The family and sexual networking in sub-Saharan Africa: historic regional differences and present day implications

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The AIDS epidemic in sub-Saharan Africa has revealed the inadequacy of our knowledge for the region of the extent of sexual networking (or relationships with multiple partners). It has also demonstrated how little we know of the mechanics and directions of change or to what extent behavioral patterns and change in the various parts of the region have depended on their being different preexisting patterns of sexual networking.

Reactions to an attempt to examine the available evidence on the social context of AIDS in the region (Caldwell, Caldwell and Quiggin, 1989) were notable in two ways. First, it was claimed that historically there had been severe punishments for female premarital and extramarital sexual relationships which implied both strong moral disapproval and the likelihood that these proscriptions had been effective in confining most female sexuality to marriage. Subsequent change was ascribed largely to the corrupting way that Western colonial influences had arrived and to the influence of the modern sexual revolution in the West. Second, most disagreement came from East and Southern Africa, thus suggesting the possibility of regional differences, at least in the historic patterns of sexuality.

With regard to the first point, the existing evidence is found almost entirely in written sources and vestigial remains of the older system, for the oral tradition offers almost no help. The failure of the oral tradition arises from the near-prohibition on the discussion of sexual activity between the generations or between spouses, a situation attested to in all parts of the region.

With regard to the second point, no help is provided by contemporary patterns of sexual networking which are not dissimilar across the region, with the exception that there is probably a greater institutionalization of commercial sex, and possibly a greater number of female commercial sex workers with an exceptionally high number of partners, in some of the large cities and mining areas of East and Southern Africa which are characterized by large surpluses of immigrant males (Larson, 1989). This situation partly arose because of colonial regulation, but it is largely evidence of a different female situation in these areas, as is examined later in the article.

There are other indisputable present-day regional differences of a type which, as we will see, might well affect sexuality as well as being affected by it. They certainly present evidence of family differences. Typically, in West Africa over 40 percent of currently married women are in polygynous unions, while in much of East Africa the proportion is 20-30 percent, falling to under 20 percent in much of Zambia and areas further south (Lesthaeghe, Kaufmann and Meekers, 1989:276-277). Of the districts mapped by Schoenmaeckers, Shah, Lesthaeghe and Tambashe (1981:33-35) according to the duration of female postpartum sexual abstinence, those exceeding one year amounted to 83 percent in both West and Middle Africa, 60 percent in Southern Africa, and only 27 percent in East Africa. Parents placing their children with other guardians for fostering most markedly
characterizes West Africa where it may in some areas exceed 30 percent (Page, 1989:417; Bledsoe and Isiuugo-Abanihe, 1989:447), compared with significantly lower levels in East Africa and reportedly Southern Africa. In some countries of Southern and Eastern Africa the use of contraception is now higher than anywhere in West Africa and there is some evidence that fertility is falling and may fall more readily (cf. Caldwell, 1990). Women are much more likely to earn their own incomes by trading in West Africa (Lesthaeghe and Eelens, 1989:91-94), arising according to Lesthaeghe (1989: 489-490; cf. also O'Barr, 1984) from a dual sex system characterized by female 'queens' or counterparts to chiefs, and women's associations.

This article aims at determining the extent of historic regional differences and their contemporary implications by two means. The first is to apply a model developed from intensive research in one district of Nigeria to ascertain the extent of fit across the continent. The second is to present the results of a continued investigation of 19th and early 20th century contemporary studies and of later attempts to work with survivors of that period to reconstitute the way of life before external cultural influences changed it forever. However, it will be useful to make a few preliminary observations before presenting this evidence.

Problems of interpretation

The argument in Caldwell, Caldwell and Quiggin (1989) was not that non-marital sexuality in Africa was outside the moral domain, but that it had always been characterized by a commonsense morality that saw sexual indiscretions "when they were regarded as such" in proper proportion, a position that much of the West has been moving to over the last one hundred years. It was not characterized by the obsessive preoccupation with female chastity that has often curiously, and even tragically, seemed to be the religious and moral lynchpin of the area Goody (1976) described as Eurasia extending from the Mediterranean to South Asia and on to China. This does not mean that traditional African religion did not also have an obsessive focus; it did, but that focus was squarely on fertility (again, with tragic results for the sterile, cf. Caldwell and Caldwell, 1987). Some critics in East Africa did believe that the obsession was on female chastity but the argument, and its references to immorality, seemed to come more out of imported Christian doctrine with a reference to God's eternal standards "a difficult argument for authors from the 20th century Western secular tradition to deal with adequately.

Traditional Africa often imposed severe punishments on females, and their male partners, for premarital and extramarital sexual relations. But a significant point is just how much these punishments were physical or financial. This was not a behavioral area reserved for the ultimate force of religious scourging, execration and moral outcasting as was the case in Eurasia. Where Africa employed such weapons, it was with regard to reproduction. Evidence from most parts of the region is to the effect that discreet sexual transgressions did not involve the ancestral spirits or higher gods in the way that infertility did and that there were few societies where the mere fact of female adultery presented the husband with a moral imperative to seek divorce. Punishments could be severe, but they were far from inevitable and often turned on questions of indiscretion, lese majesty and unrightful access, with arguments similar to those concerning trespass and property rights (cf. Phillips, 1953:227-228).

Bledsoe (1980:50) believes that anthropologists often mistake the jural framework for a description of actual behavior, while Africans regard it as a guide to show where discretion is
wise or a cheerful recklessness should be adopted or even where the game really starts. Douglas (1976:131) noted that the old Nuer men who controlled the jural system appeared in Evans-Pritchard's accounts to sympathize secretly with adultery. This discrepancy between the jural framework and behavior may be why it is necessary to treat carefully anthropologists' accounts, especially when they are trying to identify some kind of primordial system. There was also conflict with the belief and even religious system. Douglas (1976:137) notes that Richards (1939:154-155), presents for the Bemba of Zambia a convincing description of the dangerous and contaminating pollution that ensues from adultery and then points out that she also 'insists that no Bemba supposes that fear of adultery pollution deters anyone from adultery'.

Researchers' evidence may conflict with that of others, as Caldwell, Caldwell and Quiggin (1989:196) noted among descriptions of the Baganda, or it may be difficult to reconcile with their own. Ellenberger (1912:269), in a manuscript written in 1833, details the severe fines for adultery imposed in Lesotho during the first third of the 19th century, but ten pages further on (p.279) he notes that adultery has 'always been forbid by law and usage, but that has hardly checked it. Public opinion winks at it, and it is thought no disgrace for a man or woman to have intimacy with the other sex'. Evans-Pritchard (1962:120) appeared to agree with Azande reports that the old institutions had suppressed adultery, but the reports he had made in the vernacular in 1926-30 published only after his death (1974:20 ff.) hardly seem to bear this out. Reining's (1973:217-218) description of contemporary Haya premarital chastity led us at first, although with some misgivings (Caldwell, Caldwell and Quiggin, 1989:207-208), to classify these people of the Tanzanian western shore of Lake Victoria as one of those East African groups who successfully controlled female nonmarital sexuality, but her oral and written evidence provided the main source for a recent study which gave such a different interpretation that the authors employed the Latin American term, 'a people's sexual culture', to describe the situation (Zalduondo, Msamanga and Chen, 1989:181-186).

The other element in some African reaction to that paper was the argument that the present degree of sexual networking was the product of the Western impact, the corruption of colonialism, and the model provided by the contemporary Western sexual revolution (Bauni et al., 1989). In one sense this is true, but, as will be seen below, it is very far from being the whole truth. The colonial experience has not had such a marked impact on female sexuality in South Asia, the Middle East or North Africa. It might be plausible to suggest that the difference lies in the persistence in those areas of the precolonial religions in contrast to massive conversion to Christianity and Islam in sub-Saharan Africa. Even this explanation is insufficient, for African culture has not collapsed; on the contrary, many aspects of the culture, in spite of being attacked by the West, have persisted in a way that has not, for instance, characterized South Asia. In southwest Nigeria, where the research described below was carried out, there is little evidence of any decline in polygyny, the fostering out of children, the separation of spousal budgets (where the West is only now beginning to follow), maternal support for children, and fertility, while there have been only limited or slow declines in postpartum sexual abstinence, clitoridectomy and communication with the ancestral spirits. Sexuality was different, and was much more easily disturbed by the foreign presence, for reasons that will be addressed in the remainder of this article. That examination begins with the presentation of one model of change worked out in an intensive study in the Ekiti District of Ondo State, Nigeria. This is
outlined here with few references or details of evidence, as these are presented elsewhere (Orubuloye, Caldwell and Caldwell: 1990a,b).

The Ekiti study

The problem

Ekiti is the most northeasterly Yoruba population with distinct characteristics of its own. In 1895 at the end of the 19th century wars and the dawn of the British missionary, educational, administrative and jural movement into the area, it was characterized by the following institutions: polygyny at a level where nearly half of married women were in polygynous marriages, 30 percent of married men had multiple wives and 10 percent had three or more wives; female age at marriage which does not seem to have been below 17-18 years; remarriage of the great majority of widowed and divorced women of reproductive age; the deferral of first male marriage occasioned by the scale of polygyny until almost 15 years after that of women (cf. Goldman and Pebley, 1989:223) or 31-32 years of age; marriage customs that made this possible: marriage universally arranged by the parental generation, high bride wealth which could be met only by the larger family, clan exogamy so that wives were never equals in the families into which they married, and only husband-initiated divorce; female sexual abstinence for most of pregnancy and for around three years after the birth and one year after an infant's death; terminal female sexual abstinence, with grandmaternal status, sufficient surviving children or advancing age, certainly not averaging above 45 years; life expectancy probably not above 20 years, with an infant mortality rate probably over 300 per thousand live births; and women probably averaged about 6.5 live births. Social stability was ensured by permitting single men to find sexual partners, providing it was done with discretion and caused no social antagonisms, and by granting the same rights to men whose wives were abstaining and so unavailable for sex. The existence of polygyny encouraged men to have sexual experience with more than one woman; indeed, they did so even when there were available wives, but this consideration is ignored in the calculation below; it is thus a minimal calculation. First, we should note that these figures are in no way unrealistic. As late as 1973, in the Yoruba city of Ibadan, only 37 percent of wives were available to their husbands for sex (Caldwell and Caldwell, 1977:215) and of those most similar to their ancestors, in that they were illiterate and did not practice contraception, the figure was 29 percent (Caldwell and Caldwell, 1981:1%).

The problem presented by this situation is that around 42 percent of males over 17 years of age were, at any given time, single. Around 67 percent of monogamously married men and 58 percent of all married men had no sexually available wife. This means that, at any specific time, about three-quarters of all adult men were seeking a female sexual partner. The proportion of all sexual acts outside marriage was probably somewhat lower and was possibly strikingly similar to the figure for contemporary Ekiti of 60 percent (Orubuloye, Caldwell and Caldwell, 1990a:12). The question is where did they find them?

The Ekiti Study sought to solve this problem by exploring the available literature from the turn of the century, interviewing old persons at great length, and employing both demographic survey and anthropological means to identify vestigial behavior and institutions in the society.
The Ekiti model

The Ekiti Study concluded that, in spite of all proscription of premarital and extramarital female relationships, and associated potential punishments, there were five available sexual outlets for men.

1. Perhaps the most common for single men was sex with women married into the family or lineage: older brothers' wives, father's younger wives (except their own mothers), or uncles' or cousins' wives. Discretion was expected, but so was acquiescence by the women, and it was not regarded as adultery in that the woman had been married into the family and any children conceived were indisputably those of the family.

2. Men had sexual relations with other men's wives, especially the younger wives in polygynous unions where the husband was old, and particularly if they had some previous relation with the woman before marriage.

3. Men had relations with single girls, especially if they were not betrothed and came from poorer families with less prestige. Africa may not have been characterized by social class, but there were big, important, powerful and proud families and others who could not afford such pride (cf. Bascom, 1951). The famous punishments were usually meted out when families of the former type were concerned and especially when a chief's wife was involved and there were consequently undertones of political unreliability or treason.

4. Not all widows or divorced women did remarry, at least in the late 19th century, and additionally there were separated women who could not remarry. Then, as now, these women needed men's support and protection and were usually more sexually active than the single.

5. In the small towns which have long characterized even largely subsistence Yoruba society, there were houses of commercial sex and there may have been individuals, if not institutions, available in some of the villages. Now the young women involved are mostly non-Yoruba, but then they may have merely been 'strangers', not identified with the sub-ethnic group, and now, and probably then, they are mostly deserted or divorced wives with children.

The mechanisms which kept the system going were the male felt and permitted need for sex, and the female need for support and often for a strong protector in a polygynous system which left many women with little support or protection.

The application of the model to the rest of sub-Saharan Africa

If there were regional differences in Africa, then they must be of three types. The search for these differences will occupy much of our analysis.

(A) There may have been a lesser demand for nonmarital sexuality arising from (i) a lower incidence of polygyny and hence a younger male age at marriage, or (ii) a shorter duration of female postpartum sexual abstinence. Polygyny is now at low levels in Southern Africa and medium levels in East Africa and the spousal age gap is smaller there than in West Africa (Lesthaeghe, Kaufmann and Meekers, 1989:274-275), while postpartum abstinence is of short duration in many parts of East Africa and medium duration in Southern Africa. This does not mean there were always such differences, and Lesthaeghe and colleagues appear to believe that there were not. Certainly, at present these differences imply the potential for a substantially lower demand for nonmarital sex in East and Southern Africa.
(B) There may be a different balance in the categories of women with whom nonmarital sex can take place: stronger or weaker proscription of sex within the family, before or during marriage, or with prostitutes.

(C) There may be different levels or types of sexuality. Greater pressure or desire for the restriction of sex to marriage could keep polygyny at lower levels or postpartum sexual abstinence to a shorter duration or drive down these levels, as appears to have happened with regard to postpartum sexual abstinence among the Ibadan elite (P. Caldwell and J. Caldwell, 1987:87). Sexual behavior may entail something less than full vaginal penetration, as was widely the case in East and Southern Africa.

Before we examine the historical evidence, it will prove useful for guidance to identify those theories which have implications for the maintenance of the traditional system and its sexual networking implications.

Explanations for the traditional system and their implications

Non-differentiating theories
We have already considered elsewhere the major theories explaining the traditional system (Caldwell, Caldwell and Quiggin, 1989:189-193) and will deal with them here only so far as they bear on likely regional historical differences or differential change.

Boserup (1970) believed that the strength of the polygynous system, and hence its related sexual system, lay in men’s desire for a female labor force to farm the land under the onerous conditions imposed by hoe cultivation. A century ago these conditions would have applied in the whole region, but one reason for the decline this century of polygyny in the far south of the continent may be the introduction of the plow and a greater concentration on pastoralism and ultimately commercial livestock raising. This has been argued in the case of Botswana where not only polygyny but all marriage is on the decline (Kuper, 1985; Lesthaeghe, Kaufmann and Meekers, 1989:243; Timaeus and Graham, 1989:374; cf. also Burton and Reitz, 1981). Clearly, polygyny might well be most resistant to change in the forests of West and Middle Africa; Clignet (1970:20) goes further and says change is least likely where the staples are root crops. Saucier (1972), while viewing the aims of older men in much the same way as Boserup, gave greater attention to how they managed to keep the whole system under control and stable. Among other factors he identified as levers of power are the sources of wealth, land and cattle, control of marriage, and mediation by the old men with the ancestors. With the coming of colonialism, land and cattle were not to remain the sole forms of wealth, the rules for marriage were to be administratively changed, and new religions were to begin to erode the ancestor cult. Goody’s (1976) work, while explaining why the major focus of African societal control need not be sexuality, concentrated thereafter on control in Eurasia rather than Africa.

Differentiating theories
The theory with the greatest potential for differentiating between regional or cultural groups in terms of the control of female sexuality is that first put forward by Gluckman (1950) and later qualified by his followers and himself. The debate was about the control of women and the rights to children. Clearly, a central issue was the control of female sexuality, but

1 Our attention was brought to the central importance of this debate by Robert A. LeVine at a seminar in the Harvard Center for Population Studies.
the fact that the matter was rarely referred to directly, or even obliquely, is a measure of the
difficulty of collating information on female sexual networking now that there is an urgent
need to do so.

As early as the 1920s, Torday (1929:257), when summarizing research on African
sexuality, had noted that reports of strict control of females, especially before marriage,
came largely from East and Southern Africa. In 1950 Radcliffe-Brown and Forde published
the landmark volume of papers that they had edited on *African Systems of Kinship and
Marriage*.

In this book, Gluckman contrasted ‘Kinship and Marriage among the Lozi of Northern
Rhodesia (Zambia) and the Zulu of Natal’. Among the former, women’s sexuality is little
controlled by men, adultery is incessant and hardly punished, divorce is frequent, the level
of fosterage is high and the biological father’s parenthood of a child is recognized. The Zulu
contrast in every way: female sexual relations are strictly controlled successively by father
and husband, adultery is rare and severely punished, divorce is almost unknown, there is
little fosterage, and fatherhood is attributed solely to the husband, not only in his lifetime,
but even afterwards (when his brother takes his place according to the true levirate).
Gluckman sought for explanations: the Lozi woman’s main tie remains with her kin, while in
the case of the Zulu, like the Nuer as described by Evans-Pritchard (1940), the wife is
absorbed into her husband’s descent group. Gluckman wrote of the Zulu having an
especially strong *unilineal descent group* and of this being strong *patriline* or *father right*.
He also tried to explain this in terms of the type of terrain occupied and the farming
practices followed, but neither he nor others subsequently pursued this line of enquiry.

Gluckman had clearly identified something that was important, but there were still
substantial problems. His desire to link his Zulu data with Evans-Pritchard’s (1940) classic
study of the Nuer was confusing because among the latter, women clearly achieved a good
deal of sexual freedom. Schneider (1953) argued that part of the problem was that Evans-
Pritchard had not solved problems in his own data and had failed to reconcile the difficulty
of formal divorce among the Nuer with a good deal of de facto separation, a situation not
found among the Zulu. In 1955, Leach (1971) attacked the use of father right and the desire
to relate the whole issue too strongly to that mainstay of British anthropology, unilineal
descent groups. Instead, Leach argued (p.119), drawing perhaps inappropriately on his
Burmese studies, the real issue is that some societies “admittedly always patrilineal and
patrilocal ones” have a peculiarly strong marriage institution, where the husband’s lineage
acquires by the marriage not only rights in the bride’s potential children, but also absolute
physical control over the person of the bride herself.

Further relevant field studies data began to appear from East and Southern Africa.
Fallers (1957) reported that the Soga of Eastern Uganda were a patrilineal society
characterized by the wives remaining part of their original lineages with the consequence of
unstable marriage and only limited male control over female sexual behavior. He drew the
conclusion that the Zulu belonged to a special subset of patrilineal societies where wives
were completely absorbed into their husbands’ lineages. Subsequently, attention began to
focus on another society of this type, the Luo of Kenya. Potash (1978:387) reported:
‘Custody over children and genetrical rights are vested in the husband, and both are of
particular importance to marriage stability. Where separation occurs, women must leave
male children behind, regardless of age. Women emphatically stated that, once children
were born, it was virtually impossible to leave one’s husband; for, to do so, would be to
abandon one’s children’. Further (p.390), ‘She had no automatic rights to return to her home of origin.’ Although women do most of the farming, they do it on land that indisputably remains that of their husbands’ lineages and have no right to any land of their lineage of origin. A separation or divorce would damage a woman’s character in society’s eyes “something that her parents fear” and this makes her fear the consequences of any extramarital relationship. Parkin (1980) employed his Luo research to add to the theory that identified those societies which exercised firm control over female sexuality. He pointed out that the Luo do not distinguish between marriage payments for the wife and the children and even the repayment of bridewealth will not regain her children for her or her family of origin: they remain firmly with the father’s family. In societies where the two payments are distinguished, they are negotiable. Thus Kikuyu women can take their children and set up a matrifocal household while Luo women cannot. Parkin argues (p.219):

the absence of the terminological distinction between uxorial and childbirth payments, as among the Luo, culturally presupposes a total and unambiguous transfer to a woman’s husband’s group of her roles as mother and wife, and the negation of her roles as daughter and sister in her natal group. The presence of the distinction culturally presupposes the separate negotiability of these roles. Where this negotiability is expressed mainly in cash [i.e. instead of cattle, the original form of most East, Southern and West African Savanna bridewealth], it further presupposes a greater propensity for separation and divorce and, in turn, has radical implications for future changes in the status of women.

As new evidence came in, Gluckman (1953; 1959; 1971) progressively modified his position. In 1959 (pp.70-71), he was identifying the Zulu system less with East and Southern African patriliny than with ‘the patriarchal peoples of South and Northeast Africa’ but he was, nevertheless, still writing as if the only other ethnic groups were matrilineal or bilateral ones. By 1971 (pp.236-237; 242-243), he was conceding that patrilineal societies, even in East and Southern Africa, were of two types, but

Throughout the Southern Bantu, up to the Limpopo River (i.e. stopping short of the Shona), and again in Northeastern Africa, in the house-property complex a man allocates land and/or cattle to each wife, and when he dies that wife retains right in those cattle and/or that land which pass to her own sons, as against her husband’s sons by other wives. In short, each wife becomes the nucleus of a set of patrimonial property for her sons, and they have claims on the marriage payments of their own sisters. As each wife thus forms a patrimonial nucleus, she is firmly attached to her husband: if he dies, she and that property remain nucleated for her sons and her future children, who are begotten by a pro-husband in the name of her dead husband i.e. there is the true levirate ...

An underlying implication of much of the debate was that it was possible to map the areas of strong patriliny where divorce was rare and female nonmarital sexuality was under firm control, but Gluckman’s description quoted above, with its reference to Northeast Africa, presumably strongly affected by Luo studies, was as close as anyone came to doing it.

There was also an underlying suggestion that the societies where females were strongly controlled were those where men identified most strongly with cattle and where cattle formed the most important part of a high bridewealth payment. Herskovits (1926) had first
raised questions of this type, and recently Kuper (1982:10 ff), while explicitly not following Herskovits all the way, has written of those societies of East and Southern Africa where 'The fundamental bridewealth rule was that marital rights in a woman were transferred against the payment of cattle,' and where 'The transfer of rights in children was permanent. Children could not be claimed by the wife's relatives in the event of divorce or any other circumstances.' Gluckman (1959:70-71) had noted that the marriage and female-control systems of the Zulu type were usually accompanied by bridewealth payments in cattle.

The debate is important in terms of sexual networking for two reasons. First, it suggests that there are a number of societies in Southern and East Africa at least the Southern Bantu and the Luo where traditional society had unusually strong control of female sexuality and where the Ekiti model might not find an easy fit. Second, it suggests that this control was so strong that it might not merely have been achieved by proscription and penalty, but by building such behavior into the expectations of religion and morality in the sense of purity as opposed to sin and defilement. If the latter is the case, then women in these societies might not seize opportunities for change as was, as we note later, the case in West and Middle Africa. However, the thrust of most evidence was that married women were kept in line, largely through fear of losing their children. They did not always see these forces as those of virtue and truth. Potash (1978:380) reports that Luo women frequently protest about 'the difficulties of marriage for women ... men ... are well aware of women's attitudes. I was frequently cautioned by male friends not to pay too much attention to anything a woman might tell me since 'women like to complain'.

Finally, it might be noted that the debate was meaningless in terms of coastal West Africa and Middle Africa. The debate did not cite these areas and few anthropologists who had worked there entered it: one exception is Lloyd, 1968:2, who did so merely to say that the Yoruba were not a Zulu-type society.

This is fundamentally why Lesthaeghe and Eelens (1989) were frustrated when using data from seven World Fertility Surveys to attempt to categorize sub-Saharan African populations. Five of the seven available surveys were of coastal West Africa, while East Africa was represented only by Kenya, and Southern Africa and the Southern Bantu only by Lesotho. Lesthaeghe and Eelens used data at the national and ethnic levels to show that premarital births were low in Lesotho, and in Kenya were lowest among the Luo (who, nevertheless, were well within the West African range), that divorce followed by remarriage was exceptionally low in Lesotho and among the Luo, that polygyny among the Luo was the highest of the Kenyan ethnic groups, that women traders were largely a feature of West Africa, and that centuries of Islam in parts of the West African savanna had ensured early female marriage and few premarital births. Exploring Goody's (1976) ideas, they made their data yield three factors, but these were largely determined in one case by the propensity of West African women to trade and in another by long Islamization introducing social class and endogamy. The high levels of polygyny among the Luo, and the late age of Luo male marriage, together with the information from the Gluckman debate, raise difficult questions about fitting any model of sexuality to this population.

One further point. Gluckman repeatedly, and many others in the debate, identified matriliney with the opposite extreme to the Zulu with regard to the need or wish to control premarital or extramarital sexuality. They were mostly referring to the matrilineal belt that sweeps across southern Africa, including large parts of Zaire, Angola, Zambia, Malawi and Mozambique, none of which was examined by the World Fertility Survey. But the survey
did include matrilineal groups in both Ghana and the Ivory Coast. In each case, the level of polygyny was lower in matrilineal than adjacent patrilineal groups. However, in Ghana premarital births and divorce and remarriage were no higher in matrilineal than in patrilineal groups, although some tendency of this type was observable in the Ivory Coast. The explanation may lie in the fact that these matrilineal groups exhibit elements of bilateralism, as indeed do many of coastal West African patrilineal societies, reasons perhaps for not finding there the behavior typical of Gluckman’s strongly patrilineal societies.

Precolonial African society

This section attempts to employ precolonial and early colonial sources, as well as reconstructions of earlier societies with the assistance of old persons, to ascertain whether the Ekiti Study model or the Gluckman hypothesis fit or alternatively whether there is evidence for other models. Major sources are listed in the Appendix. Emphasis is on where the whole model or part of it fails to fit. Hence, compatible societies receive little or no mention, as can be seen by consulting the Appendix. Because there is less controversy about the evidence, the treatment of West and Middle Africa is more cursory than that of East and Southern Africa. Indeed, this is generally true of all societies that fit the model, and hence the concentration on the apparent exceptions. Accordingly, the examination begins with the society reported to contrast most strongly with West Africa, namely Southern Africa.

Southern Africa

It is probable, but not certain, that the traditional level of polygyny among the Southern Bantu, at least in the patrilineal societies, was as high as it is now in West Africa. Timaeus and Graham (1989:373) cite figures for Botswana in 1830 and 1860 suggesting such levels. For Lesotho, they quote the 1911 Census with 19 percent of married men being polygynists at a time when the proportion already seemed to be falling steeply. Hilda Kuper (1950:89) certainly believed that the Swazi aimed at such levels. On the other hand Ellenberger (1912:278) believed that only around 12 percent of Lesotho men were polygynous.

There is little evidence, then, that male marriage was delayed any less than in West Africa. Indeed, the delay of the marriage of age regiments of Zulus until the king granted them all permission to marry is famous. On the other hand, the literature does not appear to suggest female postpartum sexual abstinence of West African durations. There was, then, a problem of young adult male sexuality of the order found in the Ekiti model. Equally, the literature does not suggest that this was solved by a rejection of sexuality as such. On the contrary, it was regarded as natural and beneficial (Krige, 1937:108-109; Krige and Kringe, 1954).

The major solution was to permit premarital sexuality, but not pregnancy or marriage enforced by it. The latter was achieved by forbidding the breaking of the girls’ hymens and thus ensuring that there were no pregnancies enforcing marriages. These premarital sexual relations were often erotic to a degree that was, and still is, unknown in West and Middle Africa (Junod, 1938:87; Krige, 1937:109; Gluckman, 1950:181). Schapera (1933:60) emphasizes that this was particularly the case among the Zulu and Xhosa, while the Basotho and Tswana were offered less social encouragement to premarital eroticism. A prime aim of Zulu society and other Southern and East African societies as far north as the Kikuyu in Kenya “an aim strongly ignored in much of the Gluckman debate” was to create
a disciplined society where young males were warriors, single, content and available for warfare, until they began to age and were ready for marriage. Most of the premarital sexuality involved incomplete intercourse and coitus intercrura. It seems likely that such methods, being known, were also employed in marriage to mitigate the effect of postpartum sexual abstinence. Certainly, this century they have allowed the reduction in the postpartum period of sexual abstinence, and may have rendered contraception more acceptable. The existence of children that they had fathered could incline young men to premature marriage and could weaken the strong patrilineal family where all children were born within marriage and indisputably belonged to the woman’s husband. Among the Tswana, a pregnant girl’s age-mates sang the details of her disgrace and the child was killed by her family at birth. A perspective on the difference between puritanism and unacceptable pregnancies is provided by the suppression of those songs by missionaries because of their ‘obscenity’ (Schapera, 1933:66-67; 84-89).

Premarital sexuality of this type provided for most of single male sexuality. Much of the balance was probably accommodated within the family. Junod (1927:196-197) notes it among Southern Bantus in Mozambique. Among the Tswana of Botswana, where premarital eroticism was less encouraged, Schapera (1933:64-65) noted that the intrafamily sex was with the younger wives of male relatives in their lineage, especially fathers’ younger brothers’ wives. Any children were regarded as the husband’s legitimate offspring.

This practice, so far as being looked upon in the light of adultery, was held to be highly justifiable, especially when the husband was old and impotent. The main idea underlying it was that the boy should ‘raise up seed’ in the junior ‘house’ of his relative. My informants, however, also stressed the fact that it gave these boys the opportunity for acquiring sexual experience which, if denied to them, now that they were old enough to marry, might have led to frequent attempts at seduction and other illicit means of obtaining sexual satisfaction.

Married men undoubtedly sought additional sexual relations outside their marriages. Gluckman (1950:181) says that the Zulu kept strict control over their women and treated adultery harshly, but there were clearly very different degrees of permissiveness, in fact if not jurally, across the Southern Bantu. Ellenberger (1912:279) reported female adultery to be common among the Basotho in the 19th century, and Junod (1927:196-197) reported of Mozambique that, although the guilty man was fined, often heavily, little was said to the woman because the crime was regarded in the light of theft rather than immorality. Bullock (1970:321-322) was probably closer to the truth when, reporting on the Mashona of Zimbabwe in the early part of the present century, he emphasized the danger of being caught in the act, the severe punishment for seducing the wife of a chief, and the lesser penalties in the case of commoners’ wives.

All accounts of the vast matrilineal belt that extends across the continent in the northerly half of Southern Africa emphasize a woman’s control of her own body, few controls on female sexuality, and the possession of the children by her lineage (cf. on Zimbabwe: Lancaster, 1981 on the Goba; on Zambia: Smith and Dale, 1920 on the Ila; Richards, 1956 on the Chisungu; Colson, 1958 on the Plateau Tonga; and Spring, 1976 on the Lurale). In addition, as in West Africa, the patrilineal nature of some societies is mitigated, and apparently the control of female sexuality is rendered less complete, by bilateral aspects (cf. Gluckman, 1950:167 on the Lozi of Zambia and Gay, 1980:37-38 on the Basotho of Lesotho).
Southern Africa, then, presents a situation where the Ekiti model is applicable to the matrilineal societies, but where some patrilineal societies substituted premarital eroticism for premarital sexual relations and where some of these societies exerted greater control over extramarital female sexuality through the threat of deprivation of access to children.

East Africa

The evidence suggests that polygyny in East Africa used to be as high as in West Africa but that it has been falling for decades. Worthman and Whiting’s (1988:156) 1968 census of Ngeca, a Kikuyu community in Kenya, showed that all men born in the period 1900-1909 eventually became polygynous, most acquiring a second wife around the age of 40 during the 1940s. In contrast, among those born 1910-1919, mostly over 50 at the time of the census, only 28 percent had acquired a second wife. It is possible that some societies had long had lower levels of polygyny. Gray’s (1960) research in 1955 among the Sonjo of northern Tanzania revealed that in this isolated community only 11 percent of women were polygynously married (implying that only about 6 percent of husbands were). Men gave as the reason that they feared strife between wives, perhaps a result of wives not having the autonomy, especially the economic independence, of West Africa. Similarly, there appears to be evidence of traditional durations of postpartum sexual abstinence of West African magnitude (cf. on the Meru of Kenya, Mwambia, 1973:61 and Njeru, 1973:69).

With regard to premarital sexuality, much of the region seems to have been similar to the situation already described for the Southern Bantu, with discreet incomplete sex permitted, provided that the hymen was not broken and pregnancy did not occur. Adolescent boys often lived in separate houses which facilitated contact between the sexes. Wilson (1977:114) makes the point that single young men were needed among pastoralists not merely for periodic defense in warfare, but for continual protection of the cattle against raiding parties. Meyer (1959:173-174), reporting on his research among the Barundi at the beginning of the present century, is clearly referring to adolescent incomplete intercourse when he refers to ‘onanism’ as being a ‘widespread vice’. Leakey (1977: vol.2, 584-585), in his detailed reconstruction of precolonial Kikuyu life carried out with the old men in the 1930s, noted that teenage girls and boys ‘played at having intercourse’ but were warned against going too far: ‘Occasionally a boy and girl would disobey this rule, and because of this many mothers would regularly examine their daughters’ genitalia ... They [the girls] knew that if they allowed the bigger boys to have full intercourse they would be found out and severely punished ... Naturally both boys and girls grew up with a considerable knowledge of sex.’ There was, in fact, considerable pressure on girls to entertain the warriors who made up their brothers’ age grades (Kenyatta, 1953:157-158). Worthman and Whiting (1988:151) claim that pregnancies did occur and that a marriage was usually arranged to one of the warriors involved. Once again, it might be noted that the behavior described may have been the norms of powerful and respectable families. The poor probably could not afford such standards. Meyer (1959:163-164), describing the socially stratified Barundi society, insisted that great stress was placed upon girls remaining virgins until marriage, but also noted that ‘a young man, while waiting for marriage to his chosen bride, often takes a concubine from a lower class’.

With regard to extramarital sexual relations, the Gluckman pattern largely holds. However, his strong patrilineal or father right (or, more correctly, husband right) societies of northeast Africa have not been identified with most patrilineal societies of the region. Certainly, the description fits the Luo (Potash, 1978; Parkin, 1973, 1978), and probably the...
Nilotic Kavirondo (Northcote, 1907), the Gusii (LeVine and LeVine, 1966; LeVine, 1979; Hakansson, 1985), the Turkana (Gulliver, 1973) and the So (Laughlin and Laughlin, 1973), all in a rather limited area of the region. The explanation is not a Bantu-Nilotic division, but largely that certain groups ensure that no separated or divorced wife has any claim to her children, and they were likely to reject her from the husband’s family, without granting her indisputable rights to return to her family of origin, if she persistently or obviously sexually strayed.

Most research on this type of society has been carried out on the larger population, the Luo, who can serve as the archetypical East African husband-right society. The Luo system, although now changing, was surprisingly stable, and, as late as the mid-1970s, Potash (1978:381) reported that 61 percent of the marriages in the rural community she studied were still arranged. The Luo women’s position was so subsumed into marriage that, even now, she can run a market stall only as a family enterprise jointly with her husband and not on her own as Kikuyu and Akamba women do. Adultery by a married woman was, and largely still is, regarded very seriously. Parkin (1978:140-141) reported that ‘Luo men and women both state that adultery with a married woman with children will afflict her own children and the man’s own wife, children and even patrilineage with the debilitating and often fatal [wasting] disease called chira.’ It might be noted that sexual relations with a married but childless woman will not have this effect, thus providing one category of more available women in the society. However, these consequences may never have been completely inevitable, and, in any case chira was not proof of adultery, for Parkin (1978:154-155) reports not only that there are other causes but that, during his research, no case of chira was divined as having been caused by adultery. The woman had other things to fear, for a child conceived adulterously was supposed to die after husband and wife performed ritual intercourse three or four days following birth (Parkin, 1973:333). However, ‘For most Luo, adultery by a woman is almost tantamount to a divorce, for it is not normally reckoned that a marriage can survive the dislocation to the husband’s honour’ (p.161). Nevertheless, the two families try to patch the marriage up. Potash (1978:392-394) reported of the wife’s family that, although bridewealth is high and must be returned if the bride leaves, ‘the data indicate that the number of cattle to be returned is not the main issue. Rather parental willingness to support a separation is affected by the parents’ concern about their daughter’s reputation and her future marriage prospects.’ They, the society and future potential husbands feel that she has been ‘used’. Furthermore, the woman’s attitudes to separation are usually determined by the fact that there is no way she can take her children with her; her family will have to pay back the bridewealth minus a stipulated amount for each child, and those children inevitably stay with the father’s family (Parkin, 1980:209).

The strong Luo views about women who had been used or tainted apparently also made it more likely that women on marriage would be virgins. Where, then, did male excess sexuality issue, especially as Blount (1973:325) implies that there was not even sex within the larger family? Part of the answer is that the Luo were at one with the other East and Southern African societies in allowing unmarried girls incomplete intercourse (chode) provided that the hymen was not broken (Parkin, 1973:335; Southall, 1973:341). Another part of the answer was the obverse of the creation of a strong marriage in that divorced or separated women were regarded as second-class citizens and more easily available for sex or prostitution (Potash, 1978:389-391). This was especially the case as they were not incommoded by children who had obligatorily been left behind and because they were
often estranged from their families of origin to the point of having little or no support. Luo society created and has long recognized the concept of prostitution.

Returning to East African society as a whole, there are more references than in any other region to sexual relations within the larger family which was apparently general and was not regarded as adultery (although foreigners describing the society often included it under that heading). Mushanga (1973:181) wrote of the Nkole of Uganda: ‘Extramarital relations are regulated, and traditionally they were limited to in-laws, but adultery is strongly condemned.’ Burton (1860: vol.2, 321) in his exploration of northeast Tanzania and on his march to Lake Tanganyika noted much venereal disease, which he believed had spread from Zanzibar but had reached high levels because of the extent of sexual networking. Among the Bantu Kavirondo of Kenya adultery was proscribed and punished by fines. Wagner (1939:11) wrote of these fines: ‘The only exception to this rule is the custom that before the birth of the first child the brother of the husband may have occasional sex relations with his wife which the husband is expected to tolerate. Even after he has children, a husband cannot legally accuse his brother of adultery with his wife ... [f.n.] i.e. by bringing the matter before the judicial council of clan elders’. Meyer (1959:164-165), noting the relative sexual puritanism in Urundi compared with surrounding areas, nevertheless conceded ‘Even in Urundi ... married Batussi women take much greater liberties with other Batussi men, particularly with members of the kin group, than do unmarried women.’ Similarly, Middleton (1973:292) wrote of the Lugbara of North-Western Uganda, ‘It is difficult to know how many wives commit adultery; with a husband’s brother it is less of an offence than with a stranger.’ Wilson (1977:135) said of the Nyakyusa-Ngonde of Southern Tanzania, ‘Occasionally, privately, an ageing husband might grant right of access to a wife to a brother who was to be his heir, or even to a son.’ Of the Gusii of Kenya, LeVine and LeVine (1966:43) reported that ‘It is assumed that a young man will try to seduce the cross-cousin (mother’s brother’s daughter) or daughter of his half brother or paternal cousin when she comes to visit,’ and LeVine (1979:36) noted: ‘Early sexual relations may occur secretly within the clan.’ Similarly, when describing Maasai encampments in Tanzania where everyone is related, Llewelyn-Davies (1978:218) said of the young men: ‘they also have love affairs with the circumcised wives of the elders.’ Another type of relative with whom some groups permitted sexual relations were previous spouses. Kashamura (1973:122), writing of the intralacustrine region, reported that lasting marriages were the exception, most people having several, but retaining the right to sexual relations with anyone they had previously married.

The distinctiveness about East and Southern Africa is the role of age grades (or sets) or regiments of the young single warriors. Leakey (1977:810 ff) and the old Kikuyu men who in the 1930s recorded the situation before 1903 pointed out that the wife could have sex with any of the husband’s initiation age set as she was legally wife to them all, and when widowed would probably choose to sleep with them rather than the husband’s relative who inherited her. Mwambia (1973:61), when discussing what Meru (Kenya) husbands used to do when their wives were unavailable because of postpartum sexual abstinence, explained that they went to the wives of age mates, often to the same women each time, since ‘Having sexual relations with her was socially and legally accepted, and not regarded as adultery.’

Among the Kikuyu, the necessity for meeting the needs of the warriors affected society through individuals’ life cycles (cf. Leakey, 1977:810 ff). They had incomplete sex play with girls before marriage, often several couples together.
But if the warriors know of a girl who permitted full penetration they made it easy for each other to have secret assignations with her ... Adultery was most common among young wives of elderly men, since they had often made many friends among the warriors before they married, and they commonly encouraged these men to come and sleep with them secretly ... In certain circumstances, adultery was connived at by old polygamous men who felt themselves unable to satisfy their wives.

There was a recognized custom of calling in a young warrior and indirectly giving permission. As a result, 'it was by no means uncommon for the physical father of a child to be a quite different person from its legal father' (Leakey, 1977:815).

West and Middle Africa
Because most of West and Middle Africa appear to have closely resembled the Ekiti model, the relatively brief attention given here is almost entirely on the identification of societies which were probably different.

The model may not fully hold in some of the savanna areas to the north of the West African forest. This is probably the case in some, but certainly not all, of the Islamized areas. Perhaps the most interesting is the Hausa population of Northern Nigeria, whose culture was deeply affected by a successful Fulani jihad and subsequent religious intensification in the early 19th century. Meek (1925:275-276) wrote of savage punishments for adultery, but he also made it clear that punishment was most likely to be exacted when the wife of a chief was involved. Both Pittin (1983:292-294) and Schildkrout (1983:109-110) make it clear that women who engage in sex outside marriage lose status, damage their relatives and may have to flee and provide sex to support themselves until they can establish a new union. This is not coastal West Africa, but neither is it the Middle East. Schildkrout speaks of the strong discouragement of female premarital sex and adds 'Children born outside wedlock are castigated and courtesans marry if pregnant.' Further east in Bornu, the Kanuri, drawing apparently on old indigenous traditions rather than Islam, exhibit such a strong feeling against illegitimate children that their 'pariah state ... is easily seen in the widespread belief that they can only marry others like themselves or people of slave status' (Cohen, 1967:36-37).

On the coast and in the forest most testimony is to a more relaxed attitude to sexual relations. The exact situation is often ambiguous, as can be seen in the Abomey area of Dahomey (now Benin). Bohannan (1968:86) reported that, if a girl was not found to be a virgin on marriage, she had to name her seducer who would then be fined. But Herskovits (1938:284) had found that female premarital sex was not rare in the society, but that even the girls who indulged in it claimed, apparently successfully, on marriage to be virgins. Bohannan (1968:90 ff) does claim that the Dahomeans have two types of marriage, in one of which the children stay with the husband's lineage after divorce. However, it might be noted that there are two separate elements in the bridewealth, one covering the wife and the other the children, a situation which, according to Parkin (1980:216 ff), means that the possession of children is still negotiable.

There is some conflict in the testimony about Ibo society in Nigeria. Uchendu (1965:188) argued that traditional society laid emphasis on premarital female chastity, but he also reported that when a mother has been sufficiently on guard to achieve this, 'she
reaps a rich reward from her son-in-law'. After marriage, Leith-Ross (1939:127) concluded that 'Though in olden days, the punishments for adultery were heavy, I am not sure how strictly they were carried out nor how far they were an effectual check'. Ottenberg (1989:301), writing of the early 1950s, discussed the range of sexual outlets available to young men in what was, at that time, a fairly remote rural area. The young man may still be friends with a former *nwa ulo* partner [i.e. a girl friend with whom he had close but not usually sexual relations] of roughly the same age, now married to someone else ... they may become secret lovers ... More often, however, he seeks sexual satisfaction from divorced or other sexually free females, becomes involved in adulterous affairs with other women, has sexual relations with 'stranger' harlots living in the Afikpo area, or has intimacies with unmarried girls.

The real crime was for a girl to have sex, let alone become pregnant, with an uncircumcised male (p.41). Nukunya (1969:70-71) testifies that female adultery among Ewe in Southeast Ghana 'is considered very serious, and it is not surprising that it is covered by legal as well as religious sanctions.' Nevertheless, the charms which he describes as employed by jealous husbands to threaten straying wives are similar to those of the Ekiti Yoruba and probably their power to frighten is diminished as in Ekiti by recognized antidotes.

It is probable that sex within the larger family was a feature of Middle and West Africa but fewer observers than in the East and South provide testimony one way or the other. Temple's (1965:103) notes on Northern Nigeria at the beginning of the present century record that 'within the compounds all the women are common to all the men, except to their own sons.' David and Voas (1981:658), examining the problem of the sexual access of young unmarried men among the settled Fulani of North Cameroon, concluded that 'it is mainly divorcees, and, to a lesser extent, wives of visiting friends and relatives away from husbands and home who are available as sexual partners.' A related and widespread phenomenon, with some parallels to age-set behavior in Eastern and Southern Africa, is the concept of permissible sexual relations between persons of the same clan, although a marriage between them would be regarded as incestuous. Fortes (1949:100) reported of the Tallensi of Ghana that, unlike marriage, prenuptial sex and adultery are usually between distant members of the same clan. Meek (1937:145) found among Nigeria's Ibo people premarital sexual relations, but never marriage, between people of the same clan.

On the question of when men find premarital or extramarital sexual partners, there is debate over whether commercial prostitution is age-old. Fortes (1978:22) believed it was and argued that it had never been suppressed because of the commonsense and transactional attitude toward sex. Reyna (1975:65) appears to think that this was the position among the Barma of Chad, and David and Voas (1981) in the small towns along the trading routes. The latter draw attention to the high divorce and widowhood rates among the Fulani: 35 percent of marriages last no longer than two years (p.652). Although young widows and divorcees quickly find new husbands,

Before they remarry, however, divorcees are not expected to abstain from sexual intercourse, on the one hand a tactic to obtain husbands (whether pregnancy ensues or not), and on the other a means of support (since gifts will be received) in a society where women cannot own land and where the daughters of Fulbe cannot publicly engage in trade. Because a number of partners may be involved, intermarital sex can be a significant influence on the spread of venereal disease despite
the relatively short periods that individual women remain unmarried (David and Voas, 1981:658-659).

**Precolonial patterns across sub-Saharan Africa**

It is no longer possible to determine whether there were precolonial differentials in the male demand for sexual access outside marriage. It is probable, but by no means certain, that levels of polygyny were similar across the region. Schoenmaeckers et al. (1981) believe that it can be shown that durations of postpartum sexual abstinence were similar, but the evidence is sketchy.

The following generalizations can probably be made.

1. Sexual relations were always regarded in a commonsense and largely non-religious way. Extra-worldly forces were not seen as playing the same strong role in the area of marital and non-marital sexual relations as they were in the area of fecundity and infecundity. A woman who had experienced premarital or extramarital sex was not in the same class as a barren woman, nor was her situation as difficult as that of such women in much of the contemporary Middle East or in old Eurasia. The exception may be certain strong patrilineal societies identified by Gluckman, the Zulu and to a lesser extent much of Southern Bantu society, and, in addition, the Luo and some adjacent groups in East Africa. Yet even here, the sanctions were more penal than religious and almost nowhere was divorce or separation expected after a single act of discreet adultery. In all areas, there was a recognition that some provision had to be made for nonmarital male sexuality if the important institutions of polygyny and postpartum sexual abstinence were not to be destroyed.

2. The greatest regional contrast between East and Southern Africa on the one hand, and West and Middle Africa on the other, is the widespread acceptance in the former of premarital limited female sexuality, provided that the hymen is not broken and pregnancy does not ensue, while such a dichotomy between partial and full relations is hardly known in the latter region. The East and Southern African pattern seems to be based on the need to maintain a warrior class of unmarried young men, and this in turn was probably more related to the need for mobile forces to protect the greatly prized cattle than it was to inter-ethnic warfare. In recent times incomplete sex has probably, in itself, or in its development into coitus interruptus, allowed the shortening of postpartum sexual abstinence and even a more ready acceptance of other forms of fertility control. It might be noted, however, that coitus interruptus is not as prominent in fertility control data in surveys of these regions as this argument suggests; and it might also be argued that postpartum abstinence might have been replaced by these methods eons ago. These were not concerns of West and Middle Africa where, in vast regions, cattle were infrequent because of the tsetse fly found in the forest and savanna woodlands. This may be a better explanation for the contrast in the two areas than the distribution of ritual art put forward by Lesthaeghe (1989:20-22). In Ekiti, all men fought when society was attacked. Certainly, among the Ashanti of Ghana, warriors were important, but many were married, and access to women presented little problem in a matrilineal society.

3. Much of the excess sexuality of single males, and some of that of married males, was accommodated within the larger family through access, provided that it was discreet and not flaunted, to the wives of relatives: wives of older brothers, fathers (except for
their own mothers), uncles and sometimes brothers-in-law and cousins. There were others such as cross-cousins. There was a real sense in which women were married to families and proscriptions against adultery either did not apply or did so only at a much reduced level. There was a logic in such relations because many of these women could be inherited after widowhood.

4. In Southern and East Africa, there are a range of patrilineal societies, originally identified by Gluckman (1950) and described by him as exhibiting father right or strong patrilineality, where women have very little autonomy from their husbands. On marriage, there is an undifferentiated bridewealth payment, usually partly or wholly in cattle, which is exchanged for a woman and those children which she will bear. There is virtually no divorce and, if the wife leaves her husband, her own family of origin "in which she retains no rights" is reluctant to receive her back. In any case she cannot take her children who indisputably belong to the husband’s lineage. In these circumstances, adultery can place a wife at great risk, and the society tends to treat it as sinful in the strong moral sense employed by most African societies for reproductive failure. Even in these societies, however, a single act of adultery is usually not regarded as the grounds for breaking up a marriage and the punishments are by fines and beatings rather than by religious excoriation. Gluckman appears originally to have thought it possible that these societies were made up of all groups in East and Southern Africa who were not matrilineal or, to some extent, bilateral. In fact, the list does not seem to extend much beyond those originally named by Gluckman: the Zulu, and to some degree most of the Southern Bantu below the Limpopo River, and certain groups in the northeast “the Luo and some other ethnic groups mostly in western Kenya.

5. The extent to which women had a degree of sexual autonomy and possession of their children depended on the strength of their continuing bond with their families of origin. This bond was strong in West Africa where it was reflected in separate budgets for each spouse which, in turn, helped to maintain the strength of that bond. In West Africa, the ability to maintain separate budgets was provided by the fact that most women earned incomes by trading or retaining some of their farm produce and usually provided much of the support for themselves and their children. In contrast, most families “even polygynous ones” in East and Southern Africa have a single budget controlled by the husband. This is no longer absolute and may never have been wholly so: Kikuyu women can leave with their children and support themselves by trading. The explanation may be that West African societies may nearly all have some degree of bilateralism, or that they have a dual sex system (O’Barr, 1984; Lesthaeghe, 1989:489-498) characterized by women’s organizations and power structures mirroring men’s ones. Two points, then, should be stressed. Women have always had great sexual autonomy in matrilineal societies. The sexual autonomy of women in East and Southern Africa is limited by their relative lack of budgetary autonomy and their lack of sex-specific traditional occupations.

6. Because sexual rights in women were largely treated as property rights, and were protected largely by force and fines, there was potential instability in the system. It took very little change for men to find that they were satisfied with the system and women to find that they were not. Many women ‘bucked the system’ as soon as they could. There was no parallel with the continuing religious sanctions in the Middle
East, India and parts of the Mediterranean where, to a large extent, women were their own jailers.

What, then, were the conditions of change?

The destabilization of the old sexual system

The major theories have been treated elsewhere (Orubuloye, Caldwell and Caldwell, 1990a; Caldwell, Orubuloye and Caldwell, 1990). Comaroff and Roberts (1977) describing Botswana and drawing heavily upon Schapera (1933), Balandier (1970) describing Gabon, and Caldwell, Orubuloye and Caldwell (1990) describing Ekiti Yoruba society in Nigeria all agree that the critical change was the arrival of colonial rule and law abetted by missionary churches. In addition, Comaroff and Roberts place great stress on the intermediary role of the collapse of polygyny, which does not seem to have been a necessary condition in that destabilization occurred in Gabon and Ekiti without any decline in polygyny, while Balandier appears to ascribe some importance to the model provided by European libertine ways in Brazzaville, which again does not seem to have been a necessary condition in that similar models were negligible in Ekiti.

What happened in Ekiti, and generally through sub-Saharan Africa, was that colonial law (often indirectly through so-called ‘native courts’ claiming to take traditional practice into account), backed by colonial force, outlawed the use of force which restricted female sexual autonomy and was the ultimate defender of the old sexual order. It also broke the power of husbands over wives by granting rights to wife-initiated divorce. In this area, women’s legal rights often exceeded those in the colonialists’ home countries because of a belief that women had to be freed from the bondage of polygyny. In Gabon, the Catholic Church achieved a similar impact by refusing to recognize the marriages of junior wives and by providing refuge for any fleeing wife and her children on church land. Two factors were of basic importance. The first was that women recognized their position as unsatisfactory and seized their new freedom. Balandier (1970:198-199) comments that in Gabon men had a very small role in urging change forward, but that it was a movement of women. The second factor, related to the first, was that traditional religion did not focus so much attention on sexual behavior, as distinct from reproductive behavior, to control this movement when it was legally and practically possible. The position has been confused because Christian churches are now urging such control and are employing the argument of moral continuity.

Other factors certainly played secondary roles, although differentially throughout the region. Everywhere, new economic opportunities allowed some of the younger generation to pay their own bridewealth, thus weakening the control of the elders, not only over marriage but over the sexual system that accompanied it. Where men were forcibly moved to construction work, as in the Congo Free State, or tempted to the mines as in Southern Africa, patriarchal control of family behavior tended to break down. With the growth of large towns, prostitution increased. This was especially the case in Southern and East Africa where many more males than females went to town, in some areas because of colonial legal restrictions, but everywhere because, in contrast to West Africa where there were only small male surpluses in the towns, the near or partial absence of women from trading meant that there were fewer female economic opportunities there. New illicit or semi-licit opportunities were created, but these were often in prostitution or in beer brewing and selling with associated prostitution. It has also been suggested that the very politeness expected of women in such patrilineal East and Southern African societies as that of the
Mashona in Zimbabwe made it difficult for women to resist male importuning, especially once destabilization had begun. In Southern Africa, and to a lesser degree East Africa, the large European presence was probably a factor in sustaining a missionary-type Christian Church which was probably a potent force in eroding polygyny. In Southern Africa the faster relative decline in subsistence agriculture probably also played a role.

Without question, there was always the most female sexual autonomy and greater control by women over their children in the matrilineal societies of central Southern Africa and the mid West African coast.

Concluding note on regional differences and implications for AIDS
The decline in polygyny in Southern and East Africa should have allowed males to marry earlier, and this indeed appears to have been the case, except in parts of northern South Africa and eastern Botswana where both sexes marry late, if at all. This, together with the near-disappearance of lengthy postpartum sexual abstinence in this region, should have greatly reduced the male demand for nonmarital sex and hence the degree of sexual networking. This, in turn, should have reduced the rate of transmission of sexually transmitted disease and of AIDS. This does not seem to have happened, unless it is merely a matter of time, and West Africa is still to have a greater explosion of HIV infection than the rest of the region has already experienced.

In terms of the current level of sexual networking, there does not appear to be much contrast between West Africa with its higher traditional levels of female economic and sexual autonomy and most of East and Southern Africa. The exception may be some of Gluckman’s strong patrilineal societies. He employed as his starting point the relative lack of European impact on the Zulu system (Gluckman, 1950:203) and this may also be partly true of the Luo and some nearby groups.

Women had less autonomy in Southern and Eastern Africa, partly because of their lesser role in trading and the consequent presence of a single family budget. However, these were probably the very conditions that in modern times produced large male urban surpluses and a greater concentration of male nonmarital sexuality on commercial providers of sex. West Africa may have been protected by a greater diffusion of sex and greater equality of the numbers of the sexes in the towns.

The argument that the European presence and example led to a dissolution of traditional sub-Saharan African sexual mores to an extent that was not the case in North Africa, the Middle East and South Asia does a disservice to the strength of African cultural traditions. The truth is probably that sexuality, unlike reproduction, did not have centrality in the traditional belief system. Instead, female sexuality was largely controlled by earthly sanctions and was, as Fortes (1978:22) argues, subject to a good deal of commonsense.

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