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# Afro-Christian Expression of Sex and Sex Organs: A Critical Moral Challenge to Contemporary African Christianity

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## I Introduction

When one minister and an Old Testament Postgraduate student presented a seminar in this hall late last year, nothing more than his audacious direct mention of the male's sex organs elicited reactions. It seemed to us that he felt no qualms in using the word 'penis' which appeared four times on a page in his paper.<sup>1</sup> This present reaction is provided because the student is

specialising in Old Testament Theology, which for some serious reasons, avoids direct mention of sex and sex organs. We hope to show that there are objections to his linguistic expression in that paper. We do agree with scholars in linguistics who have been able to prove that 'a word means that which we want it to mean'.<sup>2</sup> It is true that we may not find a problem with the direct mention of sex and sex organs in a biology class, but we are always 'conscious of the fact that the meaning or meanings an individual attaches to a particular word or term usually depends, very much, upon his mental

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1 E. O. Omojola, 'Theological Hermeneutics of Healing in the Old Testament', a Postgraduate seminar paper presented at the Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies, Adekunle Ajasin University, Akungba-Akoko, Ondo State, Nigeria, (2008), 14.

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2 M. Y. Nabofa, 'The Problems of Communicating Afro-Mystical Experience' in A. P. Dopamu, O. Awolalu and S. G. Delamartar (eds.), *Dialogue: Issues in Contemporary Discussions* (Arifanla-Akute: Big Small Books, 2007), 138.

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situation, versatility of and exposure to knowledge, his level of consciousness, discipline and philosophy of life and death',<sup>3</sup> religious and cultural inclination, affiliation and environment. This, to our mind, applies also to the usage of a word or term because it gives a direction to interpret, understand and give meaning to it. Therefore, we shall speak about 'the selective linguistic representation of (a given) text in another language-culture in the most relevant way possible in the view of the specific audience in mind'<sup>4</sup> with particular reference to our discussion.

This paper centres on sex from both African and biblical viewpoints. The discussion on sex is important to the two religio-cultural milieux. It is important because they lay a basis which has continued to influence the world today especially where their doctrines are practised. They are important also because they form the moral canons for the evaluation of what is obtainable or practised in contemporary society. They are important because they not only deal with the existential foci on both societies, but also reflect on the metaphysico-spiritual dimensions of their cosmos.

There appear to be striking similarities between the Jewish-biblical and African (Yoruba and Edo) perspectives on the linguistic expression of sex and sex organs. Even though sex is a com-

plex phenomenon, the sex instinct is the most profound of all human instincts, second only to self-preservation.<sup>5</sup> This means that sex is a universal human instinct, although not limited to humans only. What makes human sex instinct different from other primal animals is the ability to control the sexual urge and maintain, to a very large extent, the morality of sex. This demonstrates that sex is not merely biological, it is also social and spiritual. Sex, therefore, is sacred and 'the urge to protect sex by man is by divine prompting as the prompting to make it permissive, carnal'.<sup>6</sup>

Since sex is not only biological but also social and spiritual, this paper will explore briefly sex expressions in the biblical and African perspectives in order to demonstrate that the morality that guides sex in its linguistic and practical expression is being eroded within the Afro-Christian circle in adopting a secular style of sex education.

## II Linguistic Expression of Sex in the Bible

According to David Adamo, the word sex does not appear in the Old Testament.<sup>7</sup> However, this does not mean

3 Nabofa, 'The Problems of Communicating', 137.

4 E. R. Wendland, 'Notes on a Lyricized Version of the Lord's Prayer in Chichewa' in J. C. Loba-Mkole and E. R. Wendland (eds.), *Interacting with Scriptures in Africa* (Nairobi: Acton Publishers, 2005), 81.

5 S. I. Fabarebo, 'Diversity of Sexual Morality—The Yoruba Experience' in M. T. Yahya et.al (eds.) *Issues and Practices of Religion in Nigeria* (Jos: NASR, 2006), 364.

6 Fabarebo, 'Diversity of Sexual Morality', 364.

7 D. T. Adamo, 'Sex and Old Testament in African Context', a paper presented at the Nigerian Association of Biblical Studies conference, Delta State University, Abraka, (2005), 1.

that there were no sexual activities or that sex is not important in the Old Testament. There is a range of sexual activities mentioned in the Old Testament, but euphemistic terms are used to describe them. Some of the terminologies used will be explored below.

In its non-prurient realism, the Bible uses the verb 'to know' to express sexual intercourse. In Genesis 4:1, we read: 'And Adam knew Eve his wife', verse 25, 'And Adam knew his wife again.' In 1 Samuel 1:19, '... and Elkanah knew Hannah his wife....' From the verses above, the verb 'to know' means 'more than an abstract knowledge or knowledge from the awareness of mere existence of something but experiential knowledge or participatory knowledge by a man or a woman'.<sup>8</sup> This can be confirmed in the result of 'knowing' their wives. The act of 'knowing' their wives was immediately followed by conception and bearing of children, which demonstrates that there is an actual sexual union between the husbands and their wives. Thus, Cain, Abel, Seth and Samuel are the children conceived and delivered through the sexual union of their parents as testimonies to the biological dimension of sex, expressed euphemistically.

The verb 'to know' is combined with 'to lie with' in some instances. Thus, in Numbers 31:17, we read: '...kill every woman that had known man by lying with him'. In verse 18: 'But all the women children, that have not known a man by lying with him, keep alive for yourselves'. In verse 35, we read about the number of 'women that had not

known man by lying with him'. In Judges 19:25, '...they knew her, and abused her' was used to describe a sexual union albeit an illicit one. Since the Bible does not specifically mention that the three verses in Numbers 31 mean the women concerned are prostitutes, we also do not want to imply such; even though the preceding paragraph talked in terms of husbands and wives and here we have 'man.' However, sexual union is implied in both instances as demonstrated in the explanation of knowledge.

The same is implied in 'lie with'. This is captured by A. M. Macdonald when he said that 'lie with' is archaic, yet means 'to have sexual intercourse with'.<sup>9</sup> To lie with can also mean to sleep with carnally (Lev. 18:20). In Leviticus, 'to lie with' is used with 'to lie down' as an expression of sexual intercourse. In Leviticus 18:23, we read: 'Neither shall thou lie with any beast to defile thyself therewith: neither shall any woman stand before a beast to lie down thereto....' In Leviticus 20:16, any woman that would 'lie down thereto' was to be guilty of bestial union for which the penalty was death.

Another term used to describe sexual intercourse is 'to go in/out' or 'to come into'. In Genesis 16:2, Sarah, Abraham's wife advised her husband to 'go in to' Hagar. In verse 4, Abraham 'went in to' Hagar; the latter conceived as a result of the 'going in to' and gave birth to Ishmael. The same term is used when Judah advised Onan, his son to have sexual intercourse with Tamar,

8 Adamo, 'Sex and Old Testament', 2.

9 A. M. Macdonald, *Chambers Twentieth Century Dictionary* (Edinburgh: W & T Chambers Ltd, 1977), 759.

his daughter-in-law and wife of Er, his late son. In Genesis 38:8, 'And Judah said unto Onan, "Go into thy brother's wife, and marry her, and raise up seed to thy brother."' In verse 9, Onan 'went in into his brother's wife....' In the course of time, Judah himself 'came in to' Tamar. In verse 16, Judah appealed to Tamar to allow him to 'come in to' her. Three months later, it was discovered that Tamar was pregnant as a result of Judah's 'coming in to' her. After the settlement, in verse 26, Judah 'knew her again no more'. In other words, he did not 'sleep' with her again.

Jacob's use of figurative expression of sexual union is scintillating. In Genesis 49:4, Jacob cursed his first son Reuben, 'because thou wentest up to thy father's bed; then defilest thou it: he went up to my couch.' The terms 'bed' and 'couch' refer metaphorically to Jacob's privacy with his wife. A marital bed or couch is supposed to be utilised legally and morally by the owner. But Reuben 'slept' with his father's wife; his father's couch.

In the levirate marriage arrangement, 'her husband's brother shall go in unto her, and take her to him to wife' (Deut. 25:5). In Judges 15:1, Samson expressed his desire to 'go in to my wife into the chamber' while God forbids the Israelites to 'go in to any dead body' (Lev. 21:11). The term 'to go out from' is used to refer to a man's semen during sexual intercourse in Leviticus 15:16. The word 'defile' is used in many instances in the Bible to refer to sexual activities, howbeit abominations. For instance, Ezekiel 33:26 speaks about defilement of a neighbour's wife: they that 'defile themselves with mankind' (1 Tim. 1:10); 'filthy dreamers defile the flesh' in Jude

8 refers to illicit or immoral sexual intercourse. The terms 'abomination' and 'humile' also refer to sexual activities (Ezek. 22:10, 11). The words 'go near' or 'touch' are also used in Genesis 20:4, 6.

The Old Testament does not directly use the biological terms for male and female sex organs. Instead, they are described due to their sacred nature. 'The précised words used for sexual organs are used according to Hebrew psychology-corporate personality.'<sup>10</sup> In Genesis 2:15, we read about the nakedness of Adam and Eve. Being naked, before the Fall, they were not ashamed, embarrassed or discomfited. After they had eaten the forbidden fruit, they came to realise they were naked and had to sew leaves to cover their private parts (Gen. 3:17). Ezekiel spoke about the abomination of discovering or uncovering one's father's nakedness (Ezek. 22:10) to refer to immoral or unacceptable sexual intercourse as elucidated in Leviticus 18.

According to Norman Shields, nakedness refers to reproductive organs which possess some form of mystery. 'That mystery is probably the basis of the fact that improper sexual intercourse was referred to as an uncovering of the nakedness of another person.'<sup>11</sup> This implies, according to him, that since sex is a mystery, such a mystery can be properly experienced only within marriage relationship, and should be limited to it. The nakedness being a hidden and mysterious phenomenon must be covered with

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<sup>10</sup> Adamo, 'Sex and Old Testament', 3.

<sup>11</sup> N. Shields, *Christian Ethics* (Bukuru: Africa Christian Textbooks, 2004), 194.

clothing. Shield elaborates:

The fact that Shem and Japheth walked backwards to cover Noah, who had exposed his private parts under the influence of alcohol, suggests they understood that the reproductive organs should be concealed from one's offspring and probably from others as well.... Such nudity inevitably removes something of the mystery of sex from all who see it. Those who, by appearing in public either unclothed or scantily clothed, abandon the sense of mystery that attaches to our sexuality and in doing so actually devalue it and seriously depart from the divine purpose for mankind.<sup>12</sup>

Other terms used to describe sex organs are foreskin and flesh. In making a covenant with Abraham, God used 'the flesh of your foreskin' to refer to the male's private parts (Gen. 17, 11, 14, 23-25). Zipporah, Moses' wife, in obedience to the covenant circumcised her son by cutting off the foreskin (Ex. 4:25); Moses re-emphasised the Abrahamic covenant (Lev. 12:3) to the children of Israel, and Habakkuk condemned drinking to the point of exposing one's nakedness or foreskin (Hab. 2:15, 16). Habakkuk emphasises that it is a shameful thing for somebody to be drunk and expose his/her nakedness, as in the case of Noah (Gen. 9:22ff).

The Bible also uses 'thigh' or 'loins' to describe sex organs. For instance, in Genesis 24:2, 9, Abraham demanded that his servant swear by laying his

hand on his thigh and the servant obeyed. This swearing also emphasises the mystery in the sex organs as elucidated by Shields above. In Genesis 46:26 and Exodus 1:5, the Bible reckons the number of Jacob's family that migrated into Egypt, and describes the children as those who 'came out of his loins'. This appears to be in fulfilment of God's blessing on Jacob at Bethel, where God said that 'kings shall come out of thy loins' (Gen. 35:11). Jacob also put sackcloth on his loins when he heard that Joseph had been devoured by a wild beast (Gen. 37:34). Moses gives the description of the size of the priests' dressing when he says: 'And thou shall make them linen breeches to cover their nakedness, from the loins even to the thighs they shall reach' (Ex. 28:42).<sup>13</sup> In the case of an accusation of adultery, 'thigh' is used to refer to the woman's private parts (Num. 5:21, 22).

The foregoing exposition attests to the fact that the Bible deliberately refuses to use the direct terms for sex organs or sexual activities. This is not to say that the Jews did not have their terms for them. However, contextually, the non-use of the direct terms is explained in view of the sacred nature of the organs and their activities. This thought is shared by Adamo when he states that the implication of not using the direct terms 'might be as a result of the important and sacred function of sex in ancient Israel. This sacredness is the fact that sex functions as a means of procreation, perpetuation and oath-taking' (Genesis 24:2-3).<sup>14</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Shields, *Christian Ethics*, 194-195.

<sup>13</sup> See also 1 Kgs. 12:10, Is. 21:3, Jer. 13:11

<sup>14</sup> Adamo, 'Sex and Old Testament', 2.

The sacredness and the mysteriousness of sex organs can be assumed further to show the presence of God in them. For instance, Abraham and Jacob invoked the presence of God when they made their servant and children to swear by their thigh respectively (Gen. 24:2-3; 47:29). This demonstrates that sex organs are authentically symbolic, mysterious, sacred, powerful and fearsome.

### III Linguistic Expression of Sex in Africa

The fact that Africa is heterogeneous has been repeatedly chronicled. In spite of the heterogenous nature of African societies, there are striking similarities in their cultures. In this study, we are concerned with the Yoruba and Edo people of Nigeria. The scope is chosen because of our acquaintance with the former, having being born there and worked with the people for almost a decade. As a Nigerian, the researcher belongs to the Edo nation. Apart from the above, the Yoruba and the Edo share many cultural features such as sexual morality. However, it must be stated that they have different languages, although there is some common understanding of each other's languages.

Adamo noticed that there are similarities in the way the terms referring to sex are used in the Old Testament and in African context. He argued that the direct words for human private parts are never used in the public; otherwise such a person who uses them will be regarded as possessing 'a dirty mouth'.<sup>15</sup> Among the Yoruba, '*ba a sun*'

means 'to sleep with'; 'A man *ba* his wife *sun*.'<sup>16</sup> To sleep with one's wife is a euphemism of sexual union since society frowns at the direct mention of the sexual act.

Another term common among the Yoruba is *ba se po*. This means 'to do it together' which literally means 'have a sexual union with'. The Yoruba also describe sexual union as *ba lo po*, which can be translated as 'to use it together'. Another term used by them is *koja lara re*, which means to 'pass through his/her body'. *Ojojumo ko lobirin n ri oko re* which means 'it is not every time a woman sees her husband' or *je ka sere omo* which means 'let's play the game that leads to children' are euphemisms for sexual intercourse.<sup>17</sup> Even though they have direct terms for the private parts, they also use euphemisms in describing them. For example, they say: *nkan omo okunrin/nkan omo obirin*, which means 'man/woman's thing'.

The Edo people also use euphemisms and metaphors to describe sex and sex organs. For example, they describe sexual activity as *oren mi non*, meaning 'he/she knows something for him/her'. Here, as in 'knowledge' explained in the preceding lines, it is not just abstract knowledge but experiential knowledge in terms of sexual union. More than that, the term in many cases is used to refer to a sexual situation that involves a husband and a virgin wife. To deflower one's wife, which enjoys a pride of place in most traditional African settings, is to

16 Adamo, 'Sex and Old Testament', 4.

17 An interview with Mr. Adedoyin, C. A., a Headmaster, 7th December, 2008.

15 Adamo, 'Sex and Old Testament', 4.

'know' the woman. So, to '*en mi non*' is to know the person experientially. Another term which is common is *me en kpen ri*. This means to 'sleep with'. They also say *omi ose gho*, meaning, 'he/she sees his/her wife/husband'. They can say: *oye vbo*, 'he/she goes there'. In referring to the private parts, they say, *emi egbe omohe/oghuoho*, meaning 'thing of a man/woman's body'. Another term is *egede* which means loins or *okhoo*, which ordinarily means anus but is used to refer to the private organs.

In both Yoruba and Edo beliefs, sex and sex organs are regarded as sacred. This informs the many taboos associated with sex and sexual activities. As M. Y. Nabofa argues, 'a mysterious negative power exists in the female reproductive organs and any blood that issues out from it...is believed... to be capable of rendering whatever and wherever it touches unwholesome ritually'.<sup>18</sup> To show their sacred nature and reverence, John Mbiti calls them 'the gates of life'.<sup>19</sup> As such they must be respected since everyone came to earth through them. Not only that, it is common to see women curse their stubborn children by their 'body' and such curse is believed to be very efficacious. 'The efficacy of women's sacred utterances of supplication and curses especially on their children is not in doubt, among the Yorubas. The potency rests in the Yoruba notion of '*adabi*', i.e. except it is not so. That is

to say, unless men do not suck women's breast or *come out of her*'.<sup>20</sup>

There is the belief that some forces are behind drought or excessive rainfall. Thus, women would come out at night fully naked and curse with their 'body'. In many instances however, there are instantaneous changes in the weather. The sacredness of sex is further entrenched in the socialisation process of the children. Children are expected to be sexually innocent until their wedding night when 'the groom's mother would be at hand to teach the two how to do it'.<sup>21</sup> This is further observed by Kisembo as follows:

[B]ecause the generation of life was a matter of concern for the whole community, there were strong sanctions against people who indulge in sex for selfish (i.e. destructive) reasons. Sexuality and its powers were understood as permeating every level of human existence: interpersonal relationships and matters of ritual. Sexuality was looked upon as mysterious and sacred. If it were misused, evil surely resulted. Initiation rites prepared the adolescents for the rights of his/her sexuality to get married and raise a family.<sup>22</sup>

Covering one's nakedness is a spiritual as well as a moral duty. The sex organs are sacred and as such must be kept away from the preying eyes of

18 M. Y. Nabofa, 'Blood Symbolism in African Religion' in S. R. Sutherland (ed.) *Religious Studies*, 21/3, (1985).

19 J. S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (Oxford: Heinemann, 1969), 146.

20 Anon. (unpublished), 'Womb to Tomb: Yoruba Women Power over Life and Death.'

21 Fabarebo, 'Diversity of Sexual Morality', 367.

22 Cited in L. Magesa, *African Religions: The Moral Traditions of Abundant Life* (Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa, 1997).



everybody. The way one dresses is a stark portrayal of the reverence one shows for the sex organs. Thus it used to be abhorrent to see nude or half-nude people in broad daylight. The way one sits down, especially women, also suggests the level of sacredness attached to the sex organs. Thus, when a woman is improperly seated, that is sitting with her legs wide open, such that her 'body' can be seen, she is immediately cautioned to sit right. The people also hold that because of the mysterious nature of sex, sexual activities should be done in the night when everyone else is asleep.<sup>23</sup> There is also the belief that seeing husband and wife engaging in sexual activity is not only shameful, it is also dangerous. This is also confirmed by Malinowski when he writes: 'I maintain that sex is regarded as dangerous...that is tabooed and ritualized, surrounded by moral and legal norms, not because of any superstition of primitive man or emotional view of or instinct about strangeness, but for the simple reason that sex really is dangerous.'<sup>24</sup>

Although the preceding lines have demonstrated that great respect is shown to sex and sex organs in Africa, it is also true that a few people disregard their sacrality. This set of people who have been described as possessing a 'dirty mouth' mention sex and sex organs by their direct names without qualms. It is a common knowledge that many of the contemporary Yoruba

musicians desecrate sex and sex organs. This is also demonstrated by some of their writers.

However, there are proverbs which mention the sex organs by their direct names; such proverbs in most cases are didactic in nature. As it were, proverbs are the special communicative preserve of the elders, for it is held that when wisdom is lost, the proverb is the horse used to search for it. For example, Fuji musician Abass Akande Obesere is notorious for 'insulting' the woman's 'body'. F. H. Kazeem's 'The Vagina as Symbol of Power in the Yoruba Culture' enunciates that 'the phallus represents, in its erect and fertile form, a symbol of male reproductive power... the vagina on the other hand cannot be a less veritable instrument to figure the strength'<sup>25</sup> of the woman. J. O. Ojoade asserts *obo mi yon, a ma e si pe ja pan la*, meaning 'vagina is sweet, but not for licking'.<sup>26</sup> This exceptional case does not in any way obliterate the traditional belief in the sacredness and mystery of sex and sex organs.

Even though sex is legally and morally allowed in marriage, it does not mean that there are no deviants. For example, among the Yoruba it is said, '*A mokun jale, bi oba aye o ri o Oba oke n wo o*', meaning, 'you who steal in the cover of the night, know you assuredly that if the earthly king does not see you the heavenly king (God)

23 B.O. Igboin and S. Awoniyi, *Perspectives on University Dress Code* (Ibadan: Daystar Press, 2006), 38.

24 Fabarebo, 'Diversity of Sexual Morality', 371.

25 F. H. Kazeem, 'The Vagina as Symbol of Power in the Yoruba Culture' in U. J. Yakubu (ed.), *Journal of Cultural Studies: Ethnicity and African Development*, 2/1, (2000): 364.

26 Cited in Fabarebo, 'Diversity of Sexual Morality', 371.

does'.<sup>27</sup> This may find a parallel in Proverbs 9:17-18 which enunciates, 'stolen waters are sweet, and bread eaten in secret is pleasant. But he knoweth not that the dead are there; and that her guests are in the depths of hell.' This means that even though 'illicit pleasure is sweeter than legal' the end product is the loss of life or the eternal damnation of the soul.<sup>28</sup>

From the Old Testament and African views of sex and sex organs, we can summarise that they are sacred, yet not divinised. The Hebrews and the Africans honour sex and sex organs and believe in 'the divine ordination of human sexuality'.<sup>29</sup> They believe that the primary purpose of sex is the generation or procreation of life, which must be done within marriage. 'Sex, therefore, is neither god nor a demon'.<sup>30</sup> As a result of the mystery of the sex organs, it is commanded that they should be properly covered. Those who expose their sex organs are reprimanded and nakedness is regarded as shameful. These similarities 'between Africa and biblical Israel may be traced back to the fact that they both belong to the same class of people, i.e. people of primal world view'.<sup>31</sup>

27 Fabarebo, 'Diversity of Sexual Morality', 371.

28 Adam Clarke's Commentary, Deluxe Bible Microsoft.

29 J. O. Akao, 'The Old Testament Concept of Sexuality' in D. T. Adamo (ed.), *African Journal for Biblical Studies*, XXII/1, (April, 2005): 57.

30 Faith and Life Press, *Homosexuality in the Christian Life* (Kansas: Faith and Life Press, 1995), 31.

31 Akao, 'The Old Testament Concept of Sexuality', 58.

#### IV Afro-Christian Evaluation of Contemporary Expression of Sex and Sex Organs

Most, if not all, of the negative influences on African culture are commonly attributed to the contact with colonialists. Thus, the West should be blamed for all the bad or immoral behaviours being exhibited by the Africans today. We take exception to that line of thought. It is true that most of what transpired in ancient Africa was not documented. However, from the oral evidence available, it is the case that Africa did not have a rosy past in terms of sexual morality. This position is portrayed by the rich vocabulary or register on such immoral activities. Africans believe that whatever exists has a name. Therefore, they have names for various sexual moral and immoral behaviours. This is ossified by the very strict moral taboos that are believed to have metaphysical or spiritual import.

This is not to say that the western contact with Africa did not negatively affect the latter. The argument is that there are inherent tendencies in Africa that courted such negative influences, which to our mind provided the soil upon which the so-called western seed of corruption is sown. For example, it is not the West that brought adultery, rape, homosexuality, fornication, incest, etc. to Africa. This is why the traditional Africans have taboos to guide against these perverse behaviours and also purificatory rituals in case there are offenders. This calls for African ethics on sexuality.

We accept, however, that the rate of sexual perversion and its dimensions have been heightened by western con-

tact; even though it is also necessary to concede that Africans practise a western materialistic type of Christianity. It can be said with evidence that many western Christians share similar Christian and African views of the linguistic expression of sex and sex organs.

Gary Thomas argues that the secular society has much influence on the church. As such, 'most of us are introduced to sex in shameful ways'.<sup>32</sup> One of those shameful ways is the invasion of pornography into the Christian sanctuary, to which many Christians have become addicted. According to Thomas, 'homosexuality, premarital sex, fantasy-laden masturbation, hardcore pornography—none of that constitutes "sex" as we're defining it here. Redefine sex as it was in Eden, as it was when Adam "knew" Eve and began to populate the world.... God doesn't turn his eyes when a married couple goes to bed.'<sup>33</sup> Thomas' linguistic expression of sex in the foregoing, to our mind, is as biblical as African, much as it is also western.

The Christian cannot be protected from the reality of the evolution of secular knowledge on sexuality. A true theology and Christian ethics must respond to it in light of the Bible. Thus, the term sexuality, although it had a simple meaning, has become 'notoriously fuzzy'. The term 'is evaluatively laden and its exact sense and reference are often culturally specific.'<sup>34</sup>

The real challenge however comes

in the attempt to follow 'pop' Christianity that does not distinguish between the secular and the religious/spiritual—in other words, the brand of syncretistic Christianity that includes both the sacred and the profane in its scope. In this brand of Christianity, it is not uncommon to observe emasculation and effemination, nudity and various sex perversions. Such Christianity also uses direct terms to mention sex and sex organs which usually arouses laughter and applause. To many of these types of congregation, this is modernity! The basis for such an audacious pronouncement is that sex education should be taught in the church. It is agreed that we are living in an over-sexualised culture where nudity, pornography or blue films are explicitly dramatised through the television, motion films, music and Internet, but it is our contention that the church must oppose the graphic method of sex education portrayed by the secular world.

We hold it as a fact that part of what has led to sexual abuse both within and outside the church is the disregard for Afro-biblical linguistic expression of sex and sex organs. The evolutionary accretions and post-human philosophy are facts which have led to the loss of the sacrality of the body in general and its private parts in particular. The post-human philosophy which many Christians unfortunately, but subtly, are adopting states that the body is obsolete. Stelarc argues that the body, understood from human and evolutionary levels, is obsolete when juxtaposed with the technological knowledge at our disposal, especially cybernetics. In this argument, to retain the body is to hallow it. Thus, he recoils from 'the re-

32 G. Thomas, *Sacred Marriage* (Michigan: Zondervan, 2000), 200.

33 Thomas, *Sacred Marriage*, 201.

34 P. B. Clarke, and A. Linzey, (eds.) *Dictionary of Ethics, Theology and Society* (London/New York: Routledge, 1996), 753.

emergence of the mystical' in the guise of a return to 'cultural rituals that have long outlived their purposes'.<sup>35</sup>

In defence of his 'the body is obsolete' thesis, Stelarc argues that humanity is superannuated; its biological hardware un-adapted to the infosphere. He therefore declares: '*Evolution ends when technology invades the body*. Once technology provides each person with the potential to progress individually in its development, the cohesiveness of the species is no longer important'.<sup>36</sup> He adds:

It is no longer meaningful to see the body as a site for the psyche or the social but rather a structure to be monitored and modified. The body not as a subject but as an object—not as an object of desire but an object for redesigning.<sup>37</sup>

Stelarc's post-human philosophy is reductionist: his view is that the body, in its objective form, is a structure that can be re-designed to fit the bearer's desire. Re-designing the body can first and foremost take place when the sacred and the mysterious, or the metaphysical and linguistic import, are destroyed. One of the modern ways of objectifying, monitoring, modifying and re-designing the body is through transsexualism—an exercise that is believed to make the soul and the body of the transsexual congruent through

hormone and sex reassignment therapies. In transsexualism, the transsexual's external sex organs, viewed as obstacles to the unification of the body and the soul are evacuated and replaced with artificial organs of the opposite sex.<sup>38</sup>

For the Christians, everything done with the body—whether good or bad—has great eschatological consequences. This includes the linguistic expression of sex and sex organs. The 'traditional' African Christian still argues that 'a good Christian... is one who concretizes in his or her life situation, these basic religio-moral values of Christianity'<sup>39</sup> as enunciated above. While we are not averse to sex education (which has become a plague in many denominations), we support the idea of an African Christianity that bases its sex education on strong moral values. Edwards and Matter are apposite here when they argue that the kind of sex education in the church or even in primary and secondary schools that use explicit words for sex organs is crassly inappropriate.<sup>40</sup> They also condemn such detailed biological drawings of sex organs in sex education which they believe, and we agree with them, are symptomatic of pornographic attraction.

35 Cited in P. McCarthy, 'The Body Obsolete' in *High Performance*. No. 24, (1983): 18.

36 Stelarc, 'Prosthetics, Robotics and Remote Existence: Postevolutionary Strategies' in *Leonardo*, 24/5, (1991): 591.

37 M. Dery, *Escape Velocity: Cyber Culture at the End of the Century* (London: Horder and Stroughton, 1996). 107.

38 B.O. Igboin. 'Transsexualism: Theologico-Philosophical Study', Unpublished PhD Thesis submitted to Ambrose Alli University, 2010.

39 A. Flannery (ed.), *Vatican II* (Dublin: Dominican Publications, 1987), 728.

40 Cited in J. A. Onimhawo, and P. O. Ottuh, 'The Church and Sex Education' in D. T. Adamo (ed.), *African Journal for Biblical Studies*, XXII/II, (October, 2005): 72.

This probably elicited the reaction of Mike Judge who avers that 'this kind of teaching is completely inappropriate for primary school children. It is very damaging to teach sex education without a suitable moral focus. We have seen that this kind of education has had little impact on the number of children having sex, the number of teenage pregnancies or the number of abortions amongst youths over the past few years.'<sup>41</sup>

Our position thus far may be misconstrued as if it carries a fundamentalist or conservative perspective, which states: don't talk about sex, be silent about sex. A. G. Khathide espouses the position of this school of thought in the following way: 'We often find that when we talk about sex in public, we are faced with comments like, "Don't talk about sex, we are Christians," or "Don't talk about sex, we are Africans."'<sup>42</sup> Khathide believes that such cultural attitude 'afflicts' the mainline churches that do not readily provide direction in sexual matters. He states,

Perhaps the reason why the church finds it difficult to handle sex and sexuality-related issues is because we have considered sex as belonging to a domain outside the sovereignty of God. Though many find it hard to admit, it is true that human beings, including the church, regard sex as belonging to the

devil—something that is associated with darkness, evil and wickedness.<sup>43</sup>

While Khathide makes a valuable observation, it is very important to note his attention to the Bible as the basis for a theology of sexuality. We have argued in the lines above that even though both the Hebrews of OT days and Africans honour sex and sex organs, they by no means divinise them. As Akao explains, God is described in human form and man and woman are created in his image, yet God is indisputably 'beyond the polarity of sex'.<sup>44</sup> This makes sex a purely created human affair, which is neither 'a god nor a demon'.

While avoiding extremes in this matter, we must note that the language used for sex and sex organs is of great importance in our relationship to God who gave sex as a gift to humankind. Thomas again espouses this thought beautifully, taking into account its linguistic import:

What a woman is allowing inside her, what a man is willingly entering—in a Christian marriage, these are sanctified bodies; bodies in which God is present through his Holy Spirit; bodies coming together, celebrating, but in a spirit of reverence and holiness.<sup>45</sup>

So if Christians and/or Africans do not talk about sex in the public, it is not simply because it is demonic, but

<sup>41</sup> Cited in Onimhawo and Ottuh, 'The Church and Sex Education', 73.

<sup>42</sup> A. G. Khathide, 'Teaching and Talking about our Sexuality' in M. W. Dube (ed.), *HIV/AIDS and the Curriculum: Methods of Integrating HIV/AIDS in Theological Programme*. (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2003), 1.

<sup>43</sup> Khathide, 'Teaching and Talking about our Sexuality', 3.

<sup>44</sup> Akao, 'The Old Testament Concept of Sexuality', 57.

<sup>45</sup> Thomas, *Sacred Marriage*, 209.

rather, they believe the language should reflect respect for it. That some Christians/churches teach sex education without the necessary moral quality, theological and eschatological insight, it seems to us, is anti-African and unbiblical. The example of the apostle Paul's approach will suffice here.

### V Paul's Linguistic Expertise as fundamental to Afro-Christianity

It is important to enunciate that sex and sex education are not new to Christianity. Sex issues bothered the Corinthian church so much that a letter had to be written to Paul to clarify certain misgivings and confusions. In 1 Corinthians 7, Paul was answering one of the questions contained in the church's letter. Verse 1 paints a picture of the situation: 'Now concerning the things about which you wrote, it is good for a man not to touch a woman.' The complexity of this verse cannot be denied and scholars have many different interpretations of it.

One of the interpretations suggests that phrase, 'it is good for a man not to touch a woman' implies that a man or a woman should not marry at all. Another school of thought, to which we subscribe, interprets the phrase as meaning that Paul is not admonishing Christians not to marry, but that the issue discussed is strictly sexual activity.<sup>46</sup> For us in this enterprise, the word

'touch' which elicits various controversies, is a euphemism for sex. This point has been elucidated above. S. O. Abogunrin agrees when he states: 'like the Yoruba expression *'Sun mo Obirin/Okunrin* (to move near a woman/man) [it] refers to actual sexual experience with a woman or a man. The problem is obviously whether a man should have sex or not.'<sup>47</sup>

Adeniyi Adewale and Rogers Jr. and Rogers III<sup>48</sup> also agree that 'to touch' means sexual intercourse. In defending his position, Adewale argues that it is possible that the Gnostic heresy was tearing the Corinthian church apart over the issue of sex, because as Brown indicates, 'in the second century A. D. Gnostics took the position that the spirit alone matters: some said what one does with the body is unimportant; others said the body must be treated ascetically.'<sup>49</sup> Adewale also observed that such an ascetic position is no longer strange to some churches in Africa whereby there can be fasting for forty to seventy days, during which period Christians are to abstain from sex. This long fast, he adds, has created and is still creating tension in many Christian families especially

<sup>46</sup> W. H. Mare, '1 Corinthians' in F. E. Gaebelien (ed.) *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, Vol 10, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976).

<sup>47</sup> S. O. Abogunrin, *The First Letter of Paul to the Corinthians* (Ibadan: Daystar Press, 1991), 83.

<sup>48</sup> C. L. Rogers Jr., and C. L. Rogers III, *The Linguistic and Exegetical Key to the Greek New Testament* (Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1998), 360.

<sup>49</sup> Cited in O. A. Adewale, 'Building a Biblical African Christian Views of Sex: An Understanding of 1 Corinthians 7:1-5' in D. T. Adamo (ed.) *African Journal for Biblical Studies*, XXII/1, (April, 2005): 32.

where one of the couple attends a different church.

What we have tried to establish is that Paul implies in verse 1 that 'to touch' refers to sexual intercourse. The root word for touch, *haptō* could mean 'light' or 'kindle' as in fire. This shows that to 'touch' a woman/man can kindle a physical interest when both are exploring romantic relationships before marriage.<sup>50</sup> Then in verse 2, Paul gives the reason to get married. This has been interpreted by some theologians to mean that Paul meant marriage instead of sexual union. Paul, it seems to us, understands that when physical contact grows between two opposite people who are not married, fornication or adultery may ensue. Thus, he teaches that it is only within marriage that sex can be had. Therefore, in order to avoid fornication or immorality, it is expedient for a man to have his own wife and a woman her own husband.

Verses 3, 4 and 5 elucidate this point further. Paul teaches that 'the husband must fulfil/render his duty/due benevolence to his wife' just as the wife should to her husband. The euphemism for sexual union here is to 'repay what is owed'. This means that the husband owes his wife a duty to have conjugal relationship with her just as the wife has the same 'sexual duty' to her husband. This duty/obligation is owed after marriage. As a result of the duty they owe each other within marriage, none is expected to exercise

arbitrary authority over his/her spouse since both have become as it were, 'one flesh.' Since arbitrary authority over one's body in marriage is ruled out, Paul teaches that a husband and a wife should not defraud/deprive each other of sexual union except when they have mutually agreed to do so within a reasonable time frame. The only reason Paul gave for such 'conjugal holidays' is for the couples to commit themselves to prayer, after which they should resume their normal sexual intimacy, in order to ward off satanic temptation of incontinency.

Paul's euphemism for a non-consummated sexual urge as shown in verse 9 is 'to burn'. He teaches that it is needful to hasten the process of getting married rather than to be in constant libidinous state that cannot be experientially expressed. The word 'burn' refers to

the God-created physical interest a man and a woman have for each other. It is part of the design of the creation which He uses to draw two people together, to whom He has assigned the gift of marriage. The point of the verse is that two people, who are already in a growing, God-glorying relationship, ought to resolve the problem of burning by marriage.<sup>51</sup>

The foregoing analysis of the use of euphemisms in sex education as exemplified by Paul, we believe, captures the religio-cultural sensibilities of Afro-Christians. It contrasts strongly with the sex education curriculum today.

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**50** Family Radio School of the Bible, *1 Corinthians: A Study of the Spiritual and Material Conflicts of Today* (n. p.: Family Radio School of the Bible, n. d.), 88.

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**51** Family Radio School of the Bible, 93.

Sex education, which is emphasized by the world today, is a pornographic exercise. People have lived thousands of years without sexual lessons, things which only fill and excite our minds with garbage (Rom. 13:14; Col.3:16). The excuse that is often given by those who insist on such things is that young people will learn bad things if not taught otherwise. But why will they learn? What are they exposed to? Unchecked T.V. programs? Unholy movies? Worldly music?<sup>52</sup>

Tony Campolo highlights the ills of the television as a means of sex education in America, which is true also of Africa.

Television also has had a major impact on the sexual mores and folkways of America. Messages about sexuality, often involving sadomasochism and the denigration of woman, are common fare on TV.... The MTV cable network brings to teenagers videos that depict orgiastic promiscuity and sexual bondage as normal mode of behavior. The impact of all this has been overpowering and is not likely to be overcome by an occasional Sunday school lesson on a healthy and biblically prescribed sexuality.<sup>53</sup>

However, Akinwale suggests that Africans and Christians should not shy away from talking about sex. In fact, 'the theologians, the Bible scholars as well as church ministers has (sic) to take the lead in this crusade by preaching and teaching openly about sex in the church'.<sup>54</sup> We may appreciate Akinwale's feelings about sex education on the basis that Paul's response to the letter from the Corinthian believers was addressed to the church. Perhaps, the letter was read in the church by the pastors, thereby inadvertently talking about sex. Nevertheless, one major omission in Akinwale's strong stance and advocacy is that he does not consider the linguistic import of sex education from the prism of its moral, sacred and eschatological consequences.

## VI Conclusion

Theologically, and in respect of inculturation, that is, reading the Bible in the context of African culture, there seems to be no way that the direct mention of sex organs can be regarded as appropriate and acceptable. This is because, it seems to us, that the Bible itself, the basis and manual for 'theological inculturation', for very serious reasons deliberately avoids it. In serious social and religious situations, African culture also deliberately avoids it.

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52 Family Radio School of the Bible, 90.

53 T. Campolo, *Is Jesus A Republican or a Democrat?* (Texas: Word Publishing, 1995), 89.

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54 Akinwale, 'Building a Biblical African Christian Views of Sex', 40.