Résumé

P. A. C. Isichei — La sexualité en Asaba traditionnel. Morale et éducation sexuelles chez les Ibo d'Asaba. La société traditionnelle était répressive en la matière, spécialement en ce qui concerne les jeunes filles, qui devaient arriver vierges au mariage. Il existait cependant une sorte de licence post-conjugale tolérée, analogue au sigisbéisme.

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Sex in Traditional Asaba*

Sex and Children below the Age of Puberty

In theory no child below the age of puberty was supposed to know anything about sex. Parents did not seem to be unduly disturbed, however, if their children, approaching puberty, began to manifest an understanding of sex. Before then, whenever children asked questions pertaining to the origin of human life, parents often repeated trite fables about how man came to be in his present conditions. Such questions were simply not answered, and many parents would try to divert the attention of their children to other matters.

To implement this ideal that children should not even as much as know of the existence of sex, parents brought up their children to seek only the company of others of the same sex. If a young girl (above eight years) was found in the company of boys her mother sometimes rebuked her sternly: Mma fuzikwa'i k'i so imikei n'ibuho okei, that is, ‘Let me not see you again in the company of boys, for you are not a boy.’ Again if female children went crying to their mother expecting sympathetic hearing after being beaten up by boys, they were told that it served them right and that it should teach them to seek their proper playmates (fellow girls). Even when children sat round a gifted story-teller to listen to her stories, there was often the same concern to group themselves according to their sexes, with most members of each sex endeavouring to avoid contact with any member of the opposite sex.

Tasks were also divided along sex lines and this, perhaps, helped to encourage ignorance in children about matters of sex. It had the effect of making it almost impossible for children of different sexes to meet during the performance of their daily duties. Boys resented being required to do tasks traditionally allotted to girls, and girls usually protested if they were asked to take on the heavier duties of boys. No boy liked to sell in the market or to scrub the family house. Apart from the fact that the performance of such duties would often bring him in contact with females—which, in terms of Asaba culture, would be good reason for his displeasure—there was the further consideration of the female status of such functions. Boys tended to view the performance of female tasks by them as a degradation of their maleness.

* A chapter from a B. Litt. thesis for Oxford University, 1970.
On the other hand, if a girl had to do such male jobs as splitting firewood, she would complain that it was unjust, rather than protest against it from the point of view of status.

On the whole, Asaba attitude to sex often made for stupendous ignorance about the facts of sex in their children. Young boys between twelve and fifteen years of age have been known to debate whether children were born through the anus or through the female genital, whether in the act of sexual intercourse the penis penetrated the anus or the female organ; and there were some who did not even know that it involved the use of the genitals as the following story illustrates:

One of my age-mates told how he got up one morning to find his underwear wet with a sticky fluid. He was then about fifteen. Frightened, he rushed with it to his mother, convinced that he had caught obia-nwanyi, that is, 'woman sickness' as every disease or ill-health that affected the male organ was termed.

On the previous evening he had played with a female friend and had caressed her rather intimately. But they came nowhere near to having sex, if only because, in fact, they did not know how to do it. This boy, however, had imagined that they had had a sexual intercourse, hence his fears.

After looking at his underwear, his mother assured him that there was nothing wrong with him; it was only a sign that he was growing up. She, however, advised him to be careful with females; for the condition of his underwear was also an indication that he could be a father.

This ignorance was no doubt unusual. Most boys of his age would have known about the facts of life through countless sources.

Before a group of about the same age ('teens'), another boy recounted how a widow had taken him to bed two years before and had taught him how to have sexual intercourse. When this happened he must have been about twelve. We listened, rapt in a mixture of amazement and shock, as this 'knowledgeable' boy tried to give every bit of detail about all that sex involved and the kind of sensation he felt with a woman who could easily have been his mother. For the four of us between the ages of twelve and fifteen who heard him, that might have been our first account of what sex involved and possibly our only formal (explicit) 'education' on sexual intercourse. The normal channel through which information about sex reached boys of that age was through such knowledgeable age-mates.

Sometimes, however, some information on sex trickled through during a certain traditional game if older or more experienced boys or men took part in or directed it. It was a game that improved and tested the quality of memory possessed by Asaba children. It inspired them to be creative and provided the means of assessing their originality. One of those engaged in the game pictured an event or portrayed an idea that did not overtly reflect any experience of Asaba life, but which was such that one could, with some effort, discover in it the aspect of Asaba life that it was intended to recall.

Sometimes boys would use this game of puzzle for matters of sex; at other times adults used it to introduce adolescents to sexual matters.

For example, I remember an instance when young boys in their early 'teens' formed two groups for a match. When they seemed to be on a par for rather long,
the referee, an adult in his late twenties, proposed the following puzzle: *Tu'm okpu’zo bu uzo asifia—asifia m’ukwu na ga’a*, that is, ‘Tell me that doorway or entrance, which is ever covered with grass even though human feet tread it often?’ Not a single competitor knew the answer, and the referee would not give it to them. He said that it was for them to find it out, adding that, perhaps, some of them were too young for this knowledge. Immediately, they suspected that the answer would be about sex, a subject on which adults were often reticent. Displeased at the referee’s unwillingness to tell them the meaning of his puzzle, they refused to continue the game and dispersed. Some of them searched for older or ‘wiser’ boys from whom they obtained explanations as they had hoped. There were some who learnt that the ‘entrance’ or ‘door-way’ was the sexual organ of a prostitute or a wayward woman; and others, that it was that of a married woman.

It would have been considered immoral on the part of the referee to propose such a puzzle for children below ten years old: these were not supposed to know of the existence of sex. For them to pry into sex would have been an unpardonable crime, matched only by the guilt of the adult who touched off their imagination in that direction. It is reasonable to assume that in the case cited above the referee did not want to accept responsibility for giving information of a sexual nature to some children who might be judged too young for it. Furthermore, by refusing to give them the knowledge because of their youth he underlined Asaba attitude that such knowledge could only be passed on to the mature, and that sex was a serious and sacred affair.

Nevertheless, the very mention of the puzzle before a group of boys, some of whom were on the point of becoming adolescents, is perhaps indicative of the referee’s intentions to start them inquiring about sex. Perhaps he had hoped that during their investigations the right answers would be withheld from the younger ones. If so, he was mistaken, for curiosity in matters of sex was quite high. Some children even offered to give their share of fish at a meal to older boys if they would satisfy their curiosity. The result was that it occasionally happened that some children below the age of ten could come by some information about what sex involved. A few of them even tried to use this knowledge to imitate the sexual act. But as often as they were caught in this imitation, the punishment inflicted on them knew hardly any limits. I cite an example as a case in point.

In a section of Asaba, called the Cable Point, it was not unusual to find Asaba people living side by side with one another irrespective of their lineages of origin (i.e., without grouping themselves according to their lineages). I remember going to this part on a visit. On my way back I saw two women quarrelling furiously. One was loudly accusing the other of being unfair to her son, while the other vociferously defended the justice of her action. I was quite confounded to learn what the latter had done. She had rubbed with fresh West African red pepper the genitals of her own daughter and those of the son of the woman with whom she was engaged in the war of words. She had also applied this pepper to the eyes of her rival’s son without doing the same to those of her own daughter, and the quarrel of the women, at the time I encountered them, was about this. Their two children had been caught alone in a bathroom possibly trying to imitate the sexual act. I learnt that on two previous occasions they had been found together in suspicious
corners and had been smacked for this. They had been warned seriously against being together in such odd corners. The excruciating pains of the red pepper was the penalty they paid for their disobedience.

The main reason why many Asaba children knew so little about sex was probably because they lived almost exclusively in their own exogamous lineages. Sex between members of the same patrilineage was held to be incestuous, and children of the same lineage learned quite early to refer to one another by the term for full siblings. The avoidance relationship between children of the opposite sex in the same lineage was expected to be observed between those of different lineages; so that the relatively few occasions when a child was allowed outside his own patrilineal premises, as for example, during a visit to mother’s patrilineal relatives, he was expected to seek only the company of other children of the same sex as himself. The ideal of avoidance relationship between boys and girls of different lineages (above eight years old) was not always realized though it was more or less formalized: ‘A girl tickled by a boy did not enter her parents’ premises till the following morning when she should have a bath.’ However, unless the contrary became evident, parents preferred to think that children under eight years could not know of any undesirable significance of their sexual differences, and for them, they did not consider it necessary to insist on their being segregated according to their sexes. For those above eight years old segregation was the rule until after puberty.

**Motives for Female Premarital Virginity**

In traditional Asaba premarital virginity was of vital importance to every girl. At marriage the girl who was a virgin received many gifts including, usually, a very expensive bead called acham. In the early 1920s, this bead cost about seven pounds. It was used by women during certain ceremonies and was hired out to those of them who did not own any.

The premarital virgin started life in her husband’s home with an enviable dignity respected by her husband and his relatives. If she quarrelled with her husband, she boasted about her premarital virginity: ‘Did you not meet me at home? (i kwudoho m n’uno?); when I first came to yours, was I not complete? (ezuho m oke ka m lu be’i?); surely, on my arrival at yours, you did not find me the left-over of a yesterday’s meal, did you? (abu m nni-ola ka m lu be’i?); there is no denying the fact that the whole palm fruit was eaten by you (o nweho ka i goa na ngi tasi yabo akwu).’

Let us dilate somewhat on these imageries which a woman used when she boasted of her premarital virginity.

She asked her husband if he did not ‘meet her at home’. Uno (‘house’) refers to the girl’s natal home. It was there that a girl was supposed to receive almost
all her 'education'. Thus, as a symbol of the educational values for which the home stood and which it was supposed to impart to every girl, uno could hardly be bettered. These values included the ability to rear children, to cook, to trade and to run a family. But, important as these accomplishments were supposed to be for every Asaba girl, they were considered (at least in theory) almost of no consequence for the girl who was not a virgin at marriage. Asaba men would argue that the test of a well-brought up girl did not lie in her acquisition of the skills mentioned above; there was hardly any Asaba girl without them. The only reliable index of a girl's proper upbringing was her premarital virginity. The care which a mother took to preserve her daughter's virginity was assumed evidence that she could not have neglected in her the other perfections of womanhood in traditional Asaba. And if, in fact, a particular premarital virgin proved not to have learned much else, all was not lost. Such a woman might yet be brought up to a reasonable standard under apprenticeship to her husband's mother. This attitude of the Asaba male explained why his assessment of a girl's character tended to take its cue largely from her behaviour in the sexual domain. Thus, as the virtue implying all the other perfections which a girl learned in her natal home, virginity was fittingly symbolized by uno.

When a wife claimed ezu m oke ka m tu be'i, she implied that a girl who was not a virgin at marriage was somehow essentially incomplete. There was something to be said in defence of a husband who maltreated such a wife. But there was absolutely no justification for her husband to misbehave towards her, for she was a premarital virgin. To tolerate this would be to sell herself short of the true value of 'the complete woman' for which she qualified by her premarital virginity. Therefore, her claim that she was 'complete' on her arrival at her husband's home, was her way of protesting against ill-treatment that degraded her to the level of the 'incomplete' woman who was not a virgin at her marriage.

'Surely you did not find me the left-over of a yesterday's meal, did you?' Among the Asaba a dish lost much of its dignity the moment a portion of it, no matter how small, was eaten, and it was considered bad manners to serve it to any other person without disguising this fact, even when the person served knew that the meal was a left-over. As a result of the attitude that left-overs were meant for servants, maids and slaves, it was, moreover, thought that to serve a partly eaten dish, undisguised, to another person was to rank him with servants. The man who helped himself to a partly eaten meal was believed subordinated to the person who ate the first part. Therefore, left-overs, simply as left-overs, were often considered belittling.

The woman who declared that she was no nni-ola was thinking of herself as food served her husband on the day her marriage was consumated. Out of respect for her husband she had preserved her completeness (virginity) for him, thus placing him first before every other man. In his turn, her husband had a duty to reciprocate with a becoming behaviour towards her.

Apart from the desire for high esteem and for achanu from the husband's family, there was another important motive which encouraged a girl to strive for premarital virginity. It was believed that once a girl had lost her virginity she would no longer be able to resist the advances of her male friends; she would become a girl of loose morals and would have intercourse indiscriminately. Now this was thought to lower her capacity to bear children or even to make it impossible for her to have any baby. Though many mothers freely used this as an argument to encourage their daughters to persevere in virginity, some of them knew of women whose premarital waywardness did not prevent them from becoming mothers. Such women were treated as exceptions.
For parents their daughters' virginity was a matter of their family's honour. The moment of arrival of the symbolic gift which publicly declared their daughter to be or not to be a virgin was often an anxious one.

This gift was always a calabash containing palm wine. The opening at the top of the calabash through which its content was served was sometimes covered with plantain or banana leaves. To designate a girl's loss of virginity the calabash was filled with palm wine to half its capacity, and a hole was made through the banana or plantain leaves with a finger. But if the girl was a premarital virgin the leaves were left intact and the calabash was completely filled with palm wine.

If the new wife was a virgin her mother went to congratulate her in her new home with songs of praises. She was usually joined by the *umu-ada* and some of her friends among the *ikpoho-ogbe* of her own husband's lineage. Often, especially if the new wife or her mother had been unjustly accused of immorality by someone, the mother and her daughter's *umu-ada* left for the latter's new home soon after learning of her virginity. There, they collected the white, hand-woven, blood-stained bedsheets which had been specially provided for the consumation of the marriage together with gifts of appreciation from the husband and his relatives. They sang the praises of the girl (and her mother) through the whole town, showing the blood-stained, white sheet to everyone as they passed by. Her mother reserved this sheet and would often make use of it when she wanted to urge her other daughters to continue to strive for virginity. Her own virginity sheet and that of her other married daughters were often shown to the unmarried grown-up daughters whenever such sessions of advice took place.

Perhaps the most important motive why a family stopped at nothing to help a daughter preserve her virginity was because a daughter's moral was supposed to reflect that of her family. Loss of virginity by one daughter was sufficient ground to condemn as a whole the family's ability to raise children; and the chances of getting good husbands by other daughters of the family were quite often considerably reduced.

Since a mother was largely charged with her daughter's education, she took most of the blame for the daughter's loss of virginity. Theoretically, there were usually two aspects to the mother's guilt. First, she did not keep a watchful eye on her daughter. Secondly, the bad example of her own morals was copied by her daughter. Frequently, however, the first was said to follow as a result of the second, so that in practice there was always something in the mother, copied by the daughter, which was held to account for the daughter's loss of virginity. This explains why mothers tended to view their daughter's immorality as a personal reproach for them (the mothers). Sometimes even an unmarried maid's pregnancy was considered the fault of the woman under whose supervision she lived.

A mother was not the only member of the family who was upset by her daughter's pregnancy. There were instances of fathers who chased their unmarried pregnant daughters out of their houses and threatened to kill them should they return. There were even cases in which mothers were asked out along with their daughters. Other children also shared in the misery of their sister. During a quarrel some of their playmates had no scruples about using their sister's pregnancy to taunt them.
I remember visiting three families shortly after their unmarried daughters had become pregnant and it was like going to a family where a member had died; the feeling of self-pity and disappointment was that general. Every member of the family was affected.

Why Female Premarital Virginity Was Achieved

All that we have written so far about Asaba attitude to premarital sex, as far as females were concerned, leads to the following conclusion: there are indications that female premarital virginity was highly valued in traditional Asaba and that some or probably many females were virgins at marriage. We have already discussed the motives for virginity. We turn now to other reasons why premarital virginity was achieved at all.

Boys moved into their own houses on attaining the age of puberty and enjoyed an almost unfettered liberty, including even sleeping with ‘strange women’ in their uno-ukopokpo. However, parents would generally intervene to stop their sons from having any sexual dealings with any woman suspected of spreading venereal diseases. They would also take immediate steps to prevent unbecoming sexual familiarity between their sons and any relatives or young girls below the age of puberty. The seduction of a girl under age was considered a very serious offence. It was not expected to occur, so that when it took place, the punishment for it was a matter for personalization, that is, the families involved had to reach an agreement on how amends should be made for the offence. Even then, it was usually handled with the greatest secrecy.

Again on account of the belief that a boy’s ability to procreate might suffer from excessive premarital indulgence in sex, parents sought to moderate the exploits of their son in the sexual domain: they feared he might exhaust his sperms of the best quality before his marriage.

Thus, apart from these limitations of a boy’s freedom arising from concern for his health, the fear of ostracism or fines, and the desire to preserve his procreative powers, a boy’s sexual behaviour was largely left to him. ‘Any Asaba adult male must chase, and no one is going to stop him.’ In Asaba culture, running after adult girls and women, and even trying to seduce them was instituted, more or less, as a mark of ‘manness’ (and not simply maleness). ‘Manness’ was a status achieved by sexual exploits: it could not be ascribed from the mere possession of male physical characteristics. Now the Asaba say egwu wa mali amali kwadebeli adi atu, that is, a terrifying incident, if prepared for in advance on account of foreknowledge or premonition, loses its power to cause fear. Thus, this proverb corresponds to the sense of its English equivalent: ‘To be forewarned is to be forearmed.’ Indeed Asaba parents were duly forewarned by their culture to watch it or else someone might seek to attain the status of manhood through their adult daughters. Therefore, this cultural institution of the male drive could be regarded as a reason for the premarital virginity of Asaba females.
But Asaba culture did much more than heavily underline this source of danger to the premarital virginity of her females: it instituted premarital virginity, itself, as a necessity for the complete status of Asaba womanhood. In other words complete womanhood, like manhood, had to be achieved. The mere attainment of female adulthood, together with the possession of appropriate physical characteristics, did not necessarily guarantee the fullness of womanhood for any girl. We have developed this point above through some of the metaphorical ways in which a girl spoke of her premarital virginity.

The point is, Asaba culture expected boys to give the ‘chase’ and girls to be on the run; boys to do their best to acquire sexual experiences, and girls, their utmost to remain virgins. Now, if both sexes had lived up to expectation, girls would always have been the victors and boys the losers. But this state of affairs could not have endured for ever; for as soon as boys discovered the pointlessness of their ‘chase’, as they no doubt would have if their drive was getting them nowhere, they would refuse to continue with it. However, if the male drive was completely halted, women would no longer ‘achieve’ virginity: there would be no hurdles to jump, and they would be merely making a virtue of the inevitable. The collapse of the system would have followed as a natural consequence, but it did not. Therefore, there must have been some outlets that made the system function as well as it did. As a matter of fact, there were several, but it would suffice to mention one of them here, namely: that boys sometimes had their victories however far in between and that it was on account of such successes that a definite plan had to be made to keep them within limit.

We will now try to explain what this plan seems to have been and give some indications of how it worked. We will mention some of the other safety-valves that made the system possible.

**Sex and Relatives by ‘Blood’**

On the whole, sex was prohibited between any two ‘blood’ relatives whom custom would have prevented from marrying each other. Hence for a man the following were banned as sexual partners:

- all female members of his patrilineage;
- all female members of his matrilineage;
- all females who could trace their descent to his mother’s paternal or maternal grandfather;
- all females who could trace their descent to his father’s maternal grandfather.

The reason was that he could not be married to any of these classes of relatives. Sexual intercourse between him and any of them was described variously as ‘unthinkable’, ‘impossible’, ‘unheard-of’, ‘abominable’, ‘never-done’.

This sexual patterning preexisted the birth of the Asaba child who
had to be socialized to live according to it. In his first eight years of life, he was treated almost like a sexless being, completely unaware of any distinction between the sexes or of any undesirable significance of such a distinction. For example, if a male child under eight years old was taken to the section of the Niger where females had their bath, no one would complain, whereas they would do so if a twelve-year old boy found his way there. Of children below the age of eight, it was said *o nwe ho ife wa ma* or *wa a dika e nweda uche*, that is, 'they are still ignorant'. Thus excepting the case of a particular child (under eight) where the facts argued against this assumption, no conscious effort was made to bring up children of this age according to the sexual patterning. Shortly after this age, however, there was a marked separatism which bordered upon hostility between the sexes and children were often to be found running up to their mothers to report other children of the opposite sex for a breach of the taboo.

The effort to group children of this age (between eight to thirteen years) according to their sex, was not the result of any concern to avoid incest. Asaba culture did not contemplate the possibility of sexual intercourse for children within this age bracket. Most children simply thought that it was wrong to have anything to do with children of the opposite sex because they regarded it as their right to associate only with those who were of the same sex as themselves. The fact that they did not think of this taboo in terms of relationship was probably because there were very few opportunities for meeting other children who were not related to them. As they matured and their social contact widened to include many non-relatives, this attitude went through an important change. It took shape under certain pressures shortly after the attainment of puberty by children. But first, let us see what happened at puberty.

If a boy began to show some interest in females his father built him *uno ukpokpolo*, or asked him to share an existing one with an elder brother. Parents were not expected to teach their sons anything about sex, and every discussion that included even remote matters of sex was usually taboo between boys and their parents. The discovery of the facts of sex by himself, or in collaboration with his age-mates, was part of what was expected of a boy if he was to 'achieve' the 'man' status. For the rest, a young adult boy had to prove masculinity by *iso okolobia*, a term which meant literally, 'acting the role of the unmarried male adult'. This expression embraced every thing a young unmarried man did to manifest keen interest in adult girls and women. A young man in whom this interest was not seen to be overt only made people suspicious of his manhood. Though, ideally, *iso okolobia* was expected to stop short of actual intercourse, it would appear to have included it in many cases. Some of the young men interviewed on this point answered in the Asaba proverb: *Onye ka wa nye azu O kpulu n'onyu?* That is, 'Who has ever succeeded in preserving a gift of fish in his mouth?'
Unlike a boy, a girl learned something of the facts of life from her mother or her father’s senior wife or any of her grandmothers. She came by this knowledge at a long session of instructions held for this purpose just before or shortly after her first menstruation. The time usually chosen for the girl’s instruction was at the first crow of the cock in the early hours of the morning, about 3.00 a.m. (the Asaba say that ‘sleep is king’ (ula bu eze) and as they identified the sleeping subject with sleep (king), they refrained from disturbing anyone’s sleep particularly in the normal hours of sleep). She received detailed instructions on the implication of her menstrual flow. She was told that it was a sign of maturity and that it would occur monthly.

During this state she had to observe certain rules in the interest of her father’s health and certain ‘powerful’ medicines, as for example, those supposedly directed against witchcraft. She should do no cooking for her father, nor serve him his meal. Certain sections of the house were taboo for her. As everyone had a good bath once or twice daily, the girl had only to be reminded to take special care to wash her genitals to avoid smelling and that the sponge used could not be brought into the premises of her father. It had to be left at the egbo tree a short distance away from the family shelter, marking the point beyond which, if one entered, one was supposed to be within the family’s premises. Her state was a ritually contagious one which could sap the strength or force or power or effectiveness of any object with which she came in contact. Objects so contaminated also acquired this debilitating characteristic. The sponge used during menstruation could not be admitted into the family compound which was considered to be somehow sacred and spiritually powerful.

But the time taken up by the puberty instructions which dealt with the enfeebling contagiousness of a girl during her menstrual flow or of the hygienic demands made on her in this condition by her culture was probably quite small. Much of the time was devoted to making two points, namely: that she could now be a mother, and that she was expected to remain a virgin till her marriage. A mother might then go on to explain that it was not only pregnancy that a girl had to guard against. She had to eschew every act of sexual intercourse with any man. Whatever else she did with a man, she should never allow his penis anywhere close to her genitals. No man could alone force any unwilling girl to have intercourse with him. A man’s superior physical strength could never be accepted as an excuse for intercourse with him.

There were also protective rules which she was expected to abide by. For example, she was told that she could no longer leave home without permission or unaccompanied. If sent on an errand, she was not to go from there to somewhere else or even call on her friends who happened to be close by.

Puberty was often the occasion of repeating instructions already given. From the time a girl was eight years old her mother was expected to correct her whenever she behaved wrongly. Quite often she did so by associating her failure to act up to expectation with improper sexual behaviour. If whatever she did gave her out as lacking complete control
of her person (a virtue summarized in the expression that a woman had to ‘pack’ or ‘fold’ herself neatly), her mother would reprimand her that such a behaviour was reminiscent of an improperly brought up girl—a street girl.

We have seen that at puberty a boy got the licence more or less to seek sexual experience short of copulation. But intercourse sometimes occurred between him and some ‘strange woman’ in his uno ukpokpolo without anyone bothering him much about it. Unless he actively and manifestly sought sexual experience, he ran the risk of not attaining the manhood status. The status of complete womanhood to which the ‘after-puberty’ girl aspired could only be achieved by retaining her virginity; and so she was naturally urged in the opposite direction as the boy. Like the boy, a girl could have sexual relations; but unlike him under no circumstances was intercourse by her ever countenanced. In this situation it was not uncommon to encounter girls who prided themselves on how far they could go with their male friends and still remain in control, that is never allow the ultimate step of sexual intercourse.

The question which we must now turn to is why it was necessary to stress this pattern of attitudes at puberty. We are told that among man’s closest species like the gorilla, for example, the female does not need to learn how to copulate whereas the male does.

The segregation of the sexes in the prepuberty years was inward-looking: whatever other function it might have fulfilled, it secured internal order and this would appear to have been its main purpose. Prepuberty children understood that they could only associate with others of the same sex as themselves. After puberty, the orientation became outward-looking. To begin with, opportunities for contact with persons of the opposite sex outside one’s lineage increased substantially. For example, girls joined several dance groups including boys from other lineages; they started little trading business of their own and could now go to fetch firewood a long distance away from their lineage. It was to prepare them for the problems posed by this external contact that Asaba culture changed its focus from internal order and concentrated it on a plan to contain the threat from the outside.

Let us see what this threat was. To achieve manhood, the adolescent male was to give chase and any adult girl or woman belonging to a lineage other than his was to take to her heels, that is, in the sense that she was not to give in to the ultimate demand for intercourse. The threat arose from this situation where a girl now had opportunities of meeting with many boys and men who could press her into sex with them, to the dishonour of her family. Shortly after puberty the culture approved for adolescent sexual relations that did not include intercourse. But if intercourse occurred it was the girl and her family who took most of the blame. It was to avoid this that the premenstrual rigid separatism of the sexes within the family and the lineage or its segment gradually melted away. A new era of cooperation between the sexes in the family started,
partly on account of the need for chaperons by girls, and partly because boys needed their female relatives to make their first contact with adolescent girls of other lineages; for it was now considered right that females should be kept apart from males to whom they were not related.

Notice the difference: before puberty, it was simply males on their own and females on their own, without any special reference to relationship, though, of course, the segregation referred, in fact, mainly to relations. After puberty it became: persons of opposite sex should not associate too intimately with one another, unless they were related. Relationship had come to be regarded as a guarantee that sex would not take place. Such was the power of this assumption that if a father inquired after the female voice heard in his son’s room, the son could silence all suspicion and all further prying into the matter by simply naming some kin of the forbidden degree. The new-found union within the lineage or its segment was an alliance to defend the honour of the lineage against the outsider. The boy saw to it that his ‘sister’ (classificatory) did not associate with a ‘bad’ man—anyone who would try to seduce her. He also chaperoned her to places to make sure that no one molested her. A sister, usually a classificatory one, would bring home her female friends from other lineages and would arrange for her ‘brother’ to meet them. It is important to note that in most cases friendship between a boy and a girl within a lineage rarely developed between siblings.

Discussing this chapter, D. Paulme emphasized the significance for character formation of Asaba post-puberty sexual regulations. She maintained, and I believe rightly, that in any set-up like the Asaba example where adult boys had to seek familiarity with girls but were expected to stop short of intercourse, one of the most important functions of such a regulation would be that of training the boys and girls to acquire a measure of control over their sexual drives. Here we should not omit to add that chaperonage allowed both the boys and girls to learn something of each other and of the kind of relationship that they would be called upon to maintain when they married.

Sex and the Married Man

Asaba men, it would seem, have only just begun to accept the idea that extramarital relations are not proper. In traditional times, as far as I could make out, marriage itself did not make extramarital affairs wrong for a man. Wives did not complain about the simple fact that their husbands had intercourse with other women. As often as this was a cause for quarrel, women took exception to the excessiveness of their husbands’ indulgence in extramarital intercourse or to the neglect of his obligations to the family as a result of this. Thus, if a man spent most of his nights outside his house away from his family, if he spent his earnings on other women to the manifest neglect of his wife and children, his diokpa (the head of his family) would reproach him for his act of neglect.
He would never ask him not to have women friends, but he would call his attention to the responsibilities of family life which his sin of excessive ‘chasing’ made impossible for him to fulfil. What he said to him amounted to: ‘Your extramarital sex activity should be subordinated to your duty to care for your wife and children; to live up to expectation, you have to observe moderation.’

A man was also limited by the number of socially approved partners he could get. No ‘blood’ relative of his could have sex with him. Wives of his patrilineal relatives were also excluded as sexual partners. With them, he had a right to adopt what Radcliffe-Brown described as a ‘conventionalized symbolic mode of behaviour’ or of ‘privileged familiarity’. He could embrace them publicly, put his hands round their neck at the same time as he called them his wives and repeated the meaningless expression of affection, selelem. He could sit beside them or put his foot in a mat on which they sat. Only a male member of the wife’s husband’s patrilineage could behave in this way towards the wife. All other men who were not related to her incurred a fine if they took such liberties with a married woman. Furthermore, a wife’s husband’s patrilineal relatives could only show familiarity publicly and not in odd corners or when they were alone together. Adultery was generally held to be a serious offence but it was particularly so if it occurred between a man and the wife of his patrilineal relative. A man owed respect, one which excluded sex, to his wife’s sisters, including classificatory ones.

Thus, a married man’s socially permissible sexual partners were the following:

unmarried women—the indications were that they were quite few and that the satisfaction of their sexual needs were recognized as more or less legitimate only when they had a single regular partner; widows who preferred not to remarry; young wives whose husbands were too old to exercise their right to sexual intercourse with them and who, with the approval of their husband, had picked on him (the married man) as their sexual partner; or wives whose husbands were too young, providing, however, that by an arrangement called idunyeli nwanyi mmadu, he (the married man) had been conceded the temporary right of sexual intercourse with them by their young husbands’ elders; young wives in their licence period who returned to their natal homes and were allowed to repay his favours to them before their marriage through intercourse with him; and young girls whom he (the married man) might succeed in seducing.

With his wife or any woman of the above mentioned classes, he could not have intercourse when their menstrual flow was on.

The other way a man’s sexual exploits were restricted was by consideration of his personal safety. He abstained from all sexual intercourse (even marital) in preparation for any dangerous undertaking, such as a trip to some far-away country or a risky hunting expedition. For the rest he decided for himself how far to go in his extramarital relations.
Sex and the Married Woman

In normal circumstances, as far as extramarital sexual relations were concerned, a woman had none of the liberties enjoyed by her husband. Generally her only legitimate sexual partner was her husband. The whole honour of a woman and respect for her from her husband and his patrilineal kinsmen depended heavily on her faithfulness which was said to reflect honour on the whole family. Even when she had to share the favours of one man with other women who were co-wives with her, traditional rules determined when it would be her turn to sleep with her husband, and if it meant waiting for quite a few days before satisfying her sexual urge, she had no other legitimate alternative but to wait patiently for her turn. If she resorted to adultery she committed a most serious offence against her husband and endangered his life, that of his children and close patrilineal relatives. It was a grievous crime which caused the contagious malevolent spiritual power called ishi to cover her through and through, so that whatever had contact with her assumed the same state of ishi as herself. Ishi seemed to have functioned by destroying the spiritual (and sometimes physical) powers of whoever had it, thus, making them easy victims to their enemies.

Such a woman had to confess her adultery and to go through a rite of purification before she could bring forth her child—it was supposed. She was fined a goat and some kola nuts which were shared by the members of her husband’s lineage. If the adultery was with some member of her husband’s patrilineage, she also paid the fine of a kid (ewu-ishi) which was dragged all through the patrilineage grounds before being buried or thrown into the Niger. With a chicken (also part of her fine), prongs of palm and native chalk which was touched on all the parts of her body, she was said to be purified of the ishi. These objects were also used on whatever had any contact with her during her ishi state. Some informants claim that in the olden days no fine was imposed, especially if the adulterous wife was married to an Eze-titled man: she was treated in exactly the same way as the kid (ewu-ishi).

One would think that with such severe punishment there would be no adulterous relations in Asaba. In fact, there not only were some adulteries, but there was also an institutionalized one. After a few months of cohabitation with her husband and if she had not become pregnant, a new wife returned to her natal home where she indulged in extramarital sexual intercourse with her premarriage boy friends. The points to note in trying to explain the licence period are the following:

1. It was a period for rewarding the boy friends of her girlhood days who did not ‘dare’ violate her;
2. Boy friends were not rewarded if she became pregnant during her first few months with her husband;
3. She had to make a confession when she bore her first child and to subject herself to a rite of purification;
4. The idea of a husband ‘taking his wife’s virginity’ and the belief that a woman never forgot the man who deflowered her.

The demand for confession and purification clearly pointed to Asaba society’s unwillingness to accept the licence period as normal; and so did also the very short duration of this licence. The licence period was a grudging concession made by the society in view of some good. That good was offspring. Offspring was more important than the faithfulness of marriage partners. But the latter did not, therefore, become unimportant. Thus as often as a girl was pregnant in the first few months of cohabitation with her husband, the licence period was not allowed and marital fidelity was the value to which the society clung. But crucial psychological problems of a girl’s adjustment also had to be dealt with. She might find herself tied to a man (through an arranged marriage) to whom she could not adjust emotionally and the licence period would be a welcome way out—at least, for a short while. Even as a way of meeting her emotional needs, it could not come easy to her who had, by then, spent the better part of her life aspiring to and working for premarital virginity, precisely because of her husband. She had to be given a means of resolving the conflict between two values: children, and marital faithfulness. While she understood that marital faithfulness was a normal demand of her society, she could not close her eyes to the fact that her womanhood would be at stake if she did not become a mother. Thus she compromised the first value in the interest of her womanhood; for whereas there was another way of becoming respectable again after marital unfaithfulness (rite of purification), the only way to be a ‘woman’ was to become a mother. If this meant institutional unfaithfulness she was willing to go through it for good reasons: her indebtedness to ex-boy friends and the fact that she had fulfilled the essential duty which she owed her husband who had ‘taken’ her virginity.

It remains to say that women took quite calmly the fact that their husbands could have extramarital affairs (and they could not). Many of my women informants stated that they knew that their husbands had sex with other women. They excused this on the basis of their belief that a man’s need for intercourse was much greater than that of a woman. During those periods of a woman’s life when she was not supposed to have any sexual needs such as during her menses or when she was nursing, a man’s interest in sex was not abated. Therefore, they conceded him the right to have extramarital intercourse in order to spare him undue strain from his unsatisfied sexual urge. Still, they held that it was important to their respect that he should pretend not to be having extramarital affairs and make some effort to conceal the fact from them. To bring a woman friend into their home was the greatest insult a married woman could receive from her husband.
Conclusion and Summary of Asaba Sex Organization

Asaba sexual organization can be usefully divided into two main periods: from birth to puberty, and from puberty to death. Each of these is further divided into two periods. Thus for the first, we have periods roughly corresponding from birth to eight years old, and from eight to the age of puberty; for the second, we have the following two periods: from puberty to marriage, and from marriage to death. Hence, there are two main divisions with altogether four subdivisions:

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<th>Before puberty</th>
<th>Birth to eight years old</th>
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<td>Eight years old to puberty</td>
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<tr>
<td>After puberty</td>
<td>Puberty to marriage</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Marriage to death</td>
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In the absence of a clearly contrary evidence, Asaba society assumed that children below eight had no knowledge of any undesirable significance of their sexual differences. When, however, the facts contradicted this assumption, there was hardly any limit to the severity of the punishment visited on the guilty children.

Between eight and puberty Asaba society no longer expected children to be ignorant of their sexual differences, though it still insisted that sex was not for them. Probably it was then no less severe with them than when they were within the first age-bracket. Whatever the case, internal order was secured and the sexual curiosity of children contained through the ruling that only children of the same sex could associate with one another. It should be noted that in the first two subdivisions thus far summed up, sex was banned because of the society's moral ideals and not in the idiom of relationship, nor out of any concern to exclude incest.

Between puberty and marriage certain pressures (embracing social ones) now forced children outside their lineage where their new contacts included many of the opposite sex who were not related to them. This entailed certain risks, because of the goals which Asaba society now set for its adolescents. Both boys and girls were to have sexual relations, but not intercourse. The boy was to explore sex as much as he could and to parade his interest in females. If he managed to have sex in the process, it was just too bad for his female partner, for premarital sex was not countenanced for her. As for the boy, his family was ready to defend his act of intercourse, though they would have preferred that he had not gone quite that far; for the overt demonstration of masculinity, through which the status of manhood became his, was best if it did not mean incurring the wrath of another family. Hence, there were three risks. First, a girl could lose her virginity at this stage, and with it, her complete status of Asaba womanhood. Secondly, a boy might fail to attain the status of manhood. Thirdly, the consequences which the first and second risks meant for the families involved: if a girl was not a premarital virgin,
in addition to bringing dishonour on her family, she jeopardized the chances of a married life for any of her unwed sisters; and a boy who did not achieve the status of manhood might cause people to view this as a trait of his lineage or its segment. To deal with these risks the society now emphasized the unity of the lineage and played down the sexual segregation of the preceding age bracket. It became possible for a girl to call upon any member (boy) of her lineage to accompany her on an errand, and for a boy to start his ‘chasing’ with the girl-friends of his ‘sister’ (usually classificatory) who belonged to a different lineage from his. As this cooperation was often between distantly related ‘brothers’ and ‘sisters’, it sometimes became intensely affectionate and was not always without sexual dimensions. This was in itself risky; and to keep things within proper limit, Asaba society so emphasized the inadmissibility of sex between patrilineal relatives that such a relationship by itself came to be an argument against any suspicion of improper sex relations between two persons.

Those who were brought together at marriage saw their union as a means of achieving the fullness of their respective statuses of manhood and womanhood, the ability to procreate being regarded as a necessary element of both. It was this more than anything else which made the young wife’s licence period tolerable to her and her husband. For the former, the duty of rewarding her premarital boy friends for their many gifts provided her with material to rationalize her adultery with them, when it occurred during her licence period. Since Asaba society did not wish this grudging consent to adultery to be mistaken for overt approval it demanded that the usual fines, rite of purification and ido dioke ceremony be strictly observed in this, as in all other cases of adultery. It should be mentioned that a woman was not considered fully a widow on her husband’s death, until she had performed the rite of iya-isi or her husband’s ‘second burial’: the status of widowhood was not completely attributed to her and she was strictly prohibited from having sex with anyone. If she had intercourse, she committed adultery and her husband’s spirit might revenge itself on her by disturbing her at night or afflicting her with some illness. When a boy achieved manhood status through his ‘drive’ and ultimate marriage, he did not immediately end his ‘chasing’. Most wives interviewed on this point supposed that it would have been unfair to expect that of him. Thus, a man’s sexual exploits were allowed to continue for many years after his marriage, provided he ‘respected’ his wife by making some effort to conceal his extramarital relations from her, and most important of all, that he did not have any sexual relations with his women friends in his home.

In traditional Asaba where the sexual socialization is so high that a man could not be a man, nor a woman held to be such without overt and keen sexual interest in persons of the opposite sex, it was not at all surprising that every informant on the subject claimed that Asaba had no homosexuals.
Perhaps the last few points are best summed up in the metaphor of the Asaba themselves: ‘To any woman, another woman’s body is thorny; to any man, another man’s body is thorny; to a brother (including classificatory) a sister’s (including classificatory) body is thorny.’