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Masturbation – sexual perversion or an act of sexual freedom? An analysis of the act in relation to the Onan case (Gen.38:1-10).

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Introduction

The gift of sexuality and sexual organs is one of the highest gifts humans cherish and will ever remain indebted to God. Through this gift humans are able to multiply their species as well as use it as an outlet to their sexual desires. The when and how aspect of it, however, remains a hotly contested issue. Some would want to argue that one is free to have a sexual outlet of his/her desires whether with another person or just by oneself yet others argue that it should be restricted to the matrimonial bed alone. Those who argue against sexual self-gratification often make recourse to the Onan story in the book of Genesis (38:1-10) as biblical evidence that such a practice is abhorrent before God. Using the Onan story as a case study this paper seeks to wade into this debate and analyze whether what is popularly known as *Bonyoponyo* ‘masturbation’ can really be regarded as a sexual perversion worthy of every condemnation or that humans should be left free to express themselves that way if they happen to feel so.

The Onan Story (Genesis 38:1-10)

The part in the Onan story which is of vital interest to this paper reads:

9 But Onan knew that the offspring would not be his; so when he went in to his brother's wife he spilled the semen on the ground, lest he should give offspring to his brother. 10 And what he did was displeasing in the sight of the LORD, and he slew him also.

Socio-cultural Background of the Text

A look at the socio-cultural background of this text is critical at this stage in the sense that it enables one to better understand the narrative in its original context. The starting point of this text is Tamar who had been widowed when she was still young and her husband had left her with no offspring. To mitigate this unfortunate scenario, the custom of levirate marriage was applied as the only

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solution to the problem. The law governing levirate marriage required that if a woman's husband died without offspring his brother should bear a child by her in order to continue the deceased brother's line (Dt.25:5-6). Such a marriage arrangement, as argued by Deffinbaugh (2004), did not originate with the Law of God given through Moses. It had rather been a common practice in the Near East for centuries. Uttering similar sentiments is Westermann (1986) who says that this custom was an emergency measure with a stamp of family law, found not only inside Israel and Canaan, but also outside in similar circumstances. In observance of this family law one finds Onan being instructed by Judah, "Go in to your brother's wife and perform the duty of a brother-in-law to her, and raise up offspring for your brother" (Gen.38:8). One finds mention of this family law custom at least three times in the Old Testament: Genesis 38, Ruth 1:11-12, and Deuteronomy 25:5-10. As observed by Von Rad (1995), levirate responsibility as shown in Ruth was not binding only on the brother-in-law, but also other male relatives. Returning to Genesis 38:8, behind it, as argued by Mathewson (1989), lies the plight of a childless widow hence, the resulting levirate marriage. The awkward position of this woman was captured so well by Susan Niditch when she said:

She is no longer a virgin and does not belong in her father's home. Yet she can no longer bear children in the patriarchal line; her link with that line, the husband, has died. The woman who has never had children before her husband's death finds herself in a particularly anomalous and uncomfortable situation: Where is she to go? (Niditch cited in Mathewson, 1989).

The primary significance of the custom is explained in Deuteronomy 25:6: "that his (brother's) name may not be blotted out of Israel." The custom served not only to safeguard the brother's name from being forgotten but there were also some other secondary economic factors which played a part. In Israelite culture, as averred by Niditch (1979), a widow could not inherit her husband's property, only her children had that right so the widow was reliant on them. If she managed to have a child by the levirate custom, the property of the deceased then passed on to that child. It is from this context that Niditch finds the levirate custom as playing a very important societal role. Developing her argument she notes that women in Ancient Near Eastern society gained their status from males to whom they were attached. These women were without patriarchal protection and in a sense were seen as misfits in the social structure. Levirate marriage, as she concludes, provided the male relative the opportunity to help society avoid one sociological misfit, the young childless widow. The young widow's place in the home of her husband's people was thus reaffirmed through the levirate system (Niditch, 1979).

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Some Literary and Exegetical Considerations

As one groomed in the custom of his time what is interesting to note is that Onan outwardly does not refuse to take up his levirate responsibilities. His acceptance, however, could have been conditioned by the instruction of Moses in Deuteronomy 25: 7-10 which read:

But if the man does not desire to take his brother's wife, then his brother's wife shall go up to the gate to the elders and say, "My husband's brother refuses to establish a name for his brother in Israel; he is not willing to perform the duty of a husband's brother to me." Then the elders of his city shall summon him and speak to him. And if he persists and says, "I do not desire to take her," then his brother's wife shall come to him in the sight of the elders, and pull his sandal off his foot and spit in his face; and she shall declare, "Thus it is done to the man who does not build up his brother's house." And in Israel his name shall be called, "The house of him whose sandal is removed."

Faced with such a prevailing state of things he could have well calculated that it was better to accept rather than to be ashamed before the public. Deep in his heart, however, Onan appears not to have approved of this culture and so he fakes it. The method he used to evade these responsibilities was wasting his seed. This was not a onetime event as shown in verse 9. The syntax of this verse (9) does not refer to a single time "when" Onan had sex with Tamar, but to *whenever* he had sex with her. This finds echo in S. R. Driver who argues that the construction וַיֵּבֶן בְּנֵי should be understood as a frequentative use of the perfect and translated "whenever he went in" instead of "when he went in" (Driver cited in Mathewson, 1989).

The Biblical narrator portrays Onan as putting his own interests ahead of Tamar and Tamar's future child. Onan is presented as not willing to father a son who would prevent him from receiving his deceased brother's inheritance. What, however, results in the death of Onan was not a breach of these levirate responsibilities since, as stated in the law, a man who breached them did not have to face death but was only humiliated (Dt.25:7-10). Yahweh rather is said to have been angry when he saw Onan **waste his seed on the ground** (Gen.38:9-10). But how justified was this death of Onan? Was it not also within his rights to choose a wife for himself and not to have someone forced on him?

While a cursory glance at levirate marriages would appear as if it was indeed a noble idea for a brother to raise children on behalf of his deceased brother and that God disdains mankind's tinkering with man's fertility as reflected also in Deuteronomy 25:11-12, there appears to be some issues which really look irksome. Marriages of this nature may fittingly be termed 'forced marriages' in the sense that one feels customarily bound to take up a brother's wife regardless of whether a bond of love exists or not. Culture in such a scenario may be regarded as oppressive since it does not leave room for one to say no. Onan could

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have felt oppressed by the culture inherited from his fore-fathers but since it did not leave room to say no he had to obey the word of Judah and thus he took up Tamar. While levirate marriage during the time when the law in Deuteronomy (25:5-10) was written would appear to have been something desirable but not compulsory, in earlier times during the time of Judah and Tamar, the brother, as noted by Wenham (1994) had the absolute duty to marry his widowed sister-in-law, and the father-in-law was expected to see this duty fulfilled. All what this shows is that Onan had lesser chances of refusal.

Furthermore, the fact that Tamar was the wife of his elder brother naturally could have created a gulf between them due to age difference. Even in today's society it is rare to find a young man extending a hand of marriage to a woman who looks much senior to him. It is not only abhorrent to younger men but even the society itself tends to frown at such unions. Surely Onan could not have been an exception to this and this could have resulted in him seeing it better to spill the seed than to father a child with such a woman.

Yet another critical matter to be considered also is the fact that Onan knew quite well that he did not stand a chance to benefit anything if he would give a child to Tamar given that the levirate law explicitly made it clear that the children raised in such a union would be for the perpetuation of the brother's line. Making a similar observation is Deffinbaugh (2004) who notes that Onan was well aware that the offspring from his union with Tamar would only further the cause of his deceased brother rather than his own hence, he was not willing to have any children by her. What was equally known to Onan also was the law captured in Numbers 27:8-11 which states that if a man dies without a son, then his inheritance is to pass to his daughter; if he has no daughter, then the inheritance is to pass to his brothers. Weighing these options he could naturally have settled for the idea that it was better to leave room for the possible inheritance of his brother's property than father a child who would take away that privilege from him and nothing coming his way at the end of the day.

While the writer in the story of Onan wants to show that Yahweh eliminated Onan from the face of the earth due to what he did when he spilled his semen on the ground, he appears not to have done it just for the sake of it. Onan rather knew that the consequences of not doing so were tantamount to just killing himself. Indeed one could argue, the end does not justify the means, but if one was to put him/herself in the shoes of Onan at least some form of sympathy with his plight could begin to manifest itself. While levirate marriage had some good side to it one needs to at least admit that the system was somehow faulty in that it served only the interests of the deceased. This in a way justifies Onan's spilling of his semen.

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Having looked at some challenges in the Onan story which is often used as reference to castigate *bonyoponyo*, the ground looks prepared to further move on and examine whether the act should be considered perverse or in line with acceptable human freedom in our contemporary society. Before, however, coming to this critical aspect of the paper, it is perhaps good to first look at how and under what conditions this practice is being done among men and women in our contemporary society.

Bonyoponyo among men

The time of puberty among boys is usually a time when almost every experiment is made with one's sexual organs. Since this is the time when sexual hormones begin to be so active, the urge to engage in sexual intercourse becomes so high. While in some cases there is real sexual encounter with girls of the same peer group, in most cases the sight of a beautiful girl or the visual memory of a dream lover arouses high sexual feelings which usually find their outlet in *bonyoponyo*. When herding cattle or goats boys usually notice these domestic animals mating and this may excite them to masturbate. In the privacy of their homes also boys may imagine themselves penetrating a beautiful girl they either see on a picture or a classmate. Although a variable number of boys engage in *bonyoponyo*, their elders do not approve of this. Elders normally urge youngsters to be in control of their sex urge once they reach the age of puberty. At this stage *bonyoponyo*, as observed by Gelfand (1979), is not only discouraged but is rather regarded as "a weakness in the boy in whom any weak or 'womanish' behaviour is despised. Manliness is held in high regard. To call a man a woman is most insulting."

Despite the prohibition, it remains factual that a variable number of boys do it. A gentle touch followed by a rapid movement of the hand whilst gripping the penis usually results in them reaching a climax and semen is passed out. Several names have been coined to describe this act. While some would use the term *bonyoponyo* (Karanga, Zezuru, Manyika), some within the given groups of people use the shortened version *bonyora* to mean one and the same thing. Others call it *hama maoko* 'hands are relatives' meaning to say one finds a helper to relieve him through his hands just like a relative who comes to one's help when need arises. The same act may be referred to as *chimhandara muruoko* 'a girl in the hand.' The implication of this terminology is that one imagines having a girl to relieve him by his side. Another commonly used term is *kuveza mupinyi* 'carving a wood handle.' This term is derived from the rapid downward movement of the hand whilst holding the penis so that it results in ejaculation. Equally used also is the term *chioko mugumbezu* 'a hand in the blanket' implying to say one uses his hand in the privacy of his blankets to relieve himself. Other terms used are *kuchucha* (Ndau) and *bonhora* (Zezuru). When such stimulation of the external sexual organs happens during sleep the end result would usually be wet dreams. While one may term it an involuntary act or an act of man when

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it happens during sleep, one finds that the stimuli usually would be what would have sexually attracted the boy during the day or it could be a result of the dream of a beautiful queen who resides in his subconsciousness.

Bonyoponyo is not confined to small boys only; even some adult males engage themselves also in this human act. The reasons why adult men engage in this act varies a lot. War situations can be one influential factor which leads some men to find ways of relieving themselves given that they would be alone in the bush and far from their wives. In such situations *bonyoponyo* would not only be a reliever of unmet sexual needs but also a stress reliever given that some warring situations can be so complex and deeply stressful. Equally acting as a push factor among adult men is the death of a dear wife. Traditionally in Shona culture, for example, a man whose wife passes on is supposed to remain single for at least a year until such a time when the *kurova guva* 'home bringing ceremony' is performed. While one cannot rule out the possibility of such a man having some private sexual encounters with other women, it is equally not possible to rule out the possibility of him engaging in *bonyoponyo* as an outlet to his unmet sexual desires. There are also some adult men who prefer to remain in an unmarried state the rest of their lives for reasons best known to themselves. While here and there they may be seen hanging around with women, they would be by themselves the greater part of their lives. Surely they cannot be angels who are not prone to sexual desires, thus chances of them engaging in *bonyoponyo* remains very high.

Among adults *bonyoponyo* can also be done as a test of a man's fertility. Such tests are usually done when a couple is faced with the challenge of childlessness. If the husband becomes the prime suspect he is made to undergo a traditional test for fertility in which he is made to masturbate. As noted by Bourdillon (1976), the man's semen is made to drop in water; if the semen sinks it is thought to be 'strong' and fertile but if it floats on top of the water then it is thought to be 'weak' and infertile. A boy of marriage age could also be made to undergo this supervised test.

Bonyoponyo among women

Just as among boys, the time of puberty also among girls is usually a time when almost every experiment is made with their sexual organs. Since this is the time when their sexual hormones begin to be so active, the urge to engage in sexual intercourse becomes so high. While in some cases there is real sexual encounter with boys of the same peer group, in most cases the sight of a handsome boy or the visual memory of a dream lover arouses high sexual feelings which usually results in them touching parts of their bodies; either their breasts or vagina to the point of reaching orgasm. Since women hardly want their sexual explorations

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known there has hardly been a term coined to describe this self-stimulation of theirs yet it does indeed take place. For the sake of argument therefore, this paper will use the same term *bonyoponyo* to refer to what they do to sexually arouse themselves.

Adult women are no exception also to what young girls do. Just as with young girls, a gentle touch of either the breasts or vagina is usually followed by a firmer rubbing with fingers until they reach orgasm. Apart from the use of the hand to stimulate themselves a commonly used tool to stimulate themselves are bananas. While some insert a banana directly into their vaginas others first wrap the banana in a condom so as to avoid any harmful secretions of the banana or to avoid being stretched by the edges of the banana. Given the shape of the banana, it acts like a penis inside the vagina. With the development of technology those who afford can now buy a dildo to stimulate themselves.

Just like in adult men, the reasons also why adult women tend to resort to sexual self-gratification is varied. War scenarios; in as much as they affect men, they also affect married women who usually remain at home whilst their husbands would have gone to war. In the loneliness of their homes and the stress of being not sure whether their husbands would ever make it to come back home, a number of women resort to *bonyoponyo* not only as a sexual reliever but as a stress reliever. Given also the fact that there is an imbalance in terms of the ratio of men versus women the world over it means there is often a high competition for men which results in some women failing totally to secure a man they could call a husband. Faced with the reality also that those who manage to secure husbands for themselves would be so protective of their men, the unfortunate ones often find themselves resorting to sexual self-gratification all in an effort to meet the demands of nature.

Not to be counted out also as another contributing factor is the death of a husband. If one is to cite again Shona culture as an example, a woman whose deceased husband has just passed on is bound by culture to remain single for a whole year or two until the *kurova guva* ceremony has been performed. She is expected not to breach these sexual taboos lest her paternal family is made to pay a heavy fine if she made any breach. Such expectations to remain ritually clean and not indulge in sexual encounters until the *kurova guva* ceremony are higher for widowed women than for widowers. It is only after the ceremony that she can either resume sexual intercourse in the event that she has been inherited or choose to remain alone, being inherited rather by one of her sons. What, however, the culture only guards against during the waiting period before the *kurova guva* is sexual encounters with other men and it appears there are hardly any restrictive measures put in place against the possibilities of sexual self-gratification. Chances therefore are high for the widowed woman to resort to this human act as an answer to the call of nature. This may equally be true with

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those who choose not to be inherited unless they would have reached the state of menopause.

Bonyoponyo – sexual perversion or an act of sexual freedom?

The question of whether bonyoponyo can be regarded as a sexual perversion or an act of sexual freedom is a highly contentious one. Those who want to dismiss the act as a sexual perversion are usually driven by moral and religious motives while those who tend to find no problem with it are driven by psychological and other non-theological motives.

Bonyoponyo as sexual perversion

Most theologians and moralists across denominations basically agree that *bonyoponyo* is a serious sin that will keep one from heaven. They tend to see a link between Genesis 38:9-10 and what Paul says in 1 Cor. 6:10. In this passage Paul insinuates that sexual perverts are among those who will not inherit the kingdom of heaven. The use of the term 'sexual perverts' in the Revised Standard Version (RSV), however, does not really tell us which specific group of people and activities are being covered under this umbrella term. The Africa Bible Commentary sounds a bit clearer when it points directly to male prostitutes and homosexual offenders as those falling within the category of sexual perverts (Africa Bible Commentary, 2006:1383). It would be difficult, however, in my estimation; to confidently classify *bonyoponyo* under this generic term 'sexual perverts.' While many have tried to make Genesis 38:9-10 the proof-text for banning *bonyoponyo* and any method of birth control, we must, however, take careful note of what may be regarded as evil and a faulty system. Levirate marriages looked a bit faulty in the sense that they tended to further only the cause of a deceased brother rather than that of the person who married the widow.

The other argument raised by those who want to dismiss *bonyoponyo* as a sexual perversion is that the sexual function is meant by God to serve primarily for the begetting of children. Any deliberate activations of it outside the confines of marriage is thus viewed as seriously inordinate and sinful. Within marriage such stimulation is lawful only when it serves in some way to prepare for or to complete a natural act of marital intercourse. What is often overlooked, however, by such an argument is that not every sexual encounter within the marriage union itself is meant for procreation. When a couple intends child spacing the two should not be seen to starve themselves or burn with passion. The couple should be seen to enjoy sex for the sake of pleasure and it is not just meant to let go of the burning passion but it helps to unite the couple which is a key component for the lasting of relationships. If they are free to engage in sexual contact outside the intended purpose of procreation one could possibly ask: what should be wrong if one of the couples decides to relieve him/herself during the long

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absence of the other? If one also is to think of the stress that both partners undergo in warring situations coupled also by the normal crave for sexual intercourse with one's partner, can that at least not pave way for the acceptability of *bonyoponyo*?

Theologians and moralists further argue that as in the case of any objectively and gravely sinful matter, for a person to be formally guilty of a mortal sin of masturbation, his act must be a fully deliberate choice of what he fully realizes is seriously evil. In the event that the person acts with only partial realization or only with partial choice of the will, then that person is guilty of venial sin (Farraher, 2010). In other words what these theologians want to argue is that if there is no free choice of the will, then there is no guilt of sin at all, even if the person is aware of what he is doing. This is true even when a person foresees that sexual stimulation and even orgasm will result from some action that he is freely performing, provided that he does not intend the sexual stimulation but merely permits it, and that he has a sufficiently good reason for what he is doing.

Bonyoponyo as an act of sexual freedom

As hinted above, those who want to argue in support of *bonyoponyo* often want to lean against some psychological grounds or some other non-religious motives. While considering the deliberate practice of *bonyoponyo* in preference to other sexual activity as an abnormality, some psychologists and non-religious persons have often criticized theologians and moralists of stressing too far the sinfulness of *bonyoponyo*. It is true, as observed by Farraher (2010) that some religious teachers have gone to absurd and unscientific extremes in their efforts to discourage the young from such a practice. Young ones are often threatened that if they indulge in *bonyoponyo* they would develop mental insanity. This, however, is without scientific foundation. The only psychological illness that can result from *bonyoponyo*, as noted by Farraher (2010), is from irrational and excessive fears and guilt feelings arising from such warnings, especially when such fears and feelings are related by the young person to experiences beyond his voluntary control. On the other hand, compulsive forms of *bonyoponyo* can be symptomatic of emotional and mental disturbances that stem from other sources. When performed in a normal way most of these psychologists and non-religious people view *bonyoponyo* as a natural and harmless practice for self-relief, especially on the part of adolescents and other unmarried persons.

If ever there was a time when *bonyoponyo* proved to be useful it is this era of the HIV and AIDS scourge. Given that the greater percentage of AIDS infections is usually through sexual intercourse *bonyoponyo* is seen by some as acting as a mitigating measure to reduce new infections. Since it does not involve contact with another person but serving the same purpose which is to release sexual desire, it is seen as a safer way of channeling and letting go of one's burning

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passion. Such an argument surely sounds appealing if one is to consider the increase in prostitution activities and the phenomenon of ‘small houses’ which have come to be part and parcel of our societies. While there are a myriad of factors which lead to either prostitution or the small house maze, the need to release sexual energy is usually dominant and once this need is met through *bonyoponyo* then there could be a reduction of these greater moral challenges.

Conclusion

The questions that remain hanging, however, are: are humans unboundedly free to do whatever they want with their bodies? Are there any limits to human freedom? Without God or a moral being who appears to be in control of human morality there appears to be no challenge at all for humans to do whatever they want with their bodies provided they do not infringe other people’s rights. Once we bring God on the scene, however, everything begins to change its tone. Humans are no longer found unboundedly free to do whatever they like with their bodies for their bodies are now regarded as temples of the Holy Spirit in the language of Paul (1 Corin.6:19). If, however, *bonyoponyo* is due to an involuntary emission, perhaps touched off by involuntary actions or some extenuating circumstances, even when the person is awake, he/she is not guilty of grave sin and perhaps of no sin at all.

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