, pornographically to check their excesses.

Throughout the ages therefore, pornography has evolved and developed. But it was not until the technological progress of the 20th century that it was able to find its way into literally every aspect of modern society. The development of photography and motion pictures in the 19th century and 20th centuries contributed in a great measure to the proliferation of pornography, as did the internet in the late 20th century¹⁷. Restrictions on pornography during its early modern stage were relaxed throughout much of Europe and North America, though regulations remained strict in Asia, the Middle East and Africa¹⁸. Pornography may use a variety of media, including books, magazines, postcards, photos, sculptures, drawings, paintings, animations, sounds, film, video and video games and most predominantly in this modern era, the internet, to portray its sexual themes.

Who are the Owan People?

The Owan are people of Edo extraction currently scattered around the Owan River in the Northern fringe of Edo State¹⁹. They, like most other people of Edo State (Esan, Etsako and the Benin), share same ancestry, though with some notable differences resulting from migration, location and other historical circumstances. The name Owan, also pronounced “*onwan*” is derived from the root word “*owanbua*”, the name

of the deity believed to have transformed herself into the river (Owan), which was eventually named after her²⁰.

Owan is from among the Edo North people called “Afenmai”. Afenmai people are scattered across six Local Government Areas in Edo State, namely Akoko Edo, Etsako East, Etsako West, Etsako Central, Owan West and Owan East. They make up the present day Edo North Senatorial District. The Afenmai people were initially referred to as the “kukuruku” Division of the Old Western Region of 1919²¹. The name, “kukuruku” stems from an “alert exclamation” of the people, which signaled the emergence of their captors during the Nupe invasion of Edo North in 1885-1886²².

Owan is made up of thirteen (13) major clans among which are Emai, Evbiomon, Ukao, Iuleha, Otuo, Ozalla, Uokha, Sobe, Ikhin, Ivbiadobi, Igue, Ora et cetera. Politically, these clans are presently scattered across Owan West and Owan East Local Government Area, with Sabongida-Ora and Afuze as their respective administrative headquarters. Owan occupy an area of about 1,972 square kilometer. The 2006 census puts the population of both local governments at about 251,773. They therefore constitute 7.40% of the people of Edo State. They share boundaries with Akoko Edo in the North, Etsako West; in the East, Esan West, Uhumwode and Ovia in the South, and Ekiti and Ondo State in the west²³.

The Owan people, like most other African traditional societies believe in a holistic universe in which constant actions, interactions and reactions take place between the seen world of men (*agbon*) and the unseen world of the gods (*erinmin*). Like the Benin, the Owan people believe in many gods and life after death. They basically trace their origin, beliefs and practices to *Oselobua* (the High God or Supreme Being). He is believed to be the creator of the universe and all beings therein. He resides in the sky – *okhunmun* (The heavens). Morality, from the perspective of the Owan people flows from *Oselobua*. He is the people’s idea of the holy and the morally good in the community. He ensures that the moral norms of the society are strictly adhered to and He dispenses retributive justice through the divinities/spirits (*arimin*) and the ancestors on erring members of the society. Even though these spirits are represented by physical objects, they are worshipped in spirits²⁴. The Owan people, like every other African, people believe that spirits are everywhere - in persons, animals, irons, personal belongings. Nothing is hidden from these spiritual entities; they see the depth of the human heart and dispense justice

accordingly. The consciousness of the presence of these supernatural beings offers a challenge to the behavioural patterns of the Owan people in their traditional society. The divinities in many ways act as moral entrepreneurs in Owan land. They abhor crimes like theft, cheating, suicide and sexual taboos like adultery, fornication, incest, pornography, et cetera. They communicate their wishes, demands and prescriptions to the community of the humans through their votaries, priests and priestesses (*ohen*). Also, each has its distinctive rites, rituals and taboos that would not be overlooked for any reason. These rituals and taboos still maintain their pride of place in contemporary Owan society²⁵

Human Sexual Expression among the Owan People

The issue of sex, to the traditional Owan people, is a “taboo subject”. Discussion around it is concealed through the use of polite language, euphemisms and gestures. They believe that sex is not one of those things that people openly speak about²⁶. This does not presuppose the lack of sex education in Owan. Training on sexual matters is given by the adult members of the family. Children, especially the adolescents, are taught to keep their bodies sexually, physically and spiritually healthy. They are taught a healthy acceptance of themselves as sexual beings and what is considered accepted norms of sexual behaviour in the community²⁷. The Owan people consider it a taboo that incurs the wrath of the gods for a sane person to publicly exhibit things that pertain to human sexuality especially the ‘vital sexual organs’. Even clothing that reveals the lap of a woman is regarded as inappropriate in public places. Pa Atokhaimen²⁸ remarked that human sexuality according to the Owan tradition is quite different from animal sexuality. While the latter is purely physical and purely for reproduction, that of the former is not just physical but engages the entirety of the human person: the physical, psychological and the spiritual.

It is the belief among the Owan people that the human sexual act must respect the values of all realms. They revere the human sexual organs as a potent means of checkmating the evil doers of the physical and the spiritual, worlds. Pa Atokhaimen Eguaaje reiterated this in his statement that in the case of persistent drought or the outbreak of an epidemic, women or men in Owan communities usually file out naked at night to place a curse on whoever is responsible for the evil occurrence. He stated further that parents in Owan in some cases use their sexual

organs to pronounce blessings or curses on children. Such pronouncement from a parent to a child is not taken with a *pinch of salt* in Owan land²⁹.

The issue of procreation is central to the ontology of the Owan people. Sexual expression is therefore seen by them as a sacred activity that takes place within the domestic preserve of marriage and for the purpose of promoting the vital force (life). To this end, every sexual expression that abuses this primary sexual function and all other behaviour that promotes such abuse are forbidden in African societies.

In the light of the above, the explicit portrayal of human sexuality for the purpose of sexual arousal is culturally alien to the Owan people. Ukhun affirmed this with regard to other African societies that pornography is culturally un-African. In his words, the value that African culture attaches to human sexuality cannot be over-emphasized. African culture rests on a moral principle which enables the people to advance their destinies. This moral principle does not accommodate such issues as pornography³⁰.

However, some scholars have argued that a critical assessment of the African culture reveals some elements of pornography. This is even before the phenomena became a matter of intellectual discourse³¹. These scholars have evidence to back up their claim. For instance, in the eighties, it was a sensational news item in the media that the *Koma* tribe in Plateau and Adamawa states of Nigeria was discovered to go about their normal and regular lives practically naked. This is believed to be a phenomenon which is one part of a continuum of pornography³². Okogie,³³ in yet another re-enforcing argument on the existence of pornography in African cultures referred to some traditional festivals in Africa societies. According to him, at *Ozala* in Owan West Local Government Area, there is a festival called *obo*, which takes place between October and November each year. During this festival, young girls expose their breasts as an invitation to prospective suitors. In contemporary times, during this festival, these young damsels could be seen along highways and bye ways.

Similarly, at Okpuje-Iuleha; another Owan Community, there is an age-grade festival known as *irhovbode* festival (Celebration of Manhood), performed every four years. During this festival, young adolescent girls are expected to wear the *oze* and go almost naked with the *irhovbode* entourage, to the market. They are only required to put on beads around their waists and necks with big bangles made of brass, (traditionally referred to as *oze*) on their hands and legs³⁴. Pa Atokhaimen however

stressed that this is basically to express the innocence and purity of these young damsels. Also in Irrua, Edo State with only beads covering their genitals, young damsels dance before the *Onogie* (King). It is from amongst them that the *Onogie* (King) makes a choice of his (next) wife by sending one of his coral bead necklaces to his choice damsel. Some parents are said to have even encouraged their daughters to partake in nude dancing. Perhaps there are many instances of such pornographic displays across Africa³⁵.

However, note should be taken that the essence of pornography is to eroticize, which may lead to sexual harassment such as rape and violence. When we consider the tradition of damsels exposing their bosoms during festivals or dancing naked before Kings in some African communities, it will be seen that the objective is not to eroticize. It is only an aspect of their culture which requires the damsels to demonstrate their virginity. It is emphasized further that women's behavior in these traditional African settings is not intended to eroticize men for sexual gratification. Moreover, such behaviour does not degenerate into violence, sexual harassment and rape. It does not generate any moral or human rights problem. Indeed the African tradition is a hall mark of sexual responsibility³⁶.

Pornographic Tradition of Postcolonial Nigeria

Contemporary African societies are alarmingly sexualized. In postcolonial Nigeria, for example, the belief in the sacredness and sanctity of human sexuality is becoming more relaxed. The traditional sexual taboos that had aided the proper functioning of traditional communities have been broken down. The cultural censure of disordered sexuality that enables stable family life has faded into oblivion. The proliferation of internet pornography has given birth to a modern Nigeria, permeated with hyper-sexualization³⁷. Children and young people are now routinely exposed to pornography with the aid of modern technologies. They now encounter sexually explicit images on the internet including while browsing with mobile phones. Some watch X-rated videos and like adults, they live in a culture increasingly saturated in sexual misrepresentations³⁸.

In the Nigerian movie industry of today, some Nollywood stars appear to be seeking more daring roles in pornography. These set of stars are being helped by some producers and marketers who use the internet to ensure that such movies reach as wide an audience as possible. Regrettably, with the absence of a clear-cut regulation of the internet, it

seems the Nigerian Film and Video Censor Board (NFVCB) can do little or nothing to stop these porn movies from being posted on the internet³⁹. Today's youths are reaching puberty earlier, engaging in sexual intercourse in earnest, while "emerging adults" are cohabiting more, having children outside wedlock and getting married significantly later or not at all.

The excitement of these pornographic displays has so engrossed these porn lovers in a world of fantasy that they bring it to bear in their everyday lives. This is exemplified in the indecent mode of dressing, wild promiscuity and violent sexual behaviour that is prevalent among youth in contemporary Nigeria. Significant proportion of minors also has been exposed to pornography online, either accidentally or deliberately.

Contending Paradigm on the Effects of Pornography in the Lives of People

The question as to whether pornography has any significant harmful effects on consumers continues to be a controversial issue, not only for the average citizens but for behavioral scientists. Such argument has given rise to the pro-censorship and anti-censorship schools of thought. Some pro-censorship scholars have found that exposure to pornography among young adults comes with a range of notable and often troubling effects. These effects manifest in various anti-social behaviour and attitudes. Donna Rice Hughes⁴⁰, in his article, "Protecting Your Children in Cyberspace" emphasizes that the more pornography the individual (youth) is exposed to, the higher the risk of their acting what they see, including sexual assault, rape and child molestation. This study, in affirmation of this fact, gathered that exposure to pornography is related to greater involvement in rape in Nigeria's tertiary institutions. It is the finding of this study also that, 25% of rapists within the campus were stimulated by what they experience in pornographic media. Exposure to pornography could transform the individual to a sex predator and pedophile.

Evidence of research shows also that access to pornography instigates indecent dressing in young adult. This is not unconnected with the fact that 'porn-consumers would likely emulate the mode of dressing of strippers and pornographic actors. The wearing of mercurial fashion outfits such as mini-skirts, bikinis, hot pants, palazzo pants, see-thru blouses, hipsters, patra, tubes and all forms of semi-nude attires on

campus and indeed the society at large, cannot be said to be unconnected to the indiscriminate exposure to pornographic materials and fashions⁴¹. And according to Adejumo in the *Sunday Tribune* of 5th August, 2007, “the sight of such semi-nude people on campus and in the street send sexual signal to the brain of guys. A complex reaction takes place in the anatomy of such guys, who if not able to control themselves, resort to rape of such persons”⁴².

The sexual representation of girls and women in pornographic media encourages the female folks to see themselves primarily as sex-tools. This goes to show that pornography is not made to educate but to sell. And for the most part, what they sell is a bunch of lies about sex and women. Women are portrayed as enjoying being raped, spanked, beaten, tied up, mutilated, enslaved, or as accepting these as their lot. In the less sadistic films, women are portrayed as being sexually aroused and satisfied if they do anything and everything men order them to do. What this involves is, for the most part, totally contrary to what we know about women.

In this regard, therefore, pornography promotes the dehumanization of women by reducing them to sex objects. The study reveals that most females through what they see in pornographic media see themselves as sex objects that were created to satisfy the sexual hunger of males. This heightens the scourge of pre-marital sexual activities among females in postcolonial Nigeria. Another grim consequence of pornography is seen in the steady increase of youths that are afflicted with venereal diseases. This has increased the rate of sexual illnesses and unplanned pregnancies among youths in postcolonial Nigeria⁴³

On the other hand, many anti-censorship groups believe that no matter how vulgar they may seem, pornographic media or materials are still essentially harmless to the viewer. This group holds that sexual materials, including pornography serve as educational material in the teaching of sexual knowledge. Victor Cline⁴⁴ said that if pornography is a form of sex education, it will be a dangerous one at that. This is because pornography gives a great deal of misinformation about human sexuality. Its portrayal of human sexuality is devoid of love, relationship or responsibility. It does not teach its ‘students’ about the risk of sexually transmitted diseases. And for the most part, it dehumanizes both its male and female participants, instead of ‘humanizing’ them.

Pornography has also been extolled as a tool which offers valuable sex-positive challenges to sexual repression and restrictive sexual norms. This group argues that the sexual myths and taboos that the African tradition has hitherto used as restrictive measure to checkmate the sex life of youth have been proved by pornography to be fallacious. Many claim that with the aid of pornographic media, their attitude towards sex and sexuality has changed from negative to positive.

The study also gathered from some respondents that the consumption of pornographic material only dissolves into the private life of the individual concern. The consumption of pornography, to this group of people, is not in any way in opposition to public morality. The autonomy of the right of the individual forms the crux of this argument. It is thus the belief of this group that the question of sexual expression is a key component of the freedom of sexual expression hence, it should not be tampered with by any law whatsoever.

Idumwonyi and Ikhidero⁴⁵ noted rules and norms of behaviour are common features in human society. This is basically to check the inadequacies of individualistic ethics. Such rules or norms, it seems, will offend individuals who believe or claim that their rights have been infringed upon. The question is, has there ever been a law that has not in one way or the other constrained the freedom of some people in the larger society? The purpose of any law is not to curb the rights of citizens but to protect and preserve them. Thus, if Africans make strict laws against pornography to promote sexual morals in their society, it may be offensive to some individuals. No doubt this is for the general wellbeing of the society at large. It will protect the individual from the excesses of the society and the society from the excesses of the individual.

Conclusion

From the foregoing, it has been observed that, in Owan traditional society, human sexuality is not only seen as physical, but also spiritual. A high level of sacredness is therefore attached to it. This helps to promote chastity and other sexual morals in traditional Owan society. Owan culture, as well as other African cultures, does not accept pornography. It is regarded as an abuse of human sexuality. Sexuality in African cultures constitutes life and can also be destructive of life when mal-handled. The study thus concludes that Africans should employ both religious (traditional) and legislative measures to stem the tide of pornography in the modern societies.

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