

Delaying Gratification as a Beautiful Choice

By

Muchugu Kiiru¹

I. Introduction

At the heart of the conflict in The River Between² is the divide between the tested indigenous and the encroaching colonial cultures. Muthoni, whose family has denounced the indigenous religion and embraced a foreign religion, makes a choice to go through circumcision, in the process disobeying her father who, as a leading adherent of the new religion, is dead against female circumcision. “I chose my way,” she says of her father, “and when he called me back, I refused to go.”³ This choice goes against the grain: Her preacher-father cannot countenance this, in his eyes heathen, rite of passage. In his eyes she is dead: He washes his hands of her and forbids the mention of her name in his house. Muthoni indeed dies: Her determination to become ‘a woman, beautiful in the tribe’ comes to grief as she does not recover from the operation. To the end, however, she is exhilarated and proud that she had made a beautiful choice: “Waiyaki...tell Nyambura I see Jesus. And I am a woman, beautiful in the tribe.”⁴ Waiyaki is the son in a family embodying indigenous values of life, while Nyambura, who would not make the choice Muthoni makes because she is the daughter in a family embracing foreign beliefs, is Muthoni’s sister.

Muthoni’s death however suggests that it is impossible to bridge the river between the two ways of life; now that the colonial has irreversibly infused indigenous lives—culturally, economically, and politically—this paper however suggests that it is possible, nay desirable, to bridge the river that once divided the two cultures, opening the possibility of being beautiful in not only the tribe but also the nation. This is true in relation to not only culture in general but also sexuality in Kenya. Yet, in saying this, I am aware that human sexuality involves much more than the initiation into adulthood that Muthoni talks about; human sexuality embraces “various sexually related aspects of human life, including physical and psychological development, and behaviors, attitudes, and social customs associated with the individual's sense of gender, relationships, sexual activity, mate selection, and reproduction” and “permeates many areas of human life and culture, thereby setting humans apart from other members of the animal kingdom, in which the objective of sexuality is more often confined to reproduction.”⁵

¹ Muchugu Kiiru, a lecturer in the Department of Literature, University of Nairobi, is a counsellor based in Nairobi.

² Ngugi wa Thiong’o (1969). The River Between. London: Heinemann.

³ Ngugi wa Thiong’o (1969). The River Between. London: Heinemann, p. 56.

⁴ Ngugi wa Thiong’o (1969). The River Between. London: Heinemann, p. 61.

⁵ "Human Sexuality," *Microsoft® Encarta® Encyclopedia 2000*. © 1993-1999 Microsoft Corporation. All rights reserved.

II. Indigenous Society

Within this context, the value of the initiation that Muthoni goes through lies not in the operation but in the ritual that occasions the operation as well as the rite of passage that marks a physiological and psychological stage of development from childhood to adulthood that announces to the society that one is mature and that bestows on one a new status that allows one to get married and beget and parent children. This development is a significant component of human sexuality, which the individual in the indigenous society learns about from birth to death as one as expected—predictably, inevitably—goes through rites of passage such as initiation and marriage. At each stage, sacred ceremonies celebrate these rites of passage that indicate an individual's changing relationships with both the self and the other.

Everyone's past, present, and future (that is, one's been, being and becoming) however is indivisible from rites of passage in the indigenous society that an individual must celebrate or observe. The form rites of passage assume is religious—always—because “religion is integrated with the whole...life”;⁶ so does profoundly does it pervade “all the departments of life” that “there are no irreligious people”⁷ in the indigenous society. Ceremonies that mark rites of passage therefore are sacrosanct as they are steeped in and thereby legitimised by religious conviction. Besides, the rites of passage define and organise the individual's physiological and psychological development and sexual and social relations that make one a well-adjusted physio-psycho-sexual-social being. In the process, the society develops norms to govern this being; taboos that relate to human sexuality and sexual behaviour are some of these norms, as evident in Jomo Kenyatta⁸ and J. S. Mbiti.⁹

To understand these taboos relating to human sexuality, as well as sexual behaviour, is to appreciate not only their place in regulating sexual practices but also their role in transmitting sexual education throughout an individual's life, particularly during initiation and marriage. To this end, where the woman is expected to be a virgin on marriage, premarital sexual intercourse is taboo. However, not only do single people are free to interact during public dances but also do single and eligible men and women have wide latitude in private sexual play. As part of their education during initiation and seclusion, these individuals receive elaborate instructions on how to conduct prolonged sexual play without penetrative sex; an infraction of this conduct is taboo punishable by public exposure and ridicule, imposition of fines, or ritual purification. The taboo thus ensures that sexual play is conducted

⁶ Jomo Kenyatta (1968). *Facing Mount Kenya: The Tribal Life of the Gikuyu*. London: Secker & Warburg, p. 316.

⁷ John S. Mbiti (1992). *African Religions and Philosophy*. Nairobi: Heinemann, p. 2.

⁸ Jomo Kenyatta (1968). *Facing Mount Kenya: The Tribal Life of the Gikuyu*. London: Secker & Warburg.

⁹ John S. Mbiti (1992). *African Religions and Philosophy*. Nairobi: Heinemann.

according to rules; once conducted without breaching taboo, sexual play denies single men and women casual sex as much as it ensures that they are virgins before marriage. Accepting the existence of strong sexual feelings in young adults, however, it teaches them to release sexual energy without resorting to penile penetration, as it discourages homosexuality and masturbation in young adults. In this connection, girls are censured if they as much try to touch their genitals, though boys are allowed to engage in masturbation but once initiated, they are ridiculed if they engage in what is now considered “a babyish habit”; homosexuality is however unknown because the “freedom of intercourse allowed between young people of opposite sex makes it unnecessary, and encourages them to acquire experience which will be useful in married life.”¹⁰ In the end, the taboo not only proscribes but delays sexual intercourse between the unmarried, in this way, fostering healthy heterosexual feelings in young adults through delaying full sexual gratification. Here, the immediate inference of delayed gratification is sexual intercourse in tandem with Ezeulu’s statement, “Unless the penis dies young it will surely eat bearded meat.”¹¹ Yet, delaying gratification has wider implications for human sexuality for the young adults who willy-nilly must marry to ensure that the society regenerates; in the process they will become parents, establish relations beyond their immediate families with in-laws, gain status as full members of the society as their children grow up, and in time become grandparents.

Through all these developments, taboos, varying from society to society, control and imbue sexual relationships in marriage. In this regard, there exist taboos relating to the interaction between the daughter-in-law and the father-in-law and between the son-in-law and the mother-in-law; the inference here is that these taboos ensure that sexual intimacy does not take place between people brought together through marriage. At the same time, it is taboo for a married woman “to have sexual intercourse outside the homestead” or “while her husband is away on a journey, on war or other activities, for to do so is to cause misfortune to the husband.”¹² The taboo relaxes when the married woman has sexual relations with a member of her husband’s age group with the knowledge of the husband, or with social approval or with the death of her husband and when the married man has sexual relations in these cases or when his marriage is polygamous. It is apparent that these taboos ensure fidelity in marriage while the relaxation of taboo on widows ensures that a widow would not remain single but must have a helper, a husband, and a protector, preferably a brother-in-law. This together with the socially sanctioned institution of polygamy—as well as the social imperative that all must marry—would ensure that there are no loose, sexually starved individuals running helter-skelter

¹⁰ Jomo Kenyatta (1968). *Facing Mount Kenya: The Tribal Life of the Gikuyu*. London: Secker & Warburg, p. 162.

¹¹ Chinua Achebe (1969). *Arrow of God*. New York: Anchor, p. 161.

¹² Jomo Kenyatta (1968). *Facing Mount Kenya: The Tribal Life of the Gikuyu*. London: Secker & Warburg, p. 183.

after men or women; in light of this the validity of Kenyatta's assertion that homosexual relations are unknown.¹³ In line with the taboos, as well as the sexual freedom granted the single and eligible, it is unimaginable in a society such as the one Kenyatta discusses that—pending further research—there would be word for let also deed of the undreamt of and unheard of incest, prostitution, or rape.

In the course of one's life, the society teaches the individual that neither a number of taboo words must be uttered nor a number of subjects must be discussed—certainly not between age-groups, absolutely not in public. Obscenity is the rubric under which the society forbids the words and subjects, as more often than not they centre on or revolve around human genitals, sexual desire, and sexual acts. Yet, at seasonal intervals—and during rites of passage such as initiation and marriage—indigenous society relaxes rules on obscenity and allows ritual obscenity when people discuss, sing and utter the explicit and forbidden and the naughty and the obscene. The relaxation facilitates people to express normally and socially forbidden explicit use of language germane to sex. Using dance, song, or word in public to give voice to pent-up feelings on sexuality releases repressed allusions, feelings, language, and references to sex; in this sense, their expression is therapeutic for not only the individual but also the society. This therapy is similar to “the principle” of catharsis which George Thomson says “provides relief by giving free outlet to repressed emotions through such channels as the practice of confession or participation in public festivals.”¹⁴

On the whole, there exist, socially acceptable and sanctioned avenues or means of expressing, practising, and teaching sexuality in the indigenous society. This is a society in which “the child must go through rites of incorporation so that it becomes fully integrated into the entire society”¹⁵ to the extent that the incorporated individual is indivisible from the society to which one is tied to by such a complex network of beliefs and relations that life as a lonely individual is unthinkable and unbearable. Thus, Kenyatta shares the sentiments relating to the individual's indivisibility from the society when he says of his ancient Kikuyu of Kenya: “According to Gikuyu ways of thinking, nobody is an isolated individual.”¹⁶ Mbiti, discussing African societies, says, “To be human is to belong to the whole community, and to do so involves participating in the beliefs, ceremonies, ritual and festivals of that community.”¹⁷ And when he discusses primitive societies in general, Arnold Kettle argues that in tribal

¹³ Jomo Kenyatta (1968). *Facing Mount Kenya: The Tribal Life of the Gikuyu*. London: Secker & Warburg, p. 162.

¹⁴ George Thomson (1980). *Æschylus and Athens: A Study in Social Origins of Drama*. London: Lawrence & Wishart, p. 359.

¹⁵ John S. Mbiti (1992). *African Religions and Philosophy*. Nairobi: Heinemann, p. 108.

¹⁶ Jomo Kenyatta (1968). *Facing Mount Kenya: The Tribal Life of the Gikuyu*. London: Secker & Warburg, p. 309.

¹⁷ John S. Mbiti (1992). *African Religions and Philosophy*. Nairobi: Heinemann, p. 2.

societies “individuals themselves are the sort of individuals they are because they belong to the tribe”; as a result, he continues, “the influence of tribal life is that it is all-pervasive and enters into the whole consciousness of the individual.”¹⁸ It therefore follows that ostracism in the indigenous society is a catastrophe that spells the death of an individual.

The ‘rites of incorporation’ that everyone must pass through are the bedrock of the worldview of this indigenous social dispensation.¹⁹ In this context, on them is founded the authority, the organisation of the family where offspring must obey their parents on whose blessing and participation in their rites of passage they depend. The rites of incorporation in effect decide who can consume alcohol, usually restricting its consumption to people rites of passage have incorporated as elders, while ritual relating to initiation ceremonies into adulthood, as well as ritual surrounding marriage ceremonies, incorporates the people concerned into a new social grade. In all, rites of passage are germane to incorporation into social norms on human sexuality.

III. Contemporary Society

Changes consequent on colonialism continue to undermine the indigenous society to the extent that only about 25% of the Kenyan population adheres to indigenous religion.²⁰ This indicates considerable alienation from indigenous belief, but Mugambi argues that the rites of passage forged in the indigenous society still hold sway in the contemporary society. This is the society that Mbiti has described as a place where the individual is increasingly ceasing to be a corporate member as one was when the indigenous society is the only encompassing social organisation that one cannot live without being and remaining a member of. The changes have massive implications on human sexuality and education on sexuality in Kenya.

The changes, bringing in their wake individualism hitherto unknown, are accentuated more in the urban than in the rural areas where loneliness, isolation, or alienation confronts the individual to the extent that one is “alone or even lonely in the midst of large masses of people.”²¹ The changes affect the family to the extent that the “authority and respect which parents enjoyed under traditional morality and customs” is challenged such as when offspring contract “marriage without consulting them or even

¹⁸ Arnold Kettle (1970). *The Artist and Society*. Bletchley: Open UP, pp. 14-15.

¹⁹ Jesse N.K. Mugambi (1989). “African Heritage: Change and Continuity.” J. B. Ojwang and J.N.K. Mugambi (Eds.). (1989). *The S. M. Otieno Case: Death and Burial in Modern Kenya*. Nairobi: Nairobi UP.

²⁰ African Studies Center, University of Pennsylvania. <http://www.africa.upenn.edu/NEH/kreligion.htm>.

²¹ John S. Mbiti (1992). *African Religions and Philosophy*. Nairobi: Heinemann, p. 224.

telling them about it.”²² And when the husband works far away from his family this has serious consequences for the stability of the family:

This geographical separation of families creates great strains on the emotional, psychological, sexual and marital life of husband and wife. In addition, the children grow up without a father at home, so that their image of the father is simply someone existing in a distant town from where he occasionally sends them money for clothes and school fees, and comes home once a year or every two years. For the wife, the husband is simply a person who descends upon her once a year or less often to quench his sexual passion, fertilize her and disappear like a frogman.²³

At the same time, the changes have occasioned an increase in marital breakdowns, a decline in polygamy, and an increase in concubines and created an individual who lacks guidance in issues relating to family, marriage, and sex as a result of—in Mbiti’s words—the contemporary educational system:

One serious drawback in modern African family life is the fact that whereas under the traditional set up both boys and girls receive preparatory education concerning marriage, sex and family life, especially during and after initiation rites, modern schools give little and often no such preparatory education. These schools spend most time teaching young people about dissecting frogs and about colonial history than they ever spend teaching them how to establish happy homes and family lives. Unless this structure and system of education is changed, we are heading for tragic social, moral and family chaos whose harvest is not far away.²⁴

More changes can be highlighted briefly. First, commercial sex thrives in the contemporary society, the prostitute’s gift being a multiplicity of sexual partners cut off or removed from norms controlling, governing or regulating sexual behaviour and liaisons in the indigenous society; lonely individuals cast adrift in the cold vast urban sea can be the prostitute’s easiest quarry. To some adults and children, commercial sex appears as an adventurous, profitable undertaking, but on the whole it undermines the need to delay gratification in all its complexity. Yet, it is but a feature of widespread promiscuity in the contemporary society in which the mobile phone has transformed the deception and the infamy of marital or spousal infidelity into an art of sorts,²⁵ in which coerced or forced sex—incest, defilement, and rape—is a daily occurrence, and in which the gigolo and the mistress are an institution. Second, supplies of alcohol are readily available unlike in the past when consumption of alcohol was limited and

²² John S. Mbiti (1992). *African Religions and Philosophy*. Nairobi: Heinemann, pp. 225-26.

²³ John S. Mbiti (1992). *African Religions and Philosophy*. Nairobi: Heinemann, p. 226.

²⁴ John S. Mbiti (1992). *African Religions and Philosophy*. Nairobi: Heinemann, p. 227.

²⁵ Susan Njoki 92005). “Mobile Phone Infidelity.” *Daily Nation*, 12 March 2005

restricted to special occasions and specific age-groups. Now, anyone with money can access alcohol—despite legal restrictions on the age at which one may purchase alcohol; drugs are readily accessible to the youth in and out of school.²⁶ Awaiting research to establish whether a connection between alcohol and promiscuity exists, there appears to be a connection between the two, considering the prevalence of women employees as waiters and the existence of lodgings that appear to cater, not for tired travellers but for casual trysts in the bars which flourish all over the country. Third, a lot of adult, as well as parental, sexual activities acts, especially in urban areas, are neither sacred nor secret as they are performed within the earshot of the child in the same or the neighbouring apartment, maisonette, or room. This leaves little to the child's imagination as to the acts adults, neighbours, or parents are engaged in. This exposure to explicit or implicit sexual acts might predispose the child innocence to engage in sexual intercourse, sometimes 'with a little help' from the adventurous house-help. Talk about the calf learning to crop grass because "when mother-cow is cropping giant grass her calves watch her mouth!"²⁷ Faced with the high HIV-AIDS prevalence rates in the country,²⁸ one needs little imagination to perceive the tragic implications of these juvenile shenanigans to appreciate the potential benefits of delaying gratification.

IV. A Way Forward

In the light of widespread breakdown in indigenous norms, a need arises to explore acceptable avenues for communicating education on human sexuality that will help people—especially the youth—express and release of sexual feelings through delaying gratification. This responsibility falls more heavily on specific social groups, but the responsibility poses challenges to the society in general.

In relation to specific social groups, a challenge goes to the parent—as well as the adult—as the custodian unto whom the indigenous society has handed down and entrusted the contemporary society. The parent's behaviour is a great educator, for is the bulk of human learning is experiential; once again, talk about the calf learning to crop grass by watching its mother cropping grass! Thus, the young will hardly appreciate benefits of delaying gratification or ways of promoting healthy well-adjusted physio-psycho-sexual-social beings when parents pay lip service to the benefits or the ways.

Away from home, the teacher should be an important purveyor of in education on sexuality because educational institutions have a concentration of the young--pre-teenagers, teenagers, and young adults—who spend most of their time in school and who are at an impressionable age when they not

²⁶ National Agency for the Campaign against Drug Abuse. *Youth in Peril: Alcohol and Drug Abuse in Kenya*, n.p., n.d.

²⁷ Chinua Achebe (1969). *Arrow of God*. New York, Anchor, p. 195.

²⁸ "Kenya has a severe, generalized HIV epidemic with approximately 1.25 million adults and over 100,000 children infected. The Kenya Demographic and Health Survey (KDHS) 2003 found a prevalence of 9% in adult women and 5% in adult men." A report published in July 2004 shows that 1.4 million people were infected with HIV and 140,000 adults were dead from AIDS. Global AIDS Program (GAP). HHS/CDC Global AIDS Program (GAP) in Kenya. <http://www.cdc.gov/nchstp/od/gap/countries/kenya.htm>.

only can be susceptible to sexual shenanigans but also can accept the word of the teacher as a pronouncement from a idol. Teachers who take sexual advantage of students under their care will hardly inspire confidence in teaching students human sexuality; the teacher's behaviour and demeanour are helpful in communicating education on sexuality. Then there are youth groups such as the boy scouts who conveyed to out-of-school youth, parents and students information "on human sexuality, reproductive health, sexually transmitted infection (STI) and HIV/AIDS prevention, and skills for sexual decision making," topics so "sensitive" that "the government-controlled mass media in Kenya would not allow frank discussion of."²⁹

On the head of the young, the target of the parent's and the teacher's education on sexuality, however, lies a beautiful choice: accept or deny that that sexual gratification does not entail penile penetration—protected or unprotected—and that forms of ritual obscenity, sex play and non-penetrative sex can be cultivated to help in delaying gratification.

In relation to the society in general, there is need to both address poverty and urban environment as breeding grounds for sexually transmitted infections and confront social issues relating to commercial sex, sex as a commodity, substance abuse, and criminalising or demonising e sexual play that can delay gratification. Further, forced sex regularly catches to public attention largely through reports in the mass media, thus underscoring the role the mass media can play in imparting—and sensitising people on the importance of—education on human sexuality. Health professionals, such as counsellors and doctors, can enhance the role the mass media can play by both furnishing the society with information on human sexuality in publications such as booklets, journals, and magazines and carrying out research on human sexuality in the country. At the same time, there is need to use language with positive message to give hope for the future with all its possibilities of introducing young people to sexual intercourse with its manifold duties and responsibilities. In this respect, language devoid of negative associations ought to be replaced with language with positive associations in education on sexuality.

Above all, adults need to be in touch with their sexuality if they are going to learn about or instruct the young on human sexuality. In regard to instructing the young who are indispensable in the society's becoming, and to assisting the young relate positively to lessons and messages education on sexuality contains, adults need to use youth experiences or knowledge on sexuality from the perspective of the young. This they can do by casting their minds back to their youth to realise how much they knew about human sexuality and the choices they made to give an idea on the level of sexual knowledge of or the extent of sexual engagement by the young. Adults can do this once they bring their experiences of youth to their awareness by confronting the past and conquer feelings that might make the past uncomfortable and by becoming honest with themselves and giving up a life of delusions,

²⁹ George Kahuthia and Samson Radeny. PATH, Kenya: Using Scouting as a Vehicle for Reaching Out-of-School Youth. <http://www.pathfind.org/pf/pubs/focus/Project%20Highlights/Scouts%20Kenya.htm>

illusions, or lies that might makes it difficult to discuss sexuality with the young. In the process, adults would be able to accept the vulnerability which one hides beneath a mask of adulthood, and once the mask is removed, they can communicate with the young on a human level shorn of pretence and open to feelings on delaying gratification as a beautiful choice in not only the indigenous society but also the contemporary society. The good news is that here counselling can be helpful in bringing all this to the awareness of the adult.

V. Conclusion

The changes which have taken place in the society—from the indigenous to the contemporary society, from a tribal to a national dispensation—are irreversible. Yet, there is a lot that can be borrowed from the indigenous society and applied successfully in the contemporary society, the way the foreign religions borrowed from the indigenous religion to gain converts. In this regard, Sylvania Bottignole argues that the use of traditional constructs must have been a great help in the conversion of the Kikuyu to the Catholic faith: “The traditional ritual practices, accepted with deep conviction by all the Kikuyu,” says the writer, “have been of vital help to make the people understand Christian rituals.”³⁰

In relation to human sexuality, delaying gratification is behaviour or practice that can be borrowed from the indigenous society. This concept is contemporary, having borrowed it from M. Scott Peck who uses it a different context when he says that “delaying gratification” is “the only decent way to live” as it “is a process of scheduling the pain and pleasure of life in such way as to enhance the pleasure by meeting and experiencing the pain first and getting it over with.”³¹ The concept is contemporary in form but indigenous in content, however, as sexual practices in the indigenous society demonstrate. In this indigenous society, as in the contemporary society, the older generation has a duty to guide and instruct the younger generation in human sexuality. The younger generation in the contemporary society, like Muthoni in the indigenous society, has a responsibility to make a choice. Delaying gratification is a beautiful choice: It delays indulgence in sexual intercourse until marriage so that when as adults the young engage in sexual intercourse they appreciate and treasure pleasurable possibilities and reproductive its bounties.

³⁰ Sylvania Bottignole (1984). *Kikuyu Traditional Culture and Christianity: Self Examination of an African Church*. Nairobi: Heinemann, p. 79.

³¹ M. Scott Peck (1997). *The Road Less Travelled*. London: Rider, p. 19.

References

- Achebe, C. (1969). *Arrow of God*. New York, Anchor.
- African Studies Center, University of Pennsylvania.
<http://www.africa.upenn.edu/NEH/kreligion.htm>
- Bottignole, S. (1984). *Kikuyu Traditional Culture and Christianity: Self Examination of an African Church*. Nairobi: Heinemann.
- Global AIDS Program (GAP). HHS/CDC Global AIDS Program (GAP) in Kenya.
<http://www.cdc.gov/nchstp/od/gap/countries/kenya.htm>
- Kahuthia, G. , & S. Radeny. Path, Kenya: Using Scouting as a Vehicle for Reaching Out-of-School Youth.
<http://www.pathfind.org/pf/pubs/focus/Project%20Highlights/Scouts%20Kenya.htm>
- Kenyatta, J. (1968). *Facing Mount Kenya: The Tribal Life of the Gikuyu*. London: Secker & Warburg.
- Mbiti, J. S. (1992). *African Religions and Philosophy*. Nairobi: Heinemann.
- "Human Sexuality," *Microsoft® Encarta® Encyclopedia 2000*. © 1993-1999 Microsoft Corporation.
 All rights reserved.
- Mugambi, J. N.K. (1989). "African Heritage: Change and Continuity." J. B. Ojwang and J.N.K. Mugambi (Eds.). (1989). *The S. M. Otieno Case: Death and Burial in Modern Kenya*. Nairobi: Nairobi UP. (166-79)
- National Agency for the Campaign against Drug Abuse. *Youth in Peril: Alcohol and Drug Abuse in Kenya*, n.p., n.d.
- Ngugi wa Thiong'o (1969). *The River Between*. London: Heinemann.
- Njoki, S. 92005). "Mobile Phone Infidelity." *Daily Nation*, 12 March 2005
- Peck, M. S. (1997). *The Road Less Travelled*. London: Rider.
- Thomson, G. (1980). *Æschylus and Athens: A Study in Social Origins of Drama*. London: Lawrence & Wishart.