

*Review*

# Traditional perspectives and control mechanisms of adolescent sexual behavior in Kenya

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The discourse of this paper is on theoretical perspectives on mechanisms applied by selected traditional Kenyan ethnic groups to induct, control and check sexual behavior of adolescents. The sexual behavior of the adolescents has been an area of concern for a long time to societies through out the globe. In Kenya, traditional societies had premised this concern on the understanding that if not checked; sexual behavior of adolescents could not only jeopardize the social order but also the overall functioning of the society. In view of this, majority of traditional Kenyan cultural groups are documented to have applied elaborate mechanisms of socializing, controlling and regulating sexual behavior of the adolescents until they became of age. These control mechanisms varied cross culturally but each society endeavored to produce a well adapted young person, with standard morals and keen to perpetuate it. While majority of the societies enacted strict restrictive measures to regulate and check adolescent sexual behavior, only one cultural group in Kenya allowed adolescents to express as well as, get involved sexually.

**Key words:** Adolescent, sexual behavior, sexuality, traditional mechanisms.

## INTRODUCTION

The adolescence denotes a person in transition from childhood to adulthood and to a majority of global cultures, this stage calls for proper induction into the norms and regulations of the society. One of the key areas which most cultures fervently observe either directly or indirectly during adolescence is their sexual behavior, part of sexuality. In an endeavor to understand the sexual behavior of the adolescents, it is important to note that it is strongly a product of cultural orientation. The view of sexual behavior being as a result of cultural orientation is predicated on the Social Learning Theory which observes that behavior is a learned phenomenon.

The systematic study of social learning has been widely used by various social scientists- anthropologists, psychiatrists, psychologists and sociologists. All seems to

agree that human behavior is a result of the process of social learning throughout the life cycle. Albert (1977) and Walter (1973) are the architects of the contemporary version of social learning theory, which initially was labeled cognitive social learning theory. Both argue that behavior, environment and a person's cognitive factors such as beliefs, plans and thinking, can interact in a reciprocal manner. Thus, in their view, the environment can determine a person's behavior. A synonym of social learning as applied by sociologists is the concept socialization while anthropologists use the equivalent, enculturation.

According to Gullotta et al. (1993), although, all known human cultures varied in the way they socialized, controlled and checked the sexual behavior of the adolescents, majority of them endeared themselves towards production of a well adjusted person, keen to sustain their communities. A historical account as well as, ethnographic literature across the globe indicates that

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concern over the sexual behavior of adolescents has been prevalent for a long period of time. In Africa for instance, most of the documented traditional ethnic groups instituted strict social and physical control measures especially for the sexual behavior of the young people. They safeguarded their sexual behavior until when they entered into marriage (Kenyatta, 1965; Hilgard et al., 1975; Gyepi – Garbrah, 1985; Akong'a, 1988).

In East Africa, traditional rituals of initiation prepared young people for their adult roles including education on responsibilities of sex, marriage, and child rearing. In this context, sexuality serves "...as a source of relations of kinship and affinity thereby the basis of solidarity, reciprocity and co-operation (Fugglesang, 1997: 1248). According to the author, since sexuality contributed to social cohesion, communities developed "rules" concerning the expression of sexuality as well as, mechanisms for controlling sexual behavior especially amongst the youth. Sexual behavior's potential to cause harm... through jealousy, unwanted pregnancies, emotional discord and infection, as well as good, was widely recognized. In view of this, societies designed and configured codes of conduct relating to when, where and with whom sexual relations could take place.

In order to communicate these principles to the young people, initiation ceremonies were held, often separately for girls and boys. In Kenya, rituals associated with the transition from childhood and which included sex education is described to have been quite pervasive. Majority of traditional Kenyan cultures had socially recognized "age set" or "age grade" systems which had their own codes of accepted behavior, rights and responsibilities upon which one could discern the concept of adolescence. According to Gyepi –Garbrah (1985), the age set systems were a feature to almost all major Kenyan ethnic groups. Boys and girls were initiated into the institution between age 14 and 17 years by means of circumcision and clitoridectomy, respectively. For boys, they further learned how to defend their societies, among other social responsibilities while girls were in a corresponding manner inducted into household chores and other socially constructed roles and duties. Learning was both theoretical and practical, sometimes persevering excruciating experiences (ear piercing, whipping, and working hard). The both age-sets underscored the importance of marriage and procreation but they also gave support for their members and provided their own built-in values against pre-marital sex and pregnancies. According to Akong'a (1988), each Kenyan ethnic community organized and conscripted young people to these age set systems, and youths were socialized with the desire to approximate the ideal individual as perceived by the community, relative to its environmental conditions.

Informal education was inculcated by the parents, peers, siblings and other agents of the community, while traditional formal education was provided in seclus

ion by experienced and trusted men and women during the rites of passage. During such occasions (rites of passage), boys and girls of relatively the same age were respectively exposed to the society's heroic history, responsibilities relating to family life (including sex education) and the secrets of success as a son or a daughter, spouse, parent or as a member of community in general. It was the time when in a traditional formal context, the society ensured that a generation of its young members was exposed to a common code of ethics, values and beliefs from which they would derive self-control in their experiences as adapted members of the community. Furthermore, Kalule (1987) and Kenyatta (1965) observed that sexual discipline was maintained through elaborate parental and societal control, guidance and supervision in a majority of Kenyan ethnic cultures.

### **SEXUAL BEHAVIOUR CONTROL: TRADITIONAL PERSPECTIVES**

The Kalenjin, Luo, Abaluhya, Atharaka, Abagusii, Agikuyu, Miji Kenda and Swahili people amongst other ethnic groups in Kenya, firmly proscribed indiscriminate sexual behavior in adolescence. Consequently, the effects that accompany early and irresponsible sex involvement were quite minimal (Kenyatta, 1965; Kalule, 1987; Akong'a, 1988). Among the Kalenjin people of Kenya, a man who had carnal knowledge of a girl before either of them or both were married was considered as a moral weakling who could never be appointed to a leadership position throughout his lifetime. In this same society, a girl on whom clitoridectomy was performed when she was a virgin was highly honored, respected and her parents praised (Akong'a, 1986: 125). Likewise, among the Luo and Abaluhya people of Western Kenya, virginity at marriage for women was rewarded with high status in society and her mother received material rewards in addition to the negotiated bride wealth payment usually received and controlled by the male household heads (Akong'a, 1988: 4). It was therefore in the best interest of girls to keep themselves pure until the day of marriage as they had to protect their own and their family's honour and integrity. Boys in turn underwent learning about respect for girls and how to control their sexuality till marriage.

The Abagusii community, also of Western Kenya, had very well organized though informal institutions of disseminating sex education knowledge as well as, controlling the sexual behaviour of the young people. According to Ayiamba (1996), grandmothers "Makogoro" supplemented by elderly widowed women provided a good avenue for young girls to be inducted into sexuality matters, while boys visited and sometimes slept in their grandfathers' huts "esaiga" where they were equally socialized on virtues pertaining to relationships, responsibilities as well as, sexual behaviour. The author

points out that during novitiate and girlhood, young women were warned that it was a curse to lose one's virginity, their greatest honour and pride before marrying. Boys were equally inducted into respect for self and others in regards to sexual morality. Moreover, the Abagusii culture never permitted pre-marital sex, even during courtship. They had institutionalized systems of reward and punishment for sexual offenders. For instance, parents often threatened their children with all forms of punishment if they engaged in pre-marital sex. Any girl becoming pregnant before marriage endured disrepute and could only get married to an old man or to male social outcasts amongst the Abagusii community of Kenya.

The Iteso people found on the border of Kenya and Uganda, East Africa, had an elaborate educational system whose main objective was to enable the young to become accepted members of their society, and just like most Nilotic groups of East Africa, they did not have physical circumcision of the young people (Olenja, 1986: 114). Among the Iteso, children would go to live or visit their grandparents, uncles and aunts who took it upon themselves to provide knowledge on what they were supposed to know about being men and women. Morality education with regard to family life, clan, history and sexual relationships in the community was inculcated from an early age. Ekenya and Akong'a (1986: 120) posit that virginity as a physical condition that a girl preserved before marriage was encouraged or presumed. Accordingly, a man who made a girl pregnant was either forced to marry her or pay "emong lok"eluk", that is, a bull to her father in compensation for her damaged purity. Furthermore, girls who became pregnant before marriage were severely chastised both verbally and corporally.

Some ethnic groups maintained chastity through strict parental supervision and seclusion. Among the Atharaka of Meru district, Kenya, an unmarried girl could never be allowed to go to places alone. Akong'a (1988) points out that those girls were always accompanied by related adults or given a youth to accompany them, and never allowed to converse with men on the way. In this same society, a young man never married a girl with a pre-marital child. Such a girl was taken from village to village in the neighboring Akamba society by two old men and offered for marriage as a subsequent wife, and no bride wealth would be paid. Such a girl would also be considered a disgrace. Besides, the Tugen, Pokot and Lchamus (sub-groups of Kalenjin) as well as, in other pastoral groups of Kenya, once clitoridectomy (which was mandatory to all young girls) had been performed, she was secluded in her parental house until the day of marriage (Akong'a, 1986). During this time of seclusion, a girl was not expected to perform any household chores but would be fed well and instructed as well as, exposed to learning how to adjust to marriage and motherhood. On the other hand, boys after circumcision would undergo training on warrior hood and mechanisms

of protecting their communities, as well as future social responsibilities as husbands. Moreover, training on sexual morality was a key factor including virtues of self-respect and respect for others.

The Nandi people of Kenya (a sub-group of the Kalenjin) both boys and girls were subjected to an institutionalized system of initiation. For their initiation, girls underwent what Mbiti (1969: 127) terms as a preparation for "adulthood and housewifery" and no woman could get married without going through it. Long before the initiation and when girls were about 10 years old, it was mandatory and considered part of growing up to sleep with boys of their age in places known as "Sikoroino", referring to houses where girls and young men of a given village or groups of villages could go and sleep overnight (Cherotich, 1967: 62 to 77). This was obligatory, and if the girls or any girl objected to it, the boys could threaten and sometimes coerce them without the intervention of the parents. This Nandi cultural practice was meant to make girls conscious of their sexuality, how to behave towards men as well as, how to control their sexual desires. According to Mbiti (1969), no sexual intercourse was permitted when the girls and boys slept together in this kind of cultural configuration. Indeed, at a later stage, the girls would be examined for virginity status, and it was a matter of great shame that produced anger towards the girls and the parents if any was found to have lost their virginity. Mbiti (1969) avers that in some cases, such girl(s) would be speared to death, while virgin ones would receive gifts of cows or sheep. It was after sleeping in "Sikoroino" that Nandi girls underwent physical initiation (clitoridectomy) then subsequently, seclusion for a period of six months to three years-in preparation for marriage. Such preparation entailed induction on tribal values, virtues, customs and social wisdom as future wives.

Additionally, Mbiti (1969) points out that the practice of clitoridectomy was very paramount to the Nandi culture. The author posits that the Nandi people of Kenya believed that if a girl was not initiated into clitoridectomy, her clitoris would grow long to have branches, and that children of uninitiated women would become abnormal. Women who had not been initiated were also considered to still be "children", and their off-springs known as "children of children" (Mbiti, 1969: 130). Thus, unless a person had been through the ceremony, she really was "nobody", "incomplete" and still a "child". As soon as the girl had gone through the period of seclusion and the end of initiation ceremony, they got married. On the other hand, Nandi boys also underwent circumcision in seclusion. During the process of healing, they were exposed to various ceremonies including warrior hood and security for their communities. Although, not secluded for long, they learned about social expectations and then joined community for further induction into physical, social duties and roles.

The Keiyo-Marakwet, other sub-groups of the Kalenjin

people of Kenya, had an institutionalized system of imparting into its young people the basic tenets of their sexuality. According to Kipkorir and Ssenyonga (1985), Keiyo-Marakwet parents augmented community instructors in conveying sexuality knowledge. Most channels of communication were the various initiation and marriage ceremonies during which facts of sex, fertility, parenthood as well as appropriate moral values and norms were plainly expressed. Among the Keiyo-Marakwet people, the period of circumcision for both boys and girls and subsequent seclusion from the community provided the most appropriate opportunity for imparting general knowledge, and in this case, sex education in a formal way known as "Kaptorus". The community also had youth festival, "Kirenga", held annually where uncircumcised boys and girls sang and danced throughout the night, but they were not allowed to engage in sexual activity. There were also dances for those circumcised and awaiting marriage where the young met and flirted with each other. However according to Kipkorir and Ssenyonga (1985: 86), pre-marital sexual intercourse was deemed to be improper and could result into corporal punishment. In the event of pregnancy of an unmarried or unbetrothed girl, the man responsible was liable to a fine of 30 heads of stock, while the girl could find it difficult to get a man to marry her. In practice and in most of the cases, the woman continued to associate with the man, either in his homestead or that of her father if her lover was not yet independent, in a state of "concubinage", receiving part of the fine for her support and the baby.

An equivalent seclusion pattern for both boys and girls during the process of performing rites of passage was noted amongst the Maasai people of Kenya and Tanzania, in the East African region. For the Maasai youth, community education and physical initiation (circumcision and clitoridectomy) was mandatory as a rite of passage for both boys and girls before marriage. According to Sifuna (1986: 171), after circumcision, boys were grouped into sets of warrior hood or "Limurran" where they learned social skills, duties and responsibilities as adapted members of the Maasai culture. Personal discipline, self-control and respect for one another especially in age sets were strong virtues. Indeed, peers in an age-set group among the Maasai perceived each other as a "blood brother" and by extension, what belonged to one belonged to the other. That is why it is argued that Maasai members of one age group in their future life could "share wives", that is, if a member came to his house and found a spear placed near the door, outside, he would know that warrior hood brother was inside performing conjugal rights. This cultural tradition was well accepted in the society and cut across all age systems. The Maasai people of East Africa could be classified to have practiced what anthropologists refer to as polyandry Maasai rites of passage for boys, especially circumcision and moranism (an institution

where Maasai young men were conscripted and trained into warrior hood and bravery in the bush) occurred during the age of 15 to 20 and thereafter, they would be obligated to join adult life and subsequently, marry. This practice is still common in the contemporary time among the Maasai people. This notwithstanding, the introduction and penetration of modern formal education. According to Sifuna (1986), girls on the other hand did not form age-set groups but the community would approximate a certain age (immediately after puberty) when all girls underwent initiation in seclusion but individually, each in their mother's hut. After clitoridectomy (cutting off a portion of their clitoris) by an experienced old woman, the girl was isolated and socialized into Maasai ways of life as a woman, and free from duties and interaction until healing. Subsequently, the girl progressed into marriage and indeed, there was no room to socialize with boys/men before marriage.

The Digo and Duruma people who are amongst major sub-groups of the Mijikenda people found along Kenyan coastal strip, social education or learning society's accepted moral values was mandatory and imparted within the home environment, mostly by bona-fide parents. Boys and girls underwent physical initiation after puberty, subsequently followed by intensive training about responsibility for the home (boys), while girls were taught virtues of housewifery. Kimokoti (1987) observes that girls' movement was highly restricted and both communities had high regard for a woman to be a virgin at marriage. This moral value of chastity for women before marriage could be replicated for the other Mijikenda (nine tribes) communities as well as the Swahili people of Kenya.

For instance, the Swahili people of Kenya had a tradition of testing virginity of a newly married girl by availing a white sheet to be used by the newly weds (bride and groom) as they consummated their marriage sexually. Virginity for the bride was detected through blood stains on the white sheet the following morning/day. Failure for the blood stains to appear in this white sheet meant lack of virginity for the bride and could ultimately lead to the annulment of that marriage. This same orthodox tradition of checking or testing a girl's pre-marital sex chastity after marriage was ostensibly common in many Muslim cultures across the globe and is still being perpetuated in some traditional Islamic cultures (Ember et al., 2002).

Several Islamic societies in the Horn of Africa, including the Somali people of Kenya and other Muslims in North-Eastern Kenya, girls have for a long time been subjected into excising their clitoris and external genitalia before marriage, then subsequently stitching the vagina with the belief of reducing sexual desires (EAS 21<sup>st</sup> July, 2007). The understanding amongst these cultures is that female clitoridectomy reduces sexual desire, thus, consequently inhibiting female promiscuity and adultery in later life. The operation comes in three forms:

1. There is the sunna, meaning tradition in Arabic which involves the removal of the prepuce or the tip of the clitoris; then the clitoridectomy which consists of the removal of the entire clitoris and the labia, and lastly, the most extreme form, infibulation which leaves the woman with only a tiny passage to pass urine through, thus, no sex can occur before marriage. So drastic is the "mutilation" that young brides have to be cut open (surgical process) to allow penetration on their wedding night, and are customarily sewn up thereafter. In most of these cultures, girls who have not been circumcised are considered "unclean" and can find it extremely difficult to find a husband. They are often treated with ridicule by other women and many men believe folklore which says they will die if their penis comes in contact with clitoris. This tradition is common amongst the orthodox and modern Muslims even those living in Western Diaspora. In an article titled, "Female Cut Exported to Europe", the EAS (July 21<sup>st</sup>, 2007) reported how African Muslims of Somali origin and from other parts of Africa organize to have their girl children circumcised during holidays, back home in their mother land (very discreetly), then return to Europe when fully healed. This is meant to ensure they conform to their tradition although living in Western culture. This amounts to culture lag.

2. The Kikuyu community, the most populous ethnic group in Kenya had an institution called "Ombani na Ngweko" (platonic love and fondling) for young people (Kenyatta, 1965: 154). The community organized numerous nights and days for dances, recreation and enjoyment for both boys and girls. Only those who had undergone physical initiation (circumcision and clitoridectomy) for boys and girls respectively participated. Girl would visit boys' huts known as "thingira" and would socialize with them overnight, but penetrative sexual intercourse never occurred because the girls tied a leather apron around and between their legs to effectively protect their private parts. They would also in other occasions wear skirts tied with a special knot by the grandmother in such a way that she (grandmother) would know whether it had been tampered with. The idea was to teach boys and girls values of self-control, giving rise to morally upright people. In this same community, fondling between boys and girls was allowed during such occasions but not sex, and virginity was highly valued before marriage. Any young man who rendered a girl pregnant or forced a girl into sex was severely punished by the tribal council and made a social pariah. Any girl who became pregnant before marriage among the Kikuyu people would be subjected in disrepute and marriage as a second or third wife.

3. The Akamba people of Eastern province, Kenya, are the only recorded society in Kenya which never restricted adolescent boys and girls from engaging in pre-marital sex. According to Kalule (1987: 113), in the traditional Akamba culture, sexual relation was expected to be an integral part of the young people's growth and

development. But notwithstanding this involvement, boys and girls interacted sexually under very strict control and supervision by the adult community. The Akamba society had nocturnal dances (singing and dancing) by the youth which was a popular sport considered as a school where girls and boys learned from one another, and where they were likely to meet future spouses. These dances occurred almost after puberty and after boys and girls had undergone first initiation (circumcision and clitoridectomy, respectively), and second initiation "Nzaiko Nene" or great initiation which involved a youth being fully integrated into the cultural practices of the community (Kimilu, 1962). During the occasions of nocturnal dances, sexual intercourse (complete penetration) was permitted between couples that would not necessarily become husband and wife in future. Penwill (1951) further points out that if a young man had intercourse with a girl who was unmarried but past the age of puberty as frequently happened after dance, there was no penalty, even if part of the bride price had been paid for the girl and the boy was not her prospective husband. Ndeti (1972: 8) observes that amongst the Akamba people, sexual act was allowed but highly regulated. The neophytes learn the "mbeni" or dance sessions and music what goes on in the secret world of men and women. The male and female discuss fully matters of sex and they participate in it in a session known as "moleaga". The "ngomeei" (community experts) must be consulted in all matters. If one is mistreated or forced, it is reported and the offender can be seriously punished. Sometimes even ostracized. In addition, Lindblom (1920: 407 to 412) points out that, boys and girls are duly circumcised and those who have attended puberty amuse themselves at their favorite dance, the "mbalya". This dance is engaged in almost daily and is quite erotic in character. In this dance, the girls choose their male partners and it is during these dances that the basis of marriage is formed. Pre-marital sex is expected, but it is regarded as quite shameful for an unmarried girl to become pregnant.

In spite of early sex involvement, pre-marital pregnancies and other consequences that accompany indiscriminate sex experimentation were unheard of. Ndeti (1972) and Mbula (1974) observed that during nocturnal dances, girls who were menstruating and those in their fertile periods would report these details to the dance organizers to be excluded from the dance as well as, sexual experiences as penalties for becoming pregnant before marriage were severe. The girl who became pregnant before marriage could never be married by a bachelor but to an old man as a subsequent rather than first wife. Moreover, young men were also careful for they as well bore the burden of making a girl pregnant-which included a goat, money and other forms of cleansing processes perceived to be very expensive to sustain by the boys, their family and clan. It was also anticipated that both girls and boys received sufficient

training about their body functions during second initiation, and also from grandparents to be able to avoid what the society considered irresponsible sexual encounter.

It is noteworthy that it was shameful for a bride to be a virgin at the time of marriage among the Akamba people of Kenya. If at all found to be a virgin after marriage, the bride would be returned to her parental home, carrying the handle of an axe without the hole where the axe is fixed (Kalule, 1987: 45). A girl seen returning home with this symbolic article was understood to be a virgin and ignorant, and consequently, a man would be paid to deflower her before returning to her husband. The parents of girls, especially mothers were wary, very cautious and ashamed about such an eventually occurring, thus, they would tactfully talk their girls into "knowing men" before marriage.

## DISCUSSION

It emerges from the aforesaid discourse that there were noted similarities as well as, varied mechanisms amongst traditional Kenyan cultures about society sexual standards. Ultimately, almost all cultures highly inhibited, checked and controlled sexual behavior of the young people until when they became of age. One critical observation to note about the social and physical mechanisms of controlling and checking adolescent sexual behavior was the nature of double standards and gender biasness. While it is clear that in most of the traditional cultures, girls would be secluded (not to indulge in sex) and there were other mechanisms of detecting virginity for girls, the same was not applied to boys. It is also noteworthy that the cultures associated with pre-marital sex restrictiveness, especially with elaborate observation on girls were associated with arranged marriages, transacted on bride-wealth, dowry or gifts and were patriarchal in nature.

However, the traditional notions and mechanisms restricting and controlling the sexual behavior of adolescents in Kenya have become obsolete overtime and superfluous in these contemporary times. Data abounds to the realization that young unmarried adolescents are highly involved in early and indiscriminate sex and the attendant consequences are abundant. The discrepancy noted in contemporary adolescent sexual behavior can be explained within the backdrop of collapsed traditional moral codes and mechanisms that controlled and checked sexual behavior (CSA, 2004); dereliction of responsibilities by parents while other supportive family institutions (grand parents, uncles and aunts) have become evanescent (Kioli, 2010). In the event, the society has had to contend with the entrant of ill-advised peers and a sexualized media (CAFS, 2006). There thus exists a lacuna of knowledge on pertinent issues of sexuality amongst contemporary adolescents, while the knowledge they have is quite

fallacious and not accurate. Consequently, the adolescents are in a vulnerable and accelerated position of being infected with STDS/HIV/AIDS, teenage pregnancies, abortion, school dropout and early maternal deaths. According to the CSA (2008), eleven percent of school girls" drop out of primary and secondary education annually due to pregnancy in Kenya, while over 60% of abortions and related complications occur primarily among people less than 25 years. In a study by CDC (2005), over 60% of new HIV infections among women and 40% of those among men occur during adolescence while 25% of sexually active teenagers get an STD every year. These indicators imply a phenomenal malady about the sexual behavior of the adolescents in present Kenya.

## CONCLUSION

There is considerable evidence that the sexual behaviors of the Kenyan adolescents have undergone change over time. Indeed, the contemporary Kenyan adolescents exhibit sexual behavior characteristics at variance with their traditional counter parts. Due to the collapse of the traditional mechanisms of socializing, controlling and checking sexual behavior during adolescence, ignorance has become the Achilles heel up on which their behavior can be explained. Contemporary adolescents are bereft of sexuality knowledge and this incapacitates them from making informed and responsible decisions. Owing to the fact that present adolescents spent almost three quarters of their time in school, education institutions come in handy to offer sexuality education. This calls for the enactment and incorporation in the curriculum as well as, facilitation and implementation of comprehensive sexuality education. All school going children (primary and secondary) require a responsible, holistic and medically accurate sexuality education.

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