

Article

The Dilemmas of Monogamy: Pleasure, Discipline and the Pentecostal Moral Self in the Republic of Benin

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Abstract: Based on ethnographic research in the Republic of Benin, this article explores how Pentecostal teachings on marriage and the management of sexual pleasure contribute to shaping converts' moral selves. For Pentecostals, fidelity towards God, when single and fidelity between partners, once married, is presented as the ideal model of partnership to which every "Born-Again" should aspire. In the context where polygamous unions are socially accepted, Pentecostal pastors teach that a satisfactory sexual life restricted to marriage is the means of building successful monogamous unions. However, sexual satisfaction might not always guarantee marital success, especially when people face problems of infertility. The author suggests that the disciplinary regimes that these teachings promote contribute to shaping new modes of intimacy, which are compatible with societal changes but often contradict the extant social norms and ideals of reproduction. Moral dilemmas arising from this tension are the key to understanding how Pentecostal Christianity shapes the moral self. The article addresses how Pentecostals in Benin navigate and negotiate cultural continuities and discontinuities in relation to church authority and family life.

Keywords: Pentecostalism; morality; sexuality; marriage; monogamy; reproduction; infertility

1. Introduction

In recent years, relations of intimacy in Africa have experienced important transformations. These transformations can be considered part of a global trend where emotional intimacy is seen as the source of the "ties that bind" ([1], p. 2). In Africa, as in many other parts of the world, ideas of romantic love, the pursuit of pleasure and the ideal of a companionate marriage have increasingly become paramount attributes of modern relationships and forms of personhood [2,3]. These shifts in contemporary relationships cannot be isolated from broader social, political and economic processes, such as economic liberalization, international migration and the flows of information facilitated by mass media. These factors that have contributed to shaping local aspirations and interpretations of intimacy, based on the cultivation of individualist subjectivities and new forms of consumption [1–3].

The growth of Pentecostal Christianity in Africa, as in other parts of the world, has been part of the processes outlined above. The proliferation of Pentecostal churches in this continent has coincided with the implementation of neoliberal policies and the retreat of state power during the postcolonial and post-cold war era [4–7]. Pentecostalism has been interpreted, on the one hand, as a reaction to a societal environment of fear, deprivation and lack of confidence in the future caused by a retreat of the state [5,8]. These churches have been seen as filling a void left by the state in the provision of social services ([7], p. 53). On the other hand, their emphasis on conversion and the need to break with the past, has been seen as the vehicle by which people, especially the emerging middle classes, articulate aspirations to "modernity" [9–11]. By demonizing anything associated with tradition,

they challenge older forms of authority grounded in rural life, as well as in religious and political colonial structures [7,9,12]. In doing so, these churches provide new eschatological, spiritual and moral narratives to re-interpret and predict world events ([7], pp. 63–66) and establish new forms of authority that regulate people's subjectivities and their affects ([7], pp. 65–67).

It is in this area that Pentecostal Christianity in Africa has played an active role in shaping new patterns of intimacy in people's relationships. Indeed, it has been argued that in their efforts to transform society according to a Pentecostal ethos, Pentecostal churches have contributed to shaping ideas of personhood, gender relations and emotions that are compatible with a neoliberal ethic and aspirations [8,13–16] which resonate with the modern ideals of intimacy [1]. One of the key issues is how, in the context of global concerns with the treatment and prevention of HIV, Pentecostal Christians have played an active role in teaching their congregations how to manage their marital and sexual lives. In doing so, they have relied on the introduction of methods such as counseling and the publication and distribution of educational literature on these topics [10,16]. These methods have informed the way in which "born-again" converts learn to express affection in public [17,18], assimilate ideas of romantic love [19] and train their emotions [20] to achieve an ideal of companionate marriage. People in churches are encouraged to speak openly about matters of sexuality, thus transforming local practices of secrecy that prevail in traditional religious contexts [10,17,21,22]. Moreover, these teachings contribute to a moral revaluation of social conditions that in African contexts tend to be stigmatized, such as singleness [23], infertility [24] and the bearing of children outside the marital bond [25].

This article contributes to and extends the body of literature outlined above by exploring how Pentecostal Christians within the Republic of Benin shape their moral selves through practices of discipline and self-discipline in their intimate relationships and the management of their sexuality. I focus on the moral dilemmas that Pentecostal teachings on sexuality bring about and the kinds of moral choices that Pentecostals are confronted with when they try to follow them. Indeed, the analysis of moral and ethical dilemmas has been a key concern in the study of Pentecostalism [26–29]. This is because Pentecostal conversion with its demands to break with the past [11] in order to be "born-again" requires a degree of separation or rupture from former social norms and values and an alignment with new Christian ones [30]. Pentecostal conversion is therefore characterized by an inherent tension between cultural continuities and discontinuities that derive from this process of rupture [29–32]. In his study of Pentecostalism in Ghana, Daswani [29] highlights this tension by bringing together advances in the study of Christianity and rupture with those from the anthropology of ethics and defines Pentecostal transformation in terms of ethical practice. He argues that rupture is always accompanied with ethical disputes and deliberations, where believers try to discern which aspects of their pasts should be left behind and which ones carried forward. They examine the compromises they have to make to remain committed Christians ([28], p. 13). Thus, Pentecostal ethical practice involves three interconnected aspects. The first consists of processes of discipline established by the church to ensure the continuity of a Christian future. The second aspect concerns moments of uncertainty, where converts question the parameters established to define what acceptable Christian practice is and what it is not. The third is what he calls "acts of philosophical labor and critical reflection" that intend "either to alleviate moral ambiguities or to create innovative positions around which new norms eventually develop" ([28], p. 469; [29], p. 7). Framing rupture as ethical practice, he suggests allows "for a better understanding of how people respond to an incommensurability of values and practices internal to Pentecostalism" ([28], p. 468).

The moral questioning and dilemmas that happen in the domain of sexuality can be analyzed in the light of some of Daswani's observations and Robbins' [27] theory of morality and social change.¹ In particular, I am interested in the relationship between disciplinary practices, moments of uncertainty

¹ I will discuss this process of moral change in relation to Robbins' [16,17] work in the last part of this article.

or ethical deliberations and people's responses to these moments. Moreover, one also needs to consider the relational and emotional qualities of Pentecostal transformation ([29], pp. 20, 27), the way it takes place and is achieved through people's relationships with their kin groups, their immediate family, pastors, church fellows, Jesus and God [28,29,32]. Also, the articulation of emotional expressions that accompany these relationships, such as bonds of affection, love, shame, anger or regret cannot be isolated from the analysis of the process by which converts shape their moral selves. I want to highlight how in cases where people experience conditions such as infertility that bring a sense of "disruption to social and family life" ([33], p. 201; [34]), Pentecostal "ethical practice" provides a sense of continuity and hope. I also show how moral failure and discipline open the possibility of bringing about moral change. At least in matters of sexuality, change is not exclusively the product of moments of philosophical or critical reflection ([29], p. 7). Instead, I suggest moments of moral failure, the disciplinary practices to which converts subject themselves and/or are made subject to and the experience of redemption that results from these, are central to understanding this process. In this case, moral failure and discipline should not be solely seen as negative aspects of a coercive or restrictive moral order; instead, I want to highlight their positive and productive potential.

In Benin, as in other African countries where polygynous² unions are prevalent, Pentecostals place an important emphasis on prescribing and teaching how to build monogamous unions where sex is restricted to the context of marriage. These teachings establish disciplinary regimes that also bring about important moral challenges. It is assumed that a satisfactory sexual life plays a crucial role in building and maintaining successful Godly intended monogamous unions. However, in a patrilineal society such as this, where having numerous descendants is highly valued, a satisfactory sexual life does not always guarantee marital success. This is especially the case when monogamous couples face problems of infertility. I argue that the moral and ethical dilemmas of people in these situations reveal certain continuities in the importance of the patrilineage and the value placed on sexual reproduction to secure its permanence. However, in cases when infertility threatens this value, Pentecostal ethical practice can provide a sense of personal continuity. However, this does not mean that the authority of the patrilineage remains unchanged vis-à-vis Pentecostal values. How people experience moral questioning, the choices they make and the way in which they negotiate the tensions between the imperatives of their lineages with those of the church, are key to understanding how Pentecostal Christianity in Benin brings about moral change in social norms and values.

To develop my argument I will first introduce some general characteristics of marital and sexual relationships between men and women in contemporary Benin and some of their historical transformations. Second, I will present the ways in which Pentecostal teachings try to respond to contemporary changes by providing specific moral guidelines. In particular, I describe the kinds of teachings addressed to women and men and the disciplinary regimes that they create. Third, I present the challenges that these teachings bring about, especially when people face problems of infertility. Using the case study of a young couple without children, I present the moral dilemma faced and the tensions between a person's patrilineage and the authority of the church. Fourth, I present what happens in situations where people breach the Pentecostal moral behavior and commit adultery. I suggest that these moments present key opportunities to effect moral change and where disciplinary practices such as public confession play a central role. We will see that these breaches of moral behavior can be considered essential to shaping people's moral selves at individual and societal levels.

The Ethnographic Setting

The material that I present here was gathered during a period of nineteen months of ethnographic fieldwork in the southeast of the Republic of Benin, between 2008 and 2010. The events that I describe

² Polygyny refers to the union of one man with several wives, whereas Polygamy refers to plural unions in general.

happened at the Assemblies of God (AoG), a Pentecostal church in a town that I call here Ipese.³ Ipese is a semi-rural town situated in the proximities of the border with Nigeria in an area with predominantly Yoruba population. This town has a population of approximately 5000 people and is characterized by the ethnic diversity of its population. Attracted by the burgeoning commercial activity of its two weekly markets, people from different ethnic backgrounds have settled in this town over the years. At the time of my fieldwork, the AoG church in this town had a membership of approximately 300 people, mostly of Gun origin, followed by the Yoruba.

In the Republic of Benin there exist a wide variety of Pentecostal churches with diverse theological approaches. Each of them could be situated somewhere between the continuum of so-called holiness movement or classical Pentecostalism and the increasingly popular prosperity gospel ([35], p. 9). The AoG is the Pentecostal church with most members at a national level. One of the main features of the AoG in Ipese is that its theology could be seen as closer to a classical Pentecostal theology, rather than the prosperity gospel. The pastor and fellowship at the AoG church in Ipese were rather suspicious of prosperity gospel pastors, especially from Nigeria, who emphasized the importance of material wealth as a testimony of God's blessings. Sermons and teachings in this church placed particular emphasis on the need to observe a strict moral conduct. This was particularly the case in relation to sexual practices. I now turn to present some of general aspects of marital relations and sexual reproduction in Benin.

2. Forms of Marriage, Sexuality and Reproduction in the Context of Social Change in Benin

Throughout history, marital relations in Benin, as in many other parts of Africa, have been subject to transformations that reflect broader changes in patterns of power, economic relations, gender inequalities and the assimilation of new cultural ideas [36]. At the beginning of the twentieth century Fadipe [37] described the Yoruba marriage as "one of the social institutions (...) which has been most in a state of flux as a result of the diffusion of foreign ideas and the quick process of economic growth" ([37], p. 91). In this quote, Fadipe referred to the influence of European colonization and Christian missions. Today, this colonial legacy converges with the influence of the internet, foreign films, Latin American and Indian soap operas, the government's legislation in matters of family law, the promotion of women's rights by international organizations and Pentecostal Christianity.

The existence of polygamy in African societies has been subject to contention, debate and study in religious, governmental and academic circles. Nineteenth century Christian missionaries⁴ saw polygamy as one of the major obstacles to overcome in their efforts to Christianize the population [38,39]. Many of them condemned this practice as uncivilized, unchristian and immoral ([40], p. 341). Missionary efforts to establish monogamy as the only form of Christian marriage were supported by colonial administrations that justified its enforcement by establishing legal frameworks ([38], p. 55). However, there is also evidence that missionary strategies in establishing monogamy varied across the continent and denominations, some were more tolerant and permissive of polygyny than others ([38,40] pp. 54, 342, 343). This scenario presents some parallels with the current situation in Benin, as will be seen below.

Polygyny has been and continues to be a predominant form of marriage, especially in West Africa ([41], p. 363; [38], p. 56). Neither increasing urbanization, which modernization theories predicted would contribute to its disappearance ([41], p. 365), nor missionary efforts have achieved much to change this predominance. The study of polygamy in patrilineal societies in Africa has been at the center of classical ethnographies [42–45]. One of the main reasons given to explain why men seek to enter polygynous unions is to ensure a large progeny [43], or at least to secure one male child. A large

³ The name of this town and all personal names are pseudonyms. I would like to express my sincere gratitude to all the people in the Republic of Benin whose collaboration made this research possible.

⁴ Although the missionary presence in Africa can be traced back to the fifteenth century, it was until the nineteenth century that a systematic approach to missionization took place [30].

number of progeny allows men to establish their seniority and position themselves within the social hierarchy as heads of lineages [46]. It secures a so-called “wealth in people” [45] and the necessary social relations that increase a man’s opportunities to access political and/or economic power. Among the Yoruba, Gun and Fon in the southeast of Benin, having numerous children is highly valued despite a trend among younger people to have fewer children. People often say that a person who has many children is a wealthy person, regardless of her economic status. In Yoruba language, children are often described as precious beads and silver ([47], p. 167) and women are praised in traditional oral poetry (*oriki*) for providing their husbands with children ([48], p. 213).

In a society such as this, sexual relations, the means of reproduction, shape marital relations and negotiations of sexuality ([49], p. 159). These are often at the center of power struggles between partners and raise a great deal of concern and dilemma. Due to their capacity to procreate, women play a central role in the perpetuation of their husband’s lineage. They are seen both as powerful and dangerous beings that need to be respected and feared ([47], p. 167). As I witnessed in Benin, many women are well aware of the power they hold vis-à-vis their husbands. Sometimes they use their sexuality to their own advantage, in particular to obtain economic rewards from men ([50], p. 153). In turn, men manifest concern about the fidelity of their partners or wives and say that only women know whose child they are carrying in their wombs. A man’s decision to take a second or third wife is often a painful emotional experience for women. It brings about feelings of jealousy and creates rivalries between co-wives. Some women in polygamous unions come to terms with their situation, but many others do not. On various occasions I have heard women express with sadness that “the human heart cannot be shared”.

Although in Benin monogamy tends to be associated with Christian marriages, religious affiliation alone does not determine the type of marital union. During my fieldwork, I met several Muslim men who were monogamous. Similarly, different Christian denominations hold different views and levels of tolerance towards polygamous unions. It is well known that many so-called monogamous men in Catholic and Methodist churches marry and live with one official wife, but keep clandestine relationships with other women, who are popularly referred to as *seconde* or *troisième bureau* (second or third office). Similarly, the Celestial Church of Christ, one of the largest African Independent Churches in Benin, tolerates polygynous unions on the basis that it is hypocritical to claim monogamous fidelity, while living in concubinage ([38], p. 57). In contrast, Pentecostalism is the only Christian denomination that severely condemns polygamy as unchristian and immoral and shows no tolerance towards “born-again” men who decide to take another wife.

Moreover, in 2004, monogamy became the only form of union legally recognized in the national constitution of Benin. These legislative changes have been promoted by international NGOs promoting women’s rights and by the government’s efforts to appear “modern” vis-à-vis international donors. The national curriculum in Benin prescribes the teaching in schools of the constitutional law and the declaration of equal rights between men and women. These ideas are debated in the classrooms and young people are asking questions about whether polygyny is something that people should continue practicing. On various occasions, I had conversations with young people who were curious about how monogamy worked in “the West” and the reasons why people had few or no children. Nowadays, young people in Benin become sexually active at a young age and very often a marital union happens because a girl has already become pregnant. Older generations often complain that traditional values such as the importance of virginity at the time of marriage have been lost and they condemn young people’s behavior for their lack of morality ([51], p. 964). These local debates reflect how in Benin, as in other parts of Africa, idioms of love and “affective propriety” are used to express generational differences, or assert claims of power or “modernity” ([36], pp. 15, 16). But they also reflect a sense of loss and concern for what people perceive as “lack of moral guidelines” in a context of rapid social change. During many conversations, people said with disapproval that democracy and human rights had only caused disorder, a feeling that seems to be common in West Africa [7].

Pentecostal pastors are well aware of these debates and use their teachings about relationships to offer new moral guidelines. Interestingly, these teachings often draw upon certain “traditional” values to give them Christian meanings. I now turn to explore Pentecostal teachings in relation to sexual and marital relations.

3. Teaching Women and Men to Manage Sexual Desire within the Church

Based on Biblical principles, Pentecostals prescribe the observance of chastity and fidelity towards God while single and fidelity between partners once married. To achieve this, Pentecostal churches teach their congregations how to manage their sexual and marital lives in order to build Godly intended unions and to lead a good Christian life. Single people are taught to practice chastity and to restrain themselves from physical contact until the marriage takes place. However, once married, people are encouraged to enjoy their sexual union fully. Although teachings are directed at both men and women, women’s teachings are more prominent. Whereas women’s teachings focus on the management of sexual pleasure, teachings for men focus on the development of self-control.

Teachings for women start when they are young and single. Pentecostal young girls are encouraged to keep their “hearts” and bodies pure. Abstinence before marriage holds some attraction for Pentecostal girls. Women consider that Pentecostal churches provide the education that many do not receive at home. In everyday context, people talk and joke openly but indirectly about sex. However, many women told me that they do not necessarily receive sexual education. Beginning marriage as a virgin does not mean that a Pentecostal girl arrives at this point without knowledge. Prior to their wedding day, women who are engaged to be married attend meetings for married women, where the elder women advise them on matters related to their marital and sexual lives [21]. Although the importance of virginity could be considered a form of continuity with “traditional” values, this is not necessarily the case. In the past, virginity was very important because it ensured that children born from a marital union belonged to the husband’s patrilineage [37]. However, when a Pentecostal woman keeps her virginity, she is considered to gain God’s favor and to receive his blessings in reward. Therefore, the honor of woman’s virginity no longer falls upon her patrilineage or her husband’s patrilineage. Instead, the blessings and honor fall upon her. Although the value of virginity is pursued, this is regulated under the authority of the church not the patrilineage.

Once a Pentecostal woman is married, she is encouraged to be sexually active and to fully enjoy the sexual union, as long as it happens within the marital bond. In contrast, among non-Pentecostal women in Benin, as in many parts of West Africa, the sexual act within marriage is mostly seen as an act of procreation rather than a pleasurable activity. Women are usually expected to put up with unsatisfying relations for the sake of looking after children and sex is seen as a duty that a woman must endure ([51], pp. 966, 967). Pentecostal women are told that once they are married, the body of a wife belongs to her husband and the body of the husband belongs to his wife. Therefore, they should always be available to their husbands and both partners are entitled to enjoy the sexual act. Moreover, if a woman knows how to please her husband, it will be easier for her to retain him and to maintain a monogamous household. In this sense, Pentecostal teachings reinforce the popular idea that men’s infidelity is to be blamed on women’s behavior and their incapacity to satisfy their husband’s desires ([13], p. 558; [49], p. 173; [50].)

At the AoG church in Ipese, teachings on women’s sexuality used to take place during the women group’s gatherings every two weeks on Friday. The pastor’s wife, *maman* Jasmine, organized talks (on topics, such as personal care and hygiene, seduction and sexual performance, among others) that helped women to live a Christian life. In relation to personal care, *maman* Jasmine encouraged women to look after themselves and to be attractive to their husbands. She gave advice in aspects of intimate health and encouraged women to approach midwives and nurses in case they had concerns about either their own sexual health or that of their husbands. She also instructed women in the art of seduction. For example, she advised women to cook their husband’s favorite foods and to give variety to what they cooked. She encouraged them to show their affection by feeding their husbands, placing

the food in their mouths, removing the bones of their fish and making sure that their husbands had a pleasant time while they shared their meal. Although women are taught to dress very modestly in public, she advised them to reserve and wear revealing clothes in the bedroom. She also encouraged women to be the ones who approached their husbands to have sexual relations, instead of waiting for the husband's initiation. She finally advised women to soothe their husbands by offering their bodies whenever they were sad or angry. More importantly, women were taught to use their sexuality wisely in order to strengthen their marriage and bring their husbands closer to them. Maman Jasmine used to quote Proverbs 14:1 saying, "the wise woman builds her house, but the foolish one pulls it down with her hands." This way, they would prevent their husbands searching for, or justifying their extra-marital sexual liaisons.

There was a very important personal reason why maman Jasmine took these teachings so seriously. She told me that at the beginning of her marriage with the pastor, it had been very difficult for her to be physically affectionate and sexually open. She had grown up in a polygynous household in Togo. Her father had seven wives, of which five lived in the same compound at her village of origin. She had grown up being exposed to the jealousies and discussions between co-wives. Her own mother had left the paternal compound to live in Lome. Therefore, the relationship between her parents was never close. She never knew what conjugal love was meant to be. She feared men's behavior, because she had witnessed domestic violence within her own household. Therefore, once she married, it was very difficult for her to be physically affectionate. As a result, the pastor often felt frustrated because he felt rejected. But maman Jasmine wanted to please God. She was determined to be a good Christian wife. She approached the wife of the pastor in her former church and this woman gave her advice and recommended books to read. Maman Jasmine educated herself by reading the kinds of books that Pentecostal churches produce on these topics and sell to their fellowship. One such book, written by a Christian counselor, is called *Le Banquet du Seigneur. Le Super Sexe* (The Banquet of the Lord. Super Sex). The title refers to the act of marital sex as a banquet, something that is meant to be enjoyable and originally designed by God for that purpose. After having put in practice the things that she had learnt, she noticed the difference that a good sexual union had made to her marriage. She knew that many women in the church could benefit from her own experience and that is why she invested herself in teaching women about their sexuality.

Teachings about the management of sexuality and disciplinary practices for women have a positive and affective quality. They shape women's emotions through the channeling of sexual desire and pleasure ([20], p. 354). Women need to practice abstention when they are single but in the marital context, the sexual union is meant to be both fully enjoyed and key to building a bond of love between husband and wife. Although these disciplinary practices place women under the authority of the church, they are presented and exercised in a way that holds a certain appeal to women. Therefore, women subject themselves voluntarily through "technologies of the self" [52] that involve ways of dressing, self-care and seduction. Women's teachings are complemented by those addressed to men. I now turn to explore the main features of men's teachings.

Teaching Men to Develop Self-Control

Teachings directed to men focus on the development of self-control. In order for a marriage to be monogamous, Pentecostal men need to steer clear of the temptation to seek other women and to avoid succumbing to peer or family pressures. These teachings contradict popular opinions and notions of masculinity based on sexual performance, which predominate in patrilineal societies such as these ([51], p. 966). It is common to hear men say that polygyny is in African men's blood. They justify themselves saying that the desire for more than one woman is a natural need that they have to fulfill ([49], p. 166) and peer pressure encourages monogamous men to seek extramarital affairs ([49], p. 171). Pentecostal men acknowledge these difficulties. However for them, their sense of masculinity is developed in their sense of self-control [53,54]. The Pentecostal men I talked to agreed

that the only way they could manage to do this was by being filled with the Holy Spirit, which is achieved and cultivated through practices such as prayer and fasting.

For example, papa Daniel remembered the bad experiences he had while growing up in a polygynous household. He had witnessed the jealousy of his father's co-wives, the discord among their children and subsequent accusations of witchcraft. Even before his conversion to Pentecostalism, he had decided that he wanted to be monogamous. He did not want to repeat what he had experienced as a child. Nevertheless, when he married, he had several secret "girlfriends" and owned a flat where he used to entertain them. However, when he became born-again, he decided to leave this lifestyle behind.

One of the major life changes that he described after giving his life to Jesus was precisely his ability to leave his "addiction" for women. He compared this to other addictions such as alcohol or tobacco. He portrayed peer pressure as having played an important role in his previous life, whereas his current life was one where he was able to withstand this pressure. One of the things that made him change his mind was that the church often preaches that men who have extramarital affairs are more prone to contract HIV, or to die due to spells put on them by the women with whom they sleep. He feared dying young, leaving his wife widowed and his children orphaned. He stressed that it was Jesus in his life that gave him this clarity of thought and the strength to change his lifestyle. He said,

"You see? Temptations are everywhere, in the job, at home, with friends, in the family [...] but the person who has Jesus is different to the one who doesn't have Jesus in his life. It also depends on the faith and the strength of the faith of each person [...] You always have temptations. It happens among members of the church, and even between pastors and their fellowship. But if you really know The One [Jesus] you have received, then you will be strong [...] Satan will tempt you to see if you are solid, if you can resist. But with prayer and fasting you can always resist, [temptation] will pass." [55]

Resisting temptation is a matter of choice that every Pentecostal has to make and as papa Daniel said, everyone is equally exposed. Similarly, the pastor at the AoG in Ipepe admitted that leading a monogamous lifestyle was not easy but it was possible and a man could learn how to do it. I once commented that it must be difficult to lead a monogamous life, especially when polygyny is the norm and most of people have grown up in polygynous households. He agreed, but also said that a person's upbringing does not determine her choices. That is why, he said, it is important to be filled with the Holy Spirit and lead a life of constant prayer and fasting, which are essential to develop self-control. In the case of men, self-discipline, self-control and being sexually satisfied with their wives are key elements that allow men to lead a monogamous lifestyle but more importantly, they constitute the elements by which Pentecostal men develop their sense of manhood, spiritual strength and power ([53], pp. 264, 265; [54], p. 225). Therefore, most men no longer need to define their masculinity based on the criteria of non-Pentecostal men, such as sexual performance.

Teachings directed to women and men establish disciplinary regimes that shape intimate relationships between men and women. In their efforts to build monogamous unions, Pentecostals focus their attention on building bonds of love and affection between partners ([18,19]; [20], p. 31). In doing so, they also seek to address certain dissatisfaction with polygynous unions where emotions such as jealousy and rivalries between co-wives tend to dominate. These teachings demonstrate that we cannot understand Pentecostal ethical practice in the area of sexuality without paying attention to people's relational and affective ties ([29], p. 20). Teachings on marriage, the management of sexuality and channeling of desire are essential to achieving a good Christian life. Although monogamy provides certain advantages such as avoiding jealousies in the household, there is also a downside: when a couple cannot conceive a child. I now turn to explore the challenges and the ethical dilemma of infertility and childlessness.

4. The Challenges of Infertility among Pentecostals in the Republic of Benin

Cross-cultural studies of infertility have demonstrated that this condition is often experienced as “disruption to the anticipated course of life” ([34], pp. 388, 390; [33,56]) and people develop different cultural strategies to cope with and make sense of it [34,56]. In a social context like the southeast of Benin where having a large progeny is important, its opposite, childlessness, bears a great stigma. Although the consequences of infertility affect women and men, it is women who tend to bear most of the negative consequences [33,34,56].

In Benin, parenthood is a marker of adulthood. As a sign of respect, when a person has a child, she will be called mother or father followed by the name of their eldest child or their eldest male child. Those who are unable to conceive are far less respected than those with children; their opinion is hardly valued or taken into account at family reunions. This is particularly difficult when a woman is the first wife of a man, since her position within her husband’s family is devalued. Women are severely criticized for being “barren” and not fully accomplished, as well as very often becoming targets of witchcraft accusations. However, men do not carry the same stigma. When a couple is not able to conceive, a man compensates for the lack of offspring by trying to conceive children with other women. Although women are often seen as being victims of their husbands’ infidelities, what is less often mentioned is the way in which extended families and peer groups pressure men to engage in sexual encounters outside of the marital bond.

The importance of fertility is such that people engage in different methods to secure offspring, from traditional remedies to Pentecostal prayers. Some people consider that Pentecostal churches are highly efficacious. In some cases, people convert after having obtained the gift of fertility from God but this is not always the case. Once women are pregnant, Pentecostals accompany them in prayer. Miscarriages or hemorrhages during childbirth are attributed to the work of spirits. Deaths that happen during childbirth are considered some of the most spiritually dangerous; therefore it is a moment when women need the most protection via the use of prayer. However, sometimes Pentecostal prayers do not work. Unanswered prayers pose serious challenges to those who cannot conceive. Counter-intuitively, it is probably Pentecostal men who find it more difficult to cope with infertility compared to Pentecostal women ([24], p. 42). I will now show some of these difficulties with reference to the case of Florent and Pelagie.

At the time of my fieldwork, Florent was a man in his mid-thirties and Pelagie was a woman in her late twenties. They were married and attended with commitment the AoG church in Ipese. Florent in particular, was a member of the church committee and helped as a Fon translator. During the five years of their marriage, they had not been able to conceive a child. He indirectly attributed their fertility problems to family jealousy. His wife had been diagnosed with blocked fallopian tubes, a condition that in this context is explained as caused by witchcraft. It is believed that relatives tie a woman’s fallopian tubes through “occult” procedures to prevent a woman from conceiving and to block the couple’s future. People frequently prayed for the couple for them to be delivered from malign forces. Pelagie often fasted and prayed alone or in company of other women, especially the pastor’s wife.

During a conversation, Florent shyly confessed that this situation had been a great challenge to his Christian life. He tried to avoid going to his town of origin, because he did not want to hear criticism. His maternal aunts insisted that he took another wife. He said, “I love my wife very much and hearing these comments makes me feel very sad. Besides, it is a sin! Christians are supposed to attach to one woman and become one flesh”. His wife Pelagie faced similar criticism and difficulties, as do other women who cannot conceive. She struggled to come to terms with her situation, however, maintaining virtuous behavior was for her the means to earn God’s favor and sustain her marriage. It was clear that they loved each other. They expressed to each other affection, in the ways that were taught and encouraged at church. For example, whenever they gave a testimony in front of the assembly they held hands or, in festive occasions, they wore outfits made of the same fabric.

When I asked Florent in which ways this experience had challenged his Christian life, he said, “In Benin, a person is not complete if they don’t have children. When you die and you don’t have children, people say that you just die like that! You don’t have a future; you don’t have someone who will be called ‘your son’. Nobody will bury you and represent you after your death”. I asked if he was concerned about it and he added:

“I don’t care much about my burial. They can throw my corpse away and let it rot. Those who don’t know Jesus are those who worry about the corpse. We Christians know that the flesh is just flesh and it will disintegrate. What matters is the soul that goes to heaven.” [57]

In this case, he was not concerned about the funeral ceremony as such, or what would happen if nobody gave him a proper burial. However, he was concerned about not having someone who would be called “his son”, someone who would bear his name after his death, or would inherit the house he had built: elements that in this context index the permanence of a patrilineage. When I asked him how he dealt with this situation, he said, “I just pray”. He also tried to convince himself that this was not really important. He said, “For people, the honor of this world is what matters most [...] I think God will give me a child and if He doesn’t, I cannot worry about this honor”. Florent was confronted with uncertainty and moral dilemma: to give in to family pressures or to remain loyal to his wife. He critically reflected about his situation and tried to find an explanation for why he was facing this challenge. In this case, judgment and discernment were important in his ethical practice ([28], p. 472). Florent had decided to subject himself to the moral code of the church and to practice self-discipline through prayer and self-control. This gave him and his wife a sense of hope. In cases of infertility, it has been suggested, people develop cultural strategies to reframe their understandings of the self and the world [34]. The “Judeo-Christian ethic” does so, it offers “shifts in vision” that enable people to reframe their understanding of themselves and to re-establish a certain sense of continuity ([34], pp. 401, 402). This happened in the case of Florent and Pelagie.

Florent and Pelagie had chosen to live their lives according to the moral guidelines of the church. Among non-Christian unions, the lack of children justifies the dissolution of a marriage. However, Pentecostal men and women cannot seek divorce in these situations. Those who cannot conceive are encouraged to become stronger in their faith and to use this experience as an opportunity to get closer to God. As a result, Pentecostals shift the focus of the marital union away from its merely reproductive capacity and the patrilineage and instead, place stronger emphasis on its affective role. Thus in principle, the centrality of the patrilineage becomes secondary. However, as I will explain later, this shift is not always achieved. Moreover, because Florent and Pelagie had chosen to focus on cultivating their marital union and relationship with God, they received strong support from the church, particularly in the form of prayers and social recognition. They were considered good Christians. Their social relations within the church offered essential support in moments of struggle and eased their efforts to abide to a moral framework. These relationships gave them a sense of social continuity that counterbalanced the “disruption” in their patrilineal relationships.

The way in which Pentecostals experience these kinds of moral challenges and the kind of choices they make are influenced by a person’s gender and his or her position within the patrilineage. For example, Pentecostal women who cannot conceive are usually treated with dignity within the church and their self-worth is not necessarily questioned. However, things tend to be more difficult for men. Monogamy limits men’s opportunities to secure at least one male offspring and to secure the permanence of their patrilineage. Florent’s anxiety in relation to his death is a clear example of this struggle. It is not insignificant that he expressed concerns in relation to his death. In Benin, people who die without having a child are considered to have lived a futile life, no matter how wealthy, famous, talented or successful they might have been. It is during funerals that most members of the lineage are reunited, where people judge others as to whether or not they lived life to the full and managed to become “successful” in life ([46], p. 362). His testimony conveys a negotiated acceptance of his condition and certain assimilation of Pentecostal ideas of the afterlife. However, his hesitation

and concern for not having someone that would be called “his son” after he passed away, conveyed concern for not having someone that would ensure the permanence of his patrilineage.

Many men however, do not manage to overcome the dilemmas of infertility. They end up giving in to family pressures and committing adultery. I now turn to explore these moments of moral failure and the way in which discipline and redemption play a crucial role in shaping moral change.

5. Sin, Discipline, Redemption and Moral Change in Benin

Whenever a member of the AoG church commits a “major” sin such as adultery, they are required to confess in front of the assembly and are subjected to a period of discipline. A person’s public confession usually takes place during the Sunday service. The person usually explains the conditions in which such a “sin” happened and manifests his/her repentance. After the confession, members of the assembly pray for the person, to ask for God’s forgiveness. During the period of “discipline” the person sits at the back of the church and is suspended from his/her position of responsibility within the church. The length of this period can vary from one month to one year, depending on each individual case, or until the person has demonstrated a complete change in her behavior. When a person concludes the period of discipline, he/she is reincorporated to their former roles and into the life of the church. Most Pentecostal churches in Benin have the same kind of disciplinary practices.

During my fieldwork, there were two cases of adultery committed by men. None of these men decided to marry a second wife. If this had happened, they would have been expelled from the church. Because these two men repented, they were subjected to discipline. One of them was papa Elodie, whose period of discipline lasted for more than one year. Papa Elodie used to be a very devout Christian and an active member of the AoG in Ipese. When I first arrived in Benin, papa Elodie did not live with his wife, he had a concubine and lived with her in another town. After a few months he returned to Ipese to live with his wife, he repented and started a period of discipline. Papa Elodie had one thing in common with Florent: he did not have a male child. He was the father of a young girl with his official wife, who after the birth of their first child could no longer conceive any more children. During one of my conversations with his wife, she confessed that this had caused an enormous strain in their marriage, especially in relation to her in-laws. Her husband’s parents had put a lot of pressure on them to conceive a male child. Papa Elodie was also a successful merchant and spent large periods of time away from home. It is common that men with strong economic positions, like papa Elodie, receive strong peer and family pressure to take other wives ([49], p. 167). This must have happened to papa Elodie.

Pentecostal discipline is harsh and committing adultery not only means gaining God’s disfavor but mainly losing face among church members. Therefore Pentecostal men think twice before giving in to family and peer pressures, especially if they have achieved a position of respectability within the church. However, having or not having descendants, especially male, has a strong impact on how men in Benin position themselves in relation to the rest of their kin and how they establish themselves as respectable men. In this case, both Florent and papa Elodie were well-respected members of the church, but each of them decided to respond differently to the same moral challenge. One possible reason might be that Florent did not have the same position within his lineage as papa Elodie. Florent was not the eldest son of his father. In contrast, papa Elodie was the eldest male child and a successful businessman, qualities that make him eligible for succession after his father’s death. When a man is the eldest male of his father’s children, the pressure from the patrilineage tends to be stronger. It is very likely that a person’s position within her family, patrilineage and other circles in society influence a person’s moral failure. We see here again, a tension between the imperatives of the patrilineage and those of the church.

The assimilation of Pentecostal moral behavior and the tensions that arise when a convert is confronted with the imperatives of opposing moral values is not exclusive of Pentecostals in Benin. Robbins [26,27] describes how the Urapmin Pentecostals of Papua New Guinea experience moral dilemma in quite significant ways, to the extent that they approach most of their lives as a moral

torment. Drawing on a Weberian view of social values, Robbins suggests that society is constituted of different spheres, such as the economic, political, esthetic, erotic and intellectual ([27], p. 298), which are hierarchically organized and each one having a dominant value that governs it. Where there is harmony within and between spheres, there exists what he calls a “morality of reproduction”, in which most of the moral action happens unquestioningly in everyday life. However, conflict between or within these value spheres lays the ground for a “morality of freedom” and choice, where “people become consciously aware of choosing their own fate” ([27], pp. 299, 300). When a society such as the Urapmin are confronted with a changing hierarchy of values caused by rapid social change, moral conflicts arise because the old or previously predominant values assert their importance in face of the new or formerly subordinate ones ([27], p. 302). The Urapmin live in a constant moral conflict because they have to choose between two different cultural logics with conflicting predominant values: one of Christian individualism that prioritizes individual salvation and one of Urapmin relationalism that prioritizes the creation and maintenance of social relationships. While Christianity has changed ideas in many domains, it has not completely done so in the domain of what Robbins calls “social structure”, in other words, it has not completely changed cultural ideas on how society should be organized and how relationships should be carried out ([27], p. 306).

Pentecostals in Benin also live in a context where we could say the hierarchy of values has been disrupted as a result of social change. The experiences of moral questioning that I have explored here demonstrate the tension that exists between the values and authority of the patrilineage and those of the church. Despite changes derived from conversion, the value of reproduction and the principles of seniority maintain a central role in shaping the imperatives of social relations in Benin. However, not every Pentecostal experiences moral conflicts to the same extent or degree. What shapes experiences of conflict and the moral choices they make depend to a large extent on a person’s specific social position within her patrilineage. Therefore, moral conflicts need to be understood in relation to a person’s generational context, gender and her position within the patrilineage. These conflicts need to be understood in relation to a person’s individual position within the broader social structure and her negotiations of different spheres of value.

Although, moral failure constitutes an individual experience it also has a collective transformative potential. When a person confesses publicly, members of the assembly learn the intimate details of people’s lives, leaving them exposed to gossip and public surveillance. It is a shameful experience and one could think that it works as a form of coercion ([20], p. 355). However, this is not exclusively the case. Public confession plays an important role in shaping the dynamics of secrecy and disclosure according to a specific moral framework [10,21]. In many Pentecostal circles in Africa, making public what is hidden is seen as a form of “deliverance”: it counterbalances traditional forms of spiritual power rooted in secrecy. These are also contexts where words and speech are conceived to be powerful vehicles that bring about the “realization of the subject, more than just being an expression of intentions and motivations” ([10], p. S436). Moreover, for a person to make a public confession, she must first admit her fault and repent. This means that before a person can recognize certain behavior as sin, she must have already internalized certain moral criteria. This assimilation of moral behavior takes place gradually, from the moment of conversion, as a person is socialized into the life of the church, participates in teachings, such as the management of sexuality, and practices disciplines of the self, such as prayer and fasting, as I described above. In turn, the enforcement of disciplinary techniques after a person has committed sin and repented can be seen as ways in which people, collectively, have the opportunity to rethink and later reinforce what they have learnt as part of the new value system. Disciplinary practices such as public confession, prayer and fasting, are techniques by which people can “work on the self” [58] to reinsert themselves into a new moral life. By doing so, they reinforce the importance of the new values to themselves and, through their own experiential example of shame and redemption, to others.

6. Conclusions

In this article I have presented the way in which Pentecostal churches teach their congregations to manage their sexual lives. These teachings play an important role in the project of building Christian monogamous marriages and shaping Christian moral selves. Young people are taught to practice fidelity towards God by remaining abstinent before marriage, whereas married people are prescribed sexual exclusivity and fidelity towards their partners. In the case of married couples, Pentecostals place a strong emphasis on teaching women to please their husbands sexually and men are taught to exert self-control. In this process of shaping and channeling sexual desire people embody a moral behavior through practices of the self, such as prayer and fasting, which help a person be filled by the Holy Spirit that in turn makes possible this self-control.

However, in this society where having numerous children is highly valued, sexual fidelity is hard to maintain when a couple cannot have children. Therefore, this represents one of the areas where Pentecostals in Benin face numerous dilemmas, which sometimes constitute important challenges to their Pentecostal life particularly for men. Pentecostal ethical practice also offers an opportunity to re-establish certain continuity to the personal and social disruption of infertility. This was demonstrated with the case of Florent and Pelagie. Nevertheless, not every Pentecostal decides to abide by it, such as Papa Elodie. Both cases reveal that the way in which a person faces moral choices depends on the social position she occupies, her gender, generational context and personal choice. Moreover, they reveal that sexual reproduction continues to hold prominence in people's marital relations. Although there exists certain continuities in values, such as reproduction, this does not mean that the authority of the patrilineage remains unchanged. The authority of the church plays an important role in molding these values.

Whether a person commits sin through adultery or premarital relations depends on matters of honor, her prestige, social position and personal choice. Moral dilemmas and failures also have the potential to reshape prominent values. After having failed to live up to the principles prescribed; a person can also work on the self. In this case, repentance, confession and discipline by the church served the purpose of re-inserting the person into the new moral system, but also reinforced publicly a stronger sense of morality among its members. Moral dilemmas therefore have an important transformative potential.

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Abbreviations

AoG Assemblies of God

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