



# Understanding Biblical Sexuality from an African Traditional Cultural Perspective with Reference to Iwoland

**Samson Adekunle OLOYEDE**

*Department of Religious and Intercultural Studies, Lead City University, Ibadan, Oyo State, Nigeria*

[samvicoloyede@gmail.com](mailto:samvicoloyede@gmail.com), +2348062174555

**Donald A. ODELEYE, PhD**

*Lead City University, Ibadan, Nigeria*

[odeleye.bidemi@lcu.edu.ng](mailto:odeleye.bidemi@lcu.edu.ng), +2348060162719, <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0917-2883>

## Abstract

Human sexuality can be defined as whole range of physical, emotional, mental, social and spiritual expressions of being male or female. Sexual intercourse is expressed by various terms or verbs and euphemisms in the Old Testament. In the contemporary society, sexual immoralities have come from permissive societies under the garb of human rights and freedom. The biblical data with respect with other biblical materials share same common traits with Africa waging war against sexual immoralities. Iwoland like any other African society treats sex with utmost respect owing to the recognition of the fact that it is divinely ordained for the purpose of procreation for the race. In order to ensure justice and high moral standard, Iwo established some taboos and covenants, abrogating or prohibiting some undesirable actions (with serious appeal to their gods, spirit forces and ancestors) and with stiff curses for any breach of those covenants/taboo. It is concluded that sex is not necessarily wrong in itself. Yet not all sex is physically or spiritually beneficial. The fact that people know that certain acts destroyed their relationship with the divine, should make one aware that God does reveal Himself to humanity. It is therefore recommended that people (Christians) should live for God and not for sexual enjoyment. It is unethical to rejoice in the gift of God and yet neglect the giver. Hence, it is high time proper understanding of sexual purity via religion is promoted.

**Keywords:** Human Sexuality, Sexual Purity, Sexual Intercourse, African, Iwoland

## Introduction

One of the major and current issues of interest, concern and debate in our present world is sex and sexuality. Sex is the Physical activity between two people in which they touch each other's sexual organs, and which may include sexual intercourse. It is the creation of God and a very big subject in the Bible. Sexuality according to the oxford Dictionary is



the feelings and activities connected with a person's sexual desires. Hence, Human sexuality can be defined as whole range of physical, emotional, mental, social and spiritual expressions of being male or female. By referring to sex and sexuality in this study, it means not to focus on sex alone but also our growing relationship to each other in society and as well as our relationship with the creator. In this light, sex is examined as a whole in the light of Biblical revelation and from African perspective.

The biblical foundation for understanding human sexuality is found in the first two chapters of the Bible. Genesis 1 and 2 deal directly and extensively with human sexuality. The profound portrayal of God's original design for human sexuality at the beginning of the Bible constitutes the foundation for the rest of the narrative and discourse on human sexuality and encapsulates the fundamental principles of a theology of sexuality. In this case two aspects of sexuality may be identified:

Firstly, the aspect of sexuality that relates to our being male and female. This has to do with intuitive knowledge and recognition of what manhood and womanhood are made of. In the clause concerning human kind's creation as male and female in Gen. 1:27, it is noted first of all, that sexual differentiation is presented as a creation by God. The sexual distinction between male and female is fundamental to what it means to be human. To be human is to live as a sexual person. A Scholar put it this way, "we cannot say man without having to say male or female and also male and female. Man exists in this differentiation, in this duality" According to biblical text, the word אָדָם *"ha'adam"* means "the human" and not "man" in the sense of male gender as some translations put it. It is a generic term meaning "human person" or "humanity". It is observed that sexuality is distinct from gender yet intimately linked to it. It is the social construction of a biological drive. However, human sexuality, understood in this sense, excludes sexual intercourse, but rather that the two sexes live in mutual connectedness and understanding of each other. Hence, the Edenic paradigm of human sexuality finds expression in a heterosexual relationship and remained the norm throughout the canonical Old Testament scriptures.

The second aspect of human sexuality has to do with the knowledge of sex. The scripture refers to this type of knowledge as



“knowing”  $\text{יָדָע}$ , (*yada*) in Hebrew Bible, which obviously refers to sexual intercourse. Adam, in this context, was referred to as knowing his wife and she conceived (Gen. 4:1).

## Sexuality in the Old Testament

Sexual intercourse is expressed by various terms or verbs and euphemisms in the Old Testament. These include among others: for Godly sexual intercourse, the verb used is usually “to know” (*yada*). The verb can have reference to the man as subject (e.g Gen 4:1, 17, 25, 24:16; 38:26, Judges 19:25), woman as object (e.g Gen.19:22; 21:11), the theological significance of *yada* as a term for sexual intercourse is discussed in connection with the first usage of this term in a sexual sense in Gen. 4:1. Bo’el “to go into” (Gen. 6:4; 16:2, 4; 19:31; 29:21, 23, 30; 30:3; Josh 15:18; Judg. 16:1; 2 Sam. 3:7, 12, 24; 16:2; 22; Eze 17:44; Ps 51:2; 1 Chr. 2:21, 7:23 etc). For illicit sexual relations, the terminology includes “to approach.” (*qarab or nagas*), e.g *qarab*: Gen 20:4-6; Lev. 18:6, 14, 19, 20:16; Deut 22:14; Ezek 18:6, *nagas*: Exo 19:15. *sakab'im*; “to lie with” (Gen 19:32-35; 26:10; 30:15; 16:34:2; Exo 22:16; 15:18, 33; 19:20; Num. 5:13, 19; Deut 22:22, 23; 1 Sam. 2:22; 2 Sam 11:4; 11:11; Ezek 23:8 etc. For reference to homosexuality and bestiality: Lev. 18:22; Exod 22:18 (ET 22:19) Deut 27:21. *Yada* “always refers to heterosexual coitus” whereas *sakab* refers to homosexual, bestial, and heterosexual unions. *Natan sekobet*, “use (one’s) penis for sex”, e.g lev.18:20 should be translated, “you shall not use your penis for sex” (Milgrom, Leviticus 17 – 22, 1550., Lev. 18:23; 20:15; Num 5:20) and the further related terminology “lie ... with a woman” (Lev 18:22) or emission of semen, lit., “lying of seed” (Lev. 15:18). Other euphemism related to sexual relationship implied in the expression “become one flesh” (Gen. 2: 24) and is sometimes connoted by the verbs “to love” (*ahab/'aheb*), e.g. Gen 24:67; 1Kings 11:1; Ezek 16:37. The emphasis of this term when used of sexual intercourse, is more on the experiencing and desiring of sexual relations than on the act itself. Sometimes a distinction of meaning is completed by using the active form rather than the stative, and the Hebrew word for “to take (a woman/wife)” is *laqah*, (Gen 34:2; Exod 2:1; 2Sam 11:4). The clause *gala 'erwat*, “uncover the nakedness of” is used to describe incontinent sexual intercourse (Lev 18:6-17; 20:18; Ezek 22:10) as well as other illicit sexual intercourse (Lev 18:18-19). The verb



*raba*, is used for the sex act of a human female with an animal (bestiality), or of an animal with another animal. The verb is probably an Aramaic loan word meaning “to copulate” (Lev 18:23; 20:16; cf 19:19). The word “*to’eba*” is the only term used in both Leviticus 18:22 and in 20:13 to describe homosexuality among the other vices. Targums directly link Gen. 19 with Leviticus 18 and 20. Ezekiel identifies the sin of Sodom as “abomination” (*to’eba*) in addition to other vices (16:49-50). The use of “abomination” (*to’eba*) and other phrases in 1 Kings 14:24 identifies the verse with the unmistakable prohibitions of sodomy in the code of Holiness in Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13.

Furthermore, the creation pattern of heterosexual human relationships in Edenic paradigm remained the norm throughout the canonical Old Testament scriptures. The narrative of human existence outside Eden begins with an affirmation of sexual intercourse (Gen. 4:1) as part of the created order, and to be enjoyed and celebrated between man and woman not to be linked in any way with divine sexual activity or public rituals of the cults and with a clear indication that the method of the original creation in Gen. 1-2 was the divine word and not by sex between the gods.

In contrast with the Israelite conception of sex as a creation ordinance and of a monotheistic God beyond the polarity of sex, the Ancient Near East, in particular, the Mesopotamian religions abounded with both male and female deities, and their myths often described the creation and continuing fertilities as occurring by means of sex among these deities. Sexual immorality linked with the pagan fertility. For instance, Cult rituals formed an integral part of the sin at Baal of peor, as with the worship of the golden calf at Sinai. However, in the Mosaic legal material, it becomes evident that the Biblical legislation formally rejects ritual sex in harmony with the perspective that has emerged from the golden-calf and Baal of Peor narratives. Hence, Deuteronomy 23:18 specifically forbids an Israelite from becoming a temple prostitute.

Also, the practice of plural marriage in particular, polygyny, was acknowledged and accepted within the law codes. For instance, the Babylonian Code of Hammurabi (ca. 1700 B C) acknowledged the practice of polygyny, allowing for a husband to take a concubine if his wife was infertile (as in the case of Abraham) or to take a second wife if his first wife became deceased or tried to obtain a divorce by means of public scandal. In the patriarchal period, there are several biblical



examples of plural marriages in terms of polygyny. Although these biblical narratives provide no explicit verbal condemnation of this practice, the narratives present each account in such a way as to underscore a theology of disapproval. None of the pentateuchal legislation concerning marital forms commands polygamous relationships, although remarriage after a man's first wife died is allowed.

In addition, A Scholar offers a survey of customs and traditions regarding family values and sexuality in the Ancient Middle East and biblical time. He presents the conventional view point that patriarchal hospitality was so highly regarded that it might override the strict considerations of women's chastity. The host would thus sacrifice the chastity of his wife, mistress or unmarried virginal daughters to safeguard his guest's honour and protection. Genesis 19 and Judges 19 present two cases in which virginal daughters and one's wife are offered to outsiders when the protection and honour of a guest are at stake. He thus claims that the custom of sexual hospitality practiced in the region sheds a different light on the dichotomy of patriarchal code versus female chastity. This custom which has been reported from various Arabian tribes, throws additional light on the mores and the relative evaluation of hospitality versus female chastity which constitutes the background of the sexual incidents described in Genesis 19 and Judges 19. A religious conviction impends on the custom. The tribes that practiced it believed that if they failed to perform the rite, nature would show its displeasure by way of a catastrophe. This belief connects sexual hospitality to cultic mysteries that propagate magical correspondence between fecundity cults, nature and divinity, one could categorize sexual among customs of sacred or cultic sexuality. The custom seems inherently male oriented as it concerns a situation of patriarchal hospitality in which female chastity is waived for the pleasure of a male guest. However, some aspects of the custom favour a woman's interest. Both the women and the guest concerned have to comply and neither may refuse the other. The guest must sleep with the hostess, disregarding her age or appearance and vice versa.

In general, Sexual hospitality and sacred sexuality challenge two major objectives of patriarchal dominance as presented in the Hebrew Bible: pre-nuptial intercourse and adultery. Confluent customs of fertility like sexual hospitality and sacred render pre-nuptial intercourse and



adultery imperative. Reversibly, the Mosaic constitution outlaws them. The Mosaic constitution targeted the abolition of these rites, and the Hebrew God alone claimed the objectives of fertility of women and Land.

Moreover, it has already been generally accepted that cults of sacred sexuality were practiced in the Ancient Near East and among the Israelites to various degrees. To this, the prophets unwittingly served as authentic reporters (Hosea 1-4, Ezekiel 16, 22, Jeremiah 3:2-3, 7:18, 44:15-20, 26). The fact that it was forbidden and vehemently opposed speaks for an early cultic history and the irresistible influence of neighbouring cultures.

However sexual hospitality could have thus been practiced alongside with other fecund templates in the peninsula as well as in ancient Israel even if sexual hospitality as such was not practiced among the Israelites themselves, it could still surface in the Hebrew Bible as a literary theme representing the custom practiced by neighbouring cultures in the Arabian Peninsula.

### **Biblical Hermeneutics in Typical African Societies**

In contemporary society, sexual immoralities have come from our permissive societies under the garb of human rights and freedom. We are aware of several complications arising from indiscriminate sex, some of which are threats to human existence, the reality of HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases; perversions of sex in forms of homosexuality, lesbianism, oral sex, same-sex marriage; instability of marriage and homes, divorce; rape, polyandry, polygyny, to mention but a few. Issues and problems arising from indiscriminate sex are not only growing in Africa, as elsewhere in the world, they are becoming more and more complex.

The relevance of biblical hermeneutics can provide enriching insights and tools for application in Africa if it takes African heritage and experience of marriage and sex seriously. However, while the presupposition that African world view comes close to the Biblical world especially of the Old Testament is a fact, it is to be noted however that there are certain congruencies as well as divergences between the two world views:

The biblical data with respect to Holiness code as is with other biblical material share same common traits with Africa waging war against



sexual immoralities. A few highlights would therefore suffice. Marriage in the Old Testament and in African society was both a social and religious institution. It has been noted that marriage in typical African societies was not only a social institution, but a religious one. It was a family, clan and community affair. That explains why transgression of marriage laws affected the entire family, clan or community. Marriage was for procreation, spiritual, protection, pleasure, and security.

Both the holiness code and African tradition had laws and sections specifically related to marriage and sex, while God provided the standards and punishment for marriage and sex, African community drew taboos and sanctions to marriage and sex from gods, goddess, divinities, deities and ancestors. The punishments share same commonalities such as death, hunger, excommunication, social stigma and cutting of such families from the people.

In both Old Testament and African society, virginity was upheld highly as sexual promiscuity was an abomination. Incest, homosexuality, adultery and bestiality were “abomination”. Unwanted pregnancies and bastards were not accepted in both societies. Betrothal did not allow for what is called “trial marriage”. Like in Holiness code, marriage in Africa was held in high esteem and was to be safe guarded, but the requirements allowed for some abuses in some cases. The standard of virginity held in Old Testament seems to be stricter and found force in the covenant relationship with God than that of Africa.

In Old Testament, the man was allowed some freedom in adultery cases while the woman was more vulnerable. This was also typical of the African society too. Homosexuality was also abhorred in Holiness code just as in Africa. It was rare as incest and gang rape were discouraged.

Several terms and euphemisms are used in both Holiness code and African society to refer to sexual union or sexual intercourse. Talking openly about sex and naming sexual organs was a taboo in both societies. The acts of circumlocution are often engaged in order to avoid a direct reference to a sexual act or organ. Both societies do not have sexual relations with woman during menstruation (niddah) or with a bleeding woman as a result of child birth or disease.

Both societies made levirate marriage a necessity. A levirate marriage legislated for in Deuteronomy 25:5-10 was meant to preserve the homogeneity of the family, preserve the name of its male members, safeguard the family estate and ensure the welfare of the widow (Gen.





28; Ruth 4). It was therefore meant not only to provide an heir but also to prevent dispute and litigation which would be more likely to occur if a widow were to marry outside the family.

While the biblical holiness code measure shares some common traits with the African traditional measure, it is noted however that there are also certain divergences between the two. For instances, the concept of “social sex” found in African society was foreign to Holiness code and the Old Testament generally. Also, the concept of “Cohabitation” which is called “trial marriage” which has become an accepted social custom today in Africa is strange to the Holiness code and Old Testament.

The rate of homosexuality which was in Leviticus is very few in Africa. This is found among down-trodden and the rich who have elevated it to a level of ritual, in search of fortunes such as power, money and fame. Similarly, lesbianism (female – female sex) is also known among girls who belong to the cults and the high-class ladies in the society.

However, it is instructive to note that marriage in the Old Testament revelation is no model for a doctrine of marriage.” The imperfections and examples of marriage and sex abuse in the Old Testament make it inadequate to provide the basis for formulation of any theology on marriage and sex in Africa.

### **Sex and Sexuality in Iwoland**

Iwoland is situated in the western area of Osun State, Nigeria. The ancient town is located mid-way between two capital cities, Osogbo and Ibadan. Iwo is situated at a distance of about 44 kilometres from Ibadan, 36 kilometres from Oyo and 48 kilometres from Osogbo. The Iwo indigenes and the adjoining towns and villages are one of the several Yoruba-speaking groups in Osun State claiming historical relationship with Ile-Ife, the traditional home of all the Yoruba. These people had to leave Ife in order to free themselves from the socio-political insecurity, which pervaded Ife then. They determined not to return to Ife and prepared to remain at their new abode call Iwo which literally means “*Kasimaawoo*” “let us keep watch if the new abode would be prosperous for habitation.” The town is surrounded by more than twenty-five towns and villages which have been divided into official three Local Government Areas; they are Iwo, Ayedire and Ola-Oluwa. Iwoland is populated by Muslims and Christians with meagre Traditional religions.





Iwo based on its religious mentality about sex, forbids adultery, homosexuality, masturbation, lesbianism, incest, to mention but a few. These are not only taken as sexual immoralities, they are taken also as sins against God on the one hand, and the society on the other hand. Thus, anyone who commits any of these offences will be ostracized. Anyone quilt of incest, bestiality and homosexuality will be ex-communicated. The following measures are taken in Iwo to avoid the misuse of sex, which include:

**Cultural taboos:** Societies across the world place high premium on sexual purity. This is also true of Iwo which has taboos, norms, values and rules on sexual practices. The Iwo like any other African society treats sex with utmost respect owing to the recognition of the fact that it is divinely ordained for the purpose of procreation for the race. In order to ensure justice and high moral standard, Iwo established some taboos and covenants, abrogating or prohibiting some undesirable actions (with serious appeal to their gods, spirit forces and ancestors) and with stiff curses for any breach of those covenants/taboo.

G.P. Murdock was right when he said,

“All societies have faced the problem of reconciling the need of controlling sex with that of giving it adequate expression, and all have solved it by some combination of cultural taboos, permissions and injunctions... sex behaviour is specifically enjoined by obligatory regulations where it appears directly to sub serve the interest of society.”

As a result of this, the Iwo accepts the act of sex as a natural need. To protect against sexual abuse, Iwo culture enjoins men and women to marry one another. Unwanted pregnancies and bastards were not accepted and betrothal did not allow for “trial marriage”. In respect the private parts, they do not call male and female private parts by their real biological names. They call them names that people would not easily associate with sex. Hence, talking openly about sex and naming sexual organs was a taboo. It is in the light of this fact that marriage is practiced and honoured in Iwo town.

**Abstinence:** The Iwo attitude to sex was firmly placed in the Institution of marriage. They consider the proper use of sex to be sacred and must therefore be safe guarded. Two things are necessary before marriage, abstinence from sexual intercourse and some degree of sublimation of the instinct of sex. In fact, Iwo culture teaches the need



for men to be chaste during puberty rites. Puberty rites geared towards educating the younger ones. Iwo society does not condone fornication and adultery, instead they encourage virginity which was a mark of honour to the girl and her parents especially the mother, when the girl was “found at home” by her husband on their maiden night. However, while the culture stipulates that, the girl ought to be chaste, it is silent on the part of the male. This is not because man should not be chaste, but because women are more vulnerable to sexual related diseases than men.

**Punitive measures:** Sexual offences were taken seriously in Iwo town. Various punitive measures were taken against offenders of sexual laws. Punishment measure like the payment of fines, public flogging and stigmatization served as a deterrent to others would-be violators of sexual taboos. Fornication and adultery are abhorred and adequate punitive measures are meted out to violators. For instance, women suspected of committing adultery were tried and if they were guilty they would be put to shame. Where pregnancy occurred as a result of adultery, the culprit was punished by paying fine. Also, sex before marriage leading to pregnancy was a disgrace and had to be punished. Hence these values and ethics on sex were safely guarded and made Iwo society to be morally sound.

**Magical Medicine:** To caution people from engaging in promiscuity, the society made provision for magical medicine known as *Magun*, meaning “don’t climb” or “*teso*” which is placed on a female to discourage promiscuity. Whenever it is placed on a woman, any man who has a sexual intercourse with him will suffer one injury or the other and most times, death. According to Ogunsakin-Fabarebo, there are over thirty-five types of *magun*.

**Levirate marriage:** Levirate marriage makes a woman an object that could be passed on within the family fold. It is an attempt to care for the widow and the offspring. It preserves the homogeneity of the family, preserves the name of its male members, safeguard the family estate and ensure the welfare of the widow. In Iwo town, Levirate marriage was therefore meant not only to provide an heir but also to prevent dispute and litigation which would be more likely to occur if a widow were to marry outside the family.

However, the adoptions of alien’s values i.e. westernization have produced a lot of crisis and effects that are currently manifesting in the society today. The abandonment of the Iwo ethics on the matter of sex



has brought about sexual immoralities such as promiscuity, prostitution, and rape in the society. Orhunger rightly captures the situation at Iwoland when he says “foreign culture is copied wrongly and the local ones forgotten”

## **Conclusion**

From the look of things, it is seen that sex is a secular matter. But the fact, we need to understand from the outset, is that as far as Africans are concerned, sex is interpreted to have spiritual flavour. It is in the light of this that sex today is not only a social issue, but also a theological one, and discussing it is very important, given the spread of STIs in our continent generally, and particularly in Nigeria. The problems that often arise as a result of sex abuse.

However, in many cases, Africans are similar to prohibitions found in the Bible. It is clear from what has been said above that sex is not necessarily wrong in itself. Yet not all sex is physically or spiritually beneficial. The fact that these people knew that certain acts destroyed their relationship with the divine, should make us aware that God does indeed reveal Himself to humanity. Paul makes this exact point when he says that the requirements of the law of God are written in people’s heart (Rom. 2:13-15). Therefore, sexual purity, which seem to be full of ‘do not’s’ is reality of good news. It is the path we must tread if we are to experience life in all its fullness.

## **Recommendations**

1. Sexual pleasure is a gift from God and as a result it must not be rejected or shunned, the moment it is carried out with the fear of the Lord. Christians should derive motivation from this and seek to be more positive as they live. Self-discipline, prudence and moderation are God’s requirements as Christians enjoy their sexual lives that are amazing gifts from God.
2. The “Sexual ethical teaching” dug out from Religion, in this work makes this work unique. It is ethical for human beings to enjoy sexual life but it is not ethical to be unethical in their sexual dispositions. Consequently, Christian couples must be available for one another. They should not expose their partners to sexual temptations. God’s position pertaining sexual union has not



changed: no sex before marriage; no sex outside marriage (Heb. 13: 4).

3. Christian homes should be citadels of peace and joy where water of sexuality is freely and joyfully shared between husbands and wives. This 'sexual ethical teaching' is an urgent need in the society today. African elders and the church of God should set the pace for young ones and adults to follow.
4. Consequently, people (Christians) should live for God and not for sexual enjoyment. Life lived without living association with God is futile. It is unethical to rejoice in the gift of God and yet neglect the giver.
5. Hence, it is high time proper understanding of sexual purity via religion is promoted.

### References

- Adebayo, A.G. (1982). Origin and Development of Iwo. *The African Historian*. Ile-ife vol.14.
- Adeyemo, Tokunboh (2006). *Africa Bible Commentary*. Grand Rapids: Zondavan Corporation.
- Akintunde Dorcas. Olu, and Ayantayo. J.K. (2008). Sexuality and Spiritual: Possible Bed-mates in the Religious Terrain in Contemporary Nigeria. *Orita* XL/2.
- Bruce F.F. (1986). *The New International Commentary* Grand Rapids: Zondavan Publishing House.
- Ge, P. H. (1975). "Sexual Behaviour, Human," *Encyclopedia Britannica* Vol. 16. Chicago.
- Harrison, R.K. (1980). *Leviticus: An Introduction and Commentary*. Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press.
- Igbum, Victor (2003). *Contemporary Sex Education in the Light of Christianity*. Makurdi: Aboki Publishers L.T.D.
- Johannes, Grundel (1970). "Sex" *Sacramentum Mundi*. London: Burns and Oates.
- Kayode, J. O. (1986). "African Ethics on Sex" in S. O. Abogunrin (ed:) *Religion and Ethics in Nigeria*. Ibadan: Daystars Press.
- Karanja-Die Jomoh (2001). "Sex Exploitation" in Anthony Hodges, *Children and Women's Rights in Nigeria: A wake upcall*. Nigeria.
- Mattew, Henry (1960). *Commentary on the Whole Bible in one Volume Genesis to Revelation*. London: Mashall, Morgan, & Scott.
- Southern, Jill (2006). *Sex God's Truth*. England Ellet Ministries.



Tidball, Derek (2008). *The Message of Leviticus Old Testament*. England: Intersity Press.

Zuck, Walvoord (2004). *The Bible Knowledge Commentary Old Testament* U.S.A, Cook.