The Church's Role in Addressing Immorality among Christians in Nigeria: A Case Study of Batere Community in Delta State

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Abstract

This study delves into the Church's involvement in combating immorality within the Christian populace in Nigeria, honing in on the Batere community situated in Delta State. Despite the Church's emphasis on upholding moral principles, a significant number of Christians in Batere persist in partaking in immoral acts such as adultery, fornication, and engaging in the trade of sexual services. This research investigates the causes of immorality among Christians in Batere community using phenomenological and historical and sociological implications of the phenomenon while assessing. The study reveals that factors such as weak discipleship, lack of effective counselling, and poor leadership contribute to immorality among Christians in the community. The research suggests that the Church must intensify its efforts in teaching biblical truth and values, providing counselling services, and promoting accountability among its members to effectively address immorality through discipleship and mentoring. The research findings suggest that the Church plays a pivotal role in advocating for ethical principles and positively influencing the lifestyles of Christians in Batere.

Keywords: Church, immorality, Christians, Nigeria, Batere community, Delta State.

Introduction

Sexual immorality deviates from moral standards in Nigeria and Africa, influenced by Western culture. Traditional African education supported cultural norms and intergenerational transmission, she shares in the rich and diverse cultural diversity of the continent (Itedjere, 2017). Children are taught traditional values: respect for elders, greetings, sign language from parents and modest dressing is emphasized.

Oladunjoye (2006) emphasizes the importance of Proverbs in African context when examining human sexuality from a Biblical perspective. "There are three things that are too amazing for me, four that I do not understand: the way of an eagle in the sky, the way of the serpent upon a rock, the way of the ship on the high seas, and the way of a man with a maiden" (Proverbs 30:18-19). Thus, we can say that God created male and female for procreation and enjoyment.

Conversely, empirical observations have revealed that Christianity in modern-day Nigeria is facing a crisis of moral decay as observed by Aweda (2009), Idensi (2010) Ugwueye (2002), Obiora (1999), Iheanacho (2010), Ejizu (2008), Uwaegbute (2013), who variously decried the situation that has become rampant among Christians alike without discrimonation when sexual cases arise in Nigeria.
It is paradoxical that despite the remarkable expansion of Christianity in Nigeria, there has been a noticeable decline in Christian moral values in some communities.

Theoretical Framework

Primary Socialization Theory

One theory considered germane to this research is the primary socialization theory which according to Oetting and Donnermeyer (1998) looks at family, peer groups and school as the primary sources of sexual education for youth. The media is a key source of sexual education for youth according to the primary socialization theory. Parents, peers, schools, and media influence young people's consumer behaviours (Moore, Raymond, Mittelstaed & Tanner, 2002). Their influence extends to specific consumer skills such as product selection, brand comparison, price comparison, attitudes toward products and brands (John, 1999; Moore et al., 2002). Research suggests, however, that the relative influence of these socialization

agents (parents, peers, schools, and mass media) can change, particularly as the young person ages and matures (Clark, Martin, & Bush, 2001).

Peers influence deviant behaviour more than family and schools. They impact those not connected to family or school the most. In some places, youth may not learn about sex from parents, school, or media due to economic reasons. Developing countries with low literacy and poor infrastructure depend less on school and media for socialization.

Immorality in the Old Testament

Bible forbids sexual sins like homosexuality, bestiality, incest, fornication, adultery, and rape. Such were punishable by death in the Old Testament (Abogunrin, 2006). The Bible mentions sexual sin in Leviticus 18:1-20 in the Old Testament. In Hebrew culture to be engaged was the same as marriage, except for the consummation of the marriage: sexual intercourse. If a woman was engaged, she was to be treated the same as a married woman.

Having sex with someone other than her spouse, the penalty for both consenting parties was death by stoning (Leviticus 18:6) The word in the Hebrew for seduce is 'yiphateh meaning "to entice or seduce." the words in Hebrew for virgin are *"bᵉthulah* and almah. 'yiphateh: to deceive, seduce, entice as in Exodus 22:16. *bᵉthulah*: a virgin meaning: a girl or woman who has never had sexual intercourse. Collins in *"Sexual Sin in the Bible"" in Ken Collins" Website: www.kencollins.com* tried to tell us that "almah is not referring to a virgin but to a maid. This is easily cleared up by Greek Septuagint. These Hebrew scribes translated the word" almah into the Greek word *parthenos*. This is the same word Matthew uses in Matthew 1:23. The word means: a girl or woman who has never had sexual intercourse, a virgin. The Hebrew translators of the Septuagint and Matthew understood the Hebrew Word *almah* to mean a virgin, a girl or woman who has never had sexual intercourse. To seduce such a woman, the penalty is death.

Immorality in the New Testament

In the New Testament, there are two words in Greek used concerning sexual sin: They are *porneia* meaning fornication and *moikeia* meaning adultery. *porneia*: Unlawful sexual activities include adultery, homosexuality, bestiality, incest, and

extramarital sex. Worshiping unclean spirits or gods other than Jesus Christ, spiritual fornication, idol worship, eating food sacrificed to idols (Louw, 1998).

Moikeia: A sexual act carried out with the other person who is not a spouse, otherwise indulging in adultery. The Greek word *porneuo* is the word from where we get pornography. Fornication: sex outside marriage. Condemned in Exodus 22:16 Engaging in adultery refers to being involved romantically with a person other than one's spouse. Exodus 20:14 quoted above is one of the Ten Commandments and it clearly condemns adultery (Louw, 1998). The verb in the Greek for homosexual is *arsenakoitai; a c*ompound word which means a ale sexual-intercourse with another male, same sex (Brandstra, 1988).

The Concept of Immorality in Pre-Christian *Batere*

Before Christianity came to Batere community, there is a strong sense of decorum and respect surrounding sexuality, and individuals hold the institution of marriage in high regard. As a result, marriage has been traditionally viewed as a union for the mature and experienced, rather than for the young, feeble minds and inexperienced persons. Hence, The community greatly valued morality, honour, and character. Parents invested time in imparting these values to their children during their developmental years. Families avoid tarnishing their name by addressing vices like promiscuity and stealing. Parents monitor and correct bad behaviours to protect the family image (Oritsemaye, 2020).

In contrast, certain behaviours that once caused disgust no longer elicit the same response. Conversely, teachers in modern times no longer fulfil the invaluable traditional functions they once did. They are no longer tasked with shaping the characters of their students as children have become more independent. In particular, adolescent females often rely on the backing of their parents or romantic partners. These young women exhibit concerning behaviours in educational settings that may worsen without intervention, traits that are commonly observed among college students who may eventually develop into individuals with deviant sexual tendencies and a penchant for promiscuity (Stephen, 2020).

Christianity in Batere

Before Christianity came in the 16th century, the Itsekiris and other African communities practised Ebura-tsitse, a traditional belief system centred on ancestor worship, still significant in Itsekiri culture today. Christianity in Batere community mirrors the Itsekiri people's history. It was once dominant, but now a minority are Roman Catholics, with most being Protestants like Baptists and Anglicans. This history is crucial in understanding Christianity in Nigeria. Due to their strategic geographical position, the Itsekiri people had early interactions with Portuguese priests who were accompanying explorers in search of a sea route to India in the 15th century. The first European contacts with Benin were established around 1477, leading to Augustinian monks visiting Warri by 1555. These monks were dispatched by Gasper, the bishop of the diocese of Sao Tome. Among them, Father Franscisco a Mater Dei performed the baptism of the Olu of Warri's son, giving him the name Sebastian. This historical event marked a significant milestone in the cultural exchange between the Itsekiri people and European explorers during that period (Ikime, 1969).

Sebastian supported Portuguese missionaries and sent his son, Domingos, to train for the priesthood in Portugal to spread Christianity to the hinterland. However, Domingos couldn't become a priest as he married after ten years, against the Church's rules. Itsekiri believed Africans weren't meant to be celibate priests.(Ikime, 1969).

Facilitating the presence of proficient native clergy members for the propagation of Christianity within the Itsekiri community proved challenging, primarily attributed to the inhospitable weather conditions and prevalent mosquito infestations. The financial backing necessary to sustain Portuguese priests was unattainable as a result of the kingdom's economic downturn. Additionally, the Itsekiri populace exhibited reluctance towards embracing Portuguese missionaries, largely stemming from deep-rooted superstitions surrounding the sacrament of baptism. These collective factors, compounded by the adverse environmental conditions, significantly impeded the proliferation of Christianity within their realm (Ryder, 1960) .

The Portuguese priests used gunboats of slave traders to come to the area, some even participating in the slave trade. The Roman Catholic Church did not actively discourage the trade, hoping to convert slaves to Christianity. Most slaves were taken to American plantations, not Europe. Any Christianity linked to the slave trade was destined to fail. The failure of Christianity among the Itsekiri was largely due to the slave trade. Roman Catholicism disappeared from Ode Isekiri by the early 19th century. Despite challenges, missionary efforts in the region had an impact, seen in the influence at the court of the Olu of Warri. Father Monteleone left an impression on the Urhobo community, interacting with them in 1689 during an expedition from Warri to Benin (Erivwo, 1979)

Immorality in *Batere* Community in Christian Era

The prevalence of sexual promiscuity within the Batere community can be linked back to the arrival of Western influence brought by colonial explorers and merchants. Prior to the introduction of Western civilization and education in Batere society, the moral compass of the people was guided by their socio-religious framework. This framework played a significant role in shaping ethical values and establishing moral codes within the Batere community. The impact of the white man's arrival on the traditional values and practices of the Batere people cannot be overlooked, as it led to a shift in societal norms surrounding sexual behaviour. The clash between traditional beliefs and Western ideals has had a lasting effect on the cultural landscape of the Batere society, influencing attitudes towards sexual relationships and morality (Dara, 2003).

What determine actual morality generally include religious beliefs and practices, values and norms enshrined in their custom and traditions and desire for group solidarity (Otite, 1999). According to Bisibimbo (2020), the belief of the people was that a moral act could affirm the right relationship between God, man and the ontological order, while immoral act negates and disrupts this relationship. In the hierarchy, the Supreme Being known as “Oritse” is the creator of the heavens and the earth and was worshiped as the source of all good things. If he is properly appeased by good sacrifices and obedience to his commands, he blesses the people and they find prosperity in whatever good things they do.

It is a taboo, to get involved in adultery, incest, fornication among unmarried men and women. It is called *agigho* iniquity (Darah, 2003). Once a person is involved in this "*agigho*" (iniquity) he or she attracts the wrath of the gods which could lead to sickness and diseases. Therefore, preparatory sacrifices which involved slaughtering of animals such as goat or white chicken to placate the deities, ancestors, Supreme Being is necessary after the culprit confesses otherwise they would die and before their death their bodies will be swollen to indicate that such a person committed sin before he or she died. If a married woman commits adultery in Itsekiri and refuse to confess, the husband may fall sick and die. However, Ukuedogho (2020) notes that there is always room for forgiveness if the person quickly admits and the necessary ritual of cleansing is performed on his/her behalf. Thus, death becomes the final consequence in instances wherein the person fails to confess such illicit acts.

Sexual immorality was therefore minimized in Itsekiri kingdom until the presence of the white man who introduced western civilization, education and Christianity to the land (Erivwo, 1979). Erivwo (1979) detailed the place of Christianity to the Urhoboland as well as the Itsekiri hinterland. In his view, Christianity taught otherwise, thereby reducing the "heavy" burden placed on individuals in the sacrifices they offer whenever they sinned against the Supreme Being. This had no small effect on the people who retreated gradually from the ways of the gods (Kalu) and eventually turned from the rules and regulations which held Batere morality.

The Batere traditional society had some rules in enforcing sexual morality. Traditionally, the Batere society places a very high premium on virginity and chastity. This tradition has become part of the tradition till today and it is pertinent to note that whenever Itsekiri people are gathered, and the cola nut is presented, the elders on acceptance diligently observe the nature. If the cola nut is of five (5) parts, the elders will ask for the presence of a virgin at the meeting before proceeding with the acceptance. This simple yet significant practice brings honour and pride to the girl(s) concerned while inculcating the right value on our girls and society (Oritseweyimi, 2020).

However, Erivwo (1979) decried the growing rate at which sexual immorality has increased at the presence of Western culture on the people. It is believed that the gods punish those who indulge in immorality so the fear of the gods has helped to reduce the experience drastically among the Batere people.

Causes of Immorality

Various factors contribute to the prevalence of sexual immorality. These factors are outlined below. They include:

The Nature of the Society

Society has been widely acclaimed to be dynamic lending itself to diverse range of persons at diverse times. Thus, interaction with the society plays a major role in the daily lives of the people (Haralambos and Holborn, 2013). Inasmuch as the society is dynamic, some of her cherished virtues have been traded away through the process of cultural infiltration. Denga (1983) argued that Western culture, facilitated by technology (specifically, pornography), introduces young people to adult themes at an early age, a phenomenon with which African societies are struggling. This exposure to mature content, such as sexual abuse, has a significant impact on the fabric of society. In the traditional African cultural framework, young women refrained from engaging in premarital sexual relations due to the potential social repercussions faced by those who did not preserve their virginity until marriage. Today's situation is a total contradiction to the African cultural values and norms (Ukuedogho, 2020).

Adogbo (2005) greatly lamented the wave of change that swept all over Africa and indeed the Itsekiri nation. He notes that there is overemphasis on Western thought and ideologies. He observes that the society is both dynamic and progressive. From a dysfunctional perspective, the Itsekiri nation has not left the stone untouched. Our communities have lost their savour long ago he decried; very fast we have lost our dear heritage. Today, we have exchanged our jewel for junks. Haralambos and Holborn (2013) note that when the society begins to applaud immoral actions and behaviours then dysfunctionality surely has set in.

Obubu (2020) in like vein decried the sudden turn around and general acceptance of what was previously regarded as social ills. Immoral attitudes are now welcome

development inasmuch as the need money is made from it. The breakage of the societal bedrock has remained the greatest challenge why vices such as immorality keeps trending today, with public clamour for its recognition as a profession (Jaggar, 1994, Sundahhl 1994).

Unwholesome Lifestyle

There are live challenges today especially when we try to arrive at what we can refer to as a healthy society. Such attitudes were not left unturned by Paul in his writing to Timothy (1 Timothy 1:10). This admonition ended the periscope in verse 11. The growing quest for the acquisition of material goods cannot be over emphasised. There is lots of unwholesome behaviour around us today that portrays indecency. The 'trendy dressing' of nudity, boom shot, and unkempt hair with saggy and raggy dresses are pointers to this fact. Ukuedogho, (2020 sees the unwholesome lifestyle as the end of the society; the fabrics, cords and life-support system have been removed. The dignity in labour has been replaced with sexual harassing attitudes aimed at making cheap money.

Lustful Passion

Richards (1985) notes that the word "lust" is a translation of *epithymia*. This Greek word denotes any strong desire directed toward an object. In passages like Jas 1:14 which speaks of a person "carried away and enticed by his own lust"). The object of *epithymia* is not necessarily sexual. The translators of the NIV have chosen to restrict the use of the English word "lust" to passages in the OT and NT where sexual passion is implied. These passages (Ro 1:26, 27; Col 3:5; 1 Thess. 4:5, Eph 4:19) deal with a sexual desire stimulated by the sin nature—a desire that seeks to possess and use persons who are not rightly objects of desire. The quest for cheap and personal gains has driven some into practices that are unwholesome. The desire to 'become' without hard work is the primary motive here. Cheap gains underestimate the price for labour in success.

The growing trend of sexual immorality in the Batere cannot be totally removed from the quest to readily make wealth without labour rather; the sale of the body has remained the only anchorage for laying hold unto the unclaimed wealth of the other (Udi, 2017). The pertinent question here is, for how long such attitude can sustain the community. Apostle Paul stressed on the value of Godliness in relation

to contentment pointing out that we came into this world without anything and as such we shall leave it with nothing (1 Timothy 6:6-7). In a world wherein economic system always shapes ideas, lustful passion remains the underlining factor, a major weakness of Weber's theory (Haralambos and Holborn 2013).

The Media

The global trend today is for everyone to get along with the media without necessary concern for the control of its contents as we have in education and oil sector (Lyotard, 1994). This has resulted in the production of different materials from print to non-print, audio to visual forms that can send and receive information with the speed of light. However, the bad-news in the media lies on its negative impact on the society. Like a juggernaut, it has found its way into virtually every area of the society in one form or the other with both yang and yin influence (Osajie, 2011).

The power of unhealthy pornography used abusively has left its effects even among rural and sub-urban communities. The smallest mobile phones are polyphonic others with very high and sensitive functions. Sending and receiving of multimedia signals has not only help to pollute the community but has opened a new wave of sexual immorality 'phone sex'. Harvey (2008) notes that the media and especially its digitalisation has opened to the viewers wider range of channels; it also implies more avenue of infiltration and sexual corruption.

Gbubemi (2020) argues that our youths – boys and girls learn almost every bad behaviour from the media while the society stands aloof, watching helplessly because she lacks the power to control the media contents. Davidson (2003) earlier affirms that people are moved by what they see. Hence, the gradual sexual trend among the Batere people, the media cannot be exonerated from it whether good or bad.

Challenges of Economic Hardship

Femi (2020) notes that the Batere community's strategic location offers economic opportunities like transportation, fishing, farming, and trading. Unfortunately, there is a shift towards laziness instead of utilizing these advantages for progress hence the prevailing economic hardship is commonly blamed for rising sexual

immorality among the people (Otaye, 2017). Despite being early participants in government and having interactions with colonial powers, these individuals lack government support to alleviate economic struggles. The traditional communal lifestyle is no longer sustainable, but there are no solutions in sight to address financial difficulties (Amejuma, 2017). The increasing rate of joblessness among youths and young adults call for concern hence the growing phenomenon of sexual immorality in the face of nothing, the selling point remains the body to make a living. Although, according to Ejimogho (2018), this is no excuse for sexual immorality as there are still available agricultural opportunities of fishing, farming, and even trading.

Effects of Immorality on the Church

Sexual immorality greatly impacts Christian living by creating a gap in living a godly life, damaging the relationship between believers and God, and affecting marriages and societal norms.According to Mbiti (2000), Marriage is the cornerstone of life in African culture. It serves as the nexus where past ancestors, present individuals, and future generations converge. This sacred union encapsulates the essence of time, allowing the entirety of history to converge and unfold anew. Engaging in premarital sexual activities not only jeopardizes the sanctity of marriage but also defiles the sacred space ordained by a benevolent deity.

Ehioghae (2006) Premarital sex leads to higher breakup rates and guilt in couples. It also increases the chances of extramarital affairs. Habits formed before marriage can impact fidelity. Kubo (2008) About one third of girls who have premarital sex get pregnant, even when contraceptives are ignored. Many turn to unsafe abortions, risking their lives and fertility. This can strain marriages, especially in African cultures. Mbiti (2000) underscored this point when he wrote: “marriage and procreation in African communities are a unity; without procreation, marriage is incomplete. It is therefore easy to concur with Davis that promiscuous (premarital and extramarital) sexual intercourse is contrary to divine law thus; it can endanger the health and childbearing capacity of couples in marriage. When widespread as a societal phenomenon, it undermines morality and contributes to the decline of civilization. Talking about morality and moral value, a very important aspect that must be considered is the effect of inappropriate sexual habit

on morality. It is difficult to dissociate premarital or extra martial sex from the phenomenon of prostitution and other forms of sex commercialization. In fact, premarital sex provides the basis for prostitution. Quite recently, Chidi (2006) gave a chilling report of the gruesome murder of two Nigerian girls in Italy. The circumstances of their death were linked to prostitution, which often stems from premarital sex and various factors like poverty and peer pressure.

When the walls of chastity have been broken down by premarital intercourse, it lures to prostitution under certain conditions becomes almost irresistible. One would therefore like to reiterate the point earlier made by Davis that when premarital sex and other sexual aberrations become widespread as a societal phenomenon, it has a vitiating effect on morality. Besides linking the great increase in divorce and broken home to sexual sins, Donovan (2005) has also declared that "many societies today are morally and socially unstable because people have determined to live without regards to God's law. Premarital or extramarital intercourse is a disgrace and must be eschewed by everybody.

Effects on the Society

Mbiti (2000) states that marriage is central for African people, where past, present, and future generations converge. Premarital sex weakens marriage, posing a threat to its sanctity. Ehioghae (2006) suggests that couples who have sex before marriage are more likely to break up. Even if they stay together, guilt may linger. Premarital sex can lead to extramarital affairs. Lack of fidelity can lead to marriage problems.

Effects on Morality

Premarital and extramarital sex impact morality by contributing to prostitution and sex commercialization. Chidi (2006) recounted the tragic murder of two Nigerian girls in Italy linked to prostitution. Premarital sex can lead to prostitution, influenced by factors like poverty and societal norms. Davis warns that widespread premarital sex affects ethics and morality. Kubo (2008) found that premarital sex can lead to unintended pregnancies and unsafe abortions, impacting marital relationships. Mbiti (2000) states that in African societies, marriage and reproduction are closely linked, and promiscuity can harm couples' health and fertility.

Prospects of the Control of Immorality in *Batere*

Teaching Biblical Truth in Love: Churches must balance prosperity and holiness in teaching and preaching without compromise. For instance, Our Daily Bread revealed how a message on the eight commandments, which says "Thou shall not steal" (Ex. 20:15) was preached by the Evangelist J. John in 2001 and its dramatic results in the lives of brethren.

Offer Counselling Services to the Community: Once the underlying issue has been identified, the church should regularly provide such services as a means of contributing to the community. In addition to assisting those who have already been affected, the youth should be educated about the perils through biblical teachings.Offering effective marriage counselling is essential not only for individuals but also for couples, families, and the congregation within the community.

Celebration of Role Models: with purity, chastity, and virginity among teenagers by encouraging participation in church-affiliated organizations such as Girls Auxiliary and Lydia in the Baptist community, as well as Girls Guide in the Anglican tradition.

Build Cell Groups among the People: The church is tol provide discipleship through Small Groups to bring the message closer to the peope. Discipleship helps to establish a mentor-mentee relationship with any individual.

Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) and Pentecostal Fellowship of Nigeria (PFN) don't always certify pastors before practice. Many pastors not called by God. If true ministers remain, priesthood ethics preserved. Reduce moral decay among pastors. Christians should correct wrongdoers with love, not ignore. Address ungodly behavior, advise, counsel, pray for them. Support those in challenges like Bartimaeus and Zacchaeus. Assist those in need materially. Be fair in all transactions.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Before Western influence, immorality was taboo in Batere land. Virginity was valued, but Western influence led to increased sexual promiscuity. This has

resulted in unwanted pregnancies, broken homes, and high divorce rates. Marital infidelity is common, and sexual violence has increased. Poverty and illiteracy are rising due to unplanned parenting. The church is trying to help, but more needs to be done to address these issues in the community.

It is suggested that the integration of traditional Batere family values into the educational curriculum be emphasized, supported by the messaging from the church. Additionally, the system of incentives for practicing abstinence should be evaluated and strengthened, regulations on media content should be enforced, parents should be encouraged to model sexual ethics for their children, and efforts should be made to promote religio-cultural ceremonies that promote chastity.

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APPENDIX
INTERVIEWS

Name	Sex	Occupation	Age	Date	Place
Bisibimbo, O.	Male	Teacher	55	2020	Batere
Ejuone, A. A	Male	Clergy	64	2020	Batere
Ukuedogho, F	Female	Trader	51	2020	Batere
Obubu, O	Male	Teacher	49	2020	Batere
Gbubemi, E.	Male	Missionary	30	2020	Batere
Femi N.	Male	Clergy	46	2020	Batere
Oritsebemigho O	Male	Civil Servant	39	2020	Batere
Stephen J	Male	Farmer	52	2020	Batere
Oritsemaye B.	Female	Tailor	41	2020	Batere
Omasheye M.	Female	Retiree	71	2020	Batere