

Sex Education: Ancient Israel and Igbo Traditional Practices

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Abstract

Every human (male and female) is a sexual being. Exploring and experiencing one's sexuality is part of being human. Unfortunately, human's curiosity and interest concerning sexuality are not always guided and nurtured in a wholesome way because sex is viewed as sacred and talking about it constitutes a taboo. Hence, many parents are at ease to teach their children about virtually every other thing in life, but they usually do not, however, teach about sexuality with similar ease. As a result, many grow into adulthood with partial and distorted views of human sexuality. The aim of the study was to discover the teachings of Proverbs 7:24-27 on sex education along traditional practices in tone with sex education in Igbo culture and determine the place of proper sex education for better dealing and understanding of human sexuality. The study adopted African inculturation hermeneutics which makes African social cultural context the subject of interpretation. The study revealed that sex education was integral to the training of the young adults in ancient Israel Igbo cultures. However, the study observed some areas of strength and weaknesses of sexuality training in Igbo traditional practices. Thus, the research upheld that the instructions on human sexuality preserved in the book of Proverbs are very relevant in strengthening the contemporary Igbo culture and her traditional practices in the training of young adults in the areas of chastity. Therefore, the paper called for proper sex education in the Igbo society to instill sexual purity among youths of contemporary Igbo society.

Keywords: Sex, Sexual, Human Sexuality, Sex Education

Introduction

Every human (male and female) is a sexual being. McCary asserts that “Exploring and experiencing our own sexuality is part of being human.”¹ Unfortunately, human’s curiosity and interest concerning sexuality is not always guided and nurtured in a wholesome way. While many parents are at ease to teach the children about virtually every other thing in life, they usually do not, however, teach about sexual matters with similar ease. As a result, many grow into adulthood with partial and distorted views of human sexuality.

Dike remarks that Churches have not been helpful on the issues of human sexuality for while members are frequently reminded of what they are not to do; they are seldom shown the positive biblical teaching about human sexuality.² The prevalence of pornography, rape, fornication, adultery, and incest, even among Christians, attest to the urgent need for specific ethical instruction and guidance in the realm of human sexuality. These evils exist even among Christians, yet members seldom, if ever, discuss them in Churches. To buttress her point, Dike further recounts a testimony of Fowowe who testified of how God delivered him from sexual addiction. Fowowe was abused by his Aunt who lived in his family house (where his father is a pastor) and started using the young boy from his sixth year to satisfy her sexual desires until when she left their house. Then Fowowe found in his neighborhood a girl that was equally abused and given to sexual addiction. By the time he went to the university, he was already given to sexual addiction, and knowing that it was abnormal, he struggled with it until God gave him the grace to overcome it. He laments that his parents neither knew about his sexual struggles nor taught him about sexuality. Concerning the Church, Fowowe concludes that the Church is hypocritical about human sexuality. Substantiating his claim, he narrated how he became very dedicated

to Church activities thinking that this could help him in overcoming his sexual problems. Instead, he observed that most people were doing it and covering up; he too learnt to cover up. That people testify of how God delivered them from one problem or the other and hardly testify of how they were helped out of their sexual problems. He asked: “is it that there are no sexual struggles that this is not talked about?”

Fortunately, the Bible is not silent about sex and sexuality. This research work is focused on the values which the book of Proverbs associates with human sexuality. The primary purpose of the study is to survey the teachings of Proverbs 7:24-27 on sex education; explore the place of proper sex education for better dealing and understanding of human sexuality and examine its relevance to contemporary Igbo culture. The study adopts African inculturation Hermeneutics which makes African social cultural context the subject of interpretation. This is in cognizance to the Canonical (which recognizes the unity and integrity of the text of the scripture), Grammatical-Historical Exegesis (which gives detailed analysis of the text, which agrees with the original language and the original historical situation of the author) and the principles of Syntagmatic and paradigmatic (which maintains that the meaning of a word is found in its use in a language system). It is hoped that this piece will make a contribution in the field of Old Testament scholarship especially in the study of Wisdom Literature.

Background to the Text

“The Proverbs of Solomon, the son of David, king of Israel...” is the superscription with which the book began. This superscription leads to the conservative position that Solomon was the author of the entire book which the internal evidence contradicts. The book occasionally mentions others such as an anonymous group of the “wise” (the sages), Agur and Lemuel (Pro. 22:17; 24:23; 30:1; 31:1). Particular

mention is made of those who contributed to the making of the final product – “the men of Hezekiah (Pro. 25:1). Thus, one can safely opine that with the indications within the text, the origins of the book of Proverbs might be associated with Solomon, but the editing of the book may have continued over a long period of time.

Proverbs is a practical book because it gives short instructions on how to live a godly life. This is well captured in the very first chapter of the book – 1:2-6 “to teach people wisdom and discipline... to teach people to live disciplined and successful lives... to help them do what is right, just, and fair... and to give insight to the simple, knowledge and discernment to the young.” This calls to focus the personality of the sage or wise man who was an important figure in Israel’s leadership cadre from the earliest days of kingship. He is mentioned, along with the priest and the prophets, as one of the three sources of leadership for Israel’s community (Jer. 18:18, Ezek. 7:26). Moreover, the Old Testament is aware of royal advisers in the courts of David and Solomon (2 Sam. 8:16-18; 20:23-26; 1 Kings 4:1-6). Biblical scholars like Andrew and John suggest that the wisdom of Proverbs was in effect a school textbook for the royal family and the elite of society.³ Youth from noble and royal backgrounds were trained in the ways of wisdom so that in the future they might be wise and productive leaders of the next generation of the Israelites. This is strongly alluded to from formula “my son” in Proverbs among which is the Text – 7:24. Commenting on Proverbs 1, Jusu states: “Proverbs compares learning wisdom to wise parents teaching their children”⁴. This implies that wisdom comes through careful training; wisdom is taught. The Text therefore, captures this aspect of wisdom that is learned.

The Text – Proverbs 7:24-27

24	Now then, my sons, listen to me; pay attention to what I say.
25	Do not let your heart turn to her ways or stray into her paths.
26	Many are the victims she has brought down; her slain are a mighty throng.
27	Her house is a highway to the grave, leading down to the chambers of death.

Meaning of the Text

Proverbs 7:24-27 contains a continuation of the father's (teacher) warning to the son (student) about the price of immorality. The word 'listen' is translated from the Hebrew verb *shama* which is variously used for hearing, paying attention, being attentive. Found in its collocation are verbs like *azan* "give ear", a denominative from *ozen* "ear" (hence "use the ear"), and *anâ* "answer". *shama* has the basic meaning "to hear". This is extended in various ways, generally involving an effective hearing or listening: 1) "listen to", "pay attention", 2) "obey" (with words such as "commandment" etc.), 3) "answer prayer", "hear", 4) "understand" and 5) "hear critically", "examine" (in court). The derived stems have appropriately modified meanings (TWOT).⁵ Hence when the father says "...listen ... pay attention..." he urges the son to critically examine his teachings and to obey (keep) them. The teacher warns "Do not let your heart turn to her ways or stray into her paths" (v. 25). What is being warned against is contained in verses 26-27 – the dangers of promiscuous life style. Commenting on verse 24, Martins states that the power of a seductive woman should not be underestimated but that one should look beyond the passing allurements to the tragic consequences.⁶ Implying that sexual laxity is conjoined with unpleasant consequences no matter how pleasurable it may seem.

The conclusions in verses 26-27 are similar to the thoughts expressed in 2:18-19 and 5:5 6. Verse 26 states “Many are the victims she has brought down; her slain are a mighty throng.” The first line is literally “for many are the wounded she has made fall.” The sense is that the loose woman has wounded and brought death to many people. The English Version renders the whole verse thus; “Such a woman has caused the downfall and destruction of a lot of men.” ‘Her slain’ suggests the men who have fallen victims of promiscuous life style. Viewed as slain because in promiscuous living, the essence of life maybe completely loss. ‘A mighty throng’ alludes to the fact that numerous or countless men have been influenced by the promiscuous way. The loose woman is seen here as a murderess.

This line “Her house is a highway to the grave” is Comparable to 2:18, 5:5 and 9:18. Her house should not be taken literally as simply a building, but rather what takes place in her house. Accordingly, some translate “If you want to find the road to hell, look for her house” (TLB) or “If you go to her house, you are on the way to the world of the dead. It is a shortcut to death” (GNT).

‘Grave’ is translated from the Hebrew *Sheol* (the same expression is used in 1:12; 2:18; 5:5 among others) is variously translated ‘grave’, ‘the pit’, ‘hell’ is the Old Testament opposite of life conveying the sense of futility, inactivity and death. “Chambers of death” in the next line is an expression parallel to the *Sheol*. Chambers renders a word meaning “compartments”. *Sheol* is here pictured as a house with many compartments – a suggestion of multiple woes awaiting those who visit her house. The teacher's purpose in using such strong metaphorical language is to paint as vivid as possible a picture of the painful consequences of sexual immorality. A life of immorality leads to the destruction and death of all who are involved (2:18; 5:5).

It should be observed that the teacher's audience is the son. This can lead one to conclude that the message is only concerned with the male child. It has been observed above that the setting of these Proverbs was probably the royal court and the training was aimed at producing leadership for the ancient Israelite community. It should be recalled that ancient Israel was a patriarchal society where the man is expected to lead and the woman to be led. This explains why 'my son' was the focal audience. Today's context tries to relax the gender tension. Besides, the wisdom of Proverbs is taught to prepare the young for responsible living. This brings into focus the family context. The family is a crucial unit of growth, instruction and discipline – a setting that is very relevant for the real adornment of the youth. Every family desires responsible children irrespective of gender. Hence the message applies to 'my son' as it applies also to 'my daughter'.

The Family, the Society and Sex Education

Obviously, Proverbs speaks often of family: raising children, relationships and responsibilities between family members, and enticements that jeopardize the family. It contains observations both about functional and dysfunctional families and what makes them so. Proverbs in Walton and Andrews's assessment argues against the idea that children will grow up to be fine if parents will just stay out of their way⁷. A couple of examples clearly agree with this assessment. For instance, "Discipline your son, for in that there is hope; do not be a willing party to his death" (Pro. 19:18). "Train a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not turn from it" (Prov. 22:6). These verses present the parents' role as active and constructive and a necessary ingredient to instruction in wisdom.

It is a universal belief that parents received wisdom from their own parents and should pass it onto their own children. However, the challenge today is that many parents are finding it difficult to cope

with this responsibility. Some parents shelve the responsibility of training their children to schools, church, media, and the internet. The effect is that many children today are growing up without wisdom. This is equally true of the Igbo society. Dike in her PhD. dissertation discovers that the Igbo culture (and in fact the African culture in general) views sex as sacred and discussing it a taboo. Boys and girls are left alone to discover the changes in their bodies by themselves. Even the newly married are not counseled on sexual relations. She observes that even when a cultural practice presents itself as a means of sex education as in the case of circumcision – a rite of passage, the young people are simply told that this needs to be done because it makes them unclean and immoral⁸. Apart from circumcision, there is an Igbo tradition that celebrates the young woman's virginity just before she moves into her husband's house known as "*Igbu Ewu Nso*" by the Igbo people of Old Bende Divisional Council. For a young woman to qualify for this celebration in the olden days, she is examined by assigned women to ascertain her virginity. If she is a virgin, the women will chant "*a samoba, oruadigiya*" meaning "I have washed the calabash, it has no stains." She is then presented for celebration where she is rewarded with gift items. Those days, young girls were not taught on how to preserve their virginity but were celebrated if they did. Hence preserving of virginity was more of coincidence on the part of the girls than conscious effort. The effect is that today, the *Igbu Ewu Nso* ceremony is merely celebrated as a send-off party for the girl child just before her wedding without any emphasis on virginity.

In fact, it has been observed that the much an average African woman trying to give her teenage daughter sex education in Agbo's observation is: "Don't go closer to men ... if you stay closer to them you become pregnant ... you hear?"⁹ It is even more disheartening that many girls start menstruation without a pre-knowledge of what this is all about and so lack proper information from their mothers on how to

handle their menstrual challenges. Girls (and even boys) who fall victims of lack of proper sex education from home become vulnerable preys in the hands of the peer groups who see it as an opportunity to feed such innocent victims with all manners of information which may be destructive. The book of Proverbs encourages families to be actively involved in the sex education of their children and introduce them to God's design for sex. Every human being including children is interested in the subject of sex; hence children are particularly encouraged when they hear it from their homes – mom and dad.

The role of home training cannot be overemphasized in contemporary society. From the day a child starts to walk, he seems to attract accidents and mishaps. He/she makes foolish choices and gets him/herself into all sorts of scrapes, difficulties, and dilemmas. As he/she gets older he can get him/herself into worse troubles than skinned knees or broken arms, and he/she can damage more than just his/her body. Wisdom does not come naturally to a child; on the contrary, "foolishness is bound up in the heart of a child" (Prov. 22:15).

One of the early indications that a child's childhood attitude toward the opposite sex had changed was his/her desire to date. Dating is the acting out of this new attraction. It is one's beginning involvement with the experience of 'knowing' that has its fulfillment in the union of marriage. At work in this attraction is a selective factor. Because of his attraction to certain individuals, he/she wants to get close to them, to spend time with them. He/she wants to talk with them and listen to them talk to him/her; to share with them; to get to know them better as individuals.

There is also a sexual context to this attraction. The body wants to 'get in on the act.' This should be expected in any view of life which sees the person as a whole. Since the attraction is normally between the sexes there is the desire for physical contact as well. Thus, the desire to date is also the desire to touch. The touch is

pleasant. This is why it is desired. Yet it can involve consequences. This is where training comes in for if the power of sex would be controlled, parents must of necessity impose limits upon the pleasure of sex. Here is where one runs into conflict with the growing child. Limits upon pleasure are always protested. Children are particularly notorious in this respect. If they are having fun, they view it as an outrage if they have to stop for any reason. When they are interrupted, they protest. This is why they need parents to impose these limits for them. When the child grows into adulthood there is at least the hope that he will learn not only to accept limitations on his desires but also to impose them on himself. Some, however, seem never to grow out of their childhood resistance to limits.

That sex gives pleasure is not in itself a reason to limit it. This has to come from the meaning of sex. Buth opines that sex is not solely biological but expresses the totality of a person¹⁰. When sex is expressed in a relationship, it suggests a relationship in which the commitment of each to the other is total. This is the understanding of marriage relationship. With so much emphasis on sex and on sexual intercourse as the *sina qua non* in human experience, some young people, in a desperate attempt to settle the tension over the pleasure and the mystery, seek out sexual experience. This is done even with someone they care little about – so that they can tell themselves and others that they have had it. In this context, sex relationship loses all of its real significance as one suffers a loss of identity to group pressure. Adeyemi has rightly emphasized that sexual promiscuity is an indication of want of character¹¹. Moreover, sex provides pleasure, and whenever this is experienced, it seems unnatural to limit it. Pleasure can completely occupy the present moment of a child, crowding out thoughts about the past and the future. This is why a child needs to be trained in self-discipline. Even though the child fights this training when it interferes with his/her pleasure, the training gives security.

On the part of the Nigerian society, the Federal Government's effort in the introduction of sex education in schools should be well appreciated. With the epidemic of HIV/AIDS in Nigeria especially among young people aged 15-29, the federal government through the National Reproductive Health, HIV & AIDS Prevention and Care Project through the National Youth Service Corp has launched a project known as 'Peer Educator'. This project "provides comprehensive information and life skills training to secondary school peer educators and their peers in and out of school through a cascade of peer education...."¹² The motive is direct: "The survival and development of future leaders in Nigeria is precarious unless drastic efforts are directed at ensuring young people have access to comprehensive and accurate knowledge of reproductive health, HIV prevention and life skills."¹³ On the impact of the project so far, Uzuegbunam, the National Coordinator of the HIV/AIDS Unit "has successfully provided comprehensive and accurate information to young people in a systematic manner over the past nine years."¹⁴

The next question is how has the information so far gotten by the young people been able to control the HIV/AIDS epidemic? Officials in Britain reported that all their efforts at sex education have not increased the use of condoms or decreased the number of abortions. Rather, they believe that teaching children and teens about sex has resulted in increased sexual activity¹⁵. On the part of the young people, a grandmother states: "One of my grandsons told me that the sex education curriculum introduced him and his classmates to things they had never thought about or been curious about."¹⁶

The view that sex education must lead to immorality is not only foreign, it is equally here in Africa. Levin's research in Langa (Southern Africa) reveals that some parents object to the teaching of hygiene which includes sex instruction in schools on the ground that it corrupts their children.¹⁷ On the contrary, Akingbade states: "there is no evidence that relevant sex education has any bad effect on a child's

character and morals.”¹⁸She stresses further: “Appropriate sex education does not promote promiscuity. Rather, it is because of low socio-economic condition, low-self-esteem, sinful habits from parents or mentors and misinformation about sex.”¹⁹Misinformation has to do with the erroneous idea that the only threat to sexual enjoyment is pregnancy. Implying that sex is good as far as pregnancy is avoided and “safe sex” is the phrase.

Going through the Unicef Handbook/Workbook for Peer Educators for instance, one will observe that the curriculum for sex education in public schools does not insist on abstinence but encourages “safe sex” by the use of contraceptives for those who cannot abstain. By implication, the expression of sex is unlimited as long as one feels protected from pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections. The sex education that does not insist on abstinence is very dangerous because it leads to a promiscuous lifestyle. LaHaye’s has argued that the public school has rendered itself incompetent in the field of sex education by making two fallacious assumptions: insisting on teaching sex education without moral safe-guards; while assuming that sex education will naturally produce sexual happiness.²⁰ The concept of “safe sex” has promoted promiscuity before and after marriage, which in turn has made venereal disease one of the nation’s greatest health problems for persons under twenty-four years of age.

Sexual ignorance, however, is not the alternative. This is because whether or not they receive sex education, most young persons are neither ignorant of sex nor uninterested in it; nor would it be possible to preserve chastity on the basis of ignorance in the present world. On the other hand, true sex education involves providing adequate information about the beauty and horror of sex and maintaining discipline too. Of course, to discipline is to instill the right kind of attitude in one. It is not enough to set rules but to instruct and impress the right actions. Thus, appropriate sex education whether at school, in the Church or at home should be able to expose children to the

good of human sexuality and the dangers of using sex outside of marriage. Certainly they need to be taught the high cost of promiscuity and the dangers of venereal diseases. They should be taught how to draw the line on their sexual expressions. If a Child is well informed on his/her sexuality and the dangers of abuse, he/she should be able to detect when a touch from somebody is unhealthy and should be able to raise alarm or even discuss that with his/her parents or whoever gives the training in this respect. This way, sexual abuse of children will be greatly minimized.

Result of findings

The work revealed that the book of Proverbs preserves a tradition in ancient Israel in which the Sage inculcated wisdom part of which was sex education in the young ones as a way of preparing them for responsible leadership in every aspect of life. This implies that wisdom does not just happen to the child, it is taught.

The study found that the Igbo culture views sex as sacred and discussing it a taboo. That is why some parents find it extreme difficult to discuss the issue of sexuality with their children. However, the study observed that the Igbo society has preserved a form of sexual orientation through traditional practices especially in the areas of chastity for the young and married women. Unfortunately, the study noted that some of the traditional practices eroding away because they are merely observed without verbal communication of their meaning and intended purpose. The study equally revealed the weakness of the UNICEF Peer Educator hand-book on sex education that is used in Government Schools which exposes readers to the use of contraceptives as an alternative to abstinence from sex.

Above all, by emphasizing the areas of strength and weaknesses of human sexuality in Igbo customs and traditions, the research found that the instructions on human sexuality preserved in the book of

Proverbs are very relevant in strengthening the contemporary Igbo culture and her traditional practices with regards to human sexuality.

Recommendations

1. The Igbo parents in particular and Africans in general should appreciate cultural practices that promote sexual purity and transmit same to the young ones by being actively involved in the home training of their children. They do not need to be experts to do this. Instead, they should simply answer their children's sex related questions properly and genuinely, supplying relevant information according to their level of exposure and maturity.
2. The Federal Ministry of Education and UNICEF should do a reconsideration of the "safe sex" concept enshrined in the Peer Educator Handbook used for sex instruction in Nigerian Public schools for a healthier appreciation of human sexuality among the young ones.

Conclusion

Proverbs was used as a training manual for Youth from noble and royal backgrounds who were undergoing preparation in the ways of wisdom so that in the future they might be wise and productive leaders of the next generation of the Israelites. Such training covers every aspect of human life including sex and sexuality. This training implies that wisdom does not come naturally to a child; on the contrary, "foolishness is bound up in the heart of a child" (Prov. 22:15). Thus, wisdom is learned. The text of this study emphasizes the dangers of engaging in immoral sex – adultery and sex before marriage (fornication), including all forms of prostitution. People who commit adultery or do fornication lack judgment, destroy themselves,

run grave risks to their health, and invite disgrace and shame into their lives.

The emphasis of this study therefore is on the need for sex education right from the family level. It has been observed that not giving a child sex education does not mean that such a child is ignorant about sex. The child that is not given sex education at home learns it through other sources such as schools, media, and peer group among others. Knowledge of sex from some if not all of these sources may be dangerous to the wellbeing of the child. To safeguard and prepare the next generation of leaders, conscious efforts by parents, care givers and the government towards the sex education of the youth can never be overemphasized. The text of the study emphasizes the danger of promiscuous life style which is becoming a norm in contemporary society. This strengthens the fact that true sex education should involve providing adequate information about the beauty and horror of sex; while maintaining discipline.

End Notes

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