

# 1 *Tacit Erotic Intimacies and the Culture of Indirection*

“Lesbians in Ghana?” The assumption that I was looking for “lesbians” in a place where “lesbianism” must be invisible, if it exists at all, loomed large when I described my research to friends and colleagues in Switzerland – even though I never claimed I was actually looking for “lesbians,” but rather for women who love women and whose same-sex friendships included erotic intimacies. My conviction that such intimacies existed everywhere, with or without claims to a particular sexual orientation, was met with well-meant ethnocentric or heterosexist assertions about African women’s pragmatic sexual lives, which are devoid of romantic, let alone same-sex, love. With the growing media attention on the homophobic statements of various African leaders, however, the existence of Ghanaian “lesbians” seemed more plausible and my colleagues’ concerns shifted toward “the situation” these women must be facing in “homophobic Africa.” My own interest in the regular lives and discursive practices of women who love women, whether or not they identify as lesbian, was thus challenged and inspired, in part, by the presumption that homosexuality was inherently “modern” and Euro-American, and that homophobia was backward and African.

This set of issues became even more poignant when aggressive anti-gay statements gained momentum in Ghana the year I embarked on fieldwork. In September 2006, a government minister announced the ban of a reputed “homoconference.” The rumors surrounding this statement developed a life of their own. Though the “homoconference” turned out to be a media hoax and had never been planned, it gripped the public imagination and fueled a heated media and political debate. Controversial questions concerning “lesbianism” and “homosexuality”

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or “gayism”<sup>1</sup> have reverberated through Ghana’s media landscape ever since. Arriving a few months after the controversy had cooled down, a welcome signboard in the airport’s immigration section declared that “pedophiles and other sexual deviants” are not welcome in Ghana and that such “aberrant behavior” would be harshly punished. Compelled to “prove” the very existence of women who love women in Ghana, this new preoccupation with “sexual deviants” further complicated my quest to refute the one-dimensional portrayal of Africa as invariably homophobic.

This chapter traces some of the key discursive shifts that have taken place around homosexuality in Ghana and, in particular, that have marked a move away from a tacit historical acceptance of certain intimacies. Based on a discussion of the 2006 “homoconference” controversy, it begins by exploring how anti-gay<sup>2</sup> rhetorics proliferate at the juncture of national and international church and media discourses. This is contextualized in relation to understandings of *supi* practices, historical speech norms and southern Ghanaian tenets of discretion and indirection in sexual matters. I then go on to explore the role of charismatic Christianity, the media, and the law in shaping and disciplining discourses of dissident sexuality in the country. Finally, using personal accounts of activists themselves, the chapter touches on the impacts of global gay rights discourses on local gender relations and the “silence” of same-sex desiring women at the early stages of Ghana’s gay movement. My argument is that global LGBT initiatives have prioritized male homosexuality and activism in a way that renders illegible tacit forms of “queer” resistance, including Ghanaian women’s culture of indirection.

Throughout the chapter, I draw out the connections and disconnections between public discourses on homosexuality and gay rights and

<sup>1</sup> In 2006, the neologisms “gayism” and “homosexuality” revealed that sexual practice is not considered the basis for a (legitimate) social identity. Today, these terms are less common but used more explicitly in derogatory ways. Further, the ongoing distinction between homosexuality and lesbianism in public debates in Ghana, indicates that female same-sex intimacies are not simply subsumed under male ones. For the use of “gayism” in the Ghanaian press, see Emmanuel Akli, “Ghana: Anglicans flay gay bishops.” *The Chronicle*, published online at <http://allafrica.com/stories/200707170593.html>, July 17, 2007, accessed July 12, 2014; for the use of “homosexuality,” see The Statesman, “Why should Kufuor peep into our bedrooms,” Sept 7, 2006, republished on [www.ghanaweb.com/GhanaHomePage/features/artikel.php?ID=110178](http://www.ghanaweb.com/GhanaHomePage/features/artikel.php?ID=110178), accessed February 6, 2014.

<sup>2</sup> Avoiding the Euro-American psychological connotations of (homo)phobia, I tend to refer to the specific forces attacking Africans who are tagged as “lesbians” or “gays” as anti-gay forces.

tacit ways of articulating, interpreting, and enacting same-sex passion. By contextualizing female same-sex intimacies in relation to historical notions of silence, gender relations, and speech norms in southern Ghanaian, this chapter responds to the call by queer African activists to interrupt the “single story of ‘African homophobia’”<sup>3</sup> (Ndashe 2013; Sika and Okech 2019), that is, a one-dimensional, ahistorical, and reductive account that ignores the shifting ways in which same-sex intimacies are configured, articulated, and understood in different African contexts.

### The Imagined “Homoconference”

“Government would like to make it absolutely clear that it shall not permit the proposed conference of International Gays and Lesbians to take place anywhere in Ghana,” Ghana News Agency announced on August 31, 2006. Apparently the then Minister of Information, Kwamena Bartels, signed a statement asserting that “Ghanaians were a unique people whose culture, morality and heritage totally abhorred homosexual and lesbian practices and any other form of unnatural sexual acts.”<sup>4</sup> The ban was uttered a few days after Prince Kweku MacDonald appeared on Joy FM’s “Super Morning Show.” The popular radio talk show featured a panel discussion on HIV/AIDS education. Prince Kweku MacDonald, director of an initiative promoting sexual health and human rights education, was invited to speak about an HIV research survey he was working on with a group of peer educators. These young men gathered data about Men who have Sex with Men (MSM), provided safer sex information, and distributed condoms. Indicating plans to host a conference – “It is coming in September, we have received funding” (O’Mara 2007, 35) – and revealing himself as the “president” of the hitherto unknown Gay and Lesbian Association of Ghana (GALAG), Prince’s on-air statements sparked adamant rumors about an impending homoconference.

<sup>3</sup> See also: Keguro Macharia, “Homophobia in Africa is not a single story.” *The Guardian*, opinion piece, May 26, 2010, published online at [www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2010/may/26/homophobia-africa-not-single-story](http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2010/may/26/homophobia-africa-not-single-story), accessed February 22, 2018.

<sup>4</sup> Ghana News Agency, “Govt bans International Homo Conference,” September 1, 2006, republished on [www.ghanaweb.com/GhanaHomePage/NewsArchive/artikel.php?ID=109849](http://www.ghanaweb.com/GhanaHomePage/NewsArchive/artikel.php?ID=109849), accessed July 3, 2014.

For weeks Prince MacDonald's name<sup>5</sup> haunted newspapers and air-waves and came to stand for the perceived moral decay of Ghana's youth, its growing appetite for consumerist, cosmopolitan lifestyles, and its susceptibility to sexual immoralities. While Bartels was the highest ranked politician to make a public statement, local authorities and charismatic church leaders seized the opportunity to condemn homosexuality together with other sinful practices associated with sex tourism and the West's corrupting influence: commercial sex, cyber-sex, pornography, and pedophilia. Within a few days, the gay community over which Prince claimed his presidency had come to epitomize all sexual and social ills. Invoking culture, religion, or both, "homosexuals" were demonized and condemned. In the ensuing controversy, male same-sex intimacies came to be firmly associated with "gayism" and gay rights activism. The preoccupation with men reflects a shift toward the patriarchal Euro-American focus on male sexuality and a concern with public health agendas and with HIV/AIDS in particular. Nevertheless, for many of my female respondents, the controversy was a crucial reference point in conveying Ghanaian norms of respectability and in exemplifying why both male and female same-sex intimacies should remain "a silent trade" (Dankwa 2009) and not be discussed in the public arena.

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Soon after the "homoconference" news broke, speculations arose that it had been contrived by the media. A columnist held that the oppositional NDC, the National Democratic Congress and its charismatic founding father and former president, Jerry J. Rawlings, who had himself in fact repeatedly been suspected of having male lovers, must be the driving force behind the conference.<sup>6</sup> Some online postings

<sup>5</sup> Prince MacDonald is the pseudonym of an activist whom I first met a few months prior to the "homoconference" controversy. He goes by different names. In its various spellings MacDonald is the name popularized through the media. In order to provide an index of the distance between the media portrayal of his activist persona and my own analysis on the basis of not only textual representations but of personal conversations; however, I will refer to him by his first pseudo-name, Prince.

<sup>6</sup> John Arthur, "Thank You, Mr President," September 20, 2006, republished on [www.ghanaweb.com/GhanaHomePage/features/artikel.php?ID=110818](http://www.ghanaweb.com/GhanaHomePage/features/artikel.php?ID=110818), accessed February 6, 2014. Whether or not there is any substance to these rumors, they match politically motivated portrayals of Rawlings as a corrupted "half-caste" (with a Scottish father) rather than a "full-blooded Ghanaian"

opined that the NPP, the then ruling New Patriotic Party, had a vested interest in a media scandal, for it allowed them to deflect from more pressing media debates, such as corruption and cocaine dealings within government ranks; by banning a “homoconference” the NPP could reclaim their authority and popularity, some suspected.<sup>7</sup> Besides comments discrediting Ghana’s main oppositional parties – the NDC with its strong rural basis; the NPP, which is often accused of Akan elitism; and the CPP, the much smaller Nkrumahist Convention People’s Party – others were critical of Ghana’s endemic factionalism, pointing out that politicians on all sides were simply trying to score points. Instrumentalized by a range of social and political actors, the public imagination of a grand “homoconference” that needed to be condemned and overthrown, prompts a range of questions.

While the “banned homoconference” had its immediate oppressive effects, it marked the beginning of a noisy public debate. It became the catalyst for an ongoing outcry against the sexualization of the public sphere and the perceived threat of immoral practices attributed to the West. This explicit, sexualized discourse emerging through the global flows of a liberalized “mediascape” (Appadurai 1990) clashed with Ghanaian speech cultures with their tenets of politeness, indirection, and discretion. Thus, before sketching out the role that Ghana’s press and political culture played in the public construction of a threatening “gay community,” historical speech norms and ethnic stereotypes as well as the rise of charismatic Christianity in Ghana and the nomenclature of LGBT rights need to be considered.

## Verbal Discretion and Indirection

“Silence” has been the chief metaphor through which postcolonial African sexuality has been broached by scholars and policymakers. Yet the claim that Africans shroud everything sexual in silence and secrecy is as reductionist as the stereotype of African hypersexuality. In her anthology *Re-thinking Sexualities in Africa* (2004), Signe Arnfred questions the conceptual usefulness of a “culture of silence” that is said

(Hasty 2005, 143) or as an immature “smallboy” who lacks the wisdom of a respectable African statesman (Hasty 2005, 13).

<sup>7</sup> For example, the title of an online comment read “Because of the NPP cocain[sic] issue,” reacting to the column “The conference that never was!” (also see footnote 12).

to mark African societies. Instead she advocates for an identification of “different types of silences” (2004a, 73). As opposed to an oppressive silence, Arnfred argues that in Africa a culture of discretion has prevented discursive rather than sexual acts. It is this same discretion that impedes the public display of affection between opposite-sex partners and the explicit intergenerational talk about one’s own or other people’s sexual lives – especially if that life happens beyond marriage and reproduction – foreclosing the claims to sexuality as lifestyle and identity.

Southern Ghanaian culture of discretion and indirection concerning sexual matters is strongly associated with the Akan and the Twi language. The designation “Akan” refers to around twenty ethno-linguistic subgroups that occupy a large part of southern Ghana and speak mutually intelligible dialects.<sup>8</sup> Despite internal rivalries, Ghanaian scholars hold that divergences in cultural practice among these subgroups are subtle and that “the uniformity of their cultural norms [is] beyond doubt” (Yankah 1995, 5). Among these norms are the linguistic practices that aim to contain dissent and the imperative of verbal indirection. Akan linguists refer to indirection as the practice of not directly addressing sensitive issues in order to ward off “face-threatening” interactions (Obeng 1994; Yankah 1995). Proverb, metaphor, euphemism, meandering, circumlocution, and other communicational strategies are used to save face and to verbalize “unspeakable utterances” (Obeng 1994, 60). Thus, “such delicate things as death, certain kinds of diseases, menstruation, as well as acts related to the sexual organs are not usually talked about directly” (Obeng 1994, 56). This is exemplified by the frequent use of apologetic and figurative expressions.<sup>9</sup>

In *Speaking for the Chief* (1995), Kwesi Yankah argues that Akan speakers recognize the social and performative power of the spoken word. This awareness that language shapes the world it is describing, informs verbal taboos and a preference for metaphoric speech (Yankah 1995, 51). Yankah traces the culture of indirect speech to oratory

<sup>8</sup> Besides the official language of English, most Ghanaians understand a Twi dialect, the main written versions being Asante Twi, Akuapem Twi, and Fante. Baule is another acclaimed version of Akan that is spoken in eastern Ivory Coast.

<sup>9</sup> Thus, directness is considered blunt and impolite, and personal questions are prefixed with a precautionary “please, excuse.” The emphasis on verbal discretion as a form of fearful politeness is not unique to the Akan. It is comparable to the notion of *kunya*, meaning shame or modesty, described for the Hausa context of northern Nigeria for instance (Pierce 2007, 551).

traditions at Akan courts, where chiefs and royals do not address their interlocutors directly but have an eloquent spokesperson, the *Okyeame*, to skillfully address delicate and ambivalent matters. As royal orator the *Okyeame* mediates potentially harmful words directed at the chief and uses proverbs to poetically embellish the chief's public speech acts. Similar figures are found among the Ga-Dangme, the Ewe, and other language groups in West Africa (Yankah 1995, 16).

My Ga-speaking respondents in Accra tended to invoke sex more explicitly than Twi speakers. They used direct verbs for "having sex," which were translated into English as "fucking" or "sexing." In Accra, tenuous stereotypes circulate about the sexual looseness of the Ga and the Fante, the second largest Akan group with its own formal literary dialect. Thus, regarding sexuality it seems that the norms of verbal indirection and their attending taboos are associated with the Asante, Ghana's dominant Akan subgroup, and with its royal court in particular. The perception that both the Ga and the Fante lack discretion and verbal indirection and are prone to exuberant, "shameless" behavior, such as cross-dressing and "homosexuality," has been attributed to their exposure to European merchants on the coast since the fifteenth century. This does not, however, allow for conclusions about a higher prevalence or acceptance of same-sex intimacies. If the Ga and the Fante are indeed sexually more outspoken than the Twi-speaking Akan, this may suggest that the moral requirement to conceal sexual desires are reduced among the less centralized (sub)groups of southern Ghana. Social historians have argued that the Asante kingdom in particular was obsessed with vertically controlling all forms of power, speech, and social formations (Akyeampong 1997; McCaskie 1981). It begs the question of whether the coastal groups south and east of the former Asante state are faced with less normative pressure to keep face and veil sociocultural transgressions than the Asante.

Generally, the fact that Akan norms elegantly contain ambiguities by not naming them, unsettles popular claims that "homosexuality" used to be absolutely "taboo" and "unspeakable." Arguably, homosexuality as a concept did not exist in precolonial Ghana. We cannot, however, assume that same-sex desires were never publicly discussed. In a sweeping comment on the "homoconference," philosopher Kwame Anthony Appiah countered Minister Bartels' claim that homosexuality "violently offends the culture, morality and heritage of the entire people of Ghana" (2008, 19). He reasoned that it is the obsession

with everything sexual among “contemporary religious sects (Christian and Muslim) who are busy evangelizing in Africa” (Appiah 2008, 20–21) that has led to anxieties about same-sex intimacies. Appiah refers to the wave of charismatic Christianity emanating from the USA that began to sweep across the globe in the 1980s. This neo-Pentecostal type of Christianity has firmly taken root in Anglophone West Africa and has reconfigured Ghana’s religious and sexual landscape.

### Charismatic Sexualization

Ghana records the highest percentage of Christian inhabitants in West Africa (Kirschke and Kirschke-Schwartz 2013, 73), and its current religious climate is part of West Africa’s third charismatic wave of Christian Pentecostalism (Asamoah-Gyadu 2005). This wave has affected the country’s entire public life. While only 28.3 percent of Ghana’s inhabitants identify as Pentecostal or charismatic Christians,<sup>10</sup> a broad spectrum of charismatic thought impacts the practices of older mission churches as well as the activities of Islamic groups. Due to its close involvement in the media and entertainment sectors, charismatic thought also shapes Ghanaian culture, including its sexual culture.

Ghana’s religious transformations are intertwined with broader economic and political developments (Gifford 2004; Shipley 2009). Identified with decolonization, pan-Africanism, and industrialization, Kwame Nkrumah, Africa’s first independent president, has been celebrated as an icon of black pride. In Ghana he is referred to as *osagyefo*, the “redeemer.” Nkrumah’s overthrow in 1966 heralded years of political upheaval and public frustration over state corruption that led to the seizure of power by the angry young Flight Lieutenant Jerry J. Rawlings in 1981. At the onset of his military rule Rawlings was celebrated as “Junior Jesus” (Shipley 2009, 525). Rawlings passionately urged “Ghanaians to eschew foreign commodities and presented collective moral discipline as a solution to neocolonial economics” (Shipley 2009, 527). This included a series of military attacks on market women who were blamed for hoarding and using food shortages to make personal gains, thus hindering national development (see Chapter 4). By 1983, droughts, loss of cocoa crops, fuel shortages,

<sup>10</sup> [www.indexmundi.com/ghana/demographics\\_profile.html](http://www.indexmundi.com/ghana/demographics_profile.html), accessed October 31, 2018.



and the forced repatriation of one million Ghanaians from Nigeria led to the country's economic collapse. While nominally still espousing visions of African socialism, Rawlings' military regime instituted a Structural Adjustment Program. In line with the conditions stipulated by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, this program opened up Ghanaian markets to foreign capital and privatized state enterprises (Shipley 2009, 523–26). As Jesse Shipley argues, charismatic pastors and prophets offered the spiritual language to rationalize and justify the ensuing marketization.

The charismatic movement has been led by “*men of God*” who largely communicate in English and in a directive style that clashes with Akan notions of indirection. Styled as businessmen and entertainers, they emphasize prosperity, internationalism, transformation, and deliverance and their wealth is regarded as an indicator of their spiritual legitimacy. With its constant glorification of success, this new Christianity shifted attitudes toward individual wealth. By promoting individual success as a blessing from God the charismatic movement undermined “traditional culture” that prevented individuals from prospering much more conspicuously than their fellows, for instance, through witchcraft accusations, in order to keep communities united (Gifford 2004, 185). Moreover, the importance placed on monogamous marriage that promises middle-class respectability and upward mobility attracts young women; and while top leadership roles are difficult to attain, women play significant roles as ushers or evangelists (Gifford 2004).

The proliferation of private radio stations in the mid-1990s was crucial to the spread of charismatic Christianity in Ghana. Self-acclaimed prophets successfully increased their following by broadcasting sermons and healing people over the radio – the popularity of call-ins owing much to the fact that charismatic Christians who have been delivered from sickness or other “blockages” are obliged to testify in order to keep their healing (Gifford 2004, 34). Today, charismatics invest considerable resources into their TV presence. North American imports are televised in the name of local churches and Ghanaian and popular Nigerian pastors bring in videoed sermons. These televised services are as prominent as European football, “telenovelas” (South American soap operas) or the latest Nollywood films, and amount to a form of popular entertainment.

At least since the liberalization of the media, charismatic thought has dominated public opinion and contributed to the creation of

a “sexualized public sphere”: churches actually created “sexuality as a subject of public discourse, if only in its negation” (Bochow 2008, 424). In her ethnographic work on courtship, Astrid Bochow explored how Ghanaian youth are caught between global images about the normalcy of premarital sex and the churches’ imperative to abstain. Indeed, public discussions chastise the supposedly rampant and unrestrained behavior of insatiable adolescents and booklets, such as “seX-sense: The ‘Sixth Sense’ Missing from Today’s Sex ‘Miseducation’” (Perbi and Perbi 2007), advise upwardly mobile youth on how to contain their erotic thoughts and desires. Such admonishments reverberate in the stances of underemployed young men, for whom a costly marriage is out of reach. A jobless secondary school graduate, for instance, who made a virtue of his virginity by styling himself as an aspiring pastor kept interrogating me over my research. He claimed to be doing research himself into sexual transgressions in order to chastise sinful behavior, while embroiling others, often young women, in discussions about abstinence. Such practices echo Foucault’s “repressive hypothesis,” which considers the narratives generated in confessional boxes as more than just by-products of Victorian Europe. Rather, Foucault argues, concerns with sexual sin or pathology voiced in confession boxes or on psychiatric couches were constitutive of the obsession with and “the production of the truth about sex” (1980, 71). In Ghana, the rumors about the sexual scams of prophets (and married women who seek pastoral help over fertility problems and end up being impregnated by the pastor himself) and the public obsession with distinguishing between real and fake “men of God” (Shipley 2009, 457) alerted me to the productivity of talking sex and sin.

The various charismatic church formations have invoked same-sex desire in different ways. At one end of the spectrum are the jet-setting charismatics who preach positive thinking and emphasize self-confidence and self-management as the key to spiritual progress and financial prosperity. Their take on sexuality centers on the establishment of nuclear family lives and pushes the heteronormative family ideal against both a “non-western” pro-natalist tradition and the “modern”-day technological “means of trying to bring children into the world” (Kisseado 2002, 13). Same-sex practices are construed as a stumbling block to the small family ideal that promises upward mobility to Ghana’s aspiring middle classes. At the other end of the spectrum are the prophetic Pentecostal churches which specialize in

delivering believers from diabolic forces. As Birgit Meyer explored (1999), the Pentecostal split from mission churches in the 1960s thrived on the quest to integrate local deities and witchcraft as real forces. In search of reasons for why believers do not receive their deserved prosperity, prophetic leaders detect water and snake spirits, reverse ancestral curses, and remove “blockages” that are frequently caused by family members (Gifford 2004, 105). Such demonic spirits are often sexualized and imagined as being transferred through sexual contact.<sup>11</sup> Mami Wata is one spirit that has been specifically associated with same-sex desire. Found in ocean myths throughout West and Central Africa (Drewal 2008), this mermaid spirit-figure is believed to “marry” and possess its male and female followers.

Some churches offer deliverance sessions to cast out Mami Wata and other spirits that may instill their followers with same-sex desires. Such collective healing sessions have been described as highly ambivalent or even productive in giving their participants a sense of not being “the only one” and fostering a discourse of same-sex desire (Rehnstrom 2001). The ambivalent role of pastoral care in same-sex intimacies dawned on me when Ameley Norkor told me about the “witch in the wig.” Ameley, a petty trader in her late thirties, lived in a densely populated neighborhood, sharing one room with her husband, two children, and her girlfriend at the time. One day, her increasingly jealous girlfriend took Ameley to a pastor in the mountains who was supposed to solve the problems their relationship faced. Having spoken to them separately, the pastor conveyed to Ameley that a spell resided inside the hair extensions that her girlfriend had bought for her. The pastor asserted that once Ameley removed the artificial hair (which she did), her girlfriend would “confess” that she was bewitching Ameley’s conjugal life – and sure enough the girlfriend did confess. Moreover, recurring rumors about priests inviting women to have sex with each other on their premises indicate the power historically associated with female sexuality (cf. Akyeampong 1997). Finally, an elderly woman in Accra vividly remembered a wedding between two market women performed by a Christian pastor. Others confirmed having heard or read about such a wedding in the early 1990s. Such instances indicate

<sup>11</sup> Being a “point of least resistance,” orgasms are said to lend themselves not only to the transmission of sexual diseases, but to the transfer of satanic spirits (Gifford 2004, 100) that need to be contained and combatted.

that the charismatic wave has invoked same-sex desire not only in its negation. Nevertheless, I was surprised when a young journalist told me about a “lesbian” friend of hers who was taken to a female pastor by her father. Instead of the expected cure however, the pastor told her “we are all doing it, but you are doing it too openly.”

Church activities are central to the everyday lives of a majority of Ghanaians, including the women I interviewed. Some were ambiguously attracted by the charismatic gospel and its emphasis on modern marriage and nuclear family lives. Others found the model of monogamous conjugality to be unfeasible and at odds with their own multi-layered erotic and economic lives. Generally, the clash between same-sex passions and heteronormative family structures produced contradictions that could only be contained by living a double life. There existed, however, noteworthy differences between those women who adhered to charismatic denominations and those who attended older mission churches. The worry about the negative impact of desiring the same sex seemed most bothering to those who were eager to be “uplifted” – not least socio-economically – through their allegiance to a charismatic prophet. Often, they seemed to worry less about celestial consequences than about the this-worldly repercussions of being branded as “lesbian,” and, above all, the gossip damaging their reputation and livelihood. It seems that the Presbyterians and the Catholic churches have been more indirect in condemning same-sex practices and have conveyed that same-sex desire is a vice no more sinful than other vices. Women who chose to belong to these long-standing denominations therefore tended to place “lesbianism” among other wrongs, such as alcoholism or adultery, and relativized sermons about the evils of same-sex desire by offering that the pastor’s message is for “those who want to hear it.” Stories about “fake,” imperfect, and erring ministers who justified or strategically confessed their sexual wrongs, were readily taken up as a source of consolation or relieving laughter.

### **Media, Gossip, and Public Space**

They “found people who will be talking on the radio as [if] they’re organizing a conference,”<sup>12</sup> Prince vented his scorn for Ghanaian journalists: they were “hungry” for sensational news and made up

<sup>12</sup> Interview with Prince MacDonald at Accra, June 23, 2007.

eyewitnesses to boost newspapers sales. Prince's comments about the Ghanaian lack of "journalistic ethical code" (IGLHRC 2006) call for a closer look at the "daily drama of national news" and the circulation of public commentary (Hasty 2005, 2).

While radio programs are always within earshot, newspapers remain the most visible sign of Ghana's vibrant news culture ever since they galvanized popular support for Ghana's independence in 1957. Just as the media was liberated from the colonial forces, however, Nkrumah nationalized the media and outlawed the private press as he consolidated his authority in a one-party political system. Reflecting the domination of a political class that mobilized market women and school-leavers, the state media worked toward unifying a range of ethnic and regional identities, political factions, and economic interests "through a superordinating narrative of national integration and development" (Hasty 2005, 11). Two decades later, Rawlings heavily relied on the media to bolster his charisma and legitimate his heavy-handed regime, while harassing the private press to near extinction. In line with the larger wave of democratization that swept across the continent, the newspaper licensing law was lifted only in 1991, the year before Rawlings held and won presidential elections. Reemerging after decades of abuse and repression, the private press instantly positioned itself as an angry oppositional source of discourse. Relying on sales and readership, however, underpaid journalists could not do without rumors and anonymous tips, and they came to be located at the interface of official and unofficial news. Prince's alleged conference announcement was hosted by Accra's first private radio station just before its ban was announced by the state-owned news agency under President John Kufuor, Rawlings' successor. By giving a platform to the "homoconference" rumors, journalists captured and heightened the anxieties over globalization and changing moralities in Ghanaian society.

I got a sense of the economy of such rumors in the town that emerged as site of a second smaller "homoconference." In this town, a restaurant owner indicated to one of his regulars who happened to be a journalist that "gay men" were congregating in the hall at the back of his premises. This happened the very day rumors started flying about Accra's international "homoconference." Not without pride, Mr. Badu, the restaurant owner, who has a vested interest in things sexual (for instance, he was planning to start a "transient hotel" with

rooms to rent for the hour), conveyed to me that the years he had spent in Switzerland taught him to read men who are feminine, fashionable, and flirtatious, as homosexuals. Positioning himself as a worldly man, he told me that he admonished his customer not to publicize the matter. The customer, however, worked for a tabloid radio station that thrives on circulating controversial stories. Soon enough Mr. Badu's town was mentioned as the alleged second "homoconference" site. As I found out, Prince had indeed rented the hall at the back of Mr. Badu's restaurant to hold a meeting with a group of local peer educators, and, as Mr. Badu suggests, they tried to fake straightness by inviting "lady friends" as well.<sup>13</sup>

Implicated in a culture where journalism is recognized as an essentially political practice (Hasty 2005, 122), the fact that Joy FM hosted a "homosexual" was interpreted, not least, as a sign of journalistic complicity in making a supposedly un-Ghanaian practice worthy of national attention. As one of the few academic publications on the "homoconference" summarized: the "difficulty was in ensuring that the opponents of homosexuals did not see the media outlet as having a pro-homosexual viewpoint" (Essien and Aderinto 2009, 130).

### **Gay and Anti-Gay Globalization**

In Ghana, as one of Africa's most stable democracies and fastest growing economies, the introduction of sex into public discourse has taken place in an increasingly neoliberal context where choice, entrepreneurialism, and individual consumer tastes are being valorized – while the actual chances for prosperity have been reduced for the majority of Ghanaians (Shiple 2009, 524). This context is reflected in a growing weariness of AIDS and of the "NGOization" (Tsikata 2009) that contributed to the imagination of a "homoconference."

Scholars of queer globalization have pointed out that AIDS has played a crucial role in the process of tying male same-sex practices to international gay institutions, capital, and identities (Altman 2001). AIDS has become "a vehicle generating the global flow of developmental capital to previously marginal associations and challenging the

<sup>13</sup> According to the representative of the regional HIV/AIDS program, this is a standard practice among the MSM peer workers, who try to suggest to the "general population" that they have girlfriends. Interview with M. A., June 1, 2007.

moralising state” (Cohen 2005, 300). At this historical conjuncture of neoliberalism and AIDS, foreign investments in community-based organizations seemed to encourage the formation of Ghanaian sexual rights initiatives at a moment when Ghana’s semi-public gay scene seemed to consist of a few late night bars in the heart of Accra. Frequented not least by MSM peer workers who had gone through British sponsored human rights trainings, by flamboyant black and white tourists, businessmen, and international aid professionals, this small bar scene is suggestive of an emerging cosmopolitan gay sphere, while also reflecting the uneven effects of a gendered and racialized (gay) globalization.

Steven Pierce tentatively suggested that the expansion of male same-sex subcultures in Nigeria coincided with the oil boom (Pierce 2008). Similarly, reports on an anti-gay march in May 2010 in Ghana’s oil-rich Takoradi-Sekondi metropolitan area suggest a link between economic growth, moral anxieties about sexual behavior, and the growing visibility of urban same-sex cultures. Ever since the discovery of offshore oil reserves in 2007, the coastal twin-city has been tagged as the hub of moral decadence and venereal diseases. Undergirded by the vitriolic comments of a regional minister who called for “the arrest of all homosexuals,”<sup>14</sup> Takoradi-Sekondi has seen protests of youth associations that fashion themselves as part of an “antigay and anti-lesbians [sic] movement.”<sup>15</sup>

As social historians have argued, sexual identities and politics flourished under particular socio-economic conditions that allowed for the creation of individual lifestyles and homosexual politics (Weeks 1977). This link between “capitalism and gay identity” (D’Emilio 1983; Drucker 1996) speaks to the ways in which the African debates are shaping through the antagonism between pro- and anti-gay movements (cf. Broqua 2012). However, the fact that many young Ghanaians are looking to metropolitan consumer styles while living under precarious economic circumstances suggests that it is not necessarily economic growth that encourages the emergence of gay and anti-gay identifications. Even in Niger – one of the poorest countries in the world – the

<sup>14</sup> Star Observer, “World news: Ghana orders the arrest of all homosexuals,” January 24, 2014, republished on [www.ghanaweb.com/GhanaHomePage/NewsArchive/artikel.php?ID=110183](http://www.ghanaweb.com/GhanaHomePage/NewsArchive/artikel.php?ID=110183), accessed July 21, 2011.

<sup>15</sup> CitiFM online, “Thousands attend first Anti-Gay protests in Ghana,” June 4, 2010, republished on [www.ghanaweb.com/GhanaHomePage/NewsArchive/artikel.php?ID=183484](http://www.ghanaweb.com/GhanaHomePage/NewsArchive/artikel.php?ID=183484), accessed February 6, 2014.

global accessibility of gay-themed news and television series played a central role in the constitution of self-identified gay groups (Tocco 2008). Claims to new social identities that are amplified through their (anti-gay) opposition are tied up with regional and global media practices and audiences.

If the proliferation of radio call-in shows engaged non-literate audiences, electronic media extended the mediascape to diasporic Ghanaians. Ghanaweb, the most popular online news portal in Ghana and its diaspora, has been at the forefront in archiving and disseminating news and opinion pieces, including vitriolic anti-gay columns. In her analysis of Ghanaweb's coverage of news stories pertaining to homosexuality, Akua Gyamerah (2015) shows that the media functions not only as a site for mobilization against homosexuality and a stage for the attacks between competing political parties, but also as a key platform for a range of public discussions about "homosexuality." The three main themes emerging from these debates between 2011 and 2014 are "culture and tradition," "religious values and morals," and "anti-imperialism and sovereignty." The latter refers to the notion that economically and geopolitically powerful governments and organizations in the global North are "culturally imposing their beliefs and values regarding same-sex sexualities and sexual rights on African nations and that resistance to such acts are about sovereignty and anti-imperialism." Culture and tradition is deployed to condemn "homosexuals" but also to reject homophobic statements, for instance, when "pro-gay" columnists and professionals voice that "we [Ghanaians] don't use violence to solve a problem" (Gyamerah 2015). Certainly, the anonymity of cyberspace invites angry and violent comments that clash with historical Akan standards of verbal artistry, subtleness, and indirection.

A year after the "homoconference" debate, the mention of homosexuality on the radio shows that I overheard in battered taxis and trotros (minibuses) did not seem to invoke strong feelings in people one way or the other. Whether they were tired from work or of the topic, the commentary was benign or even humorous compared to the aggressive online postings. It seemed to be part of a culture in which all mishaps and transgressions fall prey to more or less benign mockery. At least in densely populated, impoverished compounds, neighbors are ridiculed in turn, and mockery amounts to an outlet that balances unspoken



agreements by which everyone ought to ensure each other's survival. This culture of mockery, which does not usually tilt into physical violence, is missing from the abusive online voices that shout their threats anonymously and in English.

### Nature, Nurture, and the Law

Several times during my research in southern Ghana, I heard cases of female same-sex lovers being taken to the police station. In one case I had the chance to talk to the police officer in charge a week after the incident. The case involved two young women: a stocky football player and her feminine lover, whose mother resided in Germany. Upon the mother's annual visit in Suakrom, she was enraged to find out that her daughter had rented and furnished a room for her "friend," the footballer. Eventually, however, it was not the mother, but the daughter's ex-girlfriend that got the police to arrest the two lovers. At the police station they were given a warning letter and a small release fine that another friend, a market trader, agreed to pay for them. Josephine, my research associate, suspected that the mother must have made sure her daughter did not receive a police record which would hamper a future visa application. Apparently, all the policeman kept saying during the interrogation, was, "why are you doing this to yourselves?" (*aden na mo ha mo hō?*).<sup>16</sup> Finally, he made the two women swear an oath that they would refrain from "seeing" (*hu*) and "playing" (*di agoro*) with each other. Yet, as the football player told me later, there was no Bible to swear on, which is why she considered the oath invalid.

The retelling of this incident took place one early evening just outside Suakrom market. As the market closed several female traders who knew the couple joined us and I asked them what exactly police officers accused them of in such cases. This prompted another football player to tell me that police officers would sometimes stop them on the street to tell them to stop playing their game, and that they were never brave enough to ask the officers what game they were referring to. She bragged that she herself would never agree to stop anything, unless she was told what game they were referring to.

<sup>16</sup> All quotes in this paragraph are from a fieldnote written on January 20, 2008, at Suakrom.

These instances reveal how verbal indirection works in different registers and in several directions. Policemen remain inexplicit when admonishing football-playing young women who openly flirt with each other. In turn, although it might seem obvious that a gendered or erotic “play” of sorts is taking place, the women can pretend not to understand and not to feel interpellated by what has not been explicitly articulated.

As I approached the policeman a week later, he was unwilling to remember the case of the footballer and her well-to-do lover (thus adding weight to the suspicion that the lover’s mother might have bribed him). Indeed, the policeman showed little interest in female same-sex cases in general. He brushed my questions aside by arguing that there was no physical evidence when sexual acts occurred between two women, besides, they would always deny having had sex anyway. Instead, he took to talking about sex-related cases that do leave physical traces – such as domestic violence or defilement leading to teenage pregnancies. He also discussed, as already mentioned, the occult sexual crimes, in which men lose their genitals. Apparently, in one case a man came to the police station and showed the policeman that his genitals had disappeared (cf. Sackey 2006).

To date, there have only been a few scattered cases of “consenting adults” prosecuted based on the sodomy clause in Ghana’s Criminal Code (1960) that reads:

(1) Whoever has unnatural carnal knowledge – (a) of any person of the age of sixteen years or over without his consent shall be guilty of a first degree felony and shall be liable on conviction to imprisonment for a term of not less than five years and not more than twenty-five years; or twenty-five years; or (b) of any person of sixteen years or over with his consent is guilty of a misdemeanour; or (c) of any animal is guilty of a misdemeanour. (2) Unnatural carnal knowledge is sexual intercourse with a person in an unnatural manner or with an animal.<sup>17</sup>

Inherited from British Common Law, variations of this wording are still found in the Penal Codes throughout the former British colonies interpreted as outlawing non-procreative “sodomitical” acts, the law is primarily associated with sexual acts involving a penis (Ottosson

<sup>17</sup> Criminal Code of Ghana (1960), as amended to 2003, Act 29, Section 104. Government of Ghana: Accra.

2007). As the Ghanaian press has noted, the law is silent on female homosexuality.<sup>18</sup> Unlike other former British colonies (most notably Uganda and Nigeria), there have not been no legal attempts to update or expand this law toward an inclusion of female same-sex acts.

Part (b) of the law treats *consensual* sexual acts as a misdemeanor punishable with up to three years of imprisonment. It is this part that is singled out by international human rights organizations (Søgaard 2013, 43). Despite the law's embedded limitations (how can an "unnatural" intimate act be proven if it involved consenting adults?), its existence has its symbolic effects. First, people have been prosecuted based on retrospective claims that an act was non-consensual as detailed in part (a) of the law. While Ghana's sodomy law is judicially merely symbolic (Søgaard 2013, 44), it acts as a deterrent and sanctions stigmatization and violent outbursts against gender non-conforming men and women whose sexuality is considered "deviant."<sup>19</sup> Moreover, reports pertaining to the Greater Accra region show that not only men but also women who are seen as homosexuals easily fall victim to blackmailing and assaults by ex-lovers, landlords, family members, or police officers who seek to extort money, rape them, or refuse to investigate their cases (Kouassiama and Armisen 2012).

Whenever my respondents mentioned situations in which they were taken to the police office because of a female lover, it had been by jealous friends, employers, or a lovers' family members who turned them in as a way to intimidate them. Although the cases were mostly settled peacefully (and in some cases the accused women were even able to pull personal strings within the police to reverse the accusation), these instances clearly signaled to the women that they ought to be highly discreet about their same-sex desires.

In 2010, the phrase "unnatural carnal knowledge" received some attention in a talk show on Ghana's CitiFM. The Accra-based radio station allowed law lecturer Ernest Kofi Abotsi to reflect on the flaws of the sodomy law's antiquated wording. "The word natural or

<sup>18</sup> *Daily Graphic*, "Gays can be prosecuted," June 7, 2011, republished on [www.ghanaweb.com/GhanaHomePage/NewsArchive/artikel.php?ID=210533](http://www.ghanaweb.com/GhanaHomePage/NewsArchive/artikel.php?ID=210533), accessed February 6, 2014.

<sup>19</sup> See also "No Choice but to Deny Who I Am" Violence and Discrimination against LGBT People in Ghana, [www.hrw.org/report/2018/01/08/no-choice-deny-who-i-am/violence-and-discrimination-against-lgbt-people-ghana](http://www.hrw.org/report/2018/01/08/no-choice-deny-who-i-am/violence-and-discrimination-against-lgbt-people-ghana), accessed March 7, 2018.

unnatural, it's a very difficult concept [...] What is natural is based on individual preference."<sup>20</sup> Abotsi's musings about the interpretability of nature are in tune with a speech culture that values debates and disagreements about (proverbial) meanings, and treasures word plays with an openness to new interpretations (cf. Shipley 2013, 135). On air, Abotsi explains why he considers the sodomy clause "a legislative error":

Given the diverse and cosmopolitan nature of our society today, individuals' sexual orientation is something that is difficult to standardize [...] the understanding of what constitutes an unnatural sexual relationship is dependent on a person's own personal experiences, the person's own concept of what is good and bad and morality among others. So from a purely critical and academic point, I think it is difficult for me to be saying that our law prohibits homosexuality.<sup>21</sup>

Besides Abotsi, the human-rights lawyer and former minister of gender, children, and social protection Nana Oye Lithur strongly argued that homosexuality in Ghana is legal. In 2010 these lawyers belonged to a minority of intellectuals who publicly asserted themselves against the increasingly homophobic climate. In a public lecture, sociologist Akosua Adomako Ampofo declared that Ghana has "become a very intolerant nation" (2011, 8). She scrutinized the hypocrisy of many churches, she called upon humanist Christian values, and implored Ghanaians to be compassionate. More commonly, the sodomy clause has been discredited on the grounds that it is incompatible with the Ghanaian claim to be the regional hub of democracy that allows for the freedom of expression and, the fact that it is in tension with the constitutionally enshrined protection on the right to privacy.<sup>22</sup>

Public debates about the sodomy law were dominated not only by questions over the meaning of "unnatural carnal knowledge." At stake was the naturalness of homosexuality more generally; that is, the

<sup>20</sup> CitiFM, "Ghana's laws do not prohibit homosexuality – Law lecturer." Radio broadcast, interview with Ernest Kofi Abotsi, May 14, 2010, accessed September 9, 2019. [www.ghanaweb.com/GhanaHomePage/NewsArchive/artikel.php?ID=182046](http://www.ghanaweb.com/GhanaHomePage/NewsArchive/artikel.php?ID=182046), accessed February 6, 2014

<sup>21</sup> CitiFM, "Ghana's laws do not prohibit homosexuality – Law lecturer." Radio broadcast, interview with Ernest Kofi Abotsi, May 14, 2010, accessed September 9, 2019.

<sup>22</sup> Stephen Atta Owusu, "Homosexuality in Ghana: An increasing growth in numbers," January 6, 2011, republished on [www.ghanaweb.com/GhanaHomePage/features/artikel.php?ID=200705](http://www.ghanaweb.com/GhanaHomePage/features/artikel.php?ID=200705), accessed January 14, 2014.

question of whether one is homosexual by “nature” or by “nurture.” Entrenched in the “nurture” argument – which states that one is not born but *becomes* a homosexual through the wrong kind of upbringing – is the idea that homosexuality is a behavior that can be unlearned. This conviction is espoused in columns by self-identified “ex-gay” Christians who write about their “recovery,” fraught with “many relapses,” and their arrival at a place where “things are pretty stable.”<sup>23</sup>

Relatedly, nature keeps being invoked in pseudo-scientific ways by well-traveled respectable citizens, such as the restaurant owner Mr. Badu. In an interview he told me that “these [homosexual] people should be helped rather than condemned, they should be allowed to meet. Not everybody is fortunate. Some are born with too much male hormone in their bodies.”<sup>24</sup> In opposition to widespread representations of the “passive” feminine men being the homosexual deviant, Mr. Badu seems to pathologize the testosterone-driven, hypermasculine partner, whose sexual encounters with men (and women) are not necessarily considered deviant.<sup>25</sup> Similarly, Mahmood, a returnee from Europe who now spent a lot of time trading money inside Suakrom market and observing the market women, suggested that some individuals, including women, were simply more into having sex than others and were thus ready to seek it from different genders. Such arguments suggest that homosexuality in contemporary Ghana is not necessarily associated with deviance from expected gender roles, as queer historians have revealed for early twentieth-century Europe and North America (cf. Chauncey 1994), but with notions of a strong male or female sexual appetite.

Rather than attributing the above attitudes to some kind of sexual drive or “nature,” Appiah points out the carnal-friendly Ghanaian take on sexual activity in general. During his childhood in Kumasi, Appiah overheard conversations in which sex was considered to be pleasurable in the first place, while the gender of a sexual partner seemed to be of secondary importance. In 2010, in an interview about his own

<sup>23</sup> Sena Afari, “Homosexuality in Ghana: The great ‘coming out,’” September 8, 2006, republished on [www.ghanaweb.com/GhanaHomePage/features/artikel.php?ID=110253](http://www.ghanaweb.com/GhanaHomePage/features/artikel.php?ID=110253), accessed February 7, 2014.

<sup>24</sup> Interview with Kwaku Badu at Suakrom, March 28, 2008.

<sup>25</sup> Comparatively, in small-town South Africa, the fact that “big men” have male sexual partners has been regarded as an effect of their excessive masculinity, rather than a sign of their deviance (Reid 2007).

experience of “coming out” in a British-Ghanaian Christian family, he held that not long ago, homosexuality was not something Ghanaians were preoccupied with at all. Appiah’s casual optimism is based on his impression that “Ghanaians like sex too much to think that in the end it [homosexuality] is a bad thing.”<sup>26</sup> At the same time, however, current anti-gay debates heavily draw on and fuel moral anxieties over the sexualization of the public sphere and recently, charismatic initiatives such as the National Coalition for Proper Human Sexual Rights and Family Values aim at further criminalizing homosexuality.<sup>27</sup>

### Noisy Men and Silent Women?

So far female voices have been marginal both to debates on the cultural imperialism of international LGBT organizations (Massad 2002, 361) and to my own discussion of what could be considered anti-gayism in Ghana. This omission results not only from a focus on published texts, but also warrants a look at the gender contestations at the heart of queer activist projects that seek to unify a range of male and female erotic subjectivities. I am less interested in the personal tensions that contributed to the difficulty of consolidating a gay *and* lesbian movement in Ghana at the time of my research, than in the ways in which women seemed to resist their incorporation into a joint activist voice and identity.

The story of Ghana’s LGBTI activism began when Prince joined forces with his friend Stella Odamten. According to Stella, he asked her to accompany him to a youth and human rights training program sponsored by the British Council. Aimed “to empower young people to protect themselves from HIV and advocate for their gender and human rights,” the series of workshops was held outside Accra, away from inquisitive friends and family. To unemployed young people who lacked the means to pursue any formal professional training, these foreign-sponsored educational training sessions amounted to more

<sup>26</sup> Max Miller, “What was your experience like coming out of the closet in an evangelical family in Ghana?”, online interview with Kwame Anthony Appiah, recorded September 13, 2010, <http://bigthink.com/videos/ghanaians-like-sex-too-much-to-be-homophobic>, accessed February 13, 2017.

<sup>27</sup> Mohammed Awal, “We’ll campaign against any party who supports homosexuality – Group,” April 18, 2018 <https://starrfmonline.com/2018/04/well-campaign-against-any-party-who-supports-homosexuality-group>, accessed November 2, 2018.

than an interesting diversion. Listening to Stella's descriptions of the feedback rounds, role-play exercises, and other group bonding exercises through which they were encouraged to express and jot down their fears and desires on post-its and flipcharts, I was reminded of the "technologies of the self" (Foucault 1998) that the medical anthropologist Vinh-Kim Nguyen critically describes in *The Republic of Therapy* (2010). Nguyen observed the participatory workshops and "talking shops" attended by HIV/AIDS volunteer workers in neighboring Francophone West African countries (2010, 40). These training sessions incited participants to strive toward self-knowledge and self-improvement and taught them how to structure confessional group conversations themselves. Additionally, the program Stella and Prince attended in Ghana provided them with opportunities to bond with each other and to put their transnational communication skills to the test. By engaging in these programs, they also established social relations with foreign experts – contacts that proved crucial for future mentoring and funding opportunities.

Stella was eager to apply the confessional technologies acquired in these training sessions to the WSW (Women Who Have Sex With Women) group Prince asked her to build up. With the help of her same-sex loving female cousin, Stella who had never had a female lover herself started to assemble the women of her neighborhood in Accra who she knew or suspected of being lovers. She began with icebreaker games, she informed the participants about human and sexual rights, and she encouraged them to talk and to develop a sense of a shared (lesbian) identity. Keeping these women's sustained interest and establishing a female group proved to be a harder challenge than Prince's task of recruiting young men and organizing their street activities as sexual health educators; HIV/AIDS gave the men a *raison-d'être*, some cash, and an identity as "peer workers." Meanwhile Prince managed to rent a tiny office space between shanty homes, beauty parlors, and makeshift auto body shops. Its premises – a purple painted reefer container covered with corrugated iron sheets – was shared with a corner shop selling condensed milk, candy, cans, and biscuits; the wide gutter separating the container from the road was bridged by wooden planks. This space became the hub of the lively gatherings of the MSM peer workers. Stella on the other hand could only motivate WSW to join the monthly gatherings by offering them T'n'T (an allowance for "time and

transportation”). She could not offer the prospects of a structured assignment as peer educators promoting safer sex.

Soon, Stella felt alienated and pushed out of the NGO that became the basis of GALAG, the Gay and Lesbian Association of Ghana. The two young women Prince hired to replace Stella faced similar difficulties in building GALAG’s women’s wing. Unlike Stella, both these secondary school graduates had been long involved with female lovers themselves and were interested in availing themselves of a lesbian activist identity. However, none of them was successful in mobilizing global sexual categories and consolidating a lesbian group. In the three or four women’s gatherings organized at the office during my research period, women in their early twenties only attended if they were single and looking for potential lovers and if they had nothing better going on that afternoon. A few women in their thirties usually came late. Some only came for the soft drinks afterward, and older women were virtually absent and avoided being affiliated with Prince altogether, even prior to the bad publicity he received through the “homoconference” debate. Prince, however, believed that the female activists he tried to work with were not committed enough to make the project work. He felt that they liked going out with him and the peer workers, but that they expected him to pay for the drinks. While he complained about their passive and consumerist attitude, the two “lesbian” activists complained about Prince’s secretiveness and suspected that he had more money at his hands than he would admit. Having signed his successful grant proposal for a “lesbian” source of funding, they felt he was not evenly sharing the funds that were meant to benefit specifically the women.

While GALAG’s young women seemed to lack initiative and looked to Prince as their patron, it was even more difficult to involve older same-sex desiring women.

They don’t even talk about it. They think so far as we [. . .] do what we want to do, and it’s private (.) there is not need of any association, there is no need of any open coming out, there is not need to fight for acceptance, the- that is what the women will [say:] “so why are you making all this noise you rather expose us, we just want to be there quietly and enjoying what we do.”<sup>28</sup>

<sup>28</sup> Interview with Prince MacDonald at Accra, June 23, 2007.



These quiet woman lovers, many of them mothers and wives, expressed no interest in organizing themselves under the banner of sexual orientation. “They don’t have the names for them[selves] and they don’t have the- or they don’t make all the noise we do- make these days about it. [S.D.: So how do you make the noise?] Yes, the noise, the noise means that, at least in every society there should be someone who will talk, and that’s why we think we need to talk and we need to tell people we are there.” Prince was aware that public claims to having “a sexuality” were a novel and “noisy” mode of seeking public recognition. The “we” he summoned refers to junior men who provided information about safer sex as sexual health activists and who dared to make themselves heard in radio shows and on online platforms. In terms of class and gender affiliations, these peer workers had little to lose as Prince put it. As children they were considered to be “kodjo besia,”<sup>29</sup> feminine boys, and as underemployed adults they struggle to produce a nuclear family home and could not easily project normative adult manhood. Normatively gendered same-sex desiring men, on the other hand, avoid the “noise” and the risk of losing their privacy. Besides, some of these masculine-presenting men are comfortable patrons and do not conceive of their sexual activities with subordinate (feminine) men, as *same*-sex acts altogether (cf. Reid 2007; Gaudio 2009, 132).

### Naming, Labeling, and (Dis)Identifying

Prince’s concern with names and naming points to the importance that labeling of same-sex practices has gained for activists, throughout the postcolony. On the one hand, compelled to counter homophobic narratives and argue for the historicity and the cultural authenticity of same-sex practices (Rao 2010), it can be crucial to be able to reveal indigenous words and in-group terms – such as the Akan term “saso”<sup>30</sup>

<sup>29</sup> Though the term is not necessarily negative, it can be used to insult men who are considered to be too emotional or “soft” (cf. Geoffrion 2012, 11). Literally, “besia” is the Fante word for woman and Kodjo (Kodwo, or Kwadwo, in its different transliterations) is the day name given to every Monday-born boy. Although it is a Fante term it is chiefly employed among the Ga who used to be said to be particularly accepting of gender variant behavior.

<sup>30</sup> According to William Banks, “mi saso” is translated as “my mate” or “my colleague” (2011, 265). Kwame E. Otu refers to Sasso (plural) as “self-identified, effeminate men,” who see themselves as co-equals (Otu 2018).

or “sasso” used among communities of male same-sex lovers (Banks 2011; Otu 2018). On the other hand, the success of “Third World” LGBT initiatives relies on the ability to fabricate coherent cultural translations and to be legible as “gay” by international LGBT organizations (Rao 2010, 194). Thus, a cosmopolitan gay and lesbian lexicon is indispensable for attracting potential donors. Prince sweepingly attributed women’s reticence to speak out and name themselves to the “double stigma” of being female and homosexual, that is, to the “more marginalized” position of lesbians in general. While this assessment echoes a global human and women’s rights discourse, it does not reflect on the fact that women’s marginalization from public discourse is reproduced by the HIV-inflected gender asymmetries that have shaped queer African associations. However, the unwillingness of many women to embrace the label lesbian or to coin specific Ghanaian names to politicize their intimacies cannot be reduced to universalizing notions of lesbian invisibility and women’s oppression.

Most of the women I interviewed refused to categorize themselves based on their sexual intimacies and “disidentified” (Muñoz 1999) with both globally circulating and local terms labeling same-sex desires. Ameley Norkor, for instance, a wife and mother in her thirties in Accra, took issue with the act of attaching any fixed name to what she sometimes referred to as the “friendship *thing*.” I asked Ameley about the origins of the term *supi* – a term often used to denote girls’ same-sex practices – that I had also heard used among adult woman lovers in Accra. Ameley replied that she does not know “*where the word came from*.” Instead she asserted that as a child, when she started “*doing it, it didn’t have a name, but now it has gotten a name [...] to the extent that when*” a female friend visits you on a regular basis, “*they’ll ask her questions [...] because I’m now notorious for this, and immediately they see me with someone, then it means that! They have painted me black*.”<sup>31</sup> Rather than challenging the public attitudes that condemn women who (seem to) pursue their same-sex desire, Ameley pragmatically held its naming, and the negativity that goes along with terms such as *supi*, responsible for the practice’s bad reputation. Although she did distinguish between sexual and non-sexual female intimacies, she considered every woman a potential lover and deemed

<sup>31</sup> All quotes within this paragraph are taken from an interview with Ameley Norkor at Accra, April 4, 2007.

it unnecessary to produce nominal distinctions between different types of female intimacies.

Similarly, Okaile Allotey, a vocal woman in her mid-twenties, rejected homosexual and sexualizing labels. She was part of “Giving Lesbians a Voice,” the group Stella enthusiastically formed, while working with Prince. At the first gathering, a dance party that attracted a significant number of festively dressed women, Okaile gave the welcome address and renamed the group “Giving Women a Voice.” Stella’s report on that gathering states that “we believe using the normal term women here will help other lesbians who are shy of us and are not comfortable hearing the name mentioned, to also join and be part of our program.”<sup>32</sup> Discussing the possibility of reforming the group with my support, Okaile kept correcting Stella whenever she referred to the group as lesbian. “I don’t hate the word but it’s common, it’s too cheap,”<sup>33</sup> Okaile told me. The term *supi* carries similar connotations. “Everybody knows what *supi* means, everybody knows what is lesbian, but when I say ‘girls in the wood’ you will crack your mind a little, ‘girls in the wood, what is the meaning of it?’ You crack your mind a little before you will catch up. Do you [get] what I want to say? So I prefer that.” Okaile took pleasure in coining her own phrases such as “girls in the wood.” For, in the remoteness of the deep woods, with no man around, she argued, “anything can happen. You can’t stay in a room when you are four or five girls for a year without anything. You will be feeling something so you (claps her hands) join things together.” Yet, neither the imperative to be indirect nor her allusions to same-sex desire as situational<sup>34</sup> stopped Okaile from employing the term lesbian on occasion to talk about herself and her street-wise female mates.

As the political scientist Nivedita Menon reminds us, terms such as lesbian or bisexual circulate in different ways and take on ever new meanings in India and other contexts where English is not the dominant language (2007, 15). Stella, for instance, referred to the masculine styled

<sup>32</sup> Report on the group meeting in Accra on August 20, 2005, by Stella Odamten.

<sup>33</sup> All quotes within this paragraph are taken from an interview with Okaile Allotey at Accra, May 25, 2007.

<sup>34</sup> The notion of “situational homosexuality” has been critiqued on the grounds that it aims to set apart same-sex practices in single-sex spaces such as prisons, sailing boats, psychiatric wards, or boarding houses, from seemingly more authentic forms of “true” homosexuality, neglecting that all forms of sexuality are situated and given meaning by a specific context (Kunzel 2002, 253–54).

women of her group as “lesbians,” and to the more feminine ones as “bisexuals,” regardless of their actual sexual lives, thus making gender rather than sexuality the reference point. Similarly, Okaile did not call all women who opted for a female lover “lesbians.” Indeed, in her usage “lesbian” emerged as a shorthand only for those women who were particularly committed to initiating and actively pursuing same-sex relationships against all odds. When it came to forming a group, however, she deemed all terms associated with sexual practice too “obvious.” One of the expressions that circulated among Okaile’s friends for a few months was “the-value-is-the-same.” This slogan was introduced by the Ghanaian government in July 2007 to convey to the public how the currency change worked: 10,000 old cedis were replaced by one new GHC (Ghana Cedi), the value remaining the same. Among Okaile’s friends “the-value-is-the-same” became an in-group salute that indexed a doubly understood sameness: the equivalence of same- and opposite-sex passion, and perhaps their “sameness” and solidarity as what I consider, *knowing women* – that is, women knowing how to value and pursue intimate same-sex desires. Rather than investing in fixing or politicizing a term, Okaile revels in the polysemy of the provisional names she generates. At the women’s party we eventually held in Stella’s family compound, Okaile announced that we were starting a “ladies social club.” Although she did not use the term “lesbian,” it seemed to be understood among the guests that the group would serve as a socializing platform for “knowing women” whose aim was to connect with potential female lovers. Despite her interest in organizing group activities that would empower same-sex desiring women socially and economically, it did not occur to Okaile to organize around a particular term or to collaborate with male sexual rights activists.

Stella, on the other hand, who had never had a female lover, proudly identified as a lesbian rights activist and women’s group facilitator and readily embraced a cosmopolitan LGBT lexicon. Her failed fundraising efforts for the “ladies social club,” however, made me realize to what extent the international field of LGBT activism calls for the performance of a lesbian self. In fact, I encouraged Stella to write a funding proposal to the representatives of a Swiss lesbian organization whom she had briefly met while working with Prince. I advised her to prioritize her concern with the human rights of women in her locale who live an effectively “bisexual” life, without, however, pretending to be a lesbian herself. Her carefully composed one-page proposal letter

was rejected on the basis that Stella's formulations seemed to be "intentionally vague" and that the organization could only support clear-cut "lesbian projects."<sup>35</sup> Had I advised Stella to strategically present herself as a lesbian, her proposal might have been successful. It seems that internationally the performance of a homosexual identity is more coherent and even more legible than the realities of those who would qualify as lesbians based on their sexual practices but have not learned to narrate their desires in terms of having a "sexual identity."

One of the benefits of working with Prince was the access Stella gained to Euro-American gay volunteers and lesbian travelers and to the lesbian cultural materials (brochures, books, DVDs) they brought. One such overseas foreigner was Latasha Ray, a retired African-Canadian who had based herself in Accra for a few years. She supported Stella's efforts of building up a lesbian women's group by hosting two or three meetings at her own apartment in an upscale neighborhood of Accra. As Stella's reports show, these "programs" were "exciting, educational and full of discussions"; social and confessional games were played, and Latasha distributed copies of black lesbian-feminist magazines and spoke about topics such as HIV and lesbian feminism.<sup>36</sup> To what extent these parties succeeded in raising lesbian consciousness or a sense of being part of a transnational lesbian community is difficult to evaluate. Latasha herself confided to me that she felt her efforts made little impact. A few weeks before returning to Canada, she bitterly complained about Ghana's lack of "real lesbians." Based on her own romantic involvement with two young women, she concluded that Ghanaian women did not mind getting married. And although they practiced same-sex love with much fervor, they lacked a sense of lesbian awareness.

Stella did not give up easily on her vision of teaching women about their rights and pursuing her own professional identity as a group facilitator. In one of her reports she noted that Latasha shared her international experience in the field of "Women Activism [sic]" with the "sisters" present at the meeting.<sup>37</sup> Surely, Stella meant activism. Notwithstanding, the emphasis her misspelling puts on the figure

<sup>35</sup> Personal email communication between the author and Cordelia Oppliger, December 12, 2007.

<sup>36</sup> Report on the women's group meeting of October 8, 2005, by Stella Odamten.

<sup>37</sup> Report on the women's group meeting of September 11, 2005, by Stella Odamten.

of the activist reflects Stella's aspirations to acquire an activist identity. Her formulation attests to an understanding of activism as a self-perpetuating activity that teases out knowledge through "technologies of the self." Whatever the activist-ing is supposed to achieve in the world at large and among queer collectivities and the state, it provides its bearer – the group-facilitating activist herself – with the basis for a self-identity. Stella's unintentional slip of the tongue seems to sum up the "noise" of charismatic preaching, radio interviews, online comments, legal debates, and gay activist struggles within which the process of defining female same-sex love (if indeed that is a destiny) is incomplete.

### **Conclusion: Tacitness Meets "Activism"**

A decade after Ghana's democratization and media liberalization, the "homoconference" became the epitome of the "noise" attributed to the intersecting voices of sensational journalists and sexual rights activists. Indeed, it marked the starting point of an ongoing debate that speaks to anxieties about rapid economic, political, and social changes. Triggered by the exposé of a self-identified gay man, the media controversy hinted at the public concerns over a growing number of vocal young men who speak the language of human rights and are feared for challenging existing power relations. What made the "homoconference" debate particularly poignant to my respondents was that it brought terms like "gay" and "lesbian" into circulation. Furthermore, the homo/hetero binarism (and hence the notion that homosexual and heterosexual persons constitute two essentially different types of persons) gained currency. The scarcity of female voices within these media debates indicates that a textual focus on "homosexuality" and on state sanctioned forms of "homophobia" amplifies the male voices of journalists, online commentators, politicians, and activists who are able to make themselves heard. The "noise" they produce drowns out the indirect language and the tacit politics of working-class women who desire women but whose passions are bound to remain elusive.

The question of visibility and the tensions between male and female African LGBTI activists indicated in this chapter, hint not only a reproduction of gendered asymmetries, but are tied in with global funding streams. Analyzing the underrepresentation of women's queer organizations in Nairobi, Kaitlin Dearham suggests that men's greater

willingness to “come out” speaks of women’s economic marginalization, their care obligations as young mothers, and to the donor imperatives of focusing on HIV/AIDS (Dearham 2013, 189). As Varyanne Sika and Awino Okech further argue, the funding necessary for movement building rarely allows for “intersectional programming” and donor focus on “single issues” leads to competition between groups (2019, 29). Certainly, when sexual health is at stake, the outcomes of supporting same-sex desiring men appear to be more straightforward, whereas women’s sexuality seems to be complicated by gender issues. This, of course, reflects the patriarchal perceptions of women’s issues as particular and less generic than those of men.

Ghana’s charismatic culture with its threats of spiritual fakeness (Shipley 2009) and its desire to uncover the hidden have marshaled the sexualization of the public sphere. While the recent processes of calling (homo)sexuality into discourse echo Foucault’s repressive thesis, it has to be remembered that sodomy laws and homosexual theories had long traveled through missionary and colonial interventions. The question is why and how they have become such an imposing force during the last two decades. A comparative analysis of the discourses on homosexuality in Cameroon, Senegal, Uganda, and South Africa shows markedly different trajectories in the ways in which anti-gay rhetorics are unfolding in different postcolonial African countries (Awondo, Geschiere and Reid 2012; Ndashe 2013). The differences hinge on regional political economies, on diverging sexual histories of the former colonial powers (unlike Britain, France did not impose sodomy laws for instance), the specific ways in which the figure of the “homosexual” is invoked as culturally foreign, or the role of Christian and Muslim religious authorities in construing and denouncing “gayism.” These dynamics and the positive national legal and policy trends currently unfolding tend to be obscured by the “single story of ‘African homophobia’” (Ndashe 2013).

One factor contributing to the reservations of Ghanaian working-class women against the “noise” is their general reluctance to commit to set identities, sexual or otherwise. Many of the women I interacted with went by different personal names, had several mobile phone numbers (without necessarily owning their own phone), pursued various informal jobs, and had different lovers in different locations. The idea of adhering to one fixed social or political identity did not occur to their postcolonial subject positions (cf. Mbembe 2001). It seemed to be

unaffordable and undesirable. In light of the culture of verbal indirection where overt sexual talk is considered blunt, even the younger women who used the term lesbian for themselves were reluctant to side with gay men and engage in visible lesbian rights activism. Their tacitness and tendency to shy away from or disidentify with overt sexual politics, however, did not stop these women from being fascinated with lesbian sex gadgets and cultural materials, nor from the lifestyles and identities transported by overseas volunteers, tourists, and activists, or by researchers like myself.

To Stella Odamten, “activism” and her identification as (an albeit straight) lesbian activist held the temporary hope of making a living by doing what she felt she was best at: teaching human rights, facilitating groups of women, and imparting to them lesbian “technologies of the self” (Foucault 1998). These technologies profess to detangle and channel unpredictable desires into clear-cut identities. Given Ghanaian cultural norms of discretion and indirection, the quest to become visible (and marketable) on a global gay map is complicated for both male and female activists. By rejecting the project of classifying themselves in sexual terms, however, the women I encountered have been even less legible as “queer” subjects to LGBT funding bodies than men. Their same-sex passions, which are not nearly as silent as they seem to be, are the subject of the following chapters.