Homophobia and Building Queer Community in Urban Ghana

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Introduction

> Ghana's government has banned a conference for gay men and lesbians due to take place there later this month…"Unnatural carnal knowledge is illegal under our criminal code. Homosexuality, lesbianism and bestiality are therefore offences under the laws of Ghana," Information Minister Kwamena Bartels said. Friday, *1 Sept 2006, BBC News.*
>
> The Gay & Lesbian Association of Ghana (GALAG) feels compelled to issue this statement in the face of mounting misinformation being made public…GALAG has never discussed, nor have we ever organized, an international Lesbian/Gay/Bisexual/Transgender [LGBT] conference in Ghana. Since our Executive President appeared in some electronic media, this conference appears to have been the brainchild of someone's vivid imagination. As an association, we are not prepared to organize such a conference anywhere in Ghana, let alone any part of the universe, at this point. *Press Statement from GALAG, 6 September 2006*

Ghana's governmental and religious leaders created a moral panic in August-September 2006 through their reaction to Prince MacDonald who on August 24, 2006 on Ghanaian radio station Joy F.M., revealed he was gay. In the same radio panel discussion on HIV/AIDS education, MacDonald self identified as president of the Gay and Lesbian Association of Ghana, and allegedly indicated that GALAG had plans to host an international conference for gays in Accra, the capital city. In fact, according to MacDonald, he was announcing something else entirely: "it is coming in September, we have received funding" referring to the Behavior Surveillance Survey, a research survey for HIV/AIDS education that he was publicizing.

The media reaction to the radio panel discussion was immediate; in governmental press conferences, newspapers, pulpits, airwaves, and blogs an hysterical public discussion about this taboo topic took place. The public discourse demonstrated common perceptions about and attitudes towards homosexuality, especially the condemnatory stances of the government and several religious bodies—Christian and Muslim, Protestant, Catholic, and Pentecostal. The discourse employed in both political and religious spheres identified homosexuality as "unnatural, bestial, satanic, deviant, and un-Ghanaian". Augustin Sarkwa, President of the YMCA, bemoaned the "abnormal, evil practice." Major religious leaders called for a large public demonstration against gays and lesbians which Vice President Alhaji Airu Mahama agreed to lead (Ireland, 2006). Concerned to "save" Ghanaians from the "abomination to God," the verbal efforts of the social gatekeepers served to actually heighten public awareness about different sexual identities and social practices, and reveal an emergent queer community.

As discussed in this essay, in the past decade gay and lesbian social networks in Ghanaian cities have been slowly forming, laying the basis for

same sex identified micro-communities in the region of greater Accra and Tema, southeast Ghana. Their rhetoric of personal subjectivity and community identity is partly affected by global gay and youth popular culture, but equally by local Ghanaian culture. Despite the fact that silence has prevailed as the social strategy of suppression in Ghana, broken occasionally by a news event that stokes public homophobia, the discursive construction of a sexually different community has its own unique features and has not centered primarily on legal rights and citizenship as in South Africa or western countries; rather, it has been primarily about local community building within a highly exclusionary environment. Silence or concealing one's sexual identity and practice ironically creates more space for building community, whereas 'coming out' publicly invites violence, imprisonment, and familial rejection. Reminiscent of 1970s North America when the Christian 'moral majority' employed homophobia for political capital and LGBT organizations contested different strategies, in Ghana the tension between alternative approaches, i.e., quiet community builders and the "come out" of the closet and demand your human rights, is complicated by a social context of fear and suspicions of western models and tactics. The influence of international gay organizations and individuals has encouraged such organizational models as MacDonald's GALAG.

This paper is framed by particular underlying assumptions about sexual difference, i.e., that identities are fluid and permeable and that "community" as constructed in discourse is also a social construction which exists largely in the minds of its members. Further, I concur with Mary Bucholtz and Kira Hall (2004, 503-506) who assert that "gender does not have the same meanings across space and time, but is instead a local production, realized differently by different members of the community. Same sex community and queer or lesbian and gay identity in twenty-first century Accra, are articulated within a local community, marked by a specific shared geography. The analysis of Accra communities is framed, in part, by a "communities of practice" perspective which views identities as multiple and fluid and contends that identities emerge through practice, social and discursive practice (Bucholtz 1999, 209). Thus, sexual identity, an aspect of social identity, is produced in relation to particular material conditions and locations of power. Non-normative identity in Ghana has been formed in the face of stigma, exclusion, and marginality. A sense of community, however, forms around shared knowledge, experiences and social location, and strategies of in/visibility. As Bucholtz emphasizes, individuals "engage in multiple identity practices simultaneously and are able to move from one identity to another…meaning, that it is the result of a local production, realized differently by different members" of the community (Bucholtz 1999,209). Other meaningful social identities include, ethnicity, class, and religious affiliation.

Data Collection

The data for this essay was garnered in three separate series of interviews in 2005, 2006 and 2007 with subjects gathered daisy chain fashion: ten men and three women, ages twenty-three to thirty-eight. The material derives from the unstructured narratives described by Paul Thompson (2000), life story interviews with a focus on individual and community experiences and discursive practices. All interviews were conducted and transcribed by me or an African American gay male assistant. Our location as outsiders—both of us were considered *obruni* (white/foreign)—no doubt was a limiting factor, but one mitigated by our insider status as queers.

African homo/sexualities and communities of sexual difference are highly under-examined with the exception of South Africa where a specific racialized national history and economic development differ from the rest of Africa south of the Sahara. For that nation William Leap has provided us with studies of the gay geography of Capetown (1997, 2003) and its imbrication with race and class, and Cameron and Gevisser 's anthology, *Defiant Desire* covers apartheid (and anti-Apartheid South African history), demonstrating the intersections of anti-apartheid resistance with the rise of gay and lesbian activism. Murray and Roscoe's *Boy Wives and Female Husbands (1998)* typifies research on sexualities south of the Sahara; it is an anthology which demonstrates that same sex patterns of behavior in Africa are diverse, and as Gaudio and Amory show in that volume, may employ distinct language to describe non-normative masculine and feminine behaviors. More recently, Arnefred's anthology *Rethinking Sexualities in Africa* (2004) has examined enduring colonial effects on sexual discourses while focusing on what many studies of African sexualities do: HIV/AIDS, FGM and reproduction. Researchers on African homo/sexualities have described or emphasized alternative genders or indigenous "third sex" categories, e.g., ghanith/xanith. Murray and Roscoe claim that what is missing in the African inventory of same sex patterns, is an identity and "lifestyle" in which homosexual relationships are primary and not necessarily based on socially dominant ideas of gender differences. They referenced the prevailing western model which defines individuals solely on sexual object choice.

Legal and Social Context

In Ghana heterosexual marriage and procreation (not necessarily desire and monogamy) are highly dominant social expectations. Few men and even fewer women do not marry and have children, even if they are gender non-normative (www.mask.org.za, 13 July 05). The dominant social code does not so much require the "suppression of same sex desires and behaviors as not permit such preferences to supplant procreation." (Ajen, 133) Some places, in woman-woman relationships a woman is allowed to become a sort of husband to her partner and claim some of the prerogatives of a man. (Morgan and Wieringa, 99-101,112-118) A binary gender concept remains the major idiom of queer

sexualities for both men and women but forms of female masculinity and male femininity are accepted.

These characterizations do not precisely fit the social networks or mini-communities of same sex identified individuals in Accra and Tema. Their discursive constructions of themselves and their community differ from the findings of Rudy Gaudio on Hausa *'yan daudu* or Deb Amory on Swahili *mashoga* and *makhanith*, in Murray and Roscoe's anthology. A thumbnail sketch of the subjects of this paper makes this point: the Accra-Tema subjects differed in occupation and social location from most subjects in Murray & Roscoe; they all attended secondary school and most completed it (A-level/GCSE exams); none have ever been heterosexually married or had children; they all lived alone, with a gay partner, or a parent within greater Accra-Tema; they all self identified as gay or lesbian, using English, Ga and Ashanti-Twi words about the topic/their identity interchangeably. On the other hand, no subject was wealthy or a member of an elite profession. Several worked in the "hospitality industry," hotel management or restaurant service, and through such employment have had contact with western gays and lesbians. Hence, personal interactions not just global popular culture could be said to affect same sex identities and practices there.

The cultural and juridical context of gay and lesbian identified individuals in Ghana is that of a post colonial developing country which economically hit rock bottom in the late 1970s and the 1980s. Extremely high rates of poverty and unemployment under successive military governments resulted in much out-migration and a serious brain drain. Ghanaian academics point to this time as the onset of Christian revivalism, which continues in conservative forms to contribute to heightened homophobia in Ghana and in West Africa generally. Moreover, British colonial era anti-sodomy laws remain in force, notably Article 105 of the Ghana criminal code states that "whoever is guilty of unnatural carnal knowledge (a) of any person without his consent is guilty of first degree felony, or (b) of any person with his consent or of any animal, is guilty of a misdemeanor." This is the law Minister Bartels cited in the opening quote of this essay, and as a relic of British colonial sodomy laws it lumps together rape, homosexuality, and bestiality, and in this way discursively frames public attitudes. Gays and lesbians have been prosecuted and imprisoned, e.g., four gay men in August 2003 for "unlawful carnal knowledge" and "indecent exposure" for exchanging photos of themselves in sexual acts with a Norwegian man in exchange for money and gifts (Zachary, www.sodomylaws.org). They were sentenced to two years in prison.

The ILGHRC (International Lesbian & Gay Human Rights Commission) reports police entrapment of gay men in Ghana, though one queer leader, Spiffy, claimed such acts do not happen as much as people think.

> There are laws against *yagism*, but it is used when it is rape. Most cases that we have is…let's say a teacher of thirty or forty years tries to screw a kid about fifteen or twelve years.

Brian, offered a different portrait of danger and gay bashing when he spoke about the risk of socializing at bars.

> People who are not gay find the spot where we hang out, like Henri's…guys hide and attack the gays who are walking to Henri's; they have taken cell phones and they have also beaten up couple of my friends. You don't just walk down the street by bars with gays.

Homophobic generated violence shapes identity and community for these men. Chris said, "I used to go to clubs, but now I just stay at home. I didn't use to be a queen. I used to be a king…now I'm trying to be a queen. I like to be at home...I don't want any problems." Frank, too, noted that "one must be careful at and outside gay clubs." Gay bashing is reported in the press, even foreign press, as BBC's reporting of Joseph Afful and his four friends attacked in suburban Accra ("Ghana's Secret," 14 March 2007).

Although western discourse and concepts of gay life have entered the lexicon in Accra, the western concept of coming out is not used. None of the subjects acknowledged knowing its meaning. Even the idea of realizing one's erotic attraction to same sex partners was expressed differently and by only one man, "Viola," as a form of self-knowledge in childhood.

> For me I was born with it; no one could tell me to be gay…I am what I am…when you are born with it and you reach a certain age like six or eight, you love to play with other boys…we will kiss and do all kinds of things.

The metanarrative of self awareness that Brian, Viola, Isaac, Frank, Kofi, and Gina related was that they discovered same sex attraction in residential secondary schools. As Spiffy asserted, "some of us are born with it and others learn from school." In his personal experience, most of the youth are seeing the good things about being gay…in a boy's school." Brian used different words: "I went to college in Cape Coast…that's where I got corrupted." Even newspaper letter writers and bloggers in denouncing the media frenzy over the alleged "gay conference" referred to secondary school same sex practices, "C'mon, the girls practice it…and the boys...too…the supi in girls's schools and whatever the boys call themselves…is part of the transition to full blown homosexuality." The writer called fellow Ghanaians "ostriches," declaring the "reality is that homosexuality is very rife in this country." (Broni, all.africa.com). Gina concurred in describing her first same sex encounter at boarding school:

> It started like this. A senior girl to me, she had authority over me. Any time she says something to me I can't reject it…otherwise I would be punished…when I was asleep she would come to me…and tell me to lie down on her bedside …like a man and woman playing.

Identity Formation

The narratives of self recognition comprise a form of social and cultural practice, part of the process of social identity development. The Ghanaian school narratives invoke British stereotypes of public school "deviance," not surprisingly, since many churches established schools under colonialism, and the post independence government maintained secondary schools as boarding schools to encourage a national, not ethnic, identity. These "first experience at school" narratives were so common that they resonated with the "coming out" stories of US college students who came out in campus student clubs (O'Mara 1997, 22). The statements were what Foucault referred to as a field of presence, statements formulated elsewhere and taken up in discourse, acknowledged to be truthful, and involved exact description, reasoning or presupposition (1972, 57). The western idea and practice of "coming out of the closet" privileges both the act of self-naming, accepting one's same sex emotions and disclosing it to others. As queer theorists remind us, it is a matter of degree, not an either-or proposition.

After twelve years, Gina was still in an exclusive relationship with her "senior girl" who retained a "commanding role" in the relationship, one practice which connects to the dominant gender idiom in local discourse about same-sex relationships and social practices. Gina, for example, socializes without her "girlfriend" only with family, heterosexual neighbors, former school friends, and gay men not other lesbians because: "my other half…is very jealous. I don't often go out with her. She is very jealous. We do things in the house." Later she emphasized that a lesbian partner *(igybomo*) "has rights over you, like husband's, you know, because she is your everything." Bars and clubs attended by lesbians Gina described as full of tension, unlike socializing with only four to six other *supi* (lesbians) at someone's home. At a club, Gina noted, "they will fight over a person… slap you for just dancing with someone." Viola concurs with Gina's portrayal, observing that "lesbian girls are watching every step that the lesbian man takes, their *igybomo* takes." A few women, young tomboy lesbians wear jeans, sneakers, and hair in dreadlocks, much like some African American butch lesbians, homo thugs, or tommy boys in southern Africa. Gina noted they are rare because to be "obvious is dangerous." Jealousy and fear of social rejection and violence limits lesbian social networks; one result is women socializing with gay men in a wider les/bi/gay community for friendship, information swapping, and "cover." Viola and Lartey spoke about Ghanaian adherence to traditional gender roles, especially vis à vis employment. Kofi and Viola both noted that "gays that live in villages and small towns…they are cooks."

The rhetoric of essentialism marks discussions of sexual difference and identity; what sets gays apart often pivots on nurturing by the feminine identified. Gina, Kofi and Viola believe that most gays are in "service occupations." Many gay men struggle economically, working according to Isaac, as peddlers: "they sell ladies shoes and bags, whatever." Other gays and lesbians are self-employed, often as Spiffy and Gina noted, "they make clothes." Perhaps that is why Gina, who self-identified as "educated," said she "designed" clothes: "I'm in fashion." Gender idioms dominated the rhetoric this network employed to discursively construct themselves as this glossary indicates.

GAY MEN:	**LESBIANS:**
gay	lesbian
yag/yagism (backslang)	supi (Ga) girl love
zay	zay
kodjo bisiya (Asante)	yaa'mah (Asante)
nunjo (Ga)	Zimah (Ga)
--walks like a woman	--walks like a man
Mami or Hajjia (Muslim pilgrim)	Joe or Daddy
--looks like a woman	--acts/looks like a man
Sister/girl's name	ne biwa (Ga)
--looks feminine	--has quality of a woman
Yaa Asantewa	Asantehene/king
--warrior queen (1850-1921)	--has quality of a man
--leader/like a woman	

Ghanaian History is also discursively employed to signify queer identities. Although only three subjects were ethnically Asante, and as members of smaller ethnic groups they possessed some resentment toward Asante-centered historical constructions. Nonetheless, Asante history is strategically employed to define contemporary identities because the Asante state was not only the most powerful precolonial entity within Ghana, but the one that fought numerous wars with the British (1807-96), preventing domination until 1896 when King (Asantehene) Prempeh I surrendered and accepted a British protectorate. After the king's exile and other indignities, the Asante rose up one last time against the British in 1900-1901 in a war led by Yaa Asantewa, the Queen Mother of Ejisu. When gay men invoke Yaa Asantewa, the warrior queen, as they name some among them, they lay claim not only to patriotism, but the ultimate in

resistance and strength— armed motherhood. Stephan Miescher argues that Akan societies possess a "long history of contested masculinity and femininity," with rival notions of masculinity, the *ɔpanyin* (senior, mediator with good advice) and *ɔbirɛmpɔn* (a big man, wealthy and generous) as alternatives to the warrior. These notions of masculinity became more complicated and fluid with colonialism. (Miescher 2005, 8, 12).

The Queen in the Asante polity ruled women and was the lone person with authority over the Asantehene, the king. Kwesi Yankah, an ethnographer of Akan society, argues that a common strategy for "traditional systems" (perhaps better called colonized systems) to mediate "the onslaught of modernity" is to incorporate, accommodate, and domesticate" what is new or perceived to be new, to make sense of the previously unacknowledged (Yankah, 1991, 18). Among the Accra-Tema network Lartey was the person called "Yaa Asantewa," the queen mother. He further laid claim to royal privilege by asserting that his being gay is "a gift from God…God created me to become somebody." This demonstrates not only the way Lartey, Viola, and Spiffy speak of their sexual difference in locally meaningful referents, but a strategy for incorporation and domestication of non normative identities In the process they queer the culture and society which excludes and condemns them.

King Prempeh I	Yaa Asantewa

The Role of Place

Until 2005 Lartey owned a shop in Tema New Town, a drinking spot called Wazobia which closed after the rent was raised. Tema New Town is a key site on the maps the men drew when asked to sketch their "gay geography." They spoke of Lartey's former place and another now closed, run by Bennett a good friend of all the men who died in February 2005. Lartey and Spiffy were Bennett's gay daughters, and they speak of Tema New Town as their ancestral village though it was only Kofi and Lartey's childhood home. All those interviewed singled out particular bars in central Accra as identifiable gay spots comprising the "loop" of gay geography in Accra: friends' homes and corner bars in Jamestown, old Accra; Strawberries and Benmuda, in Adabraka; Chester's near Danquah Circle; and Henri's and Macumba in Osu. For Spiffy, Lartey and Viola, though, Tema Old Town, Tema New Town, Pram Pram, and Bom were also gay spots due to Bennett's & Lartey's former establishments there and the gay friendly fisher-folk who live there.

While Spiffy emphasized that "we have everything here," (i.e., like the West) Brian qualified that by noting that "there are no places that you could say are ALL gay." He identified sports bars, and street bars "that we go to; we make a business grow. We have Henri's and Strawberries, but the owner is not gay." Referring to the gay loop Kofi said, "we move around; we have Macumba, Henri's, Chester's." Brian observed, "We have a room for ourselves where there are men and women, all kinds of people. I wish there were places that we could only go. But mostly…bars are mixed."

Lartey spoke enthusiastically about claiming space, queering space in otherwise heterosexual sites, especially in Tema, but also in the middle class neighborhoods of Osu or Adabraka. He emphasized, "I meet other gays in Tema…like we meet friends there, drink there, and we have meetings there…I tell how it is to be gay, even to the chief and the head of police." Lartey repeatedly emphasized teaching**:** "I give them lecture…God gave it to us, we have to give it back…gay advice." He seemed to position himself at times as *ǝpanyin*, a man of reputation, good at mediating, and offering advice.

Queer Leadership

Lartey, Spiffy, and Viola, indicate they are following the example of Bennett who owned and managed a bar in Tema and who, Viola emphasized, "showed how to teach, be a real friend. He gave loans to fishermen, fed them, cared for their kids. Everyone came to him." Lartey spoke of his Tema circle of friends as an ideal society in embryo, a view not shared by Kofi from Tema or Frank who said he would not date someone from there, saying they "lacked style and are poor." Not so for Lartey who said.

> I like to organize that kind of people. We can get a society, organize a society (i.e., organization). Like you know, like

> Christmas. We have a nice program then, organize like food, drink. It's so nice.

Lartey also described how he intercedes for gays, especially youth, with the local chief of police in order to get people released; he also contacts gay lawyers who provide services when he asks, and not just to gays but to "fisherman in Tema." He has followed King Bennett's model of creating a gay and gay friendly enclave community, a leadership role which Spiffy and Viola also pursue. Viola proudly said, "I arranged for some friends to get married in Osu. I know a gay pastor and he married them. It was lovely, darling!" What their narratives of 'being' gay, indeed, modeling gay, support is Butler's assertion that the "foundationist reasoning of identity politics" is off the mark; that is "that an identity must be in place for…political action to take place." Rather, the "doer," the lesbian or gay self, one's subjectivity is "constructed in and through the deed" (1990, 142). The deeds of these men (and a few women) are ritualized through a process of cementation, serving the community and teaching youth about same sex practices, linking networks of gays as informants and bar 'regulars,' linking gays with gay friendly folk, advocating for those in trouble (with the law), sick or those reluctant to reveal their sexual practices. They do what few others do, they quietly foreground their sexual identity and challenge heteronormativity. Lartey stressed that this work was important because,

> They don't have anybody apart from me. You know, gay advice when you don't get it (understand)…I talk to lesbians, gays, whatever… I felt comfortable, since I was seventeen. I tell people all about gays…because you know God created me for this.

Both Lartey and Viola perform as *ókyeame*, the traditional "linguist" and diplomat, the intermediary between the king and the people (Yankah,1995), though in contemporary times this means working as a master orator in a triadic relationship between major government offices or social institutions and the local people. In Akan culture the verbal art of the *ókyeame* is equally matched by his visual and political skills.

Gina spoke of lesbians taking steps against isolation in April-May 2005 when two meetings organized by southern African lesbians brought together some Ghanaian lesbians in Osu, Accra. She spoke to someone who attended the workshops on how to deal with Christian based homophobia and how to create associations to link with the newly created CAL/Coalition of African Lesbians (based at Windhoek, Namibia). Such linkages aim to enable women to access resources, learn organizing and access income generating tools and have not yet led to a Ghanaian group (*Behind the Mask*, 13 July 2005). However, these meetings were initiated by non-Ghanaians. Discussions centered on lesbians acquiring economic independence and combating homophobia rooted in

biblical, 'Sodom and Gomorah' arguments. However, like the "alleged GALAG conference" many women, like Gina, in the Accra networks, feared attending, and read about it later. Others like Amelemegbe, a hairdresser, argued that "I don't want too many people to know. I have my group of *supi*, not all in the same place." She did not recognize a need for coalitions or organizational help as "I am successful because I am not depending on anybody."

Moving Forward

The social context of virulent homophobia, fueled by widespread conservative Christianity, produces a high price for public acknowledgment by Ghanaian gays and lesbians. After the 2006 panic over the "gay conference," Prince MacDonald received numerous threats: a note saying "burn it up" on his office car windscreen; and men outside his office, almost daily, promising to "kill you" before "you spoil our children". Ghanaians such as MacDonald interacting with global gay organizations such as ILGHRC and Behind the Mask (South Africa) indirectly lend credence to anti-gay critics who claim that gays are a foreign import, not Ghanaian. Mac Donald acknowledges that he began to speak about "organizing" a gay group after participating in gay demonstrations in France, 1998. At the urging of a World Bank official he put together and registered a human rights non-governmental organization (Center for Popular Education) in 2002 in order to apply for funds for HIV/AIDS education. External funding only became available in 2005, but conducting HIV/AIDS education and prevention has made him and his NGO a target of hostility as well as a base for local networking. MacDonald has bravely taken on the public role of "the" Ghanaian gay, issuing press releases, and attending international conferences, activities few are willing to undertake (MacDonald, 2004, 2006). Moreover, fear that an organization such as his (CEPEHRG) is not indigenous to Ghana and may be manipulated by international funders, leads many gays and lesbians to avoid contact with MacDonald and the organization, including members of the Accra-Tema community described above.

These different approaches to constructing identity and community in conditions of state and religious sponsored homophobia, on the one hand attest to the determination of the excluded to assume their own identities and social spaces in Ghana. On the other hand, the tactics of Viola, Spiffy, Lartey—to claim legitimation by staking out indigenous roles and institutions—are important to the domestication process. This latter strategy, at least partially, forestalls the West African Christian argument that same sex emotions and identities are a white, western import. It equally disrupts the western metanarrative of "coming out" with its emphasis on the individual, instead placing the speaking gay subject in a relationship to indigenous culture that asserts cultural "authentification and authority" (Bucholtz and Hall, 506-509). The members of this emergent community employ discursive strategies that are distinctly local, domesticating

their largely unacknowledged identities while at the same time their community appears very contemporary in global terms.

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